

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Carnal Moves
KOKO BROWN

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Koko Brown

Diagnosed with chronic stress disorder, half-demon Gideon is ordered to take up a hobby. Initially balking at his shrink's remedy, but faced with an eternity in solitude, Gideon signs up for ballroom dance lessons.

His hobby turns into another kind of hell when Gideon is partnered with the curvaceous Macy. He's avoided human females for more than a thousand years, but her moves evoke carnal images of sweaty bodies and tangled sheets. Unable to resist temptation, Gideon thinks a few nights of soul-searing sex will slake his lust for the human female.

He couldn't be more wrong!

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Prologue

New Orleans, Louisiana

"What's my prognosis, Doctor?"

Gideon peeked under the crook of his arm to determine the direction of Dr. Krishnamaturi's thoughts. Unfortunately, his shrink's mind was as blank as his bland expression.

How would the good doctor react if his most ornery patient revealed his true identity? Would coming clean wipe away his look of jaded detachment, which he had perfected to a science while listening to Gideon's weekly rants of sleepless nights and constant migraines?

Gideon wouldn't bet his eternally damned soul on it. Humans believed in heaven and hell. Very few would accept the fact that angels and demons walked amongst them—much less visited a shrink on a weekly basis.

"You're overworked," Dr. Krishnamaturi concluded. "You need to put less emphasis on work, more on play."

As a high prince in his father's kingdom, Gideon's work was endless. Accountable for millions, with the number growing by the second, a day off for play was out of the question. Plus, how could he enjoy life when he deprived humans of it every day?

"I know what I'm suggesting may seem objectionable for someone with such a controlling nature such as yours." Dr. Krishnamaturi shifted in his chair, causing the maroon leather to burp. "But you're slowly imploding, and if you don't do something about it, it may cause an adverse effect on your psyche."

What was he saying? Am I that stressed out, I might lose it?

For the first time in his twelve-hundred-year existence, Gideon experienced the first inklings of fear. A rogue demon was a threat to the natural order of things. As third in line to his father's throne, leader of a legion of a hundred thousand foot soldiers and trusted ally of hundreds of lower princes, he wielded too much power. Losing his mind would threaten the whole hierarchy of the Abyss.

There would be no way around it...he would be banished.

Gideon stared at his hands. Were they shaking? Not a surprise. Death was more desirable than being banished to an eternity in the Nethers. It meant he would never be able to cross the River Styx. He would never see the sun again, watch the waves crashing on the Gulf, smell the beautiful stench of burning flesh or feel the comfort of a demon bitch's thighs again.

"What's your treatment?" Gideon pressed, unable to suppress his impatience.

Dr. Krishnamaturi glanced at his notes. "I want you to hand over some of your day-to-day responsibilities to your subordinates."

Gideon nodded absently. But when his prescribed therapy sank home, he rose from his seat, balking at the implications. "That's impossible! There's no way I can do that."

While he paced, Dr. Krishnamaturi maintained his customary demeanor—placid laced with an edge of boredom. "And why not?"

Gideon pressed his lips together to stifle a litany of curses. How could he tell this mortal—paid shrink no less—that his subordinates numbered into the hundreds of thousands and that the good doctor's remedy would be viewed as a sign of weakness?

Or that, as the by-product of a liaison between his father and an Assyrian warlord's sister—in repayment for delivering her brother's enemy—Gideon had spent the better part of a millennia fighting tooth and nail to earn a smidgen of respect from his full-blooded brethren.

But considering the alternative, Gideon knew he had no other choice. "All right," he ground out as he sat back down. "First thing tomorrow morning, I'll piecemeal my duties."

A toothy smile illuminated Dr. Krishnamaturi's round face. "Good. After you've done that, I want you take up a hobby."

"What in the fu..." Gideon stifled his faux pas with a well-timed cough. "Excuse me, Doc, but what is a hobby?" Gideon patted himself on the back. He'd rather pull out his own entrails than be sent home with another one of Dr. Krishnamaturi's *Talking Points* worksheets to correct his propensity for curse words. He could re-wallpaper the Hall of Caracalla with all of the ones he'd been sent home with over the past year.

Dr. Krishnamaturi eyed him over the rim of his spectacles as if he'd grown three heads. "A hobby is an activity you enjoy doing in your down time. You know, a fun pastime so enjoyable it doesn't feel like work."

Gideon didn't have time for an enjoyable pastime. He didn't sleep, he rarely ate, thus his every waking hour revolved around only two things—collecting souls and torturing them.

Suddenly enlightened, Gideon perked up.

"I like fucking. There isn't any sport I enjoy more than sinking my cock into a warm, wet pus—"

The good doctor's disapproving cough stopped him from expounding. "I'm sure you're very good at it. Most men think they are, but engaging in sexual promiscuity is not a valid recreation. I was thinking along the lines of photography, pottery or even fishing."

Mind-numbing, boring and distasteful at best. "If this is the best you can come up with, my fate is irrevocably sealed." Dejected, Gideon mentally packed his bags for a one-way trip to his own personal hell.

"All is not lost," Dr. Krishnamaturi chastised with a wave of an arthritic hand. "At one time or another, something must have held your interest."

Gideon leaned back to gaze up at the tray ceiling. He thought of several possibilities. One by one, he scratched them off his list. Except for one. He attempted to push it out of his consciousness for being too fanciful. Still it remained like a malicious spirit attracted to a human vessel, flitting just on the periphery, taunting him.

Meeting Dr. Krishnamaturi's inquisitive appraisal, Gideon hesitated. His shrink might be sworn to the Hippocratic Oath, still he was uneasy disclosing such a frivolous predilection he'd discovered while collecting a soul four years ago.

"Well?" Dr. Krishnamaturi pressed.

After a moment of purposeful deliberation, Gideon decided to bare his soul. "Several years ago, I stumbled across a television show, *B-List Dance Off*. Ever since, I've found it a guilty pleasure. I've even tinkered with the idea of taking dance lessons."

Gideon steeled himself for the other man's condemnation.

"I know exactly what show you're talking about," Dr. Krishnamaturi gushed, hitting the arm of his chair. "My wife and I TiVo it every Wednesday just in case we miss it due to our busy schedules. We were crushed during the semifinals when they eliminated that poor blind girl from 'It's My Life'." He pulled off his spectacles to wipe away what appeared to be tears.

With a well-timed snuffle, he stood up, walked over to his desk and opened one of the top drawers. "We love the show so much we visited a couple of local dance schools. We even found a really reputable one in the French Quarter. But as luck would have it, life intervened and we've been too busy to enroll."

Dr. Krishnamaturi pulled out a gold business-card holder. "Ah, yes! I still have their card." He rounded the desk again with his hand held out, a glossy, black business card tucked between his fingers.

Gideon didn't take it.

Dr. Krishnamaturi chuckled, the sound bordering on a wheeze. "Go on. It's not going to bite you."

Sighing heavily, Gideon plucked the card from the doctor's hand. He turned it over and scanned the gold foil lettering:

Madame Vellier's Dance Academy

700 St. Peter Street

New Orleans, Louisiana 70116

Gripped with a sudden urge to throw the card down and run for the hills, Gideon knew he ran the chance of becoming the laughingstock of all purgatory. Still, he could not deny the thrill of excitement sweeping over him.

Swallowing his misgivings along with his pride, he slid the card into his pocket.

Chapter One

"Come on, twinkle toes, time's a wasting!"

Macy Beaumont stared at the door she had no problem going through twice a week and froze. "I can't do this," she muttered. In a last-ditch effort to preserve the sheltered life she'd come to depend on, Macy dug her dance heels into the cobblestones outside Madame Vellier's Dance Studio. She needed her best friend's pep talks from time to time because of her inability to move on after a bitter divorce, but Denise had gone too far this time.

"Eighteen months of intense ballroom lessons and you've never bothered with attending one of Madame Vellier's midnight socials? You and I know this is way overdue."

Macy glanced down at her newly polished toenails. "Are we talking about dancing or something else?"

"Both. I'm tired of seeing you living like a freaking hermit. You work all the time, you never go out, much less have any fun."

"So not true. I play spades online and I come here twice a week to take ballroom lessons from Madame Vellier."

"In a roundabout way you just proved my point," Denise wisecracked. "Come on, Macy, you've got to live. You sure as heck didn't do it while living a lie for that bastard of an ex-husband of yours. For the thousandth time, it wasn't your fault Trace woke up one morning realizing he preferred dick to pussy."

Macy's lips twitched. Denise's brutal honesty had always kept their seven-year friendship lively.

"Now walk through this door, setting aside your past while putting all those steps and patterns you've learned to good use." Denise twisted the doorknob, opening it inward. "What better time than tonight."

"One problem, I already have a weekly dance partner."

"I meant with someone who doesn't put his teeth in a glass of water at night. Someone like Mr. Hot Buns."

"This was all a setup, wasn't it?"

"I can't hide anything from you, can I, Nancy Drew?"

"How do you expect me to come in from the cold when you're dumping me in the fire all at once?"

Despite her misgivings, Macy followed Denise into the studio's tiny lobby. She flicked a cursory glance at Madame Vellier's nephew sitting behind an antique Louis

XVI desk. A card-carrying member of the local punk scene, Tyler's gray skintight jeans and rumpled Iggy Pop & The Iguanas t-shirt were mainstays, as were the oversized headphones wrapped around his head.

"How do you know he'll be here tonight?"

An impish light entered Denise's hazel eyes. "You're not the only person who can pry answers out of people."

"This coming from the same woman who can't find her own phone number in the residential section of the phone book."

Denise moved to pinch her forearm, but a quick two-step saved Macy from bodily harm. "You know that only happens with a new phone book and only in the first three weeks."

"So, how did you pull this one off, Sherl—" Macy paused, suddenly remembering Denise's "sudden interest" in wanting to take dance lessons. "You weren't talking to Madame Vellier about taking dance lessons last Wednesday night, were you? You were talking about me. Denise, what have you done?"

"At first I felt bad about pumping Madame Vellier for information. Then I remembered your excitement, or inability to breathe, every time you crossed paths with Hot Buns."

"You make me sound pathetic." Catching Denise's raised eyebrow, Macy shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, you're right. I need to work less and enjoy myself more. Just don't ask me to bite off more than I can chew."

"Depends on what you're biting."

"You know what I mean—the opposite sex. I'm not ready for any kind of involvement, entanglement or tête-à-tête, as my grandmamma Pessie Mae would say." But Macy's resolve suddenly hit a brick wall when Denise started nibbling on the tip of her thumb. "What is it?" she asked, her heart racing ahead of their conversation.

"Umm...I put a little birdie in Madame Vellier's head."

"The kind of little birdie that will probably poop all over my head? Spill it. What have you done, Denise?"

"I told Madame Vellier you were interested in entering the Gumbo & Mambo Ballroom Invitational in Baton Rouge. Since many of her students are geriatric patients, I encouraged her to pair you with Mr. Hot Buns."

Macy leaned toward Denise, her hands curled in a fake stranglehold. "Just give me thirty seconds. That's all I need."

Denise's impending demise caught Tyler's attention. He ripped his headphones off, greeting them with a toothy smile. "What's up, Macy?" Since they were only a few years apart, Tyler tended to talk to her more informally than his aunt's other students. "You all better go in." He paused to look up at the wall clock behind him. "The night's winding down. There's only an hour and a half left."

Saved by the kid, Macy mouthed.

"Because you're late, I'll only charge you half price." Tyler took the ten-dollar bill Macy handed him. After depositing the money in a metal cash box, he slid a cardboard box containing wilted corsages toward them.

Denise eyed the wimpy Magnolias. "What do you know, we're going to the prom."

"I think it's rather romantic." Macy picked up one of the white flowers. She pinned it to her dress, then turned to help Denise with hers.

"The social's in the main studio. Would you like me to escort you?" Tyler moved to stand up.

"Don't trouble yourself," Macy objected, waving him back down. "I know the way."

Popular in the New Orleans dance community for more than forty years, the Midnight and Magnolia socials attracted students from different studios within the French Quarter. But Macy had no idea they were this popular. Every bit of open space was crammed with either couples dancing or groups of people mingling.

Almost happy they'd come, Macy downgraded her opinion when a paunchy, middle-age man squeezed into a pair of white polyester pants and a half-buttoned burgundy silk dress shirt blocked their path.

"Hey, foxy ladies. Which one of you *la petite femmes* wants to dance with Anton?" he asked, his eyes sliding over Macy like she'd suddenly turned into a spicy meatball sandwich after Lent. An inch shorter than her five-foot-four, Anton swayed back and forth in the throes of a manic cha cha.

Macy looked at Denise with an "I told you" so expression. "I'm flattered, Anton, but I'm going to sit this one out."

Anton eyed her for several brow-sweating seconds. To her relief, he shrugged his lumpy shoulders, then turned his attention to Denise.

"Ow." Macy winced as Denise's fingernails sank into her forearm. "Anton, she's with me," she croaked, unable to shake her best friend's death grip.

Shocked, Anton's black unibrow rose to meet his widow's peak. "*D'accord...*of course! Nothing wrong with a little girl-on-girl action. If you run into any single ladies who are still strictly dickly, send them my way." He turned on his white dress boots, continuing his quest for fresh meat.

"Thank you," Denise gushed.

"You're lucky I forgive and forget. I was this close to selling you out to the Lollipop King."

"Macy, *ma cher!*" Both of them turned toward the sound of a familiar Creole-tinged drawl. Madame Vellier was gorgeous. Macy tasted a tinge of jealousy as her dance instructor set aside a plastic service ladle, then scurried over to them. Poured into a black leotard and matching ankle-length skirt, she was rumored to be almost seventy. But she didn't look a day over fifty with her olive skin as smooth as a baby's bottom and auburn tresses only slightly streaked with gray.

"I'm so glad you decided to attend one of my monthly socials," she purred, enveloping Macy into her customary hug of welcome and a kiss on each cheek. She repeated her greeting with Denise. "I see my nagging finally worked or you really must be interested in entering the Gumbo & Mambo Ballroom Invitational. You and Gideon will be perfect for the Bronze I category in the open dance."

"About that, Madame Vellier —"

"Don't you worry your head none, *ma cher*. Gideon isn't as far along as you are, but he's a quick study. So much so, I think at times he uses a little black magic to keep up." Madame Vellier chuckled, threading her arm with hers. "Of course, we only have seven months to prepare. But with a little coaching, a few hours of practice a week, you two can pull it off."

While Madame Vellier steered them through the crowd, she chatted animatedly about the upcoming competition. Macy barely heard a word of it. Routinely hard on herself, she was so busy beating herself up for going along with Denise's matchmaking-madness she didn't notice when they stopped.

"I need to introduce you to Gideon. As usual he's hemmed in by some poor creature trying to relive her youth."

Standing head and shoulders over anyone in a five-block radius, Gideon Scratch was better suited to a World Wrestling Federation ring than the dance floor. Poured into a pair of black leather pants and a matching black t-shirt, he didn't possess the model good-looks found in magazines or on romance covers. He was too bulky, his nose was slightly off-center and his upper arms were covered with elaborate tattoos.

"*Mon Dieu!* You don't have to do this!" Denise hissed. "If I had known the cutie with a bootie was going to be Dr. Doom I would have left well enough alone."

No, he would never land the cover of *Gentleman's Quarterly*. His imperfect features and inhuman size probably scared little children. But when he danced with a smiling senior citizen, he was divine. A contradiction to his large, muscular frame, his booted feet were unbelievably light and graceful. And his rocking hip movements could give Elvis a run for his money.

"It's really amazing how far he's come," Madame Vellier remarked. "The first week his feet were heavier than two cannonballs." She snapped her fingers. "Now he's a two-hundred-pound, six-foot-four version of Gene Kelly."

Macy nodded in agreement, even though she didn't quite see eye to eye with Madame Vellier. Gideon couldn't be pigeonholed. There wasn't another man on the dance floor like him with his unnatural size and brawn, yet effortless grace. His every step, pivot and chasse hijacked Macy's oxygen, reducing her to panting.

"Gene Kelly?" Denise snorted. "More like Sasquatch. I don't think I'll be able to watch this. I'm going to go round up Anton. Hopefully some toothless Betty hasn't hemmed him up in some corner already."

After Denise left, Madame Vellier turned to Macy. "Do you hold the same opinion as your friend? If so, I will not match you with Gideon. He keeps to himself, doesn't talk much, but there is a vulnerability about him. I do not want to see his feelings hurt."

"No!" Macy balked at her instructor's assumption. "I've been an admirer of his for quite some time...of his dancing, I mean." She'd almost given herself away!

"Since that's settled, in between numbers we're going to have to move fast." With a nod of her head, Madame Vellier pointed out a group of elderly women standing nearby. "Sadie and the rest of the chicken coop have claimed Gideon as theirs, sometimes tying him up for the entire evening. Poor dear. It happens every single time he comes to one of my socials, but he still shows up. Bless his soul."

As if hearing their conversation, Gideon turned his head in their direction. The driving rhythm of the cha cha and Madame Vellier's nonstop chatter faded into the periphery of Macy's consciousness like late-night TV static. Everything ceased to exist except for a six foot plus agile behemoth with a pair of dazzling golden brown eyes. When they fell on Madame Vellier, recognition flashed in their golden depths, while a friendly smile transformed the harsh slash of his mouth, softening his brutish features.

Madame Vellier might not be the usual competition, but the other woman's ability to draw Gideon's attention elicited a streak of envy so wide she could barely see reason. When Madame Vellier lifted a graceful arm and waved, she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from leaving the woman with only a stub.

Macy frowned. What in the heck had come over her? As the third of four girls, she lived by the mantra share and share alike. She'd never had a problem with it.

Until now.

She didn't want to share Gideon with anyone, not even with someone forty-six years her senior and harmless like Madame Vellier.

The thought of having Gideon all to herself turned her into one giant hormone. That made her feel like menopause was knocking five years too early as an inexplicable heat burned the back of her neck, pebbled her forehead. She even started to step from side to side in time with the music, her palms running up and down her thighs. Great. *I'm acting like those white-collar junkies I interviewed for my front page expose "Scoring from the Medicine Cabinet"!*

Macy's thoughts suddenly careened off track. She'd become the object of her malaise's attention. Too bad her body remained on course by responding to his come hither smile and slight nod of acknowledgement with a pair of hardened nipples and slickness between her thighs.

She shifted her stance to squelch the evidence. Not working! She tried looking away from the crux of her dilemma. Still not working! Some inexplicable pull was preventing her from breaking eye contact.

To compound matters, the center of her quandary didn't like her attentions. His eyebrows flatlined and his mouth tipped into a frown. Knowing that disapproving look all too well, since her ex practically trademarked it, Macy's blood ran cold.

She didn't blame him. Who would find her extra pounds attractive, even if hers placed her in the lower end of the obesity column? He was so repulsed he even closed his eyes to block out her heavy cleavage and rounded hips.

As if released from some kind of spell, Macy turned to her instructor. "Could you excuse me, Madame Vellier? I...ugh...I need to use the ladies room."

"But I was just about to introduce you to—" Macy didn't stick around to hear the rest, instead she hightailed it to the nearest exit.

Like most traditional dance studios, the bathrooms were located inside the dressing rooms. Making a beeline down the hall, Macy barged inside. She skirted around a line to the toilets and took refuge on a rose-colored sofa in the lounge.

"Fine job acting like the fearless *Times-Picayune* reporter your readers believe you to be. One mishap and you're hid—"

"Hiding in the bathroom, young lady?" Macy eyes widened. She hadn't seen anyone when she came in, especially not the octogenarian sitting at the other end of the couch. Her eyes watery with age and wispy sprigs of white hair covering her pate, the woman resembled a giant-size Yoda without all the green skin.

"Yes and talking to myself to boot," Macy muttered. "Maybe I should be committed."

The woman waved a fragile hand in the air as if talking to oneself was the most ordinary thing in the world. "Don't worry your head none. We all do it. Unfortunately it gets worse with age. If you don't mind me asking, why is a pretty thing like you holed up in here? If it makes you more comfortable, the name's Gertrude Smite, my friends call me Gertie."

"I'm Macy, ma'am. Macy Beaumont. Nice to meet you." Gertrude smiled. Slightly taken aback, Macy marveled at how white the woman's teeth were, considering she looked older than the tree of life. "I wasn't actually hiding. It was more like running."

"From something or someone?"

Macy turned toward her. "Not exactly." The old woman suddenly squeezed her eyes shut and appeared to be in the throes of a heart attack. "Gertie, are you okay?"

Worried for her companion, she stood up to go get help. But Gertie's eyes popped open, as if awakening from a deep sleep, her golden brown gaze both heavy-lidded and listless.

"I'm fine, child. Just a little spell. Happens all the time. Now why don't you sit on down and tell old Gertie your troubles." The old woman patted the cushion. Meant to be a reassuring gesture, Macy wasn't comforted.

"Are you sure? I can go get Dr. LaCroix?" Macy remembered seeing the young, emergency-room doctor standing on the edges of the dance floor, ready to jump in if anyone needed his assistance.

Gertie shook her head. "I'm fine, young lady. I don't need the young doctor and neither do you. Now sit down."

Macy seesawed between finding the doctor and being polite. "I'll sit down if you promise me you won't keel over again."

The old woman chuckled. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Not exactly what I was hoping to hear, but I guess it'll do." With a heavy sigh, Macy plopped back down. "I wasn't hiding, I was running from something. Me. My best friend duped me into coming tonight. On top of that, she arranged for me to become dance partners with this guy I have a mega crush on. At times I can be quite fanciful, but when he looked at me like my name should be Large Marge from *Pee Wee's Great Adventure*, I lost it. I had a panic attack and ran in here."

Gertie's unusually large hands worked the worn pommel of her cane. "Why didn't you stick around and give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he was just as disturbed by your reaction."

"I didn't think of that," Macy mumbled, realizing she hadn't been the proverbial smiling contessa herself. More like a gasping fish out of water. Macy sat back with a groan. "I guess I've made a mountain out of a mole hill."

"You haven't reached the summit of Mount Everest, but it's close. I think you could rectify things by going out there and facing your demons."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It is easy. All you have to do is put one foot in front of the other and you're halfway there."

Macy ruminated over the old woman's wisdom. No matter how much she turned it over in her head, Gertie was right. She'd jumped the gun by prejudging her partner. So what if he wasn't attracted to her, there were plenty of other fish in the Mississippi.

Resolved, Macy stood up. "Wish me luck, Ms. Gertie."

The old sage chuckled, her eyes wrinkling in a half a dozen folds. "I don't think you'll need wishes or luck. I have a feeling this one is destiny."

If Macy hadn't been born and raised in New Orleans, she would've thought the old woman slightly off her rocker. Since she was weaned on superstition, teathed on mysticism and baptized in spiritualism, she didn't bat an eye when they exchanged cordial goodbyes.

"Madame Vellier, I'm terribly sorry for my rudeness," Macy rehearsed, squeezing past an even longer line to the toilets. And as she pushed on the bathroom door, "You know when a girl has to go a girl has to —"

"Do you know it's rude to stare and run?" The oxygen rushed out of Macy's lungs as Gideon Scratch pushed away from the wall to stand over her. If the hall wasn't narrow enough, his presence alone shrank it to the size of an airplane bathroom.

"I-I wasn't running," she stuttered. Uneasy, Macy took a step back.

"You're running now." An unnatural light entered his eyes as he bridged the distance between them. Even though her silver dance heels elevated her average height a good three inches, Macy still had to strain her head back.

Not quite used to a man his size, she almost took a step back, but her pride alone squelched the urge. "No, I'm not," she replied, squaring her shoulders.

A small smile played along his lips. Macy's stomach pitched.

"Since you're not running, then this is the perfect opportunity to convince you to become my partner for the Gumbo & Mambo Ballroom Invitational."

Macy massacred the groan on the tip of her tongue as images of the kind of partnering she was interested in frolicked through her mind. One with her legs thrown over the back of the couch with him crouching over her looked too complicated to be pleasurable.

Ashamed of her x-rated thoughts, Macy looked down at her feet. "I haven't made up my mind yet," she murmured.

"Why not?" he asked, taking her hand in his, enveloping it almost twice over. Macy's thighs tingled. "I've seen you dance. You're one of Madame Vellier's best students."

He'd seen her dance? They weren't even in the same class!

Macy melted inside, but she met his gaze and his flattery with a question. "Why are you so keen on doing this?"

"Madame Vellier told me it might be good for the both of us."

Great! The troubled leading the troubled. "I get what you're doing and it's really kind of you. But I don't think this is a good idea."

Even if she would regret it in the morning, she stepped around him.

"I agreed to become your partner because I wanted to repay Madame Vellier for saving my life." His confession stopped Macy in her tracks. "But when I saw you for the first time, my priorities changed. Instead of being selfless, I became selfish. I think we're well matched. I can't explain it. It just is what it is."

Unsure if something significant passed between them or not, Macy hesitated. But she almost shot out of her Capezios when he brushed his fingertips against the small of her back.

"Will you permit me?"

Macy gulped. "Permit you to do what?" With the way her heart was pounding against her breastbone, she would probably permit him anything.

"To prove we're well suited."

Even though she allowed him to lead her down the hallway and back into the main studio, Macy already knew the answer before her feet even hit the dance floor.

Chapter Two

Macy Beaumont was the one.

No, she wasn't his predestined mate. Gideon snorted at the absurdity of the term. Demons weren't monogamous. And they didn't possess a soul, so they did not have the capacity to feel real emotion, much less love. Of course, like other half-breeds, he had a shadow of a soul. However, until now he had never felt anything other than lust for the feminine sex.

Despite his inexperience, Gideon still recognized Macy Beaumont as his. Even over the hot press of bodies and Martha's tea rose perfume. In truth, he would've known Macy in a crowd of thousands. Millions, if she were close enough.

All demons had this uncanny ability to recognize their first human. It was a prize many of them waited for. The one human they would be allowed to twist, manipulate and totally possess. And nothing or no one could tear them asunder, except a religious intervention, the death of the possessed or plain old-fashioned boredom—on the demon's part.

Unlike other demons, Gideon had resisted the innumerable pleasures presented by the human realm. Even when he collected souls, he was in and out before he could become distracted enough to follow the whims of his cock.

His absolute avoidance of mankind influenced Gideon's total immersion into his duties as a high prince. In an ironic twist, the constant pain and torturing he wreaked over the centuries resulted in his need to seek the help of a psychiatrist.

His very avoidance, subsequent treatment and remedy led him right into the arms of what he'd run from for over a thousand years. A human female who would repeat the very cycle he'd tried to break—a cycle which brought him into this world and ripped him from his mother's arms. And the exact reason why he would move all nine planes of the Abyss or enter a woman's bathroom to claim Macy Beaumont.

After all this time, why her? Was it because she didn't smell like the usual sulfur and brimstone he'd grown accustomed to and expected when he bedded a female. Unlike them, Macy Beaumont smelled like sunlight and flowers, particularly genus *Lavandula* or what humans commonly called lavender.

Normally such a sweet scent would have caused him to double over and empty the contents of his stomach. But to Gideon's surprise, her scent captivated him. No. It went beyond that. She rode his back, teased the beast inside him. She made him want to either destroy something or throw her to the floor and sink his cock into her. Even worse, she would let him. He smelled her arousal long before the cha cha ended.

Would she meet him thrust for thrust, like now as she followed his lead? At the thought of making love to her, Gideon's crotch strained the front of his leathers. He squeezed his eyes shut in a feeble effort to stick to the slow, slow, quick, quick steps of the foxtrot.

It didn't help.

Would making love to her be this discombobulating? To the point he couldn't control himself? *Lucifer!* He'd bedded thousands of she-demons over the centuries. But she was the only who made his jaded desires spiral into overdrive and his cock harder than one of the stone gargoyles guarding the Notre Dame.

Her scent bombed his defenses and awakened his inner demon—that selfish maniacal bastard with a possessive streak a mile wide. He wanted to chain her to a bed and make love to her for an eternity or for as long as he was interested.

Angered by his baser emotions, Gideon gnashed his teeth. He hated who he was. His weak human imperfections and the malevolent callousness of his damned other half. Thankfully, a half-breed's lack of self-control wasn't as catastrophic as a full-blooded demon. Gideon couldn't trigger a plague or cause the seas to boil, but his attentions could still be disastrous. If their interest wasn't returned, his kind was known to tear apart those they lusted after.

Gideon knew he should walk out the door and never look back. *No longer an option.* His half brother, Asmodeus, had already planted the seeds of desire. There was only one course available. He would tempt Macy Beaumont, woo her to distraction, crawl under her skin so she would think of nothing else but pleasing him.

In layman's terms, he would possess her, mind, body and soul.

* * * * *

"Did you just growl?"

Gideon's eyes snapped open, his gaze slightly out of focus. Macy reformed the question, but the words died on her lips as she stumbled over several steps in the promenade.

"What's wrong?" he asked, sidestepping her clumsiness, yet somehow managing to pull her close at the same time.

"I could have sworn just a minute ago your eyes were a light golden brown. Now they're blacker than pitch."

Gideon looked at a point over her head. "You're mistaken."

"But they were several shades lighter in the hallway," Macy protested.

"A play of the light."

Macy couldn't argue with him. Dimmer than usual, the studio's lighting had been turned down, but it wasn't that dark. There would've been too many casualties, since ninety-five percent of Madame Vellier's students carried Medicare cards. Still, not one to be hoodwinked, the dogged investigative reporter inside her surfaced.

But Macy faltered. When he met her gaze again, Gideon's eye color had returned to the beautiful golden shade she'd dreamed about on more than one night. "How did you do that?"

"Like I said before..." He lowered his head. "It was only a play of the light," he replied, his warm breath feathering over her ear.

Macy gulped. Ever since he'd taken her free hand, settled it on the boulder most Biology books called a shoulder, then placed his own on the small of her back, she'd been ready to implode. All she could concentrate on was how large his body and hands were compared to her own. And the unusual amount of heat he generated.

Of course, the rise in temperature wasn't wholly uncomfortable. It just popped off every nerve ending in a three-mile radius. Mentally shaking herself, she attempted to grasp the reins of her raging libido. But Nina Simone's sultry turn of *My Baby Just Cares for Me*, combined with Gideon's close proximity, made it practically impossible.

Absorbed in her tormented thoughts, she stumbled against him as they took a turn. The hard planes of his body pressed against her own, shocking her into hyperawareness and right out of his arms and into the elderly couple behind them.

"I-I'm sorry," she stuttered to the hapless pair.

"Pardon us. My partner likes dancing with me so much she's a little overzealous," Gideon offered her victims, still trying to right themselves. Not sure if she was more ashamed of mowing over two senior citizens or irritated at Gideon's presumptiveness, Macy broke away, her sights set on the nearest exit.

She only executed a half turn before his hand clamped down on her wrist. "You know you don't have anything to be embarrassed about," he rasped, his words low and evenly enunciated. "I like dancing with you too."

Geez Louise! How could she dance with him after an admission like that? He already had her body turning to mush, now her mind as well. What next, her soul?

Still Macy allowed him to pull her back into his arms. After several turns and no more mishaps, Macy's confidence snowballed. She forgot the jiggle in her butt, her discomfiting love handles and became one with the music and her partner.

"I'm glad you gave us a chance."

"Me too." *Pump the brakes!* What happened to the walls she so carefully erected over the past year and a half? Had they crumbled, allowing him to crawl under her skin, after only one dance?

Macy's guilt complex took a temporary detour as Madame Vellier sidled up next to them. "Well? Are you two going to represent the Academy and break *cet cochon* Etienne Lorient's five-year winning streak?"

Gideon chuckled. "So the plot thickens."

Madame Vellier shrugged, a blameworthy smile curling her lips. "Isn't there always an underlying motivation?"

"How much time would it entail?" Gideon asked.

"Three times a week, no less than two hours per session, for six months." Surely he couldn't carve out the time.

"Count me in. How about you, Ms. Beaumont?"

Macy opened and closed her mouth. She knew she probably resembled a fish out of water. She didn't care. What they were proposing was totally preposterous in spite of his so called "it is what it is".

"You're serious about this?" Gideon nodded, spreading his coal black hair over his broad shoulders.

"We're well-matched. I'd make the time. Juggle my priorities. But all bets hinge on you."

Gideon's golden gaze connected with hers. Images of him twisting her body like a pretzel flashed through her mind, sealing her fate. Unable to peel her eyes away from him or justify her sudden, inexplicable urge to concede, she finally found her voice. "All right, I'm in."

"Bon!" Madame Vellier exclaimed. "I will see you both on Wednesday at six o'clock sharp. We will begin with the American Tango, the dance for lovers. Now if you two would excuse me, Tyler keeps spiking the milk punch. I refuse to be the reason for several drunken octogenarians ending up at the bottom of the Mississippi."

As soon as Madame Vellier left them alone, Macy dropped her hand from Gideon's shoulder. "Well, I guess I'll see you next week."

"How about now? Want to get out of here?" Noticing the degree of intensity in his golden gaze, Macy found herself jumping to conclusions.

"I've agreed to be your dance partner, but I'm not easy."

"I only want to break bread with you. Etienne's Bistro is on the corner, I've been dying to try them out."

Macy's face burned hotter than a witch's tit in a brass bra.

"I—I guess I deserved that, didn't I? For having my head in the gutter, when yours obviously wasn't. I'm sorry."

Macy's apology withered away into a sharp inhale as she found herself wedged into his all too personal space, his head lowered to the point where their lips almost touched. *If only he'd turn his head a little to the left.*

"Let's call a spade a spade, Ms. Beaumont. My head is always in the gutter. So do we get something to eat or do we go to your place and I eat you?"

Macy's legs quivered worse than a drunken sailor on furlough. And the little devil on her shoulder sang a rollicking rendition of *Lady Marmalade* with a disturbing emphasis on the chorus. Still she decided to play it safe. "*Etienne's* sounds nice."

Her answer produced a wicked smirk. "Coward. Let me get my jacket. Don't move." He gave her a sly wink, then turned to pick his way through the crowd. Unable to resist, Macy watched him. More so to check out his perfectly molded ass than actual obedience.

"Koman sa va, mon amie?"

Macy turned to answer Denise's question. "Awful. I bombed out there."

Denise chuckled. "I couldn't tell by looking at you two. You were amazing together."

"I guess there was a little chemistry. He asked me out, Denise. We're headed to *Etienne's Bistro*."

Denise's eyes widened like a possum caught in a car's headlights. "Please tell me you said yes."

"Why the sudden change? I thought you said he was reminded you of a Yeti."

"Sasquatch," Denise corrected. "Besides, he kind of grows on you."

Macy's hand flew over her mouth. "Oh Denise," she moaned. "I totally forgot we came together. You're totally welcome to come along."

Denise waved Macy's invitation away like a bothersome fly. "So not my style. I have never been a third wheel and I don't plan on being one now. Plus, you haven't been on a date since...well I can't remember when, so I'm not going to get in the way."

"Getting a bite to eat is not a date or a booty call. He's only my dance partner." Keep saying it and maybe you'll believe it.

"Who are you kidding? We're talking about Mr. Hot Buns! The man of your dreams. Wet ones, I might add." Denise nodded her head toward the object of their conversation.

"Qu'est-ce qui vous allez faire, Mace? What's it going to be? Are you going to take a chance and dance with the devil? Or are you going to treat him like the half dozen or so other guys you've allowed to slip through your fingers?"

"How can I pursue someone I don't even know wants to be pursued? As always, you're jumping the gun." *Like I'd done earlier and made a complete fool of myself.*

"Midnight soiree turns into late-night dinner, even later breakfast...it's all relative in my book. I better get lost, Mr. Hot Buns is on his way over here. *Merde!* I wish I were you right now." Denise sighed dreamily. "But hearing about it will be better than nothing. Call me the minute you get home."

Macy nodded absently, her thoughts already racing over dozens of scenarios and what ifs. Unfortunately all of them ended with her flat on her back with her heels raised in the air.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Gideon asked.

He'd be richer than Bill Gates if he knew half of the Sluts R' Us imaginings she'd constructed over the past half-hour. Like whether or not a man's shoe size really correlated with his penis size or if his fingers resembled the head of his cock. Instead of sharing, Macy smiled politely while she shelved her thoughts for later, when she was alone in bed.

"Ah there it is again, that polite little smile you like to hide behind." Macy's cheeks blossomed. "So, what do I have to do to get to know you better?" As if sensing her dilemma, he winked. "Discover your deep dark secrets?"

Unaccustomed to a man harboring an interest in her, a blush stained her cheeks. If it weren't for her naturally dark complexion, resembling freshly ground nutmeg, Macy would have been doubly embarrassed.

"Did I say something wrong?"

Macy sat up straighter. Darn he was good! "No. It's been a long time since someone expressed an interest in me."

"You know lying is a sin," he replied, a smile playing across his full lips. "A woman like you must have men falling all over themselves."

"No men falling here. Not even my ex-husband," she muttered, fiddling with the goat-shaped salt shaker.

"Ex? You've been married before?" he asked, his eyes boring into hers, unnerving her. Great. He just threw her in the damaged goods pile.

"Po' boy, hold the mayonnaise, extra tomatoes, for the lady." Their waitress, a washed-out, frizzy-haired blonde, set Macy's order on the table with a flourish. *Saved by the waitress with the bad perm!*

"A petite filet with pomme frites, absolutely no salt or seasoning and medium rare, for the young stud. Anything else I can get ya'll?"

Yeah, you can get lost. Macy looked to Gideon, who leaned forward, his nostrils widening as he inhaled. He seized his cutlery and dove into his steak. While he cut his meat, she admired the play of muscles underneath his t-shirt. Certain he tasted as good as he looked, she licked her lips.

"Anything else I can get ya'll? Like maybe a room?" Macy stiffened. She'd forgotten they had company. Her cheeks blooming, she sensed Gideon's regard. When she glanced over, his brooding look frightened...and aroused her at the same time.

"I think we have all we need." Gideon replied with a wink. He then parted his lips and devoured his first bite.

Why do I get the feeling he'll do the same thing to me?

"Well, enjoy folks. Just holler if you need me."

As if sensing her regard, he looked up. He graced her with another wink, then parted his lips to inhale another bite. Once his lips closed over the piece of steak, his eyes fluttered shut, fanning a lush fringe of inky black eyelashes across his high cheekbones. His tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip.

In turn, Macy sucked on hers. For the first time in her life, she wouldn't mind begging a man to kiss her. If there was ever a heavenly expression, he won it hands down. Would he look like that during sex? Macy wondered. His eyes squeezed shut and his face flushed right before he exploded.

Macy shifted her panties, suddenly damp and uncomfortable. Seeking neutral ground before she assaulted him, she reached for the salt shaker again and angled it over his plate. "Here, let me put some salt on your fries."

"No salt!" Gideon barked, gripping her wrist. Was that fear in his eyes? Maybe hypertension ran in his family.

"O-okay." He held her wrist for a fraction of a second longer, then let go. Rattled, Macy set the shaker back down on the table, making sure she set it as far away from his plate as possible.

Once he'd gained a semblance of his former self, he picked up a pomme frites, then popped it into his mouth. With a satisfied grunt he picked up another. "Now where were we?" he mumbled between bites. "Ah yes...we were talking about your marriage. I promise I won't distract you this time."

Macy's face blazed from embarrassment. "H-how could you tell I was distracted? Your eyes were closed."

"I could feel your eyes on me." He paused, another pommes frites poised an inch from his lips. "I liked it."

The degree of raw emotion swirling in his golden gaze should have frightened her, but it didn't. In a roundabout way, it bolstered her confidence and she did something she'd been unable to do in the past year.

"Trace and I were together for ten years, but only married for four. High school sweethearts and a huge mistake from the beginning. Just too young, stupid and in love to see it, I guess. And although my divorce has been finalized for almost two years, I'm still finding it hard to move on."

Macy noticed he stiffened. "Are you still in love with your ex?"

"Heck no!" Macy rolled her eyes heavenward. "Trace was my first. First date. First kiss. First everything. So it's been kind of hard being single when you've never done it. I've really struggled these past few months. The biggest issue I have is feeling comfortable around someone of the opposite sex. That's why I've only attempted one date so far. That one was such a disaster it'll probably stay with me a hundred years." Macy cringed, remembering how she spilled her double mocha latte in her date's lap, locked his keys in the car and called him by the wrong name.

Gideon wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "How do you think you're doing on this one?"

"This isn't a date," Macy countered, even though she secretly wished it was.

"I'm a man. You're a woman. We're on a date."

"We're dance partners grabbing a bite to eat. Plus, you need a shared attraction for this to be a date." There, she'd laid it out in layman's terms. How do you like them apples...stud.

Gideon leaned toward her as if he only wanted her to hear his next words. "I guess it's a date. I'm attracted to you and you're attracted to me." Then, as if he'd just told her

the time of day, he picked up another pomme frites. But he didn't pop it into his mouth like all the others and his playful manner had disappeared.

He was waiting to hear her call his bluff.

On the hook, Macy's heart thundered. Even if she wanted to deny him, she couldn't. She kept her silence instead.

"Now that that's settled, don't most dates end with a kiss?"

Chapter Three

"I might be attracted to you, Gideon. And you might have twisted this into a date, but it doesn't mean I'm going to let you kiss me."

Gideon almost chuckled at her quizzical expression. Her sudden show of chutzpah must have surprised her as well. Her wide-set chocolate brown eyes widened and her kissable lips formed a perfect O.

Intrigued by her newfound attitude, Gideon grew impatient for her kiss, even more so now that she'd verbally denied him. Liking this side of her, he decided to press more of her buttons. "You say that, but you will."

In reaction to his smug assertion, her eyes expanded, then narrowed. But she kept silent as she cocked her head and leaned back in the booth to study him, a half-moon smile bowing her lips. If he wasn't careful, she might bewitch him.

"What makes you so sure?" she challenged.

Gideon briefly closed his eyes and inhaled. His keen senses separated every nuance from the smell of their dinner to the magnolia still pinned to her dress, down to the fragrant ambrosia of her arousal. "Because you want me too."

Again, his honesty made her uneasy. She shifted nervously, playing with the dress tie at the nape of her neck. Her naïveté provoked Gideon's lustful nature. She'd never been talked to like this before, he was sure. The thought made him want to throw her on top of the table, dive under her dress and lick her pussy until she screamed his name.

"You're too much, you know that? Your mother forgot to teach you some manners or at least a little tact."

Gideon stiffened. His lack of a mother had always been a sore point for him. "My mother had no hand in my upbringing. In fact, I never knew her. Everything I know about women, I learned from watching my father. I'm a direct product of an immoral and testosterone-driven environment, you could say."

"It shows," she replied, leaning forward and propping her chin in her hand.

Surprised his admission didn't alter the smile on her lips, Gideon relaxed. Unable to help himself, he ran his finger down her bare arm. *She felt like silk!* A jolt zinged up his arm, catching him off guard.

Get a hold of yourself before you do something you'll regret. "I'm a product of my upbringing. We can't choose our parents, but at least we can choose our lovers."

"Or choose not to take one," she whispered.

Lucifer! More women should play hard to get. Normally he could seduce a female of his kind with only a wink and a smile. But here she was, constantly throwing his

seduction in his face. Aroused by her stubbornness, he picked up the gauntlet. "You won't."

Her smile widened, dimpling both cheeks. Despite the charming picture she affected, it didn't affect him like her sudden burst of pheromones.

What would she look like wrapped in black silk sheets? Mouthwatering, he was sure, as his cock grew another inch.

"I won't what?"

"You won't have to choose tonight." He ignored her petulant frown—the one she didn't attempt to hide—lest he kiss it from her lips. Two could play hard to get. "Everything has its time and place, including our first encounter."

Her dark eyes twinkled. His change in tactics aroused her. "You're willing to wait?"

Gideon traced the delicate lines of her face, swan-like slope of her neck and slight stubborn thrust of her chin. He might be a brutal beast who tortured millions without any qualms, but he wanted her to come to him of her own free will. Even if he had to wait longer than expected.

Didn't good things come to those who wait?

* * * * *

Several hours and desserts later, they left *Etienne's Bistro*. In spite of the late hour, people still spilled out of the French Quarter's all-night bars and several cars rumbled past. Their tires sounded like juggernauts against the street's uneven cobblestone. All that turned into background noise when Gideon took her arm to walk her back up the street to her car.

"You're good at being evasive. All that time back there and I know practically nothing about you."

"I'm good at manipulation and smoke screens. Can't be helped. It's useful in my line of work." Macy felt him stiffen under her arm as if he'd said too much. Even his steps slowed until they were just standing in the middle of the sidewalk. "My job is stressful," he finally continued. "Under a doctor's orders, I took up ballroom dancing. The rest is history."

Macy stared at his profile. Noting the rigid set of his features, a feeling of protectiveness stole over her. She curled her hand around his upper arm and stroked his biceps.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. When they neared the curb, a woman dressed in a black-and-white, flower-patterned muumuu crossed in front of them. Carrying an armload-of-multicolored paper, she ambled up the sidewalk, handing out flyers to those she passed.

"How many more children have to be taken before people will take notice," she sang as if singing an old church hymnal.

"Excuse me," Macy called after her. "May I have a flyer."

The woman turned around, a warm smile stretching her plump jowls. She didn't hesitate to thrust one of the handouts at her. "Here you go, honey."

When she turned the leaflet over, a half dozen innocent faces stared back at her. *I think I'm going to be sick.*

"All of them have been taken in the past four weeks."

Macy wasn't surprised. Her practice of staying away from the crimes desk and the TV news kept her virtually in the dark. That's how she liked it. It helped her keep her sanity.

"We'll do our best to keep our eyes open," Gideon volunteered while Macy remained silent.

"A little praying wouldn't hurt either, chile'." The woman smiled, exposing even white teeth punctuated with identical gold caps covering her canines.

Macy folded the flyer in half, then shoved it into her purse. Her eyes followed the woman as she continued up the sidewalk passing out flyers, talking to anyone who'd listen.

Gideon squeezed her hand, regaining her attention. "Why so quiet?"

Macy blinked away the past. "I was just thinking about the parents of those children and how sick with worry they must be. It-it reminded me of what we went through after the storm."

Gideon took her hand. "You were here during Hurricane Katrina?"

Macy nodded, with the weight of unshed tears clouding her vision. Before she made a fool of herself, she wiped her eyes.

"I didn't arrive until after the storm. I can't imagine the things you must have gone through."

She swallowed over the lump in her throat. "If you were here during the aftermath, then you know it was pure hell."

"Yes but at least it was only temporary," he pointed out. "New Orleanians are resilient and you're turning it into your own Eden again."

Macy studied Gideon's expression. For the briefest moment, she caught a glimpse of something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Before she could dig deeper, he masked it with a wink and a sultry lopsided grin.

Her pulse quickened. Embarrassed by her body's reaction so soon after learning there was a serial kidnapper on the loose, Macy decided to put some distance between them or she'd renege on her earlier promise. Slipping her arm from his, she looked away.

"I...umm...I better get going. I have an early meeting," she muttered while taking an undue interest in her dancing shoes. When the tips of his black motorcycle boots butted against her shoes, she tensed.

"I guess I can't convince you to join me for a late nightcap. I know this bar a couple of blocks over rumored to serve up the best Hurricanes."

If he was looking to get her intoxicated, he was too late. To ensure her departure before she ended up punch drunk and reneging on her earlier chutzpah, Macy thrust her hand out. "That sounds really enticing, but I have an eight o'clock meeting in the morning."

Gideon clasped her hand, using it to pull her toward him. With each inch that brought them closer, a wave of awareness crashed over her, seduced her and tempted her to give in to countless possibilities. Like a late nightcap, followed by even later sex – preferably the hot, sticky, sweaty kind. Macy groaned.

Come on, just this once. You have nothing to lose. Nothing and everything. Sex led to feelings. Mix that with her insecurities and her fragile confidence crumbled.

Macy withdrew her hand.

Their gazes met, clashing. Gideon's eyes narrowed and a muscle worked in his jaw. Macy squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, resolved. Conditioned by an insensitive husband, she waited for the hatchet to fall.

He broke the silence, "Why do I get the feeling I'm the wolf in sheep's clothing?"

Macy wasn't expecting such a direct question nor one that hit so close to home. "There's a chance you could be," she whispered.

He reached out and brushed a wayward curl behind her ear. His touch was both warm and comforting. "I may have a voracious appetite, but if anyone is in danger of being devoured, I think it will be me. All the same, if you're the predator, then I would go gladly into slaughter."

Chapter Four

"I'm glad you all could make it this morning." Holcomb Williams, *The Times Picayune's* managing editor, glanced over at Macy as she stifled a yawn.

"Some more so than others. We have a lot to discuss, so let's dive right in. I'm pretty sure you all have heard rumblings of this. Well last night our suspicions were confirmed." Holcomb flipped through the steno pad perched atop his makeshift podium, a stack of old newspapers. When he pulled out a blue piece of paper, Macy's pencil slipped from her fingers.

"According to this flyer, six children ranging in age from six to twelve have been kidnapped from the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood."

Before Holcomb could continue, head photographer Stella Chartres raised her hand. "Why are we just hearing about this?"

"The police think the disappearances are all coincidental, which explains why they haven't gone public with the story. That's why I've decided to put two of our top investigative reporters on the streets to prove them wrong. Croce and Beaumont, congratulations."

She'd been reassigned!

For Macy, the rest of the morning meeting faded into background noise. She didn't cover homicides. She exposed crooked business practices and cultural trends for *The Times Picayune* subscribers. She wanted to keep it that way! After Katrina and a bitter divorce, she didn't deal with death or loss very well.

Through the rest of the meeting, Macy simmered with anger. And soon after it ended, she jumped up from her desk to follow Holcomb to his office. "Mr. Williams, can I have a word with you?"

Holcomb Williams turned around, his customary scowl already in place. "Make it quick, Beaumont. I have a galley to proof and put to bed before three o'clock."

"I think you made a mistake back there."

Her boss folded his beefy arms across his chest. Macy knew that stance all too well. This was not going to go well! "Are you fishing for compliments, Beaumont?"

"No sir. That would be stupid of me since you never give them. I simply wondered why you chose to reassign me. I haven't covered a homicide in more than four years."

"I need the best people on this story. Your ability to catch details others tend to miss is invaluable."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, but I'm not the right person for the assignment."

Mr. Williams sighed long and hard, already bored with the conversation. "You aren't the only Katrina survivor and plenty of your colleagues have gone through a bitter divorce, myself included, on both accounts. I'm not reassigning you. It might do a young kid like you some good. Now if that's all, I need to get to work. You need to talk to the victims' families."

Without waiting to see if she had any more objections, he turned his back on her and continued on to his office.

Even though she wanted to drop-kick him down the hallway, Macy headed back to her desk. "What's wrong, Superwoman?" Macy glanced up at Stephan Delacroix. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Macy stuffed her satchel with two reporter's notebooks and several No. 2 pencils. She might bemoan the hand of fate, but she still loved her job and she was good at it. "Not yet, but this assignment will dig up a whole nest of them."

* * * * *

Macy glanced over her shoulder. Sure enough, they still followed. *They* being a group of neighborhood children who'd taken to following her ever since yesterday. Like the purse on her shoulder, they'd become dead weight, reminding Macy of her unsuccessful attempts at interviewing the victims' families.

Unsure of her next move, Macy paused to contemplate her options. Even that couldn't be accomplished because her cell phone rang. "Macy Beaumont speaking."

"*Koman sa va?* Feast or famine, Vicki Vale?" Denise's familiar mix of N'awlins drawl and Creole brought a smile to Macy's lips.

"Famine. I'm still walking door-to-door in Bywater, trying to find someone willing to be interviewed about the recent kidnappings."

"How's it going?"

Macy stepped off the curb to cross the street. As expected, her entourage stuck with her. "Not well," she lamented. "I've wasted two days doing what the police should have done months ago."

"Babe, you aren't the police. You only gather the facts. Am I right?"

"How can I perform my job if everyone refuses to speak to me?" To stave off the onset of a major migraine, Macy pressed her lips together.

"You'll think of something, kiddo. You always do. I hate to cut this short, but I've gotta run. My boss is buzzing me. I swear the man couldn't find his nose with a flashlight. Hang in there! And don't forget to call me when you get in."

"It'll be late. I have my first lesson with Gideon tonight."

"Then it's imperative you call me! I don't care if it's four o'clock in the morning. Well...now I'm hoping you don't call because that'll mean you're hogtied to the bed, filled to the rim with cock. If that happens, I can hold out until lunch."

Macy rolled her eyes. "How many times do I have to remind you he's only a dance partner?"

"As many times as it will take to convince yourself that's all he is. Buh-bye."

Macy's retort died with their conversation. Greeted by the soft buzz of a dial tone, she flipped the phone closed. Noting the time was a quarter past six, Macy decided to call it a day. She needed to get home, change into her dance clothes and get down to Madame Vellier's by eight o'clock.

Making an about-face, Macy headed back to her car. Due to her change in direction, the kids scattered, except for a middle schooler in a pair of white roller skates. "Are you done for the day, Miss?" Stunned, Macy skidded to a stop.

"Yes, but I'll be back tomorrow."

The girl nodded her head. Her cornrows, decorated on the ends with wooden beads, clicked together, producing an odd tune. "You'll be wasting your time. No one is gonna talk to you. They're all scared."

Never surprised by people's answers, Macy didn't bat an eye. "What do they have to be afraid of? Do they think there's a gang behind the kidnap—"

"Ooooh...Cookie! You gonna be in trouble." Macy glanced across the street. On the opposite curb stood a little boy, his lips stained a bright shade of blue from the Bomb Pop clutched in his chubby little hand.

"Shut up, Bob. I won't be in trouble if you keep your big mouth closed."

Bob stuck his hand out. "What're you gonna give me?"

Cookie rolled her eyes. "You want ice cream, don't you?" The boy's eyes widened and his head wobbled like a bobble head. With an exaggerated sigh, Cookie reached into her jean pocket. Bob looked both ways, then ran across the street to join them. "Here, now go home," she ordered, placing a dollar bill in his sticky little palm. "And you better have your bath done by the time I get there."

While the little boy skipped off, Macy pulled out a pencil and her reporter's notepad. "So, why is everyone so afraid to talk to me?"

Cookie looked over her shoulder, then up and down the sidewalk. Satisfied no one else was eavesdropping, she answered, "They're afraid if they talk about what's going on, it'll mark them and the evil spirit will come after them or someone in their family."

Put a fork in me, I'm done! "An evil spirit? You mean like a demon or a ghost?"

"Yes, ma'am. Only an evil spirit can do what's happened."

"You talk like you've seen it in action."

The girl looked over at the community park across the street. "It took my cousin Olivia," she whispered. Macy rubbed her hand over her heart. If it beat any harder, it would leap out of her chest. "Do you think you can tell me what happened?"

"Livia was playing on the swings in the park. Around dinner time, her mama walked up with a bag from Don's around the corner. Livia loves candy and my Auntie

Marquette was on fire about having to shell out \$500 last month to fill four cavities. When I saw that, I knew something was wrong. But by then it was too late."

"How do you know it wasn't her mother?"

"Because five minutes later, Auntie Marquette came out of the house," Cookie pointed to a pink and white bungalow several houses down. "She called her in for dinner, but it was too late. She was gone."

Cookie leaned against the chain link fence bordering the house in front of them. "It was my fault she disappeared. I was supposed to be watching her." Macy reached out to take the girl's hand, but the girl pulled away. "I better get going. My mama wants me in before the street lights come on."

"Thank you, Cookie. With your help, I'm one step closer to finding out who took your cousin."

The girl's face clouded with anger. "I didn't do it for you. I deserve to be taken right along with Livia. She was my responsibility."

Stunned, Macy watched her skate down the sidewalk until she disappeared around the corner. "Great going, Macy. You just helped fulfill a death wish."

* * * * *

"Crap, I'm late! This is what you get for feeding your ego," Macy mumbled, taking the studio stairs two at a time. Since she hadn't laid eyes on Gideon in two whole days, she wanted to knock his socks off. So her efforts resulted in no less than seven wardrobe changes, with her settling on a gray leotard and matching swing skirt. To save time, Macy pulled her hair back in a low ponytail. She looked pretty good if she did say so herself. She just hoped Gideon appreciated the effort.

But what if he didn't?

Her steps slowed. *What am I doing? If I'm dressing up for a man's approval, then that means I care more than I ought to.* And caring meant feelings. And feelings usually led to disappointment.

Macy slumped against the wall. "Why did I agree to do this?" Easy answer. Gideon was the first guy she'd found attractive in months. "Make that years." Still, that didn't mean she had to lose her head or her heart. "You won't, if you take things slow and keep your expectations to a minimum."

Vowing to safeguard her heart, Macy took the last flight of stairs.

As expected, Tyler sat behind the studio's reception desk, his sneakered feet propped up, punk music blaring from a pair of headphones. A Rubik's cube twirled between his nimble fingers. Macy waved as she hurried past.

Owing to the tall figure standing opposite the entrance, she didn't make it across the lobby.

Dressed in a pair of black track pants and a white fitted t-shirt, Gideon's practice gear was unremarkable. The body? That was exceptional! Her eyes practically sweated

as they slid over his wide shoulders, narrow hips and his best asset—a pair of rock-hard buns.

Macy stole a surreptitious look at Madame Vellier's nephew, to make sure the Rubik's cube still held his attention. He didn't look up once. Gulping down the remnants of her personal issues, she walked over to stand next to her dance partner.

"To be that beautiful and graceful would be heavenly," she commented, referencing the dozen or so portraits of Madame Vellier in her various performances. Gideon's shoulder brushed against hers when he turned. Like a juggernaut, his touch punctured the safeguard she'd established on the stairs, almost knocking her to her knees. Before she keeled over, she leaned against the nearest chair.

"Any more blessings and you'll be the death of me."

In his roundabout way, he'd just called her a perfect ten! How could she take it slow when he bombarded her on all fronts? If her knees weren't so weak, she would have clicked them.

"We better go in, we're already late." Gideon slipped his fingers through hers. Their warm, intimate glide melted more of Macy's reserve. "I would rather face famine and a swarm of locusts than get on Madame Vellier's bad side."

Having melted to the consistency of butter on a fresh-baked beignet and slightly punch drunk, she followed him down the hallway to the main studio. *Alas, all good things must end*, Macy lamented when he released her hand to allow her to precede him inside.

"Glad you could make it," Madame Vellier sniffed. Clad in a long, black skirt and leotard, she glared at their reflection. "I hope you two brought your thinking caps because we're going to jump right in with the American Tango. Let's begin with the basic dancer's pose."

Macy placed her right hand in Gideon's, the other on his shoulder. If the basic dancer's pose didn't call for an upright posture and considerable distance from one's partner, she would've melted into him again.

"You must have had a good day. You look like a rose after a summer storm."

Whoa Nellie! If he kept up with the compliments, New Orleans wouldn't be the only thing nicknamed The Big Easy. "Actually I've had a bad week."

His expression tightened. "So bad you might cut out early? I was hoping to spend time with you after class. That's if you're free."

Macy perked up. With only a few words, he changed the direction of her day from a slow descent into hell to a day worthy of a journal entry. "What do you have in mind?"

"Later has become sooner."

Macy's extremities went up in flames. "I thought you said there was a time and a place for us?"

"Who's to say tonight isn't the night? If you hold my hand, we're halfway there. Hold my hand and I'll take you there."

Macy frowned. Why did that sound so familiar? Noting the tight press of his lips and the spark in his eyes, it suddenly clicked. "I remember singing *Somewhere* for my eighth-grade spring choral recital. You owe Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim royalties."

Gideon threw his head back and laughed, totally unrepentant of his piracy. Macy almost pursed her lips to keep from laughing herself. Instead she decided to get even, "You know, you had me until you started lifting lyrics."

His laughter dried up faster than a shirt hung out to dry on a warm summer day. "Did I?" he solicited, his expression surprisingly serious.

Macy shook her head. "No."

Gideon chuckled. His deep-throated amusement dumped an unexpected bucket of shivers down her spine. Unaware of her predicament, he continued, "At least it proves how much I honestly want you. Not many men will resort to sappy ballads and risk looking the fool because of their desire to win you over."

Her insides might be short-circuiting, but Macy stuck to her guns, feigning a nonchalant mien. "That's nothing new. Men do it all the time. Some get shot out of the water for their efforts, others get lucky."

"What category do I fall into?"

His earnest, puppy-dog look warmed Macy's heart. It was nice to have a man run after her for once! Deciding to draw this out longer than was necessary, she countered, "I haven't decided yet."

"Doesn't matter. I won't be falling into either of those categories. When you choose me, it will be an answer to *my* prayers."

Little did he know his prayers had already been answered the moment she laid eyes on him.

During their first hour of instruction, Madame Vellier put them through their paces with the dreaded eight-count basic, the cornerstone of the American Tango. And since he'd befuddled Macy with his talk of want and desire, she'd mashed his toes and the crowns of his feet more than he could count.

Gideon didn't care. Macy Beaumont could maim him for life. In the past hour and a half, she'd embedded herself under his skin. Her unique blend of spunk, peppered with her quiet tenacity and unpretentious grace, impressed upon him a side of humanity he'd rarely come across in his day-to-day dealings with the condemned.

Admittedly his lust raged brighter than either of the two. It couldn't be helped. He'd become aroused the moment she stepped into the lobby. Her scent permeated the tiny space so quickly it nearly knocked him to his knees. Their lack of privacy was the only reason he hadn't dragged her to the lobby's black and white tiled floor.

In an effort to keep the beast at bay, Gideon took several calming breaths. He concentrated on the dance steps. The music's driving rhythm. None of those distractions helped. All he could envision were Macy's lips – the juicy pair between her legs – and slipping his cock between them.

"*Nous somme terminé...*we are done. The both of you are welcome to continue practicing. My nephew leads an intermediate tap class in the smaller studio next door. If you decide to stay, he'll lock up behind you."

The thought of being left alone with Macy stirred Gideon's blood, especially the supply leading to his cock. But his ardor dissipated along with her desire to stay over her need to leave. She wanted to leave even though she was enjoying herself. She thought him dangerous, yet that was what drew her to him.

Before she slipped through his fingers, Gideon moved to accept Madame Vellier's offer. "We'll be staying...if you have nothing else planned?" Gideon looked down at Macy as if giving her a choice when in actuality she had none. Once his mind was made up, he would move heaven and earth to obtain it. *Her inner turmoil?* Only a minor hurdle for his considerable powers of persuasion.

"I guess I can stay another hour," she murmured.

Gideon shuttered a triumphant smile.

Wrapping a black lace shawl around her shoulders, Madame Vellier nodded her head. "Good. The music will play on a continuous loop. Just switch off the stereo and the lights when you leave. See you two on Wednesday. And don't be late."

Soon as the door closed behind her, Gideon pulled Macy back into his embrace. Hearing her quickened heartbeat, he knew she felt the rigid press of his cock. Nonplussed by his condition and unwilling to let her go, he pulled her closer. "So where did we leave off?"

"W-we were working on the corte with very poor results," she stuttered. "Guess I'm a klutz tonight."

"Don't beat yourself up. With your tenacity, you'll master it before the night is over." His encouragement educed a timid smile.

Gideon jerked back. The power of such an innocent gesture shocked him. "How about we take a turn about the room using the eight-count basic followed by corte?"

At her nod, he took a step backward. Even with the guiding hand at the small of her back, she stumbled against him. Her warm, soft curves made him feverish, beside himself. Gideon strangled a groan.

"I'm sorry," Macy lamented.

"It's okay. Let's start at the top of the count. Make sure you listen to the music," he encouraged. While she continued to chastise herself, Gideon patted himself on the back. Her clumsiness didn't bother him in the least. A few bruises were a fair exchange for having the opportunity to feel her body against his.

"One...two...three, four, five...six...seven...and..." Gideon lunged to his left. Macy lifted her leg, placed it on his thigh and leaned into his outstretched arm.

"Beautifully executed," he breathed. "The next time—"

A lightning bolt licked its way through Gideon's body, shocking him into an agitated stillness. The unmistakable scent of her aroused sex hardened his cock, unraveled his concentration.

It was his undoing. He crushed his mouth over hers.

Chapter Five

Macy marveled at Gideon's ability to multi-task. While still leading them through the eight-count basic, he ravished her mouth, nibbled and sucked, thrust and parried, all while keeping them on beat. If the lead had been left up to her, they would have crashed into the studio's wall of mirrors by now.

"All I want to do is make you feel good."

"No complaints here," Macy breathed, wrapping her arms around his wide neck. Her fingers threaded through the streaming locks flowing over his shoulders. Her tentative touch drew a groan from him.

"How about this?" He swirled his tongue along the inside of her lip.

"N—nice," she shuddered.

He slid his hands up the sides of her body, his fingers teasing her nerve endings, until all she wanted to do was crawl all over him. "And this?"

Macy's breathing quickened. "Much nicer," she breathed.

His hands traveled higher. "Keep...going?"

"Please," she replied tentatively, daring to ask for what she wanted after so many years of settling.

He worked his way higher, his touch insistent. He palmed her breasts, kneading them. He lifted her breasts to his lips, giving each mound a reverent kiss. Macy gulped in air to calm her frazzled nerves. It didn't help, since he took her nipple and a good portion of her breast into his mouth. Swallowing that much should have choked him. Ever since the age of sixteen, she'd been a solid 36 DD.

But like everything else, he took her girls in stride, alternating between sucking and tonguing them. Macy gasped. Her world tilted, spun and went dark.

"Who dimmed the lights?" She might be lightheaded, but that didn't mean she'd lost her common sense.

Gideon licked the sensitive spot beneath her earlobe. *Well, maybe not all common sense.* "Thanks, we needed the privacy."

WTF? How could she dim the lights halfway across the room? If it weren't for other pressing matters, like not screaming her head off when he started to roll and flick her nipples, Macy would've pointed out the absurdity of his accusation. But the more he played with the peaked buds, the less she cared about what was real and what wasn't.

Her primary focus? Throwing sand on the fire raging through her body. Striving for a solution, Macy rocked her pussy against his thigh. A few well-placed strokes and her

lips parted, exposing her clit. Wanting to increase her pleasure, she rocked her hips back and forth.

"When you move like this, you make me harder than granite." Grabbing her hips, he pulled her against him. His mouth sought hers in a full-mouth kiss. A jolt of raw electricity scampered up her spine. "I'm done with this dry humping. I need flesh to flesh contact."

Surprising her, he dropped to his knees and flipped her leg over his shoulder. "What are you doing?" She pushed at his shoulders. Ten years with Trace and he'd never ventured farther than her bra. They'd known each other less than a week!

"I want to make you feel good. I derive the utmost pleasure from it. Now relax and enjoy this."

Macy whimpered as he drew the crotch of her leotard aside. With her body wound tighter than a guitar string and his hands lifting the hem of her skirt, her body and mind were under siege. And any possibility of her relaxing resided in a remote plane along with Santa Claus.

"You have the prettiest pink pussy." He tested her flesh with a lone finger slid inside. "I could touch you like this all night and never get enough."

Macy wobbled. "No—no one has ever touched me like this."

"You're a virgin to a woman's pleasure? You're a beautiful desirable woman. Your husband was a fool for not worshipping you like this all the time," he murmured, adding another finger. "I would give anything to make up for the time you lost."

Whoever said, "flattery gets you nowhere" must have been a man because his words and the finger pilfering her pussy, imitating the act of sex, broke down the last of her reserve.

Macy's head fell back with an anguished cry. Beads of sweat punctuated her forehead, her fingers clawed at his shoulders. "I feel...I feel like...I'm on fire."

"Me too. And I don't want it to let up." His fingers delved deeper, all the way to the hilt. "Take me home, Macy. Let me spend the night making love to you."

Why did he have to sound so deliciously tempting? She couldn't take him home. They'd just met.

As if sensing her quandary, he rose to his feet. One hand rested on her hip, the other continued to milk her sex. If she wanted to run for the hills, she couldn't if she tried. Instinctively Macy reached down and tried to remove him from her body, but he held firm, stroking her core with a gentle caressing glide.

If he kisses me, I'm a goner! He leaned forward with his lips parted.

"Follow your heart...say yes."

"You're riding with me. I'll bring you back in the morning to pick up your car."

Was he afraid she was going to change her mind on the way home and bolt? Highly unlikely, Macy mused as her eyes devoured his tall, muscular frame.

"Come, my truck is parked across the street."

Macy glanced across the street. A line of vehicles still lined the curb, but she immediately knew which one belonged to him. A black H2 Hummer. The vehicle's bulky masculine lines were a perfect foil to its larger than life owner.

Gideon tightened his grip on her forearm as he stepped down into the street. He hadn't let her go since she accepted his proposal. Unused to such possessiveness, Macy found she was a quick study and followed him.

Halfway across, a set of headlights twinkled a half a block up. Gideon suddenly stopped, his dark head swinging in the direction of the car bearing down on them. Macy turned to look as well, but he grabbed ahold of her arm and swung her around so hard she practically catapulted between his vehicle and the car parked in front of it.

While she struggled to right herself, a white early model Chevy Camaro with dark tinted windows sandwiched them in. Gideon maneuvered himself in front of her.

"Are you crazy?" Macy hissed over the familiar grind of a car's window. "They could be carrying—" Her warning came too late. A cloud of white pellets flew through the air, striking him head-on.

"Fu—arrgg!" Gideon spun on his feet, almost knocking her over. It was too late, his shirt was dotted with little burn holes and smoked worse than the giant slow cooker down at Uncle Roscoe's Bar-B-Que.

"What in the world?" she whispered as he edged past her.

Macy glanced at the car still idling in the middle of the street. She stepped forward to identify the driver through the front windshield. Panicked, the driver slammed on the pedal, shooting the car forward in a flurry of smoke and peeling tires.

"Coward! You're not afraid of a six-foot plus defensive end look-alike, but you're scared of me!" Macy shouted after them. She glared at the personalized license plate. "RD2HVN?" *Road to Heaven?* Had they just been assaulted by a *Bible* thumper?

"Are you okay?"

Macy swung around at Gideon's question. No longer bent over, clutching the pavement, he stood behind her in the process of tugging his t-shirt over his head. Giving her a once-over, he then tossed the shirt into a trash can.

"The question should be are you okay?" Macy watched him dust his hands over his torso. In spite of the strange turn of events, there wasn't anything out of the ordinary about the male form in front on her. Well except for his mouthwatering physique and the extraordinary amount of oh-so lickable tattoos swirling over his biceps, shoulders and the side of his neck.

"I'm fine."

"Fine? If everything is so fine, then why is your shirt filled with burn holes?" She pointed at the wadded-up t-shirt hanging over the side of the can.

His golden gaze slid away. "I was hit with salt."

Macy's eyebrows shot up. "Salt? I might have earned a C in chemistry, but I do know that salt can't burn holes in cotton." Gideon made a move toward her. She stepped back, running up against the side of his SUV. Macy couldn't risk him touching her. Whenever he did, she couldn't think straight. This needed to be straightened out before they went any further.

But putting distance between them was useless. He simply took the extra steps to bridge the distance between them. To make matters worse, he rested his hands on the side of the Hummer, effectively blocking her in. When he lowered his head, their lips were only inches apart. His nearness drew her attention to his natural scent—an exotic mix of bergamot, patchouli and something else she couldn't put her finger on.

"Did you know salt water can burn human flesh when it's exposed to radio waves?" he asked, his warm breath playing along her lips. Macy licked them.

"No," Macy whispered, suddenly self-conscious, if not somewhat embarrassed at her ignorance.

He drew even closer, his chest barely grazing her breasts. "Or if you consumed one gram of salt per kilogram of body weight, you would expire before the sunset?"

Macy shook her head.

"You see, salt in any form can be deadly."

He might have presented solid evidence to support his claim, still Macy wasn't mollified. "If it's so deadly, then let's go to the Emergency Room."

"I'm fine, Macy," he replied, a note of finality lacing his tone. "But we should leave before she comes back."

"She? You caught a glimpse of her?"

Gideon shrugged his shoulders. "More or less."

Danger! Danger, Will Robinson! "You know her, don't you?" His silence was enough of an answer for Macy. Ducking under his arm, she rounded on him. "I guess it's one of your little girlfriends, isn't it? Well, I'm not playing that game. See you later, playboy."

Gideon roped his arm around her waist and drew her back. Macy gasped. Her entire backside was pressed against him. The sudden contact hit her like a blow below the belt. Literally. Her sex quivered in protest.

"I am not a boy and the only time I play is in bed. The person who attacked us was neither a girlfriend nor a jilted lover. Now do we go to your place or do we part ways?"

Even though she still desired him, tonight's events were way too bizarre even for an investigative reporter like her. "I'm no longer interested. I'm going home alone."

For several moments neither of them spoke, then he finally he released her. Ignoring the awkward silence hanging between them, Macy dug for her keys. Once she found them, she looked up. Half expecting him to be angry at the turn in events, she was floored by his troubled expression.

Macy choked down the cart-load of regret lodged at the back of her throat. "Um...ah...well I better be going. It's been fun." It had been until now. Crafting a smile, she gave him a half wave. He returned it with a sweep of his hand.

Macy turned toward the public parking lot where she'd parked her Honda hybrid. She hesitated. She'd forgotten something. She didn't know what or whom, but something was amiss. Macy turned around. Retracing her footsteps always helped to jog her memory.

Whoa! She had missed something. Gideon shirtless. Pooled in the amber glow of a street lamp, he resembled the statue of David cast in bronze. Macy gulped at his mouth-watering beauty. "Not that I'm complaining, but where did your shirt go?"

Gideon pointed at the trash receptacle.

Macy frowned. Had she ripped his t-shirt in her excitement? *Why don't I remember doing it?* Come to think of it, she couldn't remember coming downstairs or even crossing the street. She was a blank slate except for the last few moments upstairs when Gideon had his head between her legs.

Unsettled, Macy looked to him for answers and all she saw was skin. Lots of it. And all of it needed to be touched, licked and kissed. Then it hit her, they were going to her place to finish what they started in upstairs in Madame Vellier's studio. "Do you want to follow me?"

A lopsided grin tipped the corners of his lips. "To hell and back, if you so desire."

Macy's hands shook so badly she couldn't get the key in the door lock. "Sorry about this. I guess I'm a little nervous. I usually don't invite strange men home."

"I'm not a stranger. We've had our first dance, our first date and our first kiss in more ways than one. In my book, we're a step away from picking out china patterns."

Macy chuckled, her amusement overcoming her nervousness. Gideon remained unaffected by his comedic timing. He had little in which to be amused. In a moment of weakness, he'd used his powers to erase her memory.

He couldn't help it. One more day, one more hour and one more second not able to stake his claim was as unfavorable as the life he'd known before he laid eyes on her.

The soft click of the lock distilled Gideon's thoughts of self-reproach. "Excuse the mess," she apologized, stepping over the threshold. Stooping down, she picked up her mail and placed it on a hall table along with her keys.

"Would you like a drink? I don't have any heavy spirits. Would you like a soda or juice," she offered, making a beeline toward the back of the house.

When he didn't answer, she looked over her shoulder. "What are you doing?" Even in the darkened hallway, he could see her clearly. One of the perks of being born a half-demon he loved. Her brown eyes twinkled and two kissable dimples punctuated her infectious grin.

By the nine planes of the Abyss! He would no longer harbor any guilt for what he'd done, since it brought him one step closer to claiming this enchanting creature.

Gideon crooked his finger. Like a moth drawn to a flame, she walked back over to the door. Each step she took, his cock lengthened against the inside of his leg. "You have to invite me in."

Macy crossed her arms under her ample bosom, then leaned against the door frame. "Is this a part of your code of chivalry?" she posed.

"It's a part of my culture's code of ethics."

The pulse at her throat quickened and her mouth formed a perfect O. Lucifer, he couldn't wait to see his cock gliding past her pouty lips. Gideon tongued his incisors. They'd already lengthened in anticipation.

"Does this work with your other women?"

Gideon bottled his primal instinct which told him to yank her to him and kiss those stupid notions out of her beautiful little head. Instead he leaned against the door jamb, putting their noses at right angles. Picking up her natural scent, a bolt shot through him. Before he did something stupid, like snatching her to him and making love to her under the porch light, he wedged his hands behind his back.

"How many times must I tell you there is no one else but you." Gideon leaned forward to kiss her cheek. He might not have the use of his hands, but he still had other means in which to seduce her. Her whispered gasp completely manhandled him. His blood pounded through his veins and his cock grew another inch.

She stared at him for what seemed like an eternity. Then, as if making peace with herself, she stepped back. "Come in, please."

Gideon almost shouted Alleluia! He kicked the door shut behind him instead.

"Would you like something to drink or something to eat? I have plenty of snacks. Ho Hos? Ding-Dongs?" She walked backward down the hall.

Gideon followed. "The only snack I want is you. Every. Single. Soft. Suckable. Inch." Reaching for her, his hands slid down her upper arms, then back up again. Her skin reminded him of rose petals. Sensing the return of her nervousness, he swooped down and captured her bottom lip.

Lucifer, she tastes so sweet! "Where's the bedroom?" he murmured against her mouth.

"It's on the second floor. Wait! What are you—" She shrieked as he lifted her from the floor.

"I'm carrying you upstairs to have my way with you."

Chapter Six

Macy's master bedroom was what humans called "cozy". Hardwood floors ran the length of the room while a hodgepodge collection of mahogany antique furniture littered most of the space. A pair of overstuffed club chairs sat facing each other by the window and a fluffy white down comforter covered the four poster bed. To Gideon's surprise, he liked it.

"Getting cold feet?" Her lighthearted tone couldn't hide the spark of uncertainty visibly apparent in her chocolate brown eyes.

He'd show her cold feet. Gideon crossed over to the bed and, without any ceremony, he tossed her onto it. She bounced and giggled, her brown skin glowing warmly against the bed's stark white covering. It gave her a virginal allure.

If she rejected him now, he'd probably tear the place apart! To calm his barely-below-the surface nature, he took his time climbing in next to her. But as he settled in beside her, his blood raged. It would be better for the both of them if they jumped right in. "Take your clothes off. I want to see you."

At first Gideon didn't think she'd heard him because she lay there staring up at the ceiling, but then she blinked as if coming out of a fog. "I have a better idea." She turned her head to look at him. "How about you strip for *me*?"

What happened to the shy woman he'd set out to conquer? Did the bedroom automatically turn her into a vixen? Lucifer, he hoped so! "Do I get any music?"

Shocked, her eyes widened and a shiver swept up her spine. Gideon reached out and tapped her under the chin. "Do I get any music?" he repeated.

"The only thing I have is R&B, disco and a ton of eighties music."

"Lady's choice. If you like it, I know I'll love it."

Macy rolled off the bed. She hurried across the room to an antique armoire wedged in the corner. She swung the doors open, revealing a forty-two-inch television and a home theatre. Soon the silence was broken by the heady bump of David Bowie's *Let's Dance*.

"Will that do?" she asked, peeking over her shoulder with a look that was a heady combination of innocent and gamine. Gideon clenched and unclenched his fist. If she looked at him like that one more time, they'd never leave this room.

"If you like it, I'll love it," he grated out.

After she closed the cabinet doors, she made her way back across the room. She climbed up onto the queen size mattress and settled back against the stack of fluffy white pillows lining the head of the bed.

"Comfortable?"

Macy nodded.

“Good. I don’t want there to be any distractions. Only pleasure, because I’m going to love doing this.”

* * * * *

A week ago, Gideon didn’t even know she existed. Now here he stood in the middle of her bedroom, waiting to fulfill all of her fantasies. Filled with uncertainty, she picked up the nearest pillow. While she thought of a polite way to end this madness, she twisted the pillowcase around her fingers. She needed to get him downstairs and out of her house.

“Look at me.”

Quickly sketching together a game plan, her gaze locked with his.

Her focus soon fell off course as he started to sway his hips from side to side. In that moment, all of her doubts and insecurities evaporated into thin air. Nothing seemed to matter except for the present and the two of them.

She had no one to answer to. Over a year ago, the ink had dried on her divorce papers. There were plenty of condoms in the night stand—a gag gift Denise had given her for her twenty-sixth birthday. Why couldn’t she indulge in a little fun between two consenting adults?

You’re still smarting over that asshole of an ex-husband who nicknamed you Miss Piggy and penciled you in for sex every six months.

“You’re not watching me,” Gideon said, running his fingers through his dark hair. What should have been a rudimentary task turned into a bewitching spell that showcased the breadth of his shoulders, the narrowness of his hips.

His spell continued to build as his hands traveled down his throat to his chest where his fingers flexed wide to graze over his nipples and the placket of muscles covering his torso. Immobilized, suffocating for air and her insides quaking like a 7.1 on the Richter scale, she remained rooted even when he played with the edges of his track pants.

“It’s time for me to shake things up a little,” Gideon announced. He stepped up to the foot of the bed, caught hold of the bedpost and pulled on the tie to his sweats.

You’re going down, kiddo.

Macy stiffened. He’d leaned back with bent knees, then pitched his hips from left to right, forward and back. Her cheeks burned with each roll of his hips, which was executed better than the best male stripper.

How did his pants stay in place? Well, if she didn’t count the sexy rise of his buttocks or the brief glimpse of his pubic hair.

Macy flexed her fingers. She practically itched to trace every hard line and angle, specifically the line of hair running from his bellybutton past his waistband. Would they be silky and curl around her fingers or springy and slightly crisp?

She decided to find out. "Ready to raise the stakes?"

Gideon's hips stilled. Tipping his chin, he stared at her in silence, his golden gaze darkening by degrees. Had she grown two heads? Macy almost reached up to check.

"I'm more than ready."

His whispered declaration flowed over Macy like molten lava, spurring her to action. Setting aside the mangled pillow, she crawled across the bed, but stalled when only an arm's length separated them. She'd suddenly lost her nerve.

"Would it help if I came closer, beautiful?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Even if she had no idea it would help or not, she nodded. Anything that would make this easier for her was appreciated.

True to his word, Gideon stepped closer, his upper thighs brushing up against the bed. Macy fell back with a startled gasp. Heat rolled off him in waves, wrapped around her, heightening her lust.

Suddenly impatient, Macy reached out and curled her fingers over the waistband of his sweats. Taking it one step further, she moved her hands from side to side. As she'd expected, the thick thatch of hair surrounding his sex curled around her fingers like silk ribbons. With her heart beating wildly, she pushed the cotton material down over his lean hips.

"Oh my," she gasped when his cock sprang free, rock-hard and heavily veined.

"I think this is the biggest I've ever seen it."

Macy's eyes rose to meet his. "Really?"

He nodded. "No. Believe it or not, it still has some room to grow."

Any more room and his cock would need its own zip code! Straight as an arrow and pinker than the rest of him, his size and girth were frighteningly exceptional. Of course, she had only one other to compare him to. Still she couldn't imagine his size being the norm. And in spite of her initial apprehension, she wanted it sliding past her lips, gliding over her tongue, stretching her pussy. Actually it didn't matter how or where as long as she had him inside her.

But how could she tell him she'd never gone down on a man?

"If you're unsure of what to do, I'll guide you." He grasped her chin and lifted her head to meet his gaze. He caressed her jawline with the pad of his thumb, launching a jolt of pleasure through her body. "In truth, anything you do, I will love it."

His words, his touch, his mere presence rocked Macy to her very core, melting the last of her reserve. Her heart beating like a tom-tom drum and her hands trembling with excitement, she reached out and wrapped them around his thick shaft.

At the point of contact, both of them gasped. He was so deliciously warm, pliable yet unyielding and soft to the touch! *Like steel wrapped in velvet.* Intrigued, Macy slid her hands up and down his long length. With each pass, she memorized every inch, noted how the base was wider than the tip and depending on her grip or speed, Gideon

would either hiss or growl. Like now as she curled her hand around his cock's helmet-shaped head.

Wondering what kind of reaction she could wring from him if she were to take him in her mouth, Macy leaned forward. With the tip of her tongue, she licked around the base of his cock. She must've done something right, because his cock jumped, jiggling the sac between his legs.

"Don't stop...please," he ground out in what sounded like both a moan and a plea.

Pleased in her ability to elicit such raw emotions, Macy leaned forward again, a smile playing along her lips. Drawn to the thick purplish ridge running along the underside of his staff, she used it to guide her upward to the head, tracing and licking as she went.

"That feels so good," Gideon groaned, fisting her hair. Gasping in shock, Macy found herself temporarily sidetracked. Her ponytail had suddenly become attached to her pussy. He tugged, her clit jumped. The least bit of pressure, her clit throbbed. Macy trembled all the way down to her roots.

With her eyes drifting closed, she bent over, parted her lips and inch by slow inch, she took him into her mouth. His thickness almost choked her, but she took him as deep as she could.

"Yes...damn...just like that!"

His excitement made Macy wet, driving her to suck him harder and deeper.

"Chris...Lucif...wait...stop!" Growling, Gideon stumbled backward. Macy reached for him, but he remained out of reach.

Hurt by his overt rejection, Macy rolled off the bed. Ignoring his stunned expression, she stalked around him toward the bathroom. "I want you out of my house before I come out."

She didn't get very far. Gideon grabbed her upper arm and hauled her back around, pressing her against his hard chest. And for the briefest moment, she'd forgotten why she'd flipped out.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Macy would've flinched at his angry tone, but she couldn't, she was too pissed! Shouldering her anger, she jammed her index finger into the middle of his chest. "I may not be an expert at giving a blowjob, but you didn't have to humiliate me."

Gideon cocked his head and just stared at her like she'd grown two horns. Then his kissable lips lifted into a wicked smile. Macy couldn't keep her nipples from hardening if she tried. "I wanted you to stop because I wanted to give you a choice."

Choice? "What kind of choice?"

"When I cum for the first time with you, do you want it to be in your mouth or while my cock is cradled deep inside your pussy?"

Rendered speechless, Macy could only squeal when he suddenly lifted her in his arms. He carried her back over to the bed and placed her in the center.

"Do you have any idea how much I want you?" he asked, crawling in beside her. With each dip of the bed, Macy's inside quaked. "The first time I laid eyes on you, I wanted to make you mine?"

"Honestly?"

"You don't believe me?" He leaned down on his elbows. "Who wouldn't want to make love to such a beautiful, desirable woman like you, Macy Beaumont?"

Even as a dizzy, heady sensation washed over her, Macy threaded her hands through his dark hair, pushing the long silky locks back from his face. She wanted to see if he spoke the truth. She would have to throw caution to the wind and take him at face value.

"I can name someone who wasn't happy with me. During the last two years of our marriage, we only had sex twice because he was so disgusted with my body."

Gideon nibbled on her neck. "He was born a fool." He bit at her collarbone. "And he better remain that way if knows what's good for him. I do not share. Not now, not ever," he declared, sliding his hand under one of her leotard straps. "Are you ready to continue?"

Macy blinked in disbelief. Most men would have just taken advantage of the situation and pounced on her, not Gideon. Instead, he'd solicited her permission. For the first time in her life, she finally felt valued.

God she wanted him...no she needed him.

Slipping her hand under the spaghetti strap, she slid it off her shoulder. She did the same with the other. Once her arms were free, she rolled the material over her bellybutton.

Time for the walk of shame. Filled with trepidation, she inhaled a deep, calming breath, then waited for the derogatory remarks to fly. Every time Trace looked at her breasts, he would always comment on how huge and floppy they were. Even if each nipple sat at two o'clock sharp.

Expecting the worst, he surprised her by nestling his nose between her breasts. "They're too big, aren't they?" Silence met her question. Disgruntled, Macy grabbed each of the straps and pulled her leotard back into place.

Growling, he brushed her hands aside. "They're perfect." To prove his point, he slid his tongue along the deep crevice between her bosoms.

"Who are you kidding?" Macy would've rolled from under him, except one of his thighs trapped her beneath him – pinning her to the bed.

Gideon nipped the side of her breast. "I don't play head games, but I love playing in bed. I'm ready to play, if you're game."

Why did that sound so familiar? Brought back to the present by the insistent press of his cock against her clit, Macy pushed at his shoulders. "Wait."

"I'm too far gone at this point to hold back. I'm going to make love to you, so prepare yourself."

Simply stated but powerful, nevertheless. His words released a knee-jerk reaction through her body. One that made her want to wrap herself around him rather than run. "I'm not on the Pill. Do you have any condoms?"

Gideon stopped tonguing her nipple. "We do not need them."

Macy frowned. "So you're safe?"

Gideon's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Far from it." His smile slipped when she didn't respond to his humor. "Where are they?" He sighed, sitting back on his haunches.

"They're in the top drawer." Macy pointed at the nightstand next to the bed. "Denise bought me an entire boxful as incentive."

Gideon's eyes narrowed. "An incentive for what or better yet, whom?"

Whom? He couldn't be jealous, could he? Curious, Macy rolled over onto her side, drawing his attention to her semi-nude body. His golden gaze brightened to the finish of a newly minted coin. "Denise wanted me to see them on a daily basis so I would want to use them."

"Have you?" he bit out between clenched teeth.

Yep! He was jealous. Macy turned onto her stomach. Like a hungry animal, his eyes never left her body. Macy almost clicked her heels.

"Have you?" he asked again, his tone still disagreeable.

Macy hid her smile in the folds of her arms. "No. You'll be the first."

With no other words between them, he rifled through the contents of her nightstand like a madman.

"What are these?" Gideon shoved a pink rubber ring and a black plug at her. Macy squinted at the gadgets. Recognizing them, her clit jumped and her butt cheeks clenched.

"The pink one is a vibrating cock ring. It's supposed to give both of us added sensation and hours of immense pleasure. *"For Pete's sake, I sound like a darn TV commercial."* And the black one is...um...a butt plug." And that was pretty self-explanatory.

"Wicked," he whispered, turning them this way and that. Once the novelty wore off, he placed both toys atop the nightstand, then dove back into her treasure trove.

In short order, he pulled out a silver foil wrapper labeled Prime Maximus.

Oh my! Macy breathed, suddenly tingling from head to toe.

He tore the wrapper and rolled it over his cock, followed quickly by the pink ring. Then, as if he'd forgotten something, he went back to ransacking her nightstand.

Macy rose up on her elbows. He'd found an amber-colored bottle labeled *Get Your Glide On*.

Was she ready for this? She better be, Gideon had already flipped the cap and was squeezing a liberal dollop onto the tip of the butt plug. He massaged the oil into the rubber. The liberal excess soaked his fingers and the plug until they gleamed.

Macy's buttocks clenched. The idea of him sliding the sex toy inside her filled her with fear and anticipation. She just didn't know which one outweighed the other.

Gideon must've have sensed a change in her demeanor because he placed his hand on the small of her back. "Relax," he coaxed. His oil-slick fingers worked their way downward, over the rise of her ass, in between her butt cheeks, to rest on her rosette. A groan gushed past Macy's lips. "There is no reason to be frightened. I would never hurt you. I just want to please you."

Macy believed him. The finger rimming her ass was anything but light. Even when his strokes became dogged and resolute, stroking the spark between her legs into an inferno, his touch remained undemanding and strangely comforting.

Another finger joined the first. With each thrust, his warm digits stretched her.

"You're turning me inside out," Macy sobbed, her hands clawing at the bed covers. She turned her head to look at him. His nostrils flared, sweat drizzled down his temples, his color ripened along his cheekbones and neck. Keeping her eyes on him, she widened her legs further. The burning pressure of his finger plowing past her sphincter muscles was exquisite.

"You see. I'm not even in you yet and you're already on fire."

Tell me about it! She reeled. She sweated bullets. Her back arched more than once from the bed.

"I think you're ready."

"Me too," Macy whimpered, eyeing the raised hairs and goose bumps pimpling her forearms.

Gideon slipped his fingers from her and slowly replaced them with the butt plug. Unprepared for the real thing, Macy dropped her head between her arms with a shuddered moan. He pressed the rubber butt plug in and out, until four inches of warm lubricated rubber stuffed her to bursting. Her mind centered on the pressure and the exquisite waves of seemingly nonstop pleasure pulsing over her sphincter muscles.

The buildup proved too much. "Gideon, you're going to make me cum!"

"Do not cum. I want that pleasure reserved for my cock." He wrapped one of his arms around her waist and flipped her over onto her back. "Wrap your arms and legs around me," he demanded. He reached down to remove the butt plug, but Macy swatted his hand away.

"It stays," she stressed, her tone intolerant of an argument.

Gideon's eyes narrowed, a smirk lifting the corner of his mouth. "Wicked, wicked girl. Exactly how I like my —"

He finished in a shudder as Macy wrapped her legs around his hips. He'd been close to ruining the moment. "I'm ready. How about you?"

"More than ready." Poised above her, his muscles bulged and sweat ran down his temple. He thrust forward. "Shit! You're so blessedly tight!"

Tight was an understatement! In spite of the discomfort, Macy held on. The pleasure derived from his rhythmic thrusts far outweighed anything else, even the sensual press of his heavy body against hers. So much so, she arched her back and hitched her legs higher, affording him a better vantage to drive into her.

"I'm losing control!" he roared. "I want to take you hard and fast."

"Why don't you?" Macy gasped, her clit jumping with each thrust. Boy, that cock ring surely worked wonders!

Gideon stilled. Macy gazed up at the hulking, untamed figure hunched over her, his bronze skin looking as if it had been poured in gold, hair disheveled and a wild look gleaming in his eyes. Still, he remained motionless, staring down at her as if fighting an internal struggle.

Touched by his earnestness, Macy decided to relieve him of his unnecessary battle with self-control. "Are we going to do this or are you going to stare at me all night?" Macy uncrossed her legs. She was almost to her elbows when he grabbed her hips, holding her in place. His gaze remained locked with hers as he thrust forward, fully seating himself. Still he held back.

Macy reached up, running her hands over his sweat slickened shoulders. "You're the biggest tease. You have me wanting it, but you keep holding back. If you're not going to let go, then let me up."

With a muffled curse about demanding women biting off more than they can chew, he opened her legs wider with an arm under each knee. Lifting her hips, he plunged forward with an intensity that made her eyes cross.

Maybe she did bite off more than she could chew, Macy mused as he pounded into her. Over and over he built a dizzying momentum that sent her antique headboard crashing into the wall.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked, the incessant scrape of the bed's feet matching the relentless slap of his balls against her ass.

Nodding, Macy blinked up at him. She couldn't form the words. His frantic pace combined with the pleasure coursing through her body, stealing her ability to communicate in anything other than grunts and groans.

Did the roof just cave in, because I'm seeing stars? A sudden awareness coiled around her like the scent of their lovemaking. Cutting off her oxygen and smashing into her like a bulldozer.

"Something's wrong," she moaned. "I think I'm going to either be sick or faint."

"Neither. Your sweet pussy is about to cream all over my cock. You're gripping me like a vise."

"D-doubt it. I've never had an orgasm."

Gideon looked down at her, his hips still moving a mile a minute. "Never?" he bit out.

She shook her head. "Never."

"You will tonight." Gideon sat back on his haunches. The room was silent except for the humming of the cock ring and the music seeping through the surround system. Chancing a glance, she caught him admiring her sex. "Bend your knees a little," he grunted, taking an ankle in each hand. Macy obeyed. "Good girl. This is going to be really, really good...for the both of us."

Bending over her, he moved his hips, caught several of her toes, drew them into his mouth and sucked.

Talk about suck and fuck! Macy ground her head in the pillows. Now she knew why so many heroines in those sappy romance novels fell in love after just one night of sex with the hero.

"Oh God!" Macy shouted. "I'm about to come!"

"Come for me, Macy! Come only for me," Gideon commanded.

Macy's chest expanded and contracted as she gulped in air.

This isn't an orgasm, I'm dying!

A shockwave of pure energy pulsed through her, racking her body with uncontrollable spasms. Her world pitched, turned upside down. Her back bowed from the bed and a lung-wrenching scream ripped from her lips.

All the while, Gideon loved her, filled her body with his and whispers of praise and encouragement.

Some time later, much, much later, she floated back down to a tangible ache between her thighs and a contented smile curving her lips. "If that was an orgasm, I want to do it again and again and again," she whispered, eventually drifting off into sleep.

Chapter Seven

Gideon watched Macy while she slept. Although his cock still stood at half-mast, he would allow her this brief respite. It was the least he could do since he'd made love to her nonstop through the night. Gideon sat up.

When did he become soft? With any other female, he would have continued to have his way with her until he collapsed. But here he was, exercising a purely foreign emotion—compassion.

Angry and puzzled by his sudden show of weakness, Gideon launched himself from the bed. How could one night of sex with a human ruin him thus?

"It should have been the other way around!" he exclaimed, pacing back and forth.

"Mmm...Gideon." Still gloriously nude from their sexual machinations, Macy stretched her languid limbs in her sleep. Her dark hair fanned across the pillow. A contented smile curved her full lips.

Gideon walked over to stand over her. *Am I the reason for that smile?* His eyes roved over her generous curves, smooth mocha skin. Even now in his precarious position, he wanted her firm thighs wrapped around his hips while he plunged his cock into her deliciously tight pussy. Gideon gnashed his teeth in self-directed anger.

Needing to put distance between himself and temptation, he squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself away before he dug himself any deeper.

Gideon tipped his head back and inhaled deeply. Instead of enjoying the reek of burning flesh, he almost gagged on the sulfurous stench permeating his punishment chamber. His eyes flew open. For the first time in his preternatural existence, he held back a horrified grimace at the factory-like precision that allowed him and his subordinates to cut through more than three score of the condemned on any given day.

Spaced every two feet, manacles hung from the chamber's walls. For a more individualized session, stone slabs populated the room's perimeter along with a multitude of machinery that stretched, pulled and ripped the body apart. In the center, a gaping pit of fire reached its grasping arms upward to receive the broken bodies pitched into it.

Since respite did not exist in the Abyss, every shackle and apparatus was filled with twisting bodies screaming for mercy. Demons, their countenances shining with delighted glee, doled out punishment the Inquisition would have shied away from.

"My Lord!" Gideon ignored the prostrate forms bowed in deference. He needed to concentrate on making it to the far side of the chamber without spilling the contents of his stomach.

When he finally stood in front of his personal tool rack, he sighed in relief. It was short-lived. Anxiety took hold as his eyes drifted over the multitude of whips, bludgeons, hatchets and vises in varying shapes and sizes.

"Today is going to be a day of many firsts it seems," he mumbled, unsure of which tool to choose.

"Something wrong, my Lord?"

Gideon's gaze shifted to the twisted body hovering next to him. Ignacius stood a little over three feet, but his height was misleading. The master torturer was his best man. He could torment a hundred souls from dusk to dawn and still have enough doggedness to torture a thousand more. His voracious thirst for the bloodcurdling screams of the condemned made him practically irreplaceable.

He hated the little bastard.

Always had, yet he tolerated him simply because Ignacius was such a sadist. Plus, he did a great job of sucking up to him.

"Nothing is wrong, Ignacius." Gritting his teeth, Gideon removed his favorite instrument of flagellation, a three-foot birchwood rod. As he turned the lightweight bundle of leafless twigs tied together by the innards of one of his former victims, he almost lost it.

"We have one tied up especially for you, my Lord. It is a new one, young and female, just how you like them." Gideon followed the diminutive henchman's hobbling form to the center of the chamber where a woman struggled against her bonds on a bloodied sandstone slab.

Gideon's steps slowed. From this distance the woman could have been Macy's twin. Their mocha skin was an exact match, the condemned's hair was much shorter, cropped with crisp curls framing her heart-shaped face. The resemblance was so uncanny he almost ripped Ignacius' hand from the woman's flesh when he touched her to read her punishment decree smelted on a brass plate screwed into her forehead.

"The usual sins, envy and lust. She coveted her sister's husband and carried out a licentious affair with him for several years. She caught her brother-in-law plowing newer pastures. So she put a bullet between his eyes, the other in her temple."

"Murder-suicide," Gideon muttered. Even though condemned always brought their fate upon themselves, it didn't mellow the acrid taste of bile sitting at the back of his throat like a sewage trap threatening to suffocate him.

Gideon squeezed his eyes shut. An unfamiliar wave of empathy washed over him. How could he punish someone for a deed he would readily commit if he were to find Macy in the arms of another man?

"She's ready, my Lord," Ignacius prompted. Feeling the henchman's regard, Gideon attempted to steel himself for the task at hand. But as his gaze ran over the woman's smooth dark skin, Macy's face swam in his face.

Lucifer, my soul is cooked!

In the not so distant past, he would've salivated over the opportunity to break in a new soul with a masterpiece of cuts and welts. That was the past, now there was only revulsion.

Gideon held his palm out to Ignacius. The little henchman's mouth dropped open, a string of drool sliding from between his darkened teeth as he took the birchwood cane from him. Ignacius' one-eyed gaze whipped to his. "A-are you sure, my Lord?" he stuttered, his eye watering. Probably not with emotion, but gratitude, Gideon mused.

"You do the honors, Ignacius. I have another matter to see to. One more urgent and pressing than this. If you would excuse me, I am finished here."

Gideon turned on his heels. Ignoring the startled looks that followed him, he walked out of his grand hall with no thoughts of returning.

In more ways than one, he was finished.

Macy stretched her arms over her head with a lingering yawn. She had not been this content nor this sated in years. Denise had been right. All she really needed was a little attention from the opposite sex, a good orgasm or four and she was ready to face the world head-on.

Before she faced that new world, she needed a little more positive reinforcement. Rolling over in bed, her hand slid across the bed. Jolted by the empty space, she sat up to survey the rumpled bed linen.

Macy slid her arms around her waist to ease the ache in her belly. "You're a big girl. So you knew what you were getting into," she sniffled.

So why didn't it numb the pain?

Not wanting to start another day as hostess to her own private pity party, Macy rolled out of bed. Maybe work would get her mind off being abandoned once again.

She shuffled over to the walk-in closet and yanked down her bathrobe hanging on the behind-the-door hook. "It was simply sex and nothing more," she grumbled, tying the belt robe. High strung as she was, she loosened the belt just in case, she didn't want to hyperventilate.

"Good morning, Sunshine."

Macy whirled around so fast she fell into the door.

"Are you okay?" Gideon asked.

"I'm fine," Macy asserted, struggling to right herself and keep her heart from leaping out of her chest at the same time.

Once she pulled the remnants of her dignity together, she faced him with shoulders squared, her chin held high.

Bigger than day, Gideon stood in the middle of her bedroom balancing a breakfast tray in one hand, a newspaper in the other, dressed only in a yellow chiffon half-apron that used to belong to her grandmother. His damp hair hung around his broad

shoulders, barely hiding the scratch marks she'd tattooed into his flesh last night while he twisted her like a human pretzel.

If that wasn't bad enough, he stood pooled in the sunshine dappling through her bedroom window. The additional light turned the apron bone-jarringly transparent. Along with his legs spread apart like a pirate on a ship, she could see his cock!

Macy's blood pounded through her veins. Even in her present anger, she wanted to ride his cock for breakfast.

Not sensing a change in her mood, he sauntered over to the bed to set the tray down on the nightstand. With every step, she devoured his rock-hard ass and his cock, which bobbed like a teasing carrot. Macy bit her lip to stifle a sudden urge to whinny.

"While you were in a Gideon-induced coma." He chuckled as he stacked and plumped the bed pillows. "I freshened up, then made us both breakfast." Once the bedding appeared to be to his liking, he removed the apron, revealing a hard-on big as his devilish grin. "The first one in bed gets the largest flapjack."

He climbed into bed and then patted the space next to him. Macy almost choked, strangled by a sudden lack of oxygen. Despite the threat of a loss of consciousness, Macy held her ground, remaining on the other side of the room.

Gideon's eyebrows rose and his smile faded. "What's wrong?"

His question opened an emotional floodgate. "I woke up this morning alone. I thought you left. And I didn't like the feeling." When he opened his mouth to interject, Macy held her palm up. She needed to get this off her chest while she had the courage. "I don't think I can handle all of this. You...me...us."

"I see I'm tried, sentenced and condemned without proving my innocence." Gideon expelled a long sigh as he slung his legs over the side of the bed. He dropped his gaze to the white rug skirting the bed. Redirecting his gaze, his expression was tired and forlorn, like he'd gone to hell and back while she'd slept.

"Despite your fervent expectations, every man you come in contact with is not your ex-husband," he continued. "Last night was not just sex for me. You have had a profound effect on me and I want more of it."

He was trying to break through the barrier she had carefully built around herself over the past three years. Macy rubbed her hand over her heart. Was she suffering from palpitations?

"What we had last night was great. Please don't mess it up with asking for more than I'm ready to give right now."

Gideon's world-weary expression faded into a mask of anger. "Right now?" he asked, launching himself from the bed.

Used to showdowns, Macy braced herself. He must have noted her "bring it on" stance because he stopped several feet away from her to pace. "A minute ago you were afraid I tiptoed out of here in the middle of the night like some bedroom Casanova. And now you are telling me what we had last night was just sex?"

Feeling rotten, Macy reached for him. But he jerked away from her. "Gideon, this doesn't mean I want to stop seeing you."

"Oh no! You just want to keep fucking me," he spat. "When it comes to being faithful or belonging to one another, that is where you draw the line!"

He turned toward the bedroom door, Macy ran around him to block his way. "Can we at least find some common ground or come to a compromise?"

"I know what your compromise entails," he rasped, coming to stand over her. He reached out and used the robe belt to pull her to him until they were hip to hip, her thighs cradling his cock. Macy's eyes drooped to half mast. Their exchange might have become a clash of wills, but it had not dampened her hunger for him.

"So I'm going to show you how I treat women I want only one thing from." With no further warning, he tore the robe from her body.

"What are you doing?" Macy gasped, her eyes darting to the robe pooled around her feet.

Palming her ass, he pulled her closer. "I'm giving you what you want. Sex," he retorted, sliding his hand between her legs.

Not like this! Pissed he would take it this far, Macy pushed at his shoulders. That proved as effective as pushing Mount Fuji. On the other hand, he crushed her to him like a child's rag doll. His tongue sucked and sparred with hers in a seductive coercion.

Macy knew his callousness was merely a means to an end, a way to prove the error of her ways. To fill her with so much guilt, she would simply capitulate to his way of thinking. Poor thing. His actions had set off every one of her hormones. By the time he lifted her off her feet and slid her down his cock, she glided over him easily.

He cradled her rump in his hands, then lifted and lowered her at a chaotic pace. In this position, she was wide open to him. Even his balls came into play, adding another dimension of pleasure.

Macy trembled with each thrust. She soon forgot the malice behind the lesson, completely losing herself in his punishment.

Reminded of how he worked her 'til she cried out for him to take her, Macy squeezed her hand between their bodies. Her hand stole over the curls covering her mound. She bit her lip. Almost better than chocolate! She lingered a moment longer, then moved onto the cherry-size bud he seemed unable to get enough of last night.

Reinforced by the heady images of his head nestled between her legs, Macy rolled her clit. She strummed it. Her head swam. She flicked it. She matched his driving rhythm.

Gideon tore his mouth from hers to look down. The breach of contact almost made Macy cry out in protest. "Blast it, woman. I'm supposed to be teaching you a lesson between making love and just sex. And here you are enjoying it. What am I going to do with you?"

"I don't know," Macy panted. "I can't help it. I love it when you're inside me."

"Incorrigible," he bit out, his fingers curling into her ass. He lowered his head and placed a trail of fervent kisses across her collarbone. Macy jerked against him, driving his cock deeper.

"Mmm," she moaned.

Over and over his hips pummeled against hers, his lesson a sweet mix of pain and pleasure. *Sweet Louise, any deeper and he'll be in my throat.* If he kept it up at this pace, she wouldn't be able to walk for a week.

But who really cared when great sex was the cause?

"I am lost... I am lost," he groaned, his cock driving into her over and over again as if unable to stop. Then as quickly as it started, he tore himself away, stumbling backward, his cock bobbing in front of him, thick and wet with her juices.

"I don't get you," he rasped, his chest rising and falling heavily. "I thought all hum...females wanted a commitment."

"I do, but —"

"But not with me," he threw in.

Macy's stomach lurched into a free fall. She reached out her hand, but noticing the rigid set of his shoulders, she dropped it. "I didn't say that, Gideon. I just need time."

"How long?"

If she was still unable to come to terms with the deep seated issues she still carried around from her past, how could she find the courage to voice them? "I-I don't know," she whispered.

"I see. I've overstepped my boundaries and assumed too much too soon." Gideon walked around her to where his clothes lay neatly folded atop her dresser. He shook his pants out, then jerked them on. Once done, he faced her. "I apologize for my presumptiveness. I'll see my way out."

Macy flinched when he moved toward the bedroom door. Was she already that attached to him that his leaving threatened to rip out her heart? Ignoring the pile of bricks and mortar her heart would use to build another wall, she ran around to block his way. When he stopped, she sighed in relief.

"There has to be some other option that we can both agree upon."

Other than a raised eyebrow, he stood motionless. "What is there to agree on? You're not ready to give me what I want and I refuse to accept your terms. I live life in black and white. Heaven and hell. Love and hate. Not shades of gray."

Even if she sorely wished she could give him what he wanted, Macy knew she could not. Life had dealt her too many bad hands. Any more and she might check out for good.

Her silence must have spoken louder than any words. While she fought back tears, he closed the door quietly behind him.

Chapter Eight

"Denise...hiccup...I just made the biggest mistake of my life...hiccup. Gideon hates me!" Macy switched the phone receiver to her other hand so she could blow her nose.

"Macy, calm down. I can't help you if I can't understand a word you're saying."

"I'm...hiccup...sorry." Macy wiped her eyes with the edge of a rumpled tissue. For good measure, she blew her nose again.

"Are you calmed down enough to talk now?"

Considering she'd just killed any hope of a decent relationship, it would take her another eighteen months to truly calm down. "Denise, I've really made a mess of things."

"Let me be the judge."

Macy sighed. "Last night I had sex with Gideon."

"And your problem is?" Macy could picture the smirk on Denise's face. If she weren't so miserable, she would have appreciated her best friend's humor.

"That's not the problem. That went well, really, really well. It's the after when everything went downhill."

"And," Denise prompted.

Macy tapped her fingernail on the back of the phone. To someone else's eyes, her actions probably looked foolish. "He wants a commitment," she mumbled.

Macy grimaced at the sound of the receiver being banged on the other end. "Isn't that what women want? Isn't that what you need?" With each syllable, Denise's voice rose one octave.

Macy walked over to the window seat and sat down. Pushing back the lace bedroom curtain, she looked at the street below. As expected, Saturday mornings in her neighborhood weren't a beehive of activity. Instead of cars and school buses zipping up and down the four-lane road, a lone streetcar ambled east toward the French Quarter.

"That's exactly the problem," Macy muttered, exasperated with herself and her insecurities. "I thought that's what I wanted as well. And with a man like Gideon, it would have been pure heaven. He's sexy, he listens to me, he makes me feel like a *Playboy* cover model whenever he looks at me and he's great in bed."

"Then why the cold feet?"

Her insecurities bubbling to the surface, Macy wrapped her arms around her legs. "What if he up and leaves like Trace? Or worse, what if something tragic happened? I don't think I could handle that kind of loss again."

"Unfortunately you can't prevent either of them," Denise reasoned. "I hate to change gears here, but does your back hurt?"

Macy frowned. "Why would my back hurt?"

"From all the baggage you're carrying. Hello! What if he isn't like Trace and you've unfairly pushed him away because of it. It's time you let go of your fears of abandonment and just breathe. You know, I have a coworker who swears by a Dr. Krishna —"

"No doctors! The last one didn't amount to a hill of beans." Four years and thousands of dollars later and her issues still weighed her down.

"Sorry, honey, I forgot."

"No problem," Macy sighed. "I try to forget that time in my life as well."

"Did you try to hash it out with him?"

Macy clicked her fingernail against the telephone receiver. She was still bothered by her lack of fortitude during their conversation. "Not only am I a nut case, I'm a coward as well."

"You are so not a nut case." Denise chuckled. "You might be wishy-washy, but you don't deserve to be committed. No pun intended."

Macy sat back and released a drawn-out sigh. "None taken. Maybe it was for the best. It was all too quick."

"Oh please. Plenty of people have fallen into the sack much faster than the two of you. And with just as much baggage or more."

"I practically had a mental breakdown when I thought he'd sneaked out in the middle of the night."

Denise snorted. "Any woman in the same position would've reacted in the same manner. You really should talk to him about your past."

How can I when I haven't come to terms with it?

"Are you still there?"

"Okay, I'll talk to him. I won't make any promises. But I guess I won't have to since I probably won't get the chance, considering the way we parted."

"Stranger things have happened."

But why do they always seem to turn around and bite me in the ass?

Satanachia waited for the woman to hang up the phone before he dropped his hands, releasing her from his control. His gaze shifted to his half-brother Agaliarept, lounging nonchalantly in the middle of the woman's antique four poster bed, and he nodded his head toward the door.

"Do we have time to taste her?" Agaliarept asked, rubbing his claw over his bare cock. Whether in the Abyss or in the natural plane, Agaliarept rarely reverted from his demon form. He simply masked his presence and nudity with magic. "We can assume

Gideon's human form and tag team her. Make her think he was fucking her any which way but loose."

Satanachia looked down at the woman still sitting in the window seat. She was quite lovely with her curvaceous figure, a head full of ebony locks floating around her shoulders and smooth dark skin. Even her eyes, slightly swollen from crying, were alluring. Satanachia's lips curved into a sneer. She was much too lovely for that brute of a half brother of theirs.

"She's Gideon's first human. He would smell her on us before we even crossed the River Styx. He might be half demon, but he's older and stronger than the both of us. And he wouldn't think twice about hanging our cocks on his trophy rack. I don't know about you, I quite like my cock where it is."

Agaliarept slid from the rumpled bed and rose to a formidable height well over seven feet. He rolled his tree-trunk size neck, his smile widening with each bone crack.

"But I need pussy. Trying to thwart a prophecy has made me horny."

Satanachia glanced at his brother as he walked past him to the bedroom door. "So what's new? The simple act of picking your nose makes you horny. Let's go."

After descending the stairs to the ground floor, Satanachia stopped to check his reflection in a floor-to-ceiling mirror in the downstairs foyer. Fastidious when it came to his wardrobe, he tightened the Windsor knot in his pink silk tie that offset his pink and white gingham dress shirt and charcoal reverse stripe suit to perfection.

Damn I'm gorgeous. Satisfied with his handiwork, Satanachia touched the mirror with his manicured fingertips, reopening the portal that allowed them to move between the realm of mankind and the underworld.

Always eager to return home, Agaliarept preceded him through the mirror and onto a jagged ledge overlooking a vast cavern punctuated with towering, calcium-encrusted stalagmites and a mile-wide river with no flow or ebb. In silence, they both jumped the short distance to the black, sandy beach bordering the river Acheron.

Satanachia held out his hand and a green flame leapt from his palm to the shore. Spinning counterclockwise, the flame grew until it was large enough to carry them both across.

In spite of their innumerable powers, demons could not walk on water.

"Do you think that was enough to seal the prophecy?" Agaliarept asked, boarding their conjured transportation. Once aboard, he crouched down on his heavily muscled haunches.

Satanachia shrugged. "Who knows with humans? All we can do is give them a grain of doubt or false hope and allow them to make a mountain out of a shit pile."

"And what if Gideon decides to forget the woman and remain here in the Abyss?"

"Ye of little faith," Satanachia sighed, picking at a piece of lint on his jacket sleeve. "I have one hundred legions riding on this for it not to work."

"Fifty," Agaliarept corrected.

Satanachia chastised himself for his slip-up. Carefully choosing his words, he continued, "One hundred...fifty...it's all relative, isn't it?"

Not to Agaliarept, who sprang up and used his jacket lapels to spin him around. "Hey! Watch the designer suit."

Ignoring his warning, Agaliarept continued to skewer the expensive wool-blend material with his claws. "You aren't planning to screw me over, are you, dear brother?"

Pass the petroleum jelly. "Of course not," Satanachia replied with an ear-to-ear grin. "If I took over Gideon's army, I would be the second most powerful demon in the Abyss. And why would I want that?"

"Yes, why would you." Agaliarept's gaze narrowed. Then, as if realizing the futility of debating the honesty of a fellow demon, he released his jacket. "Sorry, brother. I gave you too much credit." Agaliarept chuckled, smoothing the ruined material.

While his brother leapt to shore, Satanachia looked down at his jacket lapels, hanging by mere threads. The suit, a commissioned original, was his favorite out of the thousands he owned. Sadly, the garment could not be replaced. He'd eaten the tailor for failing to fulfill a special order of two-hundred French-cuffed dress shirts in a fortnight.

Satanachia's blood boiled and his body shook with rage. His earthly appearance along with the ruined suit evaporated into a sulfurous vapor, while a thick sheath of peat-colored skin tattooed with elaborate markings, declaring his high born status, took their place. Per custom, his tattoos swirled over his biceps, chest and up one side of his neck, eventually disappearing inside his Mohawk.

"That suit could not be replaced," he barked.

Agaliarept farted as he entered the passageway leading to the Abyss. "Stop acting like a pussy. I swear on our father's kingdom, the more time you spend around humans, the more like them you become. You're even worse than our lovesick brother."

Like all demons, Satanachia had a hot head. "I'm the pussy?" He snarled, his anger rising by the second. "If you were such a hellion, you would have gone straight to our father instead of seeking my help with your silly prophecy." Satanachia made an insulting noise in the back of his throat. "Father like son in more ways than one, the son shall follow in his father's stead. But he will follow his heart and not his head, turning his back on all he knows and deal his father and brethren a fatal blow. Sounds more like a child's nursery rhyme than an apocalyptic proph – oof!"

Satanachia attempted to breathe around the shoulder wedged in his midsection.

"My visions are not silly!" Agaliarept bellowed, lifting him from the ground and smashing him through a solid rock wall. "Take it back!"

Back split open from the initial impact, precarious position notwithstanding, still Satanachia would never apologize to his brother. "When the Abyss freezes over!"

Not pacified by his answer, Agaliarept continued to mine. "I think I've developed a new tool, brother. Instead of using pee-brained viziers to mine for us, we can use you," he grunted.

On and on Agaliarept mined until they hit a solid rock of resistance. In earnest, his brother attempted to ram his way through the compact sediment. His clawed feet ran in place and dust fell from the ceiling. Still, it held. Disgusted and winded, he flung himself away with an enraged bellow, allowing Satanachia to disengage himself from the cracked sediment.

"Is that all you have?" he choked out in an overinflated show of bravado whilst his brother paced to and fro in an angry fit.

In mid-stride, Agaliarept stopped, his fists clenched at his sides. "Matter of fact, it's not." He advanced on him. At arm's length, he ducked his head. Ready for his assault, Satanachia caught him with one hand at his shoulder and the other around the back of his neck. He shifted his weight to the balls of his feet and like an experienced shot putter he spun his brother in a semi-circle. When he finally gained the proper momentum, he released Agaliarept into the impregnable wall he'd just dislodged himself from.

This time the rock gave in, crumbling into rubble, dust and a semi-unconscious demon. Without checking on his brother's welfare, Satanachia stepped over him and through the opening in the cavern wall.

"Are you two boys arguing again?"

Satanachia whipped around, in search of the unfortunate soul about to be ripped apart for their insolence. His eyes narrowed. Through the haze of soot, he made out the figure of an exquisite auburn-haired female reposed on a low divan draped in gold and white silk.

Lilith! Satanachia stiffened. Like him, she preferred a human appearance. Long of limb and curvaceous, her milky paleness reminded him of the otherworld's moon. They must have interrupted her during her feeding because she removed a human metacarpal bone from between her ruby-tinted lips and tossed it behind her where it fell atop a pile of other human remains.

Since Lilith was several years older than the both of them combined, Satanachia bowed his head in deference. "I apologize for interrupting you during your feeding, my Lady."

"I'm sure," she purred, holding up her hand when he approached the low dais. Satanachia took her hand in his and planted a kiss on the inside of her wrist. He almost jerked his hand back in embarrassment. His cock had stiffened to granite at the first whiff of her scent. Thankfully, her attention had been drawn by Agaliarept's groans as he finally came to.

"So tell me what you two were fighting over?" Lilith prompted, her green gaze finally settling on his cock.

"Nothing," Satanachia replied, shifting uncomfortably from one clawed foot to the other. Usually a consummate liar, he suddenly found it difficult to lie to the very demon he'd lusted after ever since his seed pooled in his ball sac.

"Tsk...tsk...how foolish of me to expect honesty from a fellow demon." Satanachia winced. He wanted her favor, not her censure. "You could have at least flattered me by claiming to be fighting over me."

"And stroke your legendary vanity, my Lady?" Agaliarept grunted, coming to stand beside him. His eyes roamed freely over Lilith's nakedness.

Satanachia refused the heady temptation of littering the floor with his brother's brains. Instead, he moved to appease the object of his wet dreams. "Legend, yes, yet not half as renowned as your beauty."

Digesting his compliment, Lilith's green eyes sparkled like the emeralds on his favorite pair of cuff links. Satanachia's gut twisted and his cock bobbed in excitement. After all these years she had finally looked at him and not through him.

"Nor as insatiable as my lust." Lilith lay back onto the pillows with her slender pale arms raised above her head. Her coral-tipped breasts jiggled in invitation. Adding fuel to the fire, she spread her fleshy thighs to reveal auburn curls touched with dew. "So are you going to make me beg or are you going to join me?" she asked, dropping her heavy-lidded gaze to his cock.

Enthralled by her innate allure, Satanachia had forgotten his brother's presence until he spoke, "You are willing to take the both of us at the same time?" Agaliarept asked, palming his foot long erection. *I will not bash his brains in... I will not bash his brains in.* "I warn you, the ride will be rough."

"I have entertained and exhausted whole legions. You two would be nothing," she scoffed, opening her legs even wider to reveal the pink bud glistening just inside her slit.

Needing no further inducement, Agaliarept advanced on her while Satanachia held back. He didn't want to share the only woman he'd lusted after since he was a knee-high demon. He'd dreamed of this day coming to fruition a hundred times over, but there had been no one else except for him and her. If there was ever a time Satanachia wanted to turn his brother into a pile of smoking ashes, the moment was now.

Satanachia twitched. A shudder ran down his back followed by a gut-wrenching vibration in his gut and a tingling in his fingertips. Holding his hands up, his eyes widened. His fingers had become transparent and he could look straight through them to Lilith's ripe body. Agaliarept must have experienced the same tug of black magic, because he hesitated on the step before him.

He looked over his shoulder and their eyes met in mutual fear. "We're being summoned," Agaliarept stuttered, his body fading into nothing.

The second Satanachia re-materialized in his father's receiving chamber, he'd prostrated himself on his knees with his head bowed and his arms crossed behind his back as was custom.

"You two may rise."

Satanachia rose to his feet. And as always, he was taken aback. Before them, sitting on a throne of pure amber inlaid with polished onyx, sat no beast with horns, red skin and pitchfork. It was almost laughable how far from the human myths and caricatures Lucifer truly was.

On the surface, this achingly beautiful being with a full shock of white blonde curls, piercing turquoise-blue eyes and angular features wasn't the stuff of nightmares. More like a young girl's romantic fantasy. Still, external beauty aside, there was nothing in the nine planes of the Abyss Satanachia feared more or mistrusted.

"Is it true? Have you had a vision regarding your brother, Gideon?"

Shit, he knew! Beside him, Agaliarept noticeably stiffened. He couldn't blame him, Satanachia mused. Whenever he suffered their father's full regard, his ability to control his bowels became an endeavor.

"Yes, my Lord," his brother admitted.

"And?" their father prompted, his white-knuckled grip belying his even tone.

Failing to remember to whom he spoke, Agaliarept's gaze rose to meet their sire's. Lucifer's pale blond eyebrows shot up at his faux pas. Immediately realizing his misstep, Agaliarept gulped spasmodically and he bowed his head. "Y-you will not like what I have seen."

"Out with it!" Lucifer bellowed, shaking the very foundations. The denizens of the Abyss howled and yelped in fear. And several office buildings in downtown Santa Monica trembled from a 4.1 earthquake. "I warn you, it will not benefit you or your brother if you continue to be evasive."

Not wanting to bear the brunt of their father's wrath and end up in a pile of smoking ashes, Satanachia stepped forward to confess. "Gideon will turn his back on you and everything you have given him. He will choose to walk among mankind and become a thorn in your side."

Lucifer leaned back, placing his fingertips together. While he appeared to ruminate on their revelation, a protracted silence settled over the room.

A droplet of sweat splashed on the crown of Satanachia's foot. Up to this point he had no idea he was sweating, however, he dared not wipe his brow or even move for fear of drawing his father's unwanted attention.

Nevertheless, he gained it when Lucifer finally spoke, "Do you know the root of this treason?"

"A human female," Satanachia replied. "His first."

Something akin to dismay flitted across Lucifer's face before he smothered it with a hardened expression. "Has this human female so bewitched my son that he would turn his back on everything I've given him, even surrendering his immortality?"

While voiced aloud, Satanachia knew the question had not been intended for either of them to answer.

"Have either of you attempted to forestall this prophecy? Or have you two spent your free hours fighting and trying to fill Lilith's arse with both of your cocks?"

"Of course, my Lord. We left his female with feelings of distrust and doubt." As the lie left his lips, Satanachia didn't bat an eye. Nothing passed his sire's notice in the Abyss. Among mankind, his reach had limits. One of the reasons Satanachia spent so much time amongst mortals. "Before we left her, we made sure her feelings for Gideon withered to the point she will refuse his suit."

Lucifer's pale full lips twisted into a sneer. "His suit? Is the foolish pup that smitten with this woman he wants to mate with her?"

Since he'd already voiced one lie, Satanachia decided to break his record. "Yes, my Lord."

Lucifer pulled at one of the golden curls spilling over his forehead. "Even if you influenced the female's mind, that does not mean Gideon will not change it back, if what you say is true," Lucifer ground out.

Without warning, his father shot from his seat so quickly Satanachia had no time to react. Grabbed by the throat and lifted from the floor, he prayed for a quick death.

"You will find Gideon and bring him to me. But do not apprise him of these accusations or you will cease to exist."

With no further instructions, his father released him like a sack of rotting wormwood. Wheezing and clawing at his broken windpipe, Satanachia scrambled to his feet to do his Lord's bidding.

Chapter Nine

Gideon barged into Dr. Krishnamaturi's office on Toulouse Street. At half past nine, the doctor's lobby was still empty save for Dr. Krishnamaturi's receptionist, to whom he flung a passing hello before he shouldered his way inside the psychiatrist's private office.

Not wholly unexpected, Dr. Krishnamaturi was already occupied with clients, a professional-looking couple sitting on the couch holding hands. Barely giving them a cursory glance, Gideon stalked across the room and stood over the good doctor and principal catalyst for why his life was now a miserable mess.

"I would suggest you both leave. I have a score to settle with Dr. Krishnamaturi. It dates back to an incorrect diagnosis during a stint at Angola."

Dropping the nickname of Louisiana's most infamous State Penitentiary worked just as Gideon expected. The couple gathered their belongings and scuttled around him to the door.

"What's the meaning of this?" Dr. Krishnamaturi huffed. He moved to rise from his chair but Gideon blocked him by planting his hands on the arms.

"I hope you have your ducks in a row, good Doctor. I'm suing you for negligence."

Dr. Krishnamaturi frowned. "Negligence?"

"You were supposed to help me relieve stress, not cause me more, were you not?"

Dr. Krishnamaturi ripped off his reading glasses. "You've done remarkably well over the past twelve months. No more restless nights. No more emotional outbreaks."

Gideon's eyebrows jackknifed to his hairline. "I was until recently."

"In what manner did your condition worsen?"

"Over the past forty-eight hours I've been unable to either sleep or eat. And I'm totally useless at the job you seemed so convinced you could help me keep."

Gideon looked at Dr. Krishnamaturi expectantly. He really hadn't come here to mete out some kind of personal justice. The doctor's treatment had worked until he laid eyes on Macy.

Gideon squeezed his eyes shut and waited for it—the inevitable kick to the gut he experienced every time he thought of her. And like the thousand other times, it hit him with a vengeance, almost bringing tears to his eyes.

"You've met someone." Dr. Krishnamaturi chuckled.

Great! I'm becoming the laughingstock in both worlds. At least demons had the courtesy to laugh at him behind his back. Expelling a defeated sigh, Gideon released the arms of

the good doctor's chair. He walked over to the patient couch and flung himself on it. "I've more than met someone."

Dr. Krishnamaturi clicked the button of his ink pen. "She doesn't return your feelings."

"Why do you say that?"

The doctor scribbled a note on the legal pad in his lap. "You wouldn't have barged into my office if everything were to your liking."

Hit by another kick to the gut, Gideon groaned. "She has feelings for me. They just don't extend past my cock."

"Watch your language," Dr. Krishnamaturi chastised, flicking the paper over the top of his writing pad. "What do you want?"

Gideon thought back to the morning he'd found peace in watching her sleep. "Is her heart, body and soul too much to ask?" he rasped, rubbing his hand over his heart.

"Sort of a tall order, my boy." Dr. Krishnamaturi set down his pen. "Have you tried being her friend?"

Gideon snorted. "Demo...I don't have any friends, never needed them."

Until now.

"And why not? My wife is my best friend."

Why am I not surprised? "I've never looked at a female as anything other..." He drew his hand over his mouth. "Other than a sex object."

"How does she make you feel when you're around her?"

Gideon remembered how easy it was to talk with her without wishing he were someplace else. And how even the silences they shared comforted him. "To the point I am changing. Things that were once pleasurable are now intolerable."

"It is not what you give in friendship, Gideon, but what you're willing to give up that determines the quality of friendship."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like your prognosis." Aggravated, he sat up.

"The way I see it, you only have two options. You can either cut your losses and move on or be her friend and wait for her to come around."

Neither choice appealed to him. Gideon pushed himself off the couch and stalked over to the bank of windows overlooking Toulouse Street. At this time of day, the cobblestone roadway contained very little traffic or pedestrians. Of course, the steady stream of lunch patrons from Ralph and Kacoo's wouldn't begin for several hours, still the street was practically deserted.

Lonely even. Like him.

* * * * *

Macy eyed the young woman standing on the other side of the screen door.

She might be a native New Orleanian and the black arts might have been discussed openly in her presence when she was a child. Still, Voodoo priestesses were not her cup of tea. But since another child was reported missing last night, desperate times called for desperate measures. Plus, she hadn't heard from Gideon for two whole days, so she needed to immerse herself into something other than repeatedly analyzing their last moments together.

"Tante Céline?" Macy asked the petite figure, dressed in a white track suit and with long dreadlocks pulled into a neat ponytail. The young woman reminded her of a college coed, rather than one of the most powerful voodoo practitioners in the French Quarter.

Tante Céline accepted the business card Macy slipped through the crack in the screen door. "*Oui, je suis, Tante Céline...*and you are my one-thirty appointment," she countered, glancing down at her business card. "The reporter from *The Times-Picayune*. I'm glad you know how to keep time. If you would have been late, I would have refused to see you. Time is money and I'm not a firm believer in keeping Southern folk's time, if you know what I mean."

"I tried to time my arrival so I'd arrive five minutes early. I didn't want to get on your bad side." Macy groaned. Bad enough to show fear, even worse to admit it.

"*Une femme intelligente...*smart woman, I like that." Tante Céline chuckled, her good nature warm as her cinnamon-colored skin. "Well, come on in. I won't bite." She opened the door wide. "And I see you don't mean me any harm either. If you did, you wouldn't have been able to enter my home. I have a line of *piment rouge...*red pepper, across my front door to keep out evil spirits."

Expecting a gloomy abode filled with shrunken skulls, gris-gris dolls, boa constrictors and a cloying scent of incense, Macy found herself liking the old double-gallery home's shell-pink walls trimmed in white and sparse yet modern furniture.

"I'm cooking lunch. Do you mind if we talk in the kitchen?"

"Sounds fine to me," Macy replied, following Tante Céline into an eat-in kitchen at the back of the house.

"Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I'm just finishing up."

Macy accepted her host's invitation and sat down at the breakfast nook. Pulling out her notepad, she looked over her pre-written questions.

Tante Céline picked up a plastic ladle and stirred the contents of a crock-pot. "So why are you in need of my services?"

"I'm covering the Faubourg Marigny kidnappings. I've had a handful of interviews with people who live in the neighborhood. But only one with the last victim's family. I know this is an unconventional way of going about finding answers, but I'm unsure of how to proceed."

Tante Céline looked over her shoulder. "And why is that?"

"Some people say an evil spirit is responsible for the kidnappings."

"Then what you're doing isn't too farfetched. Local law enforcement have used my services for several years."

Macy's jaw dropped. She'd watched several TV shows where psychics were used to help solve murders. None featured law enforcement using the services of voodoo queens or priestesses. "Have the police spoken with you about the missing children?"

Tante Céline turned from the stove, a red toile patterned bowl in one hand and a baking pan filled with cornbread in the other. She set both down on the table, then slid into the opposite end of the breakfast nook.

"Sure, but that's privileged information. When and if the police want the press to know that they use my services, I will let them share that bit of information themselves." Macy set her pencil down, acquiescing to Tante Céline's roundabout request for no comment. "I hope you like gumbo."

Macy took the bowl held out to her. Following Tante Céline's lead, she bowed her head while the other woman blessed their meal. After the prayer, Macy ladled a heaping spoonful of homemade gumbo and started to eat.

Thickened with rice, diced tomatoes, fresh okra, chunks of shrimp and Andouille sausage, the spicy roux slid down her throat and enfolded her in a good ole' embrace of warm Southern hospitality. Unable to help herself, she slurped down another spoonful.

"What would you like to know?" Tante Céline prompted, bringing Macy back to the reason why she'd sought the voodoo priestesses' services.

With a tinge of regret, Macy set her spoon down. "I've interviewed everyone from the chief of police to the meter maid, but all leads either dried up or went cold. There isn't a suspect. What I need are clues. Are any of the children still alive? Who's responsible for the kidnappings? Is it a man or a woman? Or is it both?"

Tante Céline rested her hands on the table top, her French manicured fingertips as pristine as her terry cloth track suit. She reached into the kangaroo pocket of her jacket and pulled out a pack of Swisher Sweets grape-flavored cigarillos and a silver-plated lighter.

"*Je sais une mauvaise habitude.* Nasty habit, but it calms my nerves and centers me." She flipped the hinged lid of the cigar box and withdrew one of the slender cigars. Before bringing it to her lips, she plucked off the wood filter tip, then lit the other end.

"So you want answers, Miss Beaumont." Tante Céline took a healthy drag, then exhaled, filling the small alcove with the saccharin-sweet scent of grapes. "The answer is no."

Surprised at the answer, Macy sat back. "No to all three?"

"Let's not play games, Miss Beaumont." Tante Céline leaned forward and placed her elbows on the kitchen table. "Of course, it's pretty clever of you not to divulge your information first. I guess you want to see if I really have the gift I claim to profess." The younger woman stared at her for the briefest moment, then, as if coming to some conclusion, she shrugged her shoulders. "But both of us know there is something else out there that can't be explained or categorized by gender alone."

Macy resisted the urge to scratch her scalp. She was more confused than a tourist on Canal Street. "I don't mean to offend, Tante Céline, but I have no earthly idea what you're talking about."

"You have no idea what I'm talking about?" Tante Céline's lifted her cigarillo to her lips and took another healthy drag. "Children are the embodiment of innocence, Miss Beaumont. And this draws evil to them in spades. Whatever is taking those children isn't a man or woman. It isn't even human. It's evil personified or what the Good Book calls a demon."

Macy looked out the bay window, recalling her conversation with the young girl near the park. "I spoke with a relative of Olivia Whitfield. She believed an evil spirit was involved and whoever talked to the authorities would be the demon's next target. But I thought she was just sprouting nonsense."

"Most people would," Tante Céline sucked on her tooth. "Things that aren't readily seen by the human eye are always hard to grasp or believe if not proven by science."

"But I thought demons only preoccupied themselves with human possession."

"Demons are complex, just like humans. They could be using the children to enact a powerful spell which we have not seen the affects of yet or to strengthen their own powers. Or they could be holding them as pets. In either case, the police will probably never find those children."

Even though she feared the answer, Macy knew she had to ask, "Why not?"

"How else would you purge the innocence from a living soul?" Tante Céline paused to take another drag, creating a gravity-defying ash pipe on the opposite end. "By killing them. The demon will either consume them whole or sacrifice them."

This was way too much to handle in one afternoon. Macy pinched her forehead. A migraine was coming on. "So you're saying Satan could be taking the children?"

A cool smile tipped the corners of Tante Céline's glossed lips. "You didn't listen to your bedtime stories, did you? *Le mauvais fille*...bad girl. Satan is forbidden to walk the face of the Earth. It was a part of his punishment for being extracted from heaven. It's why he has innumerable minions doing his dirty work for him."

"If it's not Satan, then do you have any idea what particular demon is behind this?"

Tante Céline flicked an ash onto the jalapeno-shaped ashtray next to her soup bowl. "I'm good, but not that good, honey. But I do know what you're looking for is a very powerful demon. It has to be to walk back and forth between our two worlds. The demon you seek could be as old and powerful as Lucifer himself."

Tante Céline's words sank in like a twenty-pound weight. With leaden fingers, Macy rummaged through her purse for her emergency bottle of aspirin. Upon finding it, she popped the top, tapped two gel-caps into her hand, tossed them down her throat and washed them down with a healthy swig of Tante Céline's ice-cold lemonade.

"Are you okay, Miss Beaumont?"

Macy nodded. "I'm fine, it's quite a bit to swallow in one sitting. Can anything be done to stop it?"

"Of course, you just have to find out what it is first. *Et c'est comme chercher une aiguille dans une botte de foin...* but that'll be like finding a needle in a haystack. There's just as many demons in hell as there are humans here on Earth. I've tried on several occasions to entrap one, but he's proving to be rather elusive, like a swamp bass.

"If it's any consolation to you, demons usually come out at twilight, which is around the exact time all the children were taken. If you don't have any plans, we can walk through Faubourg Marigny tomorrow night. I can't tonight, I have a séance scheduled. And you never know how long those are going to run."

Macy almost agreed, then she remembered her dance lesson. What if Gideon showed up and she wasn't there?

"I'll have to accept a rain check for tomorrow, Tante Céline. I have a dance lesson."

"Ah, dancing with the devil, as the old saying goes."

Macy averted her eyes. "If he shows up."

"*Une sexy femme comme vous...* a hot thing like you? Why wouldn't he show up?"

I acted like a clown and ran him away. "He wanted more than I could give right now. Since neither of us was willing to a compromise, he stormed out. And of course, being a woman, I've since rethought my decision a hundred times."

"Your first decision was for the best, Miss Beaumont," Tante Céline declared, stabbing the cigarillo butt into the ashtray. "More than likely lover boy wanted only sex. And an attractive young woman with a good head on her shoulders should want more than being some playboy's booty call or, pardon my French, just a piece of ass."

You're excused, but I'm not. What a way to be called a shallow asshole! Embarrassed by her ill-treatment of the one person who made her feel alive again, Macy preoccupied herself with gathering her things. "Thank you for lunch and for fitting me into your busy schedule, Tante Céline. I need to get back to the office."

"*Vous êtes sur...* are you sure? Your hour isn't up yet." Tante Céline waved her hand at the two twenty dollar bills Macy pulled out of her wallet. "It's on the house. I gained just as much from your company as you have from mine."

Macy doubted it, still she tucked the two twenties back into her wallet. Well-versed in Southern etiquette, she'd never insult another person by pushing money on them, no matter how much they needed it.

Besides, the fee wasn't nearly enough. Tante Céline's advice could prove to be priceless in more ways than one.

* * * * *

Even now with her hand on the doorknob leading into Madame Vellier's Dance Studio, Macy's stomach twisted into knots for the umpteenth time. Her conscience

warred with her heart, demanding she turn around and never see Gideon again, while the other drove her to show up for tonight's dance rehearsal.

"So what is it going to be, Mace? Are you going to take one step forward or ten steps back?" Like always when it came to Gideon, her heart seemed to have the bigger guns.

"About time, Ms. Beaumont, now all we need is your dance partner." Macy gave Madame Vellier a halfhearted smile while her eyes darted around the studio. He hadn't shown. If he was even going to show. Macy's spirits plummeted. Knowing her luck, he'd most likely dropped off the face of the Earth.

"I know you hate the Mambo, *ma cher*, but you don't have to look so forlorn."

Frustrated, Macy swiped her hand over her bun. "My mood isn't because of the Mambo, Madame Vellier."

"What is it then? Bad day at work? Problems in paradise?"

"I don't have a dance partner, he —"

"Throwing me out with the trash so soon?"

Macy wrapped her arms around her waist. His "sex-on-a-stick" voice triggered a strange wooziness akin to a kick to the gut. Sure too much at one time would be too much of a shock to her system, she turned around slowly.

A total waste of time. The moment their eyes met, Macy became practically catatonic, losing complete control of her motor skills. Fortunately her breathing was automatic or she would have slumped to the floor from lack of oxygen.

On the other hand, she could have done without her brain's spontaneous interference. Still working a mile a minute, it made her question her reasons for being there and her recent decision for taking a leap of faith.

A Grand Canyon leap of faith, Macy mused. She'd vowed to maintain a level head the next time she entered into a relationship. And just watching Gideon close the distance between them, her head was anything but level.

Am I ready for this? Lord, she hoped so. She desperately wanted whatever this man was willing to give her and more.

Gideon stopped just inside her personal space and leaned down to mutter in her ear. "And here I thought we made the perfect couple."

Reminded of their one and only time together, a tremor rattled her, jerking Macy from her state of inertia. How could she remain levelheaded when he made her feel so deliciously scattered, as if coming out of a spell?

Macy shook the cobwebs from her head, partially breaking his enchantment enough to find her voice. "I thought you weren't going to show up."

"So are you both still partners?" Madame Vellier cut in from what sounded like a distant planet.

Gideon's eyebrows swept up as if to say "are we?" She might have seesawed for days over what to do. Now she was firmly grounded in her resolve to let the chips fall where they may.

"Basic dancer's pose?" she asked, taking his hand and pulling him behind her to the middle of the dance floor.

"*Oui*, basic dancer's pose." Madame Vellier flipped the stereo system's power button, filling the studio with Reel 2 Real's *I Like To Move It*.

"As you both know, there are four beats to the Mambo. The basic step is quick, quick...slow...quick, quick...slow." Madame Vellier demonstrated the steps with an invisible partner several times before beckoning them to join her. "The mambo has its roots in Cuba. Supposedly its name is derived from a Haitian voodoo priestess, who was said to have been a soothsayer, healer and even an exorcist."

Macy yelped. If Gideon would had landed on her instep any harder, her amateur dance career would have ended then and there.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, drawing up short. He seemed uneasy, distant.

Even if her foot smarted, Macy was more concerned with his well-being. "Are you okay?"

Gingerly he pulled her against him and began the dance again. "Somewhat disturbed by Madame Vellier's history lesson."

"You can't be from New Orleans if the tale of a voodoo priestess spooks a big guy like you," Macy joked in an effort to ease the tension lines around his mouth.

It worked because he rewarded her with a lopsided grin. "I'm not easily spooked, but certain aspects of Madame Vellier's story raised the hairs on the back of my neck. Sort of like you do to me, only in a good way."

Macy dropped her head. If her toes weren't so pinched from her gold Capezios, they would have curled. He always knew what to say to make her feel ten feet tall. And Lord knew she needed it since her ex-husband cowed her for so many years.

Blatantly sensual, instead of being overly dramatic like the American Tango or upbeat like the foxtrot, the Mambo focused more on the dancer's hip movements than the actual execution of the steps.

Not unlike their previous lesson, Gideon was a natural. He picked up Madame Vellier's intricate choreography and performed each step with gusto. Too much gusto in her opinion. The swing of his hips was a hypnotic aphrodisiac, igniting memories from the last time they'd done the horizontal mambo.

As if she needed anymore memories! Her panties were already sticking to her clit the moment he pulled her into his arms. She was so worked up, she silently cheered when Madame Vellier called an end to the night's lesson.

"Since I won't see you two over the weekend, make sure you both practice on your own. I want you to be able to pick up where we left off."

"I guess I'll see you on Monday." Gideon slid his arms from around her waist. Was he reluctant to let her go?

Normally the old Macy, the one with a stockpile of insecurities rivaling a fourteen-year-old with braces, would have hightailed it out of there. Except that Macy was lonely and unsatisfied, while the new and improved Macy had so many possibilities ahead of her.

Out with the old and in with the new as they say! Seizing the opportunity, she took his hands in hers. "Um...I was wondering...ah...if you didn't have any other plans tonight..." Macy floundered.

What if he wasn't interested anymore? Or even worse, what if he was already seeing someone else? Mentally shaking herself, she rushed forward before she chickened out. "Would you like to go out for drinks? Tonight's Bottlenecks and Poetry down at Crawfish Willie's Bar and Grill over in Metairie."

Finished with her "will you go out with me" speech, Macy patted herself on the back. Why was he standing there looking as if she'd grown a pair of horns?

She slipped her hands from his. "What was I thinking?" Already distancing herself, she took several steps back. "Ha! A guy like you probably has a calendar filled to the gills. We can do something another time. I'll accept a rain check."

"I won't," he countered, taking the necessary steps to close the distance and hurl her hormones into hyperspeed. "I would move heaven and hell to have you all to myself."

Ironic how he'd already delivered part of his promise.

Chapter Ten

After memorizing Dr. Krishnamaturi's I worksheets on "Establishing Worthwhile Friendships", he'd shown up at Madame Vellier's Dance Studio determined to win Macy's friendship. But the vixen had thrown him for a loop by asking him out on a date.

What was she up to? Did she think if she got him alone he would capitulate? Enraged, Gideon ground his teeth. If Macy thought he was going to be her cock- on-call, she was sadly mistaken. He wanted more and it wasn't in his nature to accept anything else.

Determined to turn the tables in his favor, he would use the remainder of the evening to gain some leverage. He would show her he could be trusted to keep her secrets, was worthy enough to share her dreams and so loyal she would think twice about treating him like a bed boy.

"Have you've always wanted to be a reporter?" *Come on! How generic could you be?* Gideon slanted a glance to ascertain her reaction. In the orange glow cast by the dashboard, her beauty surpassed the ethereal, especially when she smiled at him like that. He coughed to keep from choking. It suddenly felt like someone just punched him in his windpipe.

"I've wanted to be an investigative reporter ever since I tagged behind a *Times Picayune* reporter covering a house fire in our neighborhood. To an eight-year-old, the job was fascinating and glamorous. And I never strayed from that path in all these years. Even after I learned there would be long hours, never-ending deadlines and god-awful pay."

What did God have to do with her salary?

"What about you? What do you do for a living?" Gideon stiffened. The worksheet told him what questions to ask. It forgot to mention she would ask some in return. He couldn't tell the one woman he desired above any other that he collected souls and made sure they received the punishment they deserved. Gideon formed the words to change the subject back to her. He hesitated. How could they truly be friends if she didn't know anything about him?

"I work for my father. Our company deals with rare commodities. I'm responsible for procurement and product management." That wasn't all that bad. The sky hadn't fallen. Not yet anyway.

"I couldn't imagine working with my family. I have three older sisters and brothers and we would be at each other's throats before lunch."

Over the years he'd ripped out quite a few throats himself due to his siblings' constant intrigues and hidden machinations. Relieved by their similar circumstances, he decided to give another inch. "A family business is a mixed blessing. I have job security, but there's also the constant need to prove myself."

"Your coworkers sound really cutthroat."

"Coworkers, no. Step-siblings, yes. Quite a few of them work for my father."

"How many?" she asked.

"Too many to count."

"So your father was a rolling stone?"

Gideon smiled at her analogy. "More like a freight train. He could cut a path through an entire village and they would never know what hit them 'til nine months later."

Even if this cleansing of his soul felt good, Gideon braced himself for her censure. "Your father sounds like my Uncle Otis. His situation is so bad he'll end up paying child support his entire life and the next. Too bad he wasn't born a cat."

"There aren't enough stray cats in New Orleans to help my father repay a tenth of his debt. So I guess he'll be damned forever."

Instead of shocking her, Macy threw her head back and laughed. The tinkling sound was so delightful, so infectious Gideon joined her. Not because he saw the humor in his comeback but because for the first time in his life he enjoyed another person's company.

Who knew friendship could feel this damn good?

* * * * *

Located in an old fish house, relocated from its original home on Lake Pontchartrain, Crawfish Willie's Bar and Grill was a two story ramshackle building barely standing on eight sturdy cinder blocks. The locals didn't seem to take much heed to their own safety since the rock and gravel parking lot was practically filled. Macy didn't seem to mind either because she jumped out when he parked the truck and then hurried them both inside.

The inside didn't improve upon the exterior, Gideon noted. The entire first floor was dominated by an open dining room with thick ceiling beams draped with fish nets, stuffed alligator heads and more than a dozen pictures depicting Louisiana's backwater swamps.

Gideon glanced at a plastic sign stapled to the wall above the cash register, which read, *KITCHEN CLOSSES AT 10PM. NO EXECEPTIONS. THEM'S THE RULES. SIGNED...THE OWNER.*

That explained why at a quarter 'til ten, only a handful of tables remained unoccupied. "My kind of place," Gideon drawled, his eyes settling on the few remaining stragglers, a family of four and a pair of backwoods boys wearing plastic,

baby bibs emblazoned with "Crawfish Willie's, Everyone Loves Our Head!" Unaware of their audience, the pair tore through a pile of steaming crawfish.

"Can I help ya'll?"

"We're here for Bottlenecks and Poetry."

"It's upstairs." The brunette looked toward a set of stairs on the other side of the dining room. "You better get a move on, it starts in a few minutes."

Gideon looked down at the petite brunette juggling four steaming plates piled with food. Fanatical when it came to human fare, he attempted to differentiate each portion from the other. He catalogued the odd-rounded shapes and peculiar, golden crisp-like coatings. Still, it proved too difficult.

Racked with curiosity, he took a whiff.

I have died and gone to the Abyss! Willie's rustic charm and questionable clientele disguised a gastric treasure. Spellbound, he followed the brunette's every move as she walked away to serve the undeserving family of four.

Macy took his hand, her warm touch rousing him from visions of gluttony. Almost. "What is she serving them?"

"You aren't from New Orleans, are you, or from the South for that matter."

Gideon shook his head. "No, however, I'm beginning to love everything about it."

She turned her head away from him to study the table, but not before he glimpsed the pink spots on her cheeks. Did she think he was in love with her? Gideon suddenly lost his appetite for food.

"It looks like corn on the cob, fried hushpuppies, catfish and shrimp. Any more requests?"

Will you be with me for an eternity? Gideon shook his head. What was he thinking? A demon never took his first human to mate. They were mainly for fucking and manipulating.

She tugged on his hand. Why did it feel like it was tied to his cock? "Come on, we need to snag a couple of seats before the show begins."

Gideon stifled a groan. "I'll follow if you lead."

Finding humor in his remark, she chuckled, displaying a row of even white teeth. Gideon swiped his hand over his mouth. His fangs were descending! *What the fuck was happening!* That only happened during...breeding.

She tipped her chin to regard him. "Wow! You're in rare form tonight."

If she only knew how rare!

Gideon followed Macy up the stairs, his eyes latched on her rounded hips. He ran his tongue over his fangs. Memories of her soft limbs wrapped around him ate at him like a rabid fiend.

Lucifer! It would be so easy to throw her over his shoulder and give her a hard tumble in the parking lot. His eyes followed the dip in her waist, the slope in her back, her luscious ass. Gideon grimaced. He had not suffered this long only to end up as Macy Beaumont's parking lot booty call. No matter how much he lov...lusted after her.

Gideon almost heaved at the bad aftertaste resisting temptation left in his mouth.

Still, he pulled himself together by contenting himself with holding her hand and admiring the view.

He did not have to suffer overlong because they soon reached the second floor. Only half the size of the floor below, the second landing was dark and cramped. An antique bar with its best days behind it took up a third of the area. A tiny stage and a spattering of tables vied for the remaining space.

"Watch your step," Macy warned, navigating them between the tables. "The floor can be deadly if you're not careful."

Gideon glanced down. Charming. The floor's unevenness and odd acoustics were caused by discarded peanut shells.

Luckily, walking the peanut gallery was brief because she procured them a booth near the stage. No sooner had they taken their seats than a young man sporting an INXS 1989 World Tour t-shirt appeared. He placed a basket filled with peanuts on their table, then retrieved a notepad from his back pocket.

"*Bonsoir*. The name's Cal. I'll be your waiter this evening. The peanuts are free, but the drinks aren't. All well drinks are 2-for-1 and draft beer is only a dollar until eleven. What's your poison?"

"Poison?" Baffled, Gideon reached over and picked a plastic drink menu nestled between the napkin holder and ketchup bottle. "Do you really have poison on the menu?"

"No, Daddy-O!"

Gideon stiffened. Not only did the kid call him his daddy, but he glanced at Macy with a "where did you get this guy from" expression. Thankfully for him, she didn't notice. She was too busy studying the tabletop placard advertising the bar's specialty drinks. Her inattention over his gaffe eased Gideon's embarrassment. Somewhat.

"We don't serve arsenic, potassium cyanide or furniture polish. It's just a figure of speech. How about you look over the menu while I take the lady's order."

Even if he itched to rip his head off, Gideon took the waiter's advice.

"What'll you have, miss."

Macy's lips puckered, drawing his attention and jogging his memory. Images of her crouched over him with her plump mouth clasped around his cock flashed in his head. Gideon bit back a groan.

"I'm going to take a risk and go with the Swamp Thing. How is it?"

Cal scribbled her order on the notepad. Without looking up, he replied, "No complaints, so far. In fact, if you drink too much, some people claim it'll grow hairs on your lip."

She chuckled at the waiter's joke. Instead of a light tinkling sound, her vocal chords produced a husky treble that curled his lips and tightened his balls. Upon his mother's soul! He could listen to her laughter the rest of his immortal days.

"Would you like your drink frozen or on the rocks? And do you want sugar or salt on the rim?"

Macy dropped the placard back on the table. "On the rocks and salt on the rim, please."

Turning back to him, Cal asked, "Made a decision yet?"

Tired of looking the fool, Gideon decided to take the easy route. "I'll have what she's having. Instead of salt, I'll have sugar."

"Daredevil. I'll be back in a jiff with your drink orders, hopefully before the poetry starts. You'll thank me later."

The hurricane lantern hanging overhead brought out the reddish undertones of her dark skin, highlighting her high cheekbones and deep-set eyes the color of smoky quartz. He couldn't deny she was gut-wrenchingly beautiful, but there was something else. Something more profound that tugged at him, calmed his restlessness and punctuated his days, so they did not seem as ceaseless and laborious as they'd once been.

Would that be enough for him? Even if it meant going against his true nature?

Yes.

"Macy, I've been thinking a lot lately and I've changed —"

"Hey ya'll! My name's Billie Jean and I'll be your host this fine evening." Gideon's gut twisted into a sailor knot. He'd lost his opportunity to a tall, willowy redhead in ripped jeans and a scarf subbing for a top.

"We have more than a dozen people signed up for your listening pleasure. So you better loosen your girdles, order a few drinks per the bartender's orders and get ready to be entertained!"

Thinking she'd forgotten their conversation, she startled him with a question, "What were you about to say?"

"Nothing that cannot wait," he replied, not wanting to spoil her fun by unloading his heart's desire. He would hold off until later. Plus, he needed more time to digest the fact he'd been brought to his knees by a woman.

* * * * *

An hour later and thoroughly anointed with enough mediocre poetry to last him another millennium, Gideon was immersed in his thoughts. And unlike Macy, who still

nursed her first drink, he was on his fourth Swamp Thing. He rather liked the sweet and sour concoction made from one thumb dark rum, two thumbs Midori Liquor and what Cal called “a secret ingredient found only in the depths of the Bayou”.

Still his evening wasn't entirely lost. In between poets, he'd shared more with Macy than anyone he'd ever known. She now knew his favorite color (black), his musical preferences (Nina Simone and David Bowie) and they shared a mutual love for old movies, especially starring James Dean and Betty Davis.

“You better drink up. The Black Widow is up next. She normally closes things down since she's the best of the crop and the reason people come.”

Gideon heeded her advice. Not because of the bad prose. He needed the spirits to fortify his soul, since he would be baring it soon.

As he set his mug down, a petite woman of indeterminate age stepped on stage. Sporting an afro and dressed all in black, the poetess readjusted the microphone stand to her diminutive height. Once it was to her liking, she gazed out at the audience and smiled. An immediate hush fell over the room.

*“Am I your next conquest?
In your long list of personal accomplishments?
Are my grasping arms and clenching thighs the only thing you see?
Why cast a blind eye to the beauty I hold inside?
Yes, my lips may swell from your ardent kisses.
And my hips will follow where your hips lead.
But if you look deeper than just the physical,
You'll find a heart and soul that bleeds.
My weakened pride may be susceptible
To your voracious appetites and callous demands
But beware of the tangled web you weave
This Black Widow needs a home.”*

The Black Widow stepped back from the microphone with her hands pressed together as if in prayer. The room erupted in euphoric finger snapping.

Gideon rolled his eyes. Humans and their strange quirks. Ready to salvage what was left of their evening he began, “Macy...”

Were those tears in her eyes?

A smile and telling her how much I enjoyed being in her company, per the “Talking Points” worksheet, probably wouldn't help. At a loss, Gideon slipped from his seat. She scooted over so he could slide in beside her. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine.” With a loud groan, Macy leaned into him, filling his nostrils with her perfume. “It's just blaringly apparent how stupid I've been lately.” Gideon reached up

to wipe away a tear from her cheek. The proof of her sorrow triggered a knee-jerk reaction that made him want to move mountains and slay fairytale dragons for her.

"The way we parted the other night really bothered me. None of it was your fault. I place the blame wholly on myself."

Gideon resisted the urge to pull her onto his lap. "Is that why you asked me out tonight, to apologize? If you did, there is no need. I allowed my pride to come between us and I could've have been more understanding."

"Don't feel that way." He looked down at the hand she placed over his. "You were only holding to your guns. And I didn't respect your wishes."

Gideon's stomach fell as if he'd just jumped from the cliffs of Maureth. "What are you trying to say, Macy?"

"I'm so tired of being unhappy and afraid of my own shadow. I'm not proposing marriage," she rushed as if needing to speak her mind before she chickened out. "But if you're still interested, I want what you want."

By the nine planes of the Abyss, he'd just been handed the Holy Grail! To be sure, he tested the waters. "I'm interested only if it's an exclusive relationship. And one that isn't based solely on sex."

Macy chewed her bottom lip, way too long for his liking. Were his hands sweating? "But there will be sex, right?"

Her question caught him off guard, but not his cock. It extended across his thigh. Gideon placed her hand on his lap. "Whenever and however you like."

"How about now?" she asked, squeezing him. Gideon struggled to keep his eyes from crossing.

"I thought you would never ask."

* * * * *

Macy heaved an exasperated sigh over her fourth attempt. "I can't get the key in the door lock with you sucking on my ear."

Gideon didn't care if she tried to open the door a hundred times. He couldn't get enough of her sweet taste. Tired of her halfhearted protests, he spun her around to face him, causing her to drop the key in the process. "Forget the key. We can stay out here."

She looked over to her next door neighbor's porch. "Out here where anyone could see us?"

"Of course, I'm an exhibitionist. What about you, hot stuff? Got a little devil inside?"

Despite her new found confidence and racing heartbeat, Gideon knew her answer before it even passed her full lips. "No," she swallowed.

"No, you're not an exhibitionist," he whispered, reaching out to dust a curl from her shoulder. "Or no, you don't have a little of the devil inside?"

"Neither." She bent down and picked up her house key. When she straightened, she kept her gaze averted. "Unfortunately I'm pretty much a bore."

Gideon took her hand and placed it over his heart. "Could a bore do this to me?" Shell-shocked by the force of his heartbeat, her mouth fell open. Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, he capitalized on her surprise. He lowered his head and crushed his mouth over hers.

Lucifer! She tastes better than the sweetest nectar!

"Put your arms around my neck," he mumbled against her mouth. When she did, he groaned. Her curves fit him perfectly. Wanting more, he slid his hands around her hips and cupped her heart-shaped bottom. As he drew a lazy trail over her upper lip, Gideon realized he was more territorial than an exhibitionist. He didn't want anyone to see the treasure he'd found after so many centuries all alone.

Tightening his hold, he picked her up, then swept her across the threshold. As he kicked the door shut, she drew back slightly.

"How did you do that? The door was locked." She opened her palm and in it lay the key.

Gideon cursed himself a thousand times over. She bewitched him to the point he'd been careless. "You must have hit the hole and didn't realize it." Gideon hoped she'd buy it. He didn't want to waste any more time on a senseless argument or explanations. All he wanted at this moment was to be cradled between her legs and his cock nestled deep inside her.

She deliberated, but to his surprise she didn't question him further. To prevent her from noticing any more black magic, he kissed her.

Gideon's defensive strategy almost brought him to his knees. Every flick and swirl of her tongue against his only heightened his lust and hardened his cock. Too impatient to take the stairs, he carried her down a short hallway to the family room.

"You know there's a bed upstairs," she pointed out when they fell onto the sofa with her landing conveniently on top. Gideon yanked her black tank top up and over her head, followed quickly by her bra. Her dime-size nipples were already hard for him!

"Logistics doesn't bother me." He leaned up and licked a dark chocolate peak. She gasped and gripped her shoulders. "How about you?"

Even if she said yes, they wouldn't be going anywhere. He needed to be inside her like yesterday. "H-here is fine." Gideon hid a smile in the cleft between her breasts.

"Staying away from you was the hardest thing I've ever done." *And I won't be doing it again.*

"We were only apart a few days, not even a week."

"An eternity."

Sitting up, Gideon placed his hands on her rounded hips. "An eternity where I could not touch you." He untied her swing skirt, drew it over her hips and deposited it on the floor.

"An eternity where I could not undress you." When he fingered her lace front panties, her pupils dilated and she rocked against him. Dipping his hands over the waistband, he rolled them slowly over her ass. "An eternity where I could not feel your hot wetness."

Appearing dazed, her eyes heavy-lidded and drowsy, she lifted up slightly and wiggled out of her panties.

Once she straddled him again, his appreciative gaze raked over the proud thrust of her swaying breasts and delicate curve of her belly. His eyes dipped lower to her dark, glistening curls.

"You're ready for me?"

She nodded. "I-I've been wet since the moment I laid eyes on you tonight," she panted. A simple, heartfelt admission and she had his head swimming.

Palm up, he slid two fingers inside her slit, seeking the source of his sleepless nights. *Squeezing me tight!* He hissed in a breath. *Mine. All mine.*

Snarling in bliss, he stroked her, plunged his fingers upward and made love to her. All the while, she watched him with heavy-lidded eyes and lips swollen from his demanding kisses.

With each pass, his cock jumped, her pussy lips quivered. Their breaths grew labored, harried.

"I can feel you growing against me," she murmured. "You're hard and thick."

He sputtered to a stop when she reached back and dipped her hand inside his pants. "I was right," she gushed, running her hand down his length, then back up. She wrapped her fingers around him, massaging the slit at the crown.

Unable to help himself, he bucked against her. "More," he rasped.

As she gave him a slow smile, the pad of her thumb circled him. Moisture beaded on the swollen crown. She didn't let up, to his immense pleasure. Instead, she spread the collective juices over the head. She took him in hand, her tiny fingers stroked him.

Lucifer, he was going to lose it! *Not like this.* Not after what he'd been through these past few days.

Growling, he gripped her hips. "Put me inside you. Now!"

She rose up on her knees, positioning herself over him. She pressed down slowly until his cock rested against her, flesh to flesh. When Gideon glanced down he shuddered, the stark contrast between their complexions breaking him.

Desperate to be inside her, he jerked his hips upward and impaled her with one swift thrust. Even better than the first time!

Gideon groaned. His forehead beaded with sweat. Her tight sheath massaged and squeezed his cock like a clenched fist. She lengthened his cock, tightened his balls against his ass and triggered the beast.

Fuck! Not now! Gideon squeezed his eyes shut. Her kiss-swollen lips and swaying breasts would only continue to provoke him. If the beast came forth, he could break her in two.

To control the situation, he pressed his hips into the couch cushions, allowing her to establish the rhythm. His strategy didn't help. She turned a steady, controllable trot into a maddening gallop. Gideon grabbed her waist to slow her pace. If he unleashed his full lust upon her, he would never forgive himself. "If you keep up this pace, we're going to both be sorry."

Macy bit his shoulder. "If sorry feels better than this, I want more." Not heeding his warning, she leaned back with her knees dug into the cushions and proceeded to buck against him.

Keep it in check... Keep it in check. His chanting didn't soothe the beast. It raised its hackles and roared for release.

Losing control, he grappled with the beast.

She raked her fingernails down his torso, not breaking the skin, but enough to sting.

Gideon howled in pleasure, his head thrashing on the cushions. His body began to shift, eyes dilating, muscles cording and growing to monstrous proportions. Got to do something before she sees.

"No!" she protested when he suddenly plucked her from his lap. Ignoring her objections, he turned her around, planting her hands firmly on the back of the couch.

"Don't move." Gideon winced at his guttural tone. His fangs had descended and it was difficult to speak around them.

When she turned her head to look back, he swatted her ass. "Obey me." Clearly she didn't hear his command because she attempted to turn her head once more. Again, he slapped her ass. This time much harder.

"Oh," she gasped. But before she dropped her forehead onto her arm, there was a precocious smile on her lips.

So his female liked it rough? It would be his pleasure to appease her. Gideon slid his cock along her slick folds. His breath rushed out in a hiss. "The time for making love is past. I'm ready to fuck, hard and deep."

"Please," she panted, arching her back and inadvertently propelling her fine ass in the air.

"Spread your legs," he rasped. She did so but not enough for his liking. "Wider." She complied again, her tongue darting out to lick her lips.

Such a simple, yet natural act and his hunger for her shot through the roof. Gideon tightened his grip on the globes of her ass and pulled her toward him. Inch by slow inch, he entered her.

Lucifer! There was nothing better in this world or the next than being inside her!

Gideon drew his hips back 'til the head of his cock breached her opening. He sawed the head back and forth, heightening not only his but her pleasure as well. Her perfectly polished nails clawed at the couch's linen upholstery and her lips moved in quiet, frantic murmurings.

Even if he was able to hear a conversation next door, Gideon leaned forward to tease her, "Speak up, Macy baby. I can't hear you."

"Gideon, please..." she whimpered, her body shining with a light sheen of sweat.

"Please what?" He lifted her hair aside and licked the back of her neck.

"Give me more, please."

Ask and you shall receive. His hips shot forward, forcing his cock back inside her. Despite his girth, which had grown considerably when the beast snatched the reins, she took every inch of him. Her warmth enveloped him, holding him tightly.

Almost too tight. Gideon's eyes rolled in his head. Pleasure and pain served on the same plate.

"Delicious," he hissed, rocking his shaft deeper and deeper.

"I'm going to come," Macy groaned beneath him. Her breath turned into labored gulps of air. Still, she held on, even arching her back and widening her legs, affording him a better vantage point in which to drive into her.

He obliged with a succession of quick, deep-seated thrusts.

"Oh...yes!" she crooned.

Gideon jerked. His seed pooled in his ball sac. His back bowed. *No! Much too soon!* To hold off the inevitable, he sank his fangs into his bottom lip.

"I'm about to come, Gideon!" She began to writhe and buck against him.

Hold on...hold on...wait for her.

Her body shook uncontrollably. Macy reared back against him, her mouth slack and sweat rolling down her beautiful dark skin.

"I...I—ah!" She wailed, grinding her ass against him.

Now! His eyes on the prize, Gideon bent over her. He searched for her hands, threading their fingers.

He snarled against her, drove inside. His rhythm increased to a furious pace. Harder. Deeper.

"Macy, what you do to me is beyond words." He bent down and swirled his tongue over her quivering shoulder.

On and on he continued to buck against her.

Getting close...so close.

Suddenly he froze, his body racked with pressure. The muscles in his neck corded and his back bowed. A bright light blinded him to everything but the woman beneath him. He flung his head back and bellowed, pumping his hot seed into her.

When he'd given her all that he had, he fell back onto his haunches. He brought her with him, wrapping her in his arms. As he rocked her and kissed her delicate shoulders, he trembled with a mixture of bliss and irony. This would be the closest he would ever come to experiencing heaven.

Chapter Eleven

"Gideon, son of Lucifer, it's time you meet your maker!"

By the time Macy realized they had an intruder, Gideon had already deposited her behind him on the couch.

"Tante Céline!" he bellowed, crouching and ready to spring. "How dare you intrude upon me?"

In a state of bewilderment, Macy pulled Gideon's t-shirt from between the sofa cushions and tugged it over her head. With her body finally covered, she peeked around his shoulder. Why in the world was the voodoo priestess she interviewed the other day standing in her living room? "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for lover boy, Miss Beaumont," the voodoo priestess sniffed. "Just like every minion in his father's kingdom, I'm what you call a thorn in their side."

"More like a pain in the ass."

Tante Céline shrugged her shoulders. "Sticks and stones." She reached inside her jacket and pulled out a purple drawstring bag. The same Crown Royal collectible bag her grandmother used to carry her .38 in when she traveled up and down Interstate 10. "Just doing my job, ridding Crescent City of evilmongers like you." Tante Céline turned the bag over and dumped green powder on the floor in a circle around her.

"I don't mean any disrespect, considering this is my house and all, but what in the heck are you dumping on my floor?" Macy sprang from the couch, but Gideon stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "I just had those refinished last month," she complained.

The voodoo priestess waved her hand dismissively. "Keep your panties on. It's only green sage. It keeps dark spirits, like sweet cheeks here, at bay."

Tired of riddles, double speak and the mess on her hardwood floors, Macy exploded, "Stop speaking in riddles and tell me what the heck is going on here!"

"In layman's terms?" Tante Céline asked, tucking the velvet bag back in her jean pocket.

"Layman's terms. Epistemological terms. In any terms!"

"Lover boy is a demon. And not your run-of-the-mill, garden-variety demon either. He comes from the loins of ole' Lucifer himself. And his birthright makes him mighty powerful, a high prince of hell with one hundred legions at his beck and call," Tante Céline recited as if reporting the weather. "But don't worry. I plan on sending sugar foot here back to his daddy."

Macy glanced at Gideon. Other than the wicked tattoos covering his upper body and above average size, she didn't see anything demonic in his appearance. Heck, most of the New Orleans Saints fit the same profile.

Angered by her absurd claims and the mess on her floor, Macy advanced on her.

Again, Gideon pulled her back. "Let me at her!" Macy objected, trying to wiggle out of his grip.

"Let her go. When I'm done with her, you're next." Galled by her audacity, Macy struggled even harder.

"You came here for me, Tante Céline, so let's do this."

Macy's jaw dropped. "You can't fight her, she's a girl."

"He can and we will because this girl is packing." In one fluid movement, Tante Céline twisted the leather strap slung across her body, revealing a double-barrel shotgun. With a smile splitting from ear to ear, she cocked the barrel.

I have fallen into the Twilight Zone. Macy squeezed her eyes shut, counted to ten and reopened them. Tante Céline still stood at the entrance of her family room waving a high-powered rifle at them. Her finger twitched on the trigger.

"Gideon, don't!" Gideon prevented her from meeting her maker by shoving her behind him. Macy yelled and beat at his back. It was of no use since it was like beating on a concrete wall.

Suddenly a gun shot blast rattled the quiet, followed by Gideon smashing into her, sending them both crashing to the floor.

Dazed, Macy sat up. Shaking away the stars, she looked over at Gideon. Something wasn't right. He lay at her feet in a crumpled heap, bellowing at the top of his lungs.

"Gideon, are you okay?" She reached out to touch his shoulder, but he scuttled away from her.

"Don't touch me!" he roared.

Too late. Macy turned her hand over and she almost vomited as a jelly-like substance swam in her open palm. Her eyes darted over to Gideon. Ohmy GodohmyGodOhmyGod, she mouthed, her eyes fixed on the wide swath of muscle and tissue running along his shoulder blades.

"What did you shoot him with?" she asked, looking to Tante Céline.

"Iodized salt packed into carbine shells and blessed by Bishop Francois Yakatunde of Feed My Lambs Missionary Baptist Church over on St. Charles. By themselves they can do a bang-up job, but together they're fatal."

Like a seasoned pro, Tante Céline flipped open the shotgun barrel and shoved two more cartridges into the double barrels. "One more shot should do it and Gideon will be ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Macy couldn't process the night's events fast enough. Not with Gideon's skin melting all over her floor and a shotgun-packing voodoo priestess hell-bent on doing an Evangelist's dirty work.

Tamping down her fears, Macy edged over to him. Again, he backed away, wincing when his back hit the fireplace grate.

"I am sorry if I hurt you. I just wanted a taste of what it would be like to be completely human," he rasped. "To be loved by some—"

"Even though I'm enjoying the waterworks, I have a job to do. Move out of the way, Miss Beaumont. I need to finish this."

Macy didn't move. "I can't let you do this. He might be a..." She grappled over the word and lost. "W-whatever he is, he doesn't deserve to be turned into ashes. He's shown me nothing but kindness."

"I appreciate the show of compassion, but I'm not the United Way. Now move or I'm going to have to—" Tante Céline lowered her shotgun, her gaze fixed above the fireplace. "We've got company."

Macy looked over her shoulder. The antique mirror above the fireplace raged like a whirlpool. "What in the hell," she gasped.

"More like from hell," Tante Céline corrected. "Demons use mirrors to move from one plane to the next."

A being with coal black skin and red markings tattooed over its upper torso burst through the swirling glass. It reached down, grabbed Gideon around the neck and hauled him up. Before they disappeared through the portal, his hands shot out to grip both sides of the mirror's gilded frame.

What the heck was he doing?

Now the stuff of nightmares, there was no mistaking the beautiful golden eyes staring down at her. The very same eyes that bewitched and opened her heart to so many what ifs, Macy lamented.

In halting tones, Gideon spoke, "*Amare et sapere vix deo conceditur.*"

When he finished, the demon holding him cocked his head, his stiff-bristled Mohawk quivering as his dark gaze traveled over her. Then with a shake of his head, he promptly dismissed her to look beyond her to Tante Céline.

The demon's gaze flicked over the voodoo priestess with a cursory glance, looked away, then immediately snapped back to rake over her again.

"Eww," Tante Céline sneered. Her obvious disgust didn't thwart the demon's pursuit. He went a step further and stuck his tongue out and wagged it suggestively. "Why, you nasty son of Satan. Now you've hit my last nerve."

Tante Céline picked up her shotgun and aimed it at them. In the blink of an eye, the demon forgot his flirtation. He tugged on Gideon again, pulling him through the portal. After they disappeared, the mirror expanded on the verge of bursting, contracted inward and then settled into smooth lines.

He was gone. Blinking back tears, Macy remained rooted in place. Just when she thought she'd started to heal, another wound had been opened.

"Can you lend me a hand?" Tante Céline strode past her with a footstool in hand. "I'm sure that thing is going to weigh a ton."

"What are you doing?" Macy asked, curious as to why the other woman set the stool in front of the fireplace.

"Do you want them to come back through while I'm gone?"

Macy crossed over to the fireplace and took ahold of the bottom of the mirror. Together they set it on the floor. Tante Céline wasn't done. She picked up one of the fireplace pokers, lifted it over her head and swung downward, shattering the mirror into large chunks.

Macy jumped out of the way. "What the heck are you doing?"

"I have to destroy it. Removing it from the wall isn't going to stop a demon from using it again."

Macy looked away from the destroyed antique mirror to the empty space above her fireplace. "What did he say?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Rogers. Gideon, who else? What did he say right before he went through the portal?"

"You mean that Latin mumbo jumbo?"

"Yeah, that Latin mumbo jumbo."

"Hmm...*qu'est-ce qu'il dit*...what did he say?" Tante Céline rolled her eyes to the tray ceiling. "Even a god...finds it hard to love and be wise at the same time." The voodoo priestess thumbed her nose. "Ha! *Quel fou idée!* What a crazy idea—! A demon professing his love for a human. I would have thought hell would freeze over before that ever happened."

"Are you done here?" Macy asked, irked by the voodoo priestess's indifference.

"I think destroying the mirror should pretty much do it. Sorry about the mess. I can stay and help you clean it up if you want."

Macy shook her head. She'd had enough company for the night.

Tante Céline reached inside her front jean pocket and pulled out a pink business card. "*C'est quand même difficile, non?* I know it's hard, so how about you call me if you need to talk or if anything else happens."

Macy took her card and set it on the mantelpiece. When she turned back around, it suddenly dawned on her, how did the voodoo priestess know Gideon would be with her? "How did you know to come here?"

Tante Céline scratched her head. "I've been hunting Gideon for a year now. And when you came to my house the other day, I could smell the stench of the devil's own

on you. I just put two and two together and decided to lay in wait." Tante Céline turned to go. "Um, I'll see my way out."

I was used as bait to blow him to bits. Left on her own, Macy sank into the nearest chair, exhausted and spent. She looked around her living room floor at the fragmented pieces littering the rug and she couldn't help comparing them to the condition of her heart.

* * * * *

"Here he is as you commanded, my Lord. Tears and all," Satanachia sneered, releasing Gideon at the foot of their father's throne.

Before he stood, Gideon swiped his forearm across his cheeks. His attempt to hide the evidence of his downfall proved futile.

Lucifer sat forward, stroking his dimpled chin, studying him silently. Unfazed by the tactic used to intimidate lower beings, Gideon raised his chin, meeting his father's gaze. "I see. The circumstances are more serious than I first believed."

Gideon gritted his teeth in self-directed anger. It had been foolish of him to think he could hide the fact that he'd delegated a majority of his duties to his subordinates. "What are the circumstances you speak of, my Lord?"

"Do not play the simpleton with me!" Lucifer raged, slamming his fist on the arm of his throne. "Are the reports true?"

"You speak in riddles, my Lord. I cannot admit to something I have no knowledge of."

Lucifer launched from his seat. Folding his hands behind his back, he paced back and forth, his booted feet clicking loudly on the polished black onyx floor.

"I've heard you no longer have the temerity to mete out punishment. To the point you hand off your responsibilities to those beneath you." *Ignacius, you're a dead man.* "But that is not your only charge..." Lucifer closed his eyes, tipped his head back and took a deep breath. "Supposedly you're in love with a human female who you will choose over everything I have given you."

Broadsided by the indictments, Gideon swayed.

His father stopped his frantic pacing to face him. He cocked his head and regarded him with a crooked grin, reminding Gideon of all the times his sire took pleasure in his hijinks as a child. From tempting Saint Anthony with a pile of gold to possessing Prince Rupert's prized poodle during the English Civil War.

"Does the oracle tell the truth?"

Would he really forsake his position and the power that came with it for a mortal? "Yes, my Lord. The oracle speaks the truth." He was wholeheartedly in love with Macy. And if it meant he would have to walk away from everything to be with her, then so be it.

Gideon's confession produced a wave of frantic murmurings from those in the reception hall. He ignored them. All that mattered was his father's judgment. He created him, thus he had the omnipotent power to destroy him.

Lucifer looked past him to address the several hundred demons in his royal court. "Should Gideon, 4th Lord of Antihc, be punished?"

The court held their silence. Who would dare tell Satan how to run his kingdom?

"Tariq, do you think my son deserves to be chastised for his past and future transgressions?" Gideon glanced over his shoulder at a water demon condemned to never walk the face of the Earth. The minor demon appeared to be searching for his tongue. "P-put him on a boat in the Persian Sea. That should keep him out of trouble."

Tariq visibly relaxed when Lucifer refocused his gaze to the accused. "Too lenient for one I personally groomed to be in line for my throne. Your punishment would still allow him to feel the moon's caress and the pleasure of a woman's thighs. I have made up my mind. Gideon, 4th Lord of Antihc, you are condemned to an eternity in the Nethers. Guards, remove him from my sight."

Ice-cold fear ripped through him. He would rather lose his soul than be sent to the farthest reaches of the Abyss to live an eternity without Macy.

"Strip me of my immortality and my position, my Lord. Do not send me away for eternity."

His father whipped around to face him. "Who are you to tell me how to mete out punishment?" he bellowed.

Gideon formed the words to plead his case, but two of his father's guards stepped forward, picked him up by each arm and proceeded to drag him from the chamber.

"Father. Do not do this! Do not turn your back on me!" Gideon raged, fighting against the guards' hold. His attempts to break free were futile. "Father, please have mercy!"

Enraged, Lucifer's features contorted, his skin darkened. The last vestiges of hope died in Gideon's chest. "You have me confused with someone else!" he bellowed, stalking toward him. "I am not in the business of being merciful or forgiving those who seek to destroy me and my commandments."

"I have done no such thing!" Gideon's chest rose and fell, his heart racing in earnest. A flicker of some unknown emotion flashed in the depths of his father's blue gaze. Still, he tensed when his sire reached out, grabbed him by the shoulders and embraced him.

"But you will, my son," Lucifer whispered. "That is why I must carry out this punishment." Setting him aside, his father ordered, "Take him away. He is no longer my son. From this day forth he will no longer be known as Gideon Luciferous, high demon of one hundred legions and Lord of all of Antihc."

The guards took him in hand once again.

"Father," Gideon bellowed in earnest, yet glad his voice did not crack under the weight of his circumstances. Lucifer answered his plea by giving him his back and ascending the steps to his throne.

Even if he wanted to hang his head in defeat, Gideon thrashed and kicked. He would not go quietly. His father's edict meant he would never see Macy again.

Gideon's insubordination served him well. One of the guards suddenly stumbled, loosening its grip. Seizing the opportunity, Gideon broke free from his hold and bashed his other captor in the throat. Fed by hurt and betrayal, Gideon sprinted across the floor and up the steps to his throne, fingers reaching for the hem of Lucifer's purple robes. "Are you crazy?" Satanachia barked, snatching him back unmercifully and cracking several bones in his back.

His rebellion short-lived, Gideon roared. Wild with despair, he spouted profanities, his eyes rolling back in his head. A crazed laughter breeched his lips and still he verbalized this vow, "If I am no longer your son, the same holds true for me. I put you and my years of faithful service behind me. From this day forth and for all eternity, I will not recognize you as my father. You are nothing but Lucifer, a fallen angel. The stuff of small children and old women's night—"

Gideon doubled over. His body burned hotter than the Plains of Tabor! Without his sibling's support, which had fallen away sometime during his vitriolic rant, he tumbled to his knees.

A rumbling of excited whispers washed over the antechamber, doing little to appease Gideon's anxiety. He'd never felt like this. His insides twisted and rearranged. His demon skin peeled away to reveal the bronze tones of human flesh.

Lucifer shot to his feet. "No, you cannot have him! He belongs to me."

"What's happening to me?" he choked, falling to the floor as another wave of pain seared through his body.

But there were no answers, only blackness.

* * * * *

Macy popped one eye open, zeroing in on the digital clock set on her nightstand. "It's only a dream," she groaned. "No one in their right mind would be knocking at my door at three forty-five in the morning." Convinced, she threw the comforter over her head and rolled over.

Bang, bang, bang

"This better be good," she muttered, slinging the comforter aside. She rolled out of bed, snatching up her white terry-cloth bathrobe all in one motion. "No, this better be better than good."

"Hold your horses!" Macy took her time descending the stairs, hoping they would change their mind before she wasted her energy.

Bang, bang, bang.

She checked the security chain, unbolted both the top and bottom locks and peeped through the crack.

"Hello."

Macy's heart plummeted to her ankles. "Gideon?"

"In the flesh."

Literally, she mused, her gaze running over his naked body. Without any clothing, he looked taller, more powerful and achingly beautiful. With each inch of flesh her eyes devoured, her breathing became labored. *Why did he have to be Satan's baby?*

"Aren't you going to let me in?" He braced his hand on the door frame just above her head. If it weren't for the door, she could lean forward and nibble on his lips.

Macy shook away the cobwebs of lust he was always able to weave around her. Not this time. Apart from her deep-seated feelings, he still deceived her. Burn me once shame on you, burn me twice, shame on me.

"I can't do that."

"I have no other place to go and no one else to turn to. Despite what happened, I came here thinking you might extend a little charity."

"What happened to all the clothes? And the fancy H2 Hummer, can't you sleep in that?"

"Gone."

"What do you mean gone?"

"All of my material possessions were conjured through black magic."

A shiver ran down Macy's spine. In New Orleans, voodoo and black magic were openly discussed like the time of day, but she'd never found the topics to her liking. "Why don't you use your magic to blink up a change of clothes and another Hummer, then go find someone else eye to deceive."

Macy moved to shut the door, but he stopped her with a hand on the door frame.

"That's why I'm here. My powers were stripped from me along with my immortality. My father found out about my love for you and my inability to carry out my duties. He tried to sentence me to an eternity in the Nethers, but I couldn't bear an eternity without you. When I turned my back on him, I was purged from the Abyss. I ended up not far from here."

My love for you? Macy groaned. Why did he have to hit her with a one two punch? Wobbling, she rested her head against the door. Should she let him in? Her heart pleaded with her to let him in, but images of him being sucked through her living room mirror shattered any thoughts of reunited bliss. "I'm sorry, Gideon, but it's hard for me to get over the fact I just learned you're a demon—"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," he interjected. "I'm no longer a demon. That side of me died with my immortality."

"If you're no longer a demon, prove it."

Hoping for some kind of miracle, her heart beat wildly. His long hair stood wildly about his head like some Byronic hero from yore.

"I can't." His golden gaze fell to the porch floor, Macy's heart following.

"I'm sorry to hear that." She really was. "I wish you all the luck in the world, but you can't stay here, Gideon. If you need something to wear, your clothes are over there on the porch swing." She'd tried throwing them in the morning trash, but couldn't bring herself to do it.

With a heavy heart, she closed the door on him, all the what ifs and her heart.

* * * * *

Macy ignored the mini-television attached to the elliptical machine. After the thirty-five minute mark, she would already be huffing and puffing, but her mind was too scattered from the events of the past week. When a hand waved in front of her face, she suddenly jerked backward, pulling the earphones from her ears.

"Your time's up." The tall redhead from accounting pointed a well-manicured nail at the thirty-minute sign attached to the machine.

"Sorry," Macy mumbled, grabbing her towel and bottled water. "My mind was someplace else." She gave the other woman a sheepish smile as she stepped off.

Who could blame her for being unable to think straight? She had a demon stalking her. Tired of the self-doubt and needing answers, she pulled her cell phone out of her hoodie's kangaroo pouch and dialed the one person who could probably help her.

"Tante Céline. How may I be of service?"

"Hello, Tante Céline, this is Macy Beaumont. The reporter from *The Times Picayune*." Macy opened her gym locker. She pulled out her shower bucket, sat down, then kicked off her running shoes.

"I had a feeling you would be calling. You've seen Gideon, haven't you? I'll be right over with my shotgun."

Macy eyeballed a coworker reapplying her makeup to make sure she wasn't eavesdropping.

"I've seen him and smelled him. He sits in front of my house every night. He won't leave me alone. And get this, the first night he showed up, he claimed he'd given up his immortality."

A distinct pause stretched between them. "Not possible...unless your demon was a half-breed. The idea isn't too farfetched. I'm sure plenty of children have been produced over the centuries. The seven deadly sins originated with Lucifer."

"If Gideon is only half demon, I've read they can choose to live permanently in either world, not both. Too bad he's no longer of the otherworld. He could've led you to the Faubourg Marigny kidnapper. Doubt it though. Just don't see a demon ratting out their own no matter how much they want to get into a human's pants. But who knows, there's a first time for everything."

Macy wiped her palms on her bath towel. "Do you think he's telling the truth about not being a demon anymore?"

"Of course not," Tante Céline snapped. "He could've given up his powers and become mortal like a newborn babe, but his father's blood still pumps through his veins."

"So some of his story could be true?" Macy held her breath.

"Yes, but what difference does it make? He's still half-demon."

There was a big difference. He'd given everything up for her.

* * * * *

Like clockwork, Gideon was sitting on her porch waiting for her.

Macy grabbed her purse, then climbed out of her car. Kicking the door shut, she hit the key fob twice, activating the alarm. Energy thrummed through every fiber of her body. Good. She had a big fish to fry.

As she approached her house, her steps slowed. Saints alive, he'd seen better days! Of course, she would look a hot mess too if she'd slept on someone's front porch for the past week and a half. Still, aside from his sorry appearance, he was still the sexiest homeless man she'd ever seen.

"Good evening, Macy. I hope you had a good day today."

Instead of going inside like she usually did after returning his greeting, she turned around to confront him. "Just the person I wanted to see."

It must have surprised him, after so many nights of ignoring him, because he sat up straighter. "Did you miss me?" With a smile curving his lips, he stretched his arms out to her. Tamping down the urge to run into them, she stepped back.

Gideon dropped his arms to his sides. "I know you're mad at me for not admitting who I was, but I'm no longer that person, Macy. Please forgive me and give me another chance."

Were those violins playing?

Macy filled her lungs with fresh air—the perfect remedy for clearing one's head and strengthening one's resolve. "Like I told you before, there can be no *we* if you can't prove you're no longer a demon."

Gideon shoved his hands through his limp locks. "But I cannot! The only thing I can prove is that I love you more than anything in this world and the next."

Macy leaned into the porch railing. "I showed up just in time!" Tante Céline barked, her white sneakers eating up the front walk. "You know, I almost didn't believe you on the phone earlier. But since lover boy seemed to have such an attachment and didn't want to leave last time, I thought it best to investigate."

"I think you better go," Macy warned, eyeing the white water balloon in Tante Céline's outstretched palm filled with God only knew what. Expecting him to heed her warning, she was surprised when he turned to face his adversary.

Tante Céline bounded up the porch steps two at time. In an obvious show of protection, she stepped between them. Like their last altercation, the voodoo priestess pulled out a purple velvet drawstring bag and poured a line of green sage, separating them from Gideon.

Two weeks ago, Macy would've considered all of this laughable, insane even. Now it was merely another day in the neighborhood.

"What's in the balloon?" Gideon drawled. "Rain water from the turrets of St. John's cathedral? Or more holy water from Reverend Lackawanna?"

Tante Céline drew her shoulders back. "It's Bishop Yakatunde, ash eater."

Gideon shrugged. "It does not matter where it came from, since it will not hurt me."

"We'll see about that, demon," Tante Céline countered, hauling her arm back.

Chapter Twelve

Gideon didn't bat an eye. With his feet planted apart, he simply waited. She, on the other hand, was riddled with guilt. If she hadn't called Tante Céline earlier, she would have never shown up. And Gideon wouldn't be facing a firing squad.

When the balloon exploded against his midsection, Macy braced herself for his reaction.

Nothing. Well, not exactly. Instead of howls and shrieks, he looked down at his soaked t-shirt.

He must have lost a few pounds because he looked leaner. This in turn improved the definition of his eight-pack abs, the sinful v-cuts accenting his lean hips and his tree-trunk arms corded with muscles.

Macy groaned. Mercy, the man was fine!

While she ogled, Tante Céline fiddled inside her bag again. She pulled out another water balloon and let it rip, bursting against Gideon's collarbone.

Like the first assault, he just stood there with the water dripping off him, forming a puddle at his bare feet.

"I don't know what's wrong!" Tante Céline fumbled through the contents of her sack again. She pulled out a small tin canister. She clawed the top off, abandoning it on the porch floor with a clatter, and then flung the contents at him.

Some of the debris from her haphazard aim flew back, hitting Macy in the face. "Is that salt?" she sputtered.

"Yep, it's as potent as holy water."

Still, Gideon remained untouched by physical pain.

"If all else fails," Tante Céline muttered, holding up a chain containing a crescent moon. Her movements were jerky and agitated, which they should have been considering she held a bag of worthless tricks. "No demon in its right mind will touch this."

"Um...I don't think that'll work, Tante Céline. A crescent moon amulet is used to ward off the evil eye," Macy pointed out, her eyes glued on the wet dream headed their way.

The voodoo priestess opened her mouth to argue with her. Her words were cut short when Gideon suddenly reached out, picked her up and set her aside.

"This isn't happening!" Tante Céline shrieked, trying to right herself. "I know for a fact evil spirits can't cross a barrier made of sage."

"He's no longer an evil spirit. He renounced his claim to eternal life. And since he was half human, the demon half was destroyed."

"Not destroyed, only overshadowed by his other half," Tante Céline corrected. "You can't destroy the half without completely razing the whole."

Macy gazed up into Gideon's golden gaze. "You were telling the truth," she whispered.

Gideon palmed her cheek. "Now do you believe my love for you freed me from the Abyss?" Unable to help herself, she nuzzled his palm, welcoming the familiar heat. "And this time, I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm outta here! Nothing makes you feel more single than two people in heat. Call me if you need me."

Neither Macy nor Gideon heard Tante Céline leave. In fact, a funeral procession could've shimmied its way down the middle of Chartres and Macy wouldn't have heard a thing. Her head was so filled with Gideon and his wicked tongue she didn't realize he'd picked her up, carried her upstairs to the master bathroom and set her atop the quartz countertop.

He plucked at the tiny delicate buttons on her cotton blouse. When his nimble fingers grazed her skin, Macy trembled. "I can't get you naked fast enough," Gideon snarled against her lips, his large hands tugging impatiently at the delicate material. "This is much too difficult without my former powers. Finally!" he exclaimed when the garment surrendered.

"You're doing just fine to me," Macy breathed, arching into him so he could remove her bra in his haphazard marathon to see her undressed. Soon, her bra came undone with a loud pop. Gideon flung the garment over his shoulder. "Your strong sexual drive seems to match your powers."

"My sexual drive will always be strong for you. Just so you know, I ruined that contraption of torture you use to hide these two." He palmed her breasts, rubbing his hands up and down as if trying to warm them. Totally unnecessary. They became hotter than a witch's tit in a brass bra out on the porch.

"That's fine." Macy gulped. "I hate wearing them anyway."

He leaned forward and bit her collarbone, followed by a soothing kiss which was simply a leisurely roll of his tongue. "Then why wear them?" He grasped the collar of his t-shirt. In one deft movement, he ripped it right down the middle. *Oh my!* "Ridiculous. From this day forward, I forbid you to wear one."

That wasn't going to happen. "Oh thanks, lord and master. I don't think that's going to happen since they hold all of this in check." Macy motioned to her girls. "I might poke someone's eye out."

Gideon frowned, most likely visualizing the scenario. "Let's come to a compromise." The joke wasn't lost on Macy. "You can wear it to work and out in public, but when you're home with me, I'll take over." To clarify his point, he lifted both breasts and swiped his tongue over each in turn.

"Your plan is certainly doable." Macy purred like a milk-stuffed kitten. He always stroked or touched her the right way. Like now, as he dipped his nose in the crook of her shoulder and licked her while his hands ran over the waistband of her pencil skirt.

In a matter of seconds, she was sitting on the counter in nothing but her black and pink lace panties, which he tossed to the growing pile behind him. What a dummy she'd been! She almost threw this kind of loving out on the street.

"Open your legs for me."

When she complied, he ran the pad of one finger through the springy curls covering her sex. He stroked his finger over her labia, coaxing a wet response. "I love it when your honey pot drips for me."

Macy's hips pitched off the counter. How could he sound so cool and collected, calm when she was about to shout Alleluia?

"Do you like what I'm doing?" he asked, plunging first one thick finger and then a second into her sex.

"I more than like." She pressed her body closer. "Where are you taking me?" she gasped when his hands slid underneath her, lifting her from the counter.

Snarling, he nipped her chin. "It's a surprise."

Macy didn't really care about their destination. He could have put her out with the trash as long as he kept tonguing her nipples and finger-fucking her pussy. She still didn't care when she heard the familiar swoosh of the shower door.

"The water's freezing!" she cried, finally objecting. Even though he seemed to hesitate, he released her, allowing her to slide to her feet.

While she avoided the cold rush, Gideon stepped directly under the cold spray. "I've always wondered how this works," he purred, the water's force plastering his ebony locks to his head and shoulders. Beads of water glistened on his body like diamonds. "This...feels...delicious."

Yes, delicious. Macy gulped. In any element, the man was divine.

"It'll feel even better if you add a little heat." Macy reached out and turned the faucet to HOT. His eyes rolled back in his head.

"I have died and gone to the Forbidden."

"Is this the first time you've taken a shower?"

"No and yes. I've collected countless souls from them, but never had the pleasure of using one."

Macy suppressed a shiver. Gideon as the grim reaper wasn't appealing. "I wasn't the harbinger of death, Macy." He reached out and pulled her to him. Flesh to flesh, she could barely think straight. "My brother, Thanatos, is cursed with that endeavor. I was just a collector. And regarding your other question, there are five rivers in the Abyss. All of them suitable for bathing, but we did not use them. When and if a demon washed, we did so with ash or hid our scent with magic."

He ran his tongue along her shoulder. The insistent press of his lips washed away all thoughts of dirty demons and grim reapers. "All this talk of bathing and washing has given me an idea. Can I bathe you with my tongue?"

"Y-yes," she panted, rubbing her nipples into him, drawing forth a deep throated growl. The rumble against his breastbone teased her nipple. Macy creamed.

Wow! That was what you call cause and effect!

Gideon whipped both of them around to face the wall. He grabbed a hold of her hands, dragged them over her head and curled them around the showerhead. "Don't let go until I say so." After a long leisurely lick to the side of neck, he dropped to his knees.

Macy braced herself. She really tried, still nothing could prepare her for his hands lifting and kneading her buttocks while he licked her sex. As always, his style of lovemaking was like kryptonite. It weakened her defenses, both mental and physical. Thank goodness for the showerhead or she would have dropped to her knees. Instead she dropped her head onto her arm. Holding it up took too much willpower. He sapped that away when he rimmed the puckered hole above her sex.

"You taste so sweet," he rasped, releasing her clit with a salacious pop. Macy clawed at the chrome bar overhead. "I can eat you for hours."

That was her only warning. He leaned up and thrust his tongue inside her.

He plunged, she shook.

He plundered, she cried out.

She was drowning. "Gideon...Gideon...Gideon," she chanted, her lasting grip on reality slipping further and further from reach.

"What do you want?" he asked, tonguing her pussy lips.

"You..."

Gideon chuckled, tickling her with his cool breath. "But I'm already inside you."

"Ah! You know what I mean. I want more than just your tongue." Offering him a visual, she wiggled her bottom at him.

Gideon rose behind her, his fingers gripping her hips. "Woman, you play a mean hand."

He rubbed the head of his cock over her slit, wetting his cock. He removed one of the hands at her hips and placed it over her sex. Parting the hairs covering her mound, he slipped two fingers inside to tweak her clit.

"I play a mean hand?" Macy groaned as he rolled the bud round and round. "You're playing with the whole deck." She blew out a breath before she choked on her heart, which was lodged in the back of her throat.

"If you don't like it, I can stop," he whispered his breath hot on her neck.

Macy shook her head. "N-no...I can handle mean."

"Good, because I plan to be both mean and wicked." He placed the head of his cock between her ass cheeks. She felt him shift his stance and his cock slid down to nestle in the tight juncture between her thighs.

"Need you," he breathed, prodding against her opening.

She needed him too. She practically ached with it. Her back arched to give him a better vantage point. In answer, he inched inside. His slow upward glide was maddening. And when he finally bottomed out and his balls quivered against her butt cheeks, she was quaking.

"So tight," he rasped, then kissed the side of her neck. His voice was like sandpaper rubbing her in all the right places. "And all mine."

His retreat was equally measured. Withdrawing to the tip, he rubbed her clit and flicked her clitoris.

"Oh Gideon!" She sobbed with open abandon, unsure of whether she was coming or going. Her head lolled against his shoulder. When he pressed his lips against her skin, she smiled.

Over and over he pumped into her with a deliberate rhythm that was both methodical and bone-jarringly unhurried, like being stretched out on the rack. His cock filled her up, sending her almost over the edge with each delicious stroke.

But tormented as she was, Macy still met him thrust for thrust and even stood on her tiptoes to provide him better access. Accepting him into her body, like she'd accepted him into her heart.

Macy's eyes popped open. *I'm in love with him.* Unequivocally and irrevocably.

It wasn't based solely on sex, mind-blowing though it was. She loved him because he didn't care about her issues. He didn't mind her butt having a slight jiggle. He was the most patient man she'd ever met. And he had sacrificed everything, including his immortality, to be with her.

And he loved her in return.

Overwhelmed, she let go of the showerhead and stepped forward, his cock slipping from her with a loud sucking sound. She turned around, but gasped when he bit her collarbone, the beginnings of a smile curling his sensual lips. "You know what happens when you disobey me?" he posed, a touch of menace in his lucent tone. "It calls for more punishment and more fucking." Before he could carry through with his threat, Macy grabbed the sides of his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his lopsided grin faltering.

"Everything's fine. Actually it's perfect...I just wanted you to know that I love you."

A prolonged silence stretched between them as he stared down at her. Her stomach twisted into knots as she locked gazes with him. "Don't say anything you don't mean," he whispered as he wrapped his arms around her. She melted into his solid warmth, loving the contrast of his hard planes against her much softer curves.

Macy ran her fingers through his damp hair. "IloveyouIloveyouIloveyou."

A gust of air whispered between them. "I warn you. I have crossed the nine planes of the Abyss to be with you. So do not play my heart lightly. Now that I know you return my feelings I will never let you go."

"Promise you'll never let me go?" Macy asked, her heart beating wildly.

"As long as I have breath in this body," he vowed, pressing his lips to the love bite on her collarbone. Macy trembled. With a few simple words, he'd taken her heart and stole it forever.

With his words, his ardor returned. One kiss turned into a dozen more along her neck and shoulders. Each one blazed a scorching trail that had her squirming and curling her toes.

"Lift your leg." He grasped her thigh, then wrapped her leg around his waist. He captured one of her nipples and thrust his way inside her.

He dipped his hips and began an earnest rhythm. His momentum rocked her to the core. She could feel every surge and pulsing sensation of his cock stretching her, filling her.

Gideon pumped and thrust. The tip of his cock buried deeper and deeper to the hilt. The slapping of his balls against her ass echoed in the tight shower stall. Macy rubbed her hands over his muscular back. She clawed at him. She goaded him and rode him just as hard as he rode her.

His cheeks puffed with his labored breaths and his nostrils flared. With a loud roar, his head snapped back, a pained expression twisted his features and hot liquid heat shot up Macy's canal, warming her.

Somehow his climax satisfied her and, like a trigger, his orgasm sparked hers. Blood rushed from all of her extremities, her body clenching around him. Overwhelmed, she squeezed her eyes shut and a primal scream ripped from her lungs.

Chapter Thirteen

"Is that you, Lucy?"

Macy smiled as she walked down the hallway to the kitchen. Other than the bedroom, it had become Gideon's favorite place in their home. Their home. A warm buzz swept over her. They'd decided to cohabitate over six weeks ago and every day since had been bliss.

As she rounded the corner, a pair of hands shot out. Startled, Macy dropped the shopping bag from Pour Homme she'd carried inside along with the tamarind sugar he'd asked her to pick up from Papa Jacques. Sighing, she allowed him to envelop her in a bear hug and a wallop of a kiss. Geesh, they had on too many clothes.

"How many times do I have to tell you I do not need anything else," he drawled, pointing out the two bags lying forgotten on the kitchen floor.

Macy pressed her nose into the crook of his neck. *I've died and gone straight to heaven!* "It's only a cashmere sweater and a couple of pairs of silk boxers," she mumbled, snuggling closer.

"Cashmere and silk?"

"Mmm...hmm." Macy hid her smile. While helping her shop for new bed linens, he'd lingered over a set of silk sheets and a cashmere throw. With the household items out of their price range, she'd promised herself she would treat him to a few things of the same ilk compliments of her next paycheck.

"I will accept these gifts this time, but no more. Deal?" He nuzzled his nose into the side of her neck. Pleasing him had such great perks!

"Deal."

He turned her around and walked her into the kitchen. "How was your day?"

"Same dead ends and another child added to the list. The police haven't made it official, but his disappearance fits the profile."

Gideon massaged her shoulders, relieving the kinks caused by a stressful day. "Tante Céline told me." Macy stiffened. "I was waiting for you to tell me. Why haven't you?"

His dejected tone filled her with guilt. She didn't mean to hide anything from him, but it was hard to tell your significant other you suspected one of his own was responsible for the disappearance of almost a dozen children. "I don't want to talk about it."

Macy pushed away from him, but he stayed her with a hand on her wrist. She looked up at him and as always she was struck by his physical handsomeness. His bronze skin stood out in stark contrast to the whiteness of his white v-neck. And the

kitchen's recessed lighting illuminated the blue highlights in his black hair and the near perfect symmetry of his features. Like always, she found it hard to believe he'd been sired by the devil.

"You have to come to terms with who I am, Mace. I do not hold any fairy tale illusions about the reservations you may still have. I cannot change who I am or the blood that is running through my veins. But I can assure you, I'm nothing like the demon kidnapping those children. What they're doing is against the laws of order and they will be punished. Demons tempt and manipulate humans. We torture the damned, but we are forbidden from killing the innocent."

"I wasn't sure you would help me, especially if it meant fingering one of your own."

"From now on, come to me for help. I might be ashamed of my heritage, but I would never turn my back on you, even if it meant causing harm to the one who sired me."

Macy stretched up on tiptoe and kissed the dimple in his chin. "I'm sorry, stud."

A sensual smile softened the hard set of his lips. "Apology accepted. The next time I will toss you over my knee and spank you."

"Promises, promises, you probably won't—" The rest of her taunts came out in a shriek when Gideon suddenly picked her up and deposited her—face down, ass up—over his knee.

Macy held her breath, every muscle in her body pulled tight as a guitar string. She'd never been spanked past puberty. Of course, Gideon had taken her in every hole and on every available piece of furniture, but they'd never ventured over this particular bridge. And she couldn't wait.

"Your ass looks like it was stung by bumblebees," he whispered, his tone deep with lust. Macy rose up on her hands with a startled whimper as he caressed the small of her back and the rise of her buttocks.

"I used to take exception to bootylicious," she breathed. "But I've never heard my butt described quite like that. Is that a compliment or just a polite way to tell me I need to lose weight?"

He gripped her butt cheek, pulled, then let go, shooting heat through her core. His fingers followed, lightly tracing the tender flesh, taunting her to respond. "I don't want you to lose a single pound."

"You have the most beautiful heart shaped ass I've ever seen," he whispered as if the twin globes were made of gold. Macy glanced over her shoulder to make sure he wasn't pulling her leg. His reverent expression said more than any words. Reassured by his accolades, she relaxed against his knee. "It's so luscious...so mouthwatering...I can't wait to do this."

Slap.

"Owww!" Macy balked. His hand smoothed over her buttock, soothing the sting. A small moan slipped past her lips.

I should be humiliated. She wasn't. Her body buzzed with anticipation.

Without giving her a chance to regroup or even cry mercy, Gideon's open palm smacked the curved rise of her derriere again.

"Ohhh," Macy moaned, his stinging slap connecting a little lower this time. Surely she was drowning! A tidal wave of heat was sweeping over her, originating from the hot spot on her bum.

"The way your ass jiggles when I do this turns me on. Why have I never thought of doing this before now?"

Again, he raised his hand and lowered it, harder this time, causing her to jerk and her pussy to bump against his knee. Her shoulders lifted as she inhaled a shaky breath. Warm fluid gushed past her lips to coat her panties and the insides of her thighs.

Who would've known spanking could be almost better than sex?

"Have you had enough?" Gideon asked his tone surprisingly even.

Had she had enough? No. The party was just getting started. A conspiratorial smile curving her lips, Macy grabbed the kitchen chair's cool, metal legs and rocked her hips against his lap, taunting him.

"You're getting off on this." Macy's nipples prickled at his indrawn breath.

She craned her neck to look over her shoulder. He was just as affected. His pupils practically swallowed the golden irises, his high cheekbones were now flushed and his nostrils flared.

"I know you're calling my bluff, but this...this is an incredible turn-on. And the harder the better —"

Smack.

"Ahh!" Macy gushed. She bowed her head between her arms. Her entire body was on fire, even the tips of her toes.

Smack...smack...smack.

One after the other her punishment fell. Each one deliciously harder than the last, establishing an erotic momentum, a buildup of pressure that had her pitching her hips against him with a single-minded determinedness.

I'm about to lose it! The biting sting of his hand through the thin cotton material of her pencil skirt bore her downward into that familiar realm where she gave up all control and just allowed herself to feel. A euphoric end to what he'd started.

"Spread your legs," he breathed, leveraging her skirt up and over her thighs.

Macy froze. Gideon might have lost his demonic powers, but in some areas he was still deliciously wicked!

She maneuvered her knee to the side, opening her body to him.

He pressed two fingers inside and she clenched around him. She wanted to keep him there, filling her, giving her the buildup, the torment and earth-shattering reprieve she always craved and received from him.

He developed a rhythm in and out as deep as his fingers could sink, until the heel of his hand rested against the bottom of her ass. He added a third finger, his thumb sinking gently into her ass, straining her sphincter muscles.

"Ahh!" Macy gasped, her back arching away from his lap. With both of her holes filled to the brink, it was almost too much as he pressed deeper, harder.

Still she held on.

Almost there! She groaned, jockeying to the finish line with the helpful thrust of his hands.

"Your tightness feels so good squeezed around my fingers," Gideon acknowledged, his voice thick and strangely foreign to her ears.

"You feel better than—ah!" Macy cried out. He'd curled his two fingers upward, hitting that spot that made her feverish and her body spasm.

Macy's eyelids fluttered as she gripped the chair's legs so tight thought she might bend them, pitching them both to the kitchen's hardwood floors. The chair held. Instead she toppled headfirst into that blessed oblivion only he could send her to time after time.

A good while later, Macy regained her bearings and she eased off his lap. She looked over to the stove. "Were you cooking dinner?"

She'd been so preoccupied with issues at work and then his mind-blowing punishment, she'd missed the pots on the stove and the seductive aroma of Cajun spices and baked chocolate.

"I finished everything right before you walked through the door. I hope you like it. I made your favorites—crawfish bisque, crab cakes, Tilapia Atchafalaya, cheese grits and red velvet cake."

"Red velvet cake? Where did you learn how to cook all of that?"

"Maybelline Waters Cooks."

Figures. Gideon had become addicted to the Creole woman's regional cooking show ever since he accidentally turned to it there after one of their sexual marathons on the family room couch. Macy walked over to the stove.

"Everything looks and smells so good," she gushed while lifting the pot lids. "And four courses. Wow! What's the special occasion?"

Gideon came up behind her. He picked up a spoon from the sideboard and dipped it into the crawfish bisque. When he held the spoon out to her, she opened her mouth readily.

Was there anything this man couldn't do without hitting it out the ballpark? Macy moaned, squeezing her legs together. Was she about to cream again? Probably. She

loved great food and the bisque's spicy gravy, punctuated with bits of crawfish, fresh okra and corn, was seasoned to perfection.

"What do you think?" he asked, his voice inflected with eagerness.

"No complaints here, sweet cheeks." Macy turned around to face him. "Everything's perfect..." She eyed the unsealed greeting card he placed under her nose. Noting the sly curl of his lips, her stomach twisted into knots.

Homemade meal. Check.

Greeting card. Check.

I'm in the dog house. Check.

Choking on humble pie, she slipped the card from his fingers, turned it over and read aloud, "You have opened my eyes to a whole new world I never knew existed. And now that I have a taste, you only make me thirst for more. Happy Anniversary."

"I missed our first month anniversary a couple of weeks back." Gideon moved away from her to stir a pot of red beans and rice, missing Macy's pathetic attempt at blinking back tears. "I thought I would make up for it by cooking dinner. I also picked out something I think will fit you to a tee. I haven't purchased it yet because I wanted to make sure it was the right size."

"The right size?" Macy choked, her heart now lodged in her throat.

Gideon nodded. "After we eat dinner, we can go down and pick it out."

* * * * *

"You know, the customary gifts for anniversaries are candy, perfume, vacations to exotic locations or even a ring. Not a role-playing costume." Macy eyed the white suede cowgirl outfit consisting of only a skimpy bra top and a pair of chaps.

"Is this not appropriate for an anniversary gift?" Gideon nodded toward a pink-haired store clerk helping a hapless customer squeeze into a baby blue, latex-shift dress in the back of the store. "Wanda assured me couples experience hours of enjoyment from dressing up for each other."

Macy tapped her finger against her chin. She'd never had a man go all out on an anniversary before. Heck, Trace celebrated their tenth year together by dragging her from dealership to dealership picking out a new car for himself.

"This tops your list of things to experience?"

Gideon shrugged, stretching his fitted navy blue t-shirt across his totally drool-worthy chest and sculpted abs. "You top my list, Macy. Everything in this life revolves around you and the experiences we create and share together."

Her knees buckled and turned to mush. To keep from toppling to the floor, she leaned into him. "I wonder if the costume comes in a size twelve."

Just after dusk, Macy and Gideon walked out of Naughty Essentials. Still early evening, the streets of New Orleans were already shrouded with shadows cast by gas lamps situated up and down the street. And a cold wind ruffled the hem of Macy's pink overcoat and scattered dead leaves up into mini tornadoes.

Macy gripped Gideon's arm a little tighter as he hurried them across the street. She hadn't fully recovered from the night she'd become a human cannonball.

Once safely across, he walked her around the car to the passenger side, unlocked the door and leaned in to place the packages on the backseat. Macy zeroed in on how nicely his jeans molded to his firm ass. Unable to resist temptation, she pinched his butt.

Gideon shook his head. "If you do that again, plan on making it home an hour from now."

"Promise?" Macy taunted, barely stepping aside when he straightened.

Gideon slipped his hands inside the collar of her overcoat. He leaned down and kissed the corners of her mouth. The heat of his hands and lips shocked her all the way down to the tips of her toes. He moved in closer as if to deepen the kiss, but he turned his head at the last minute.

"What the fuck is she doing?"

"Well, I was waiting for a kiss," Macy quipped.

"Not you, her."

Macy followed his gaze to a father and son ambling up the sidewalk. "I think your brains are addled from too much cream cheese icing. That's a guy and his kid out for an evening stroll."

Gideon eyes never left the pair. "That's not a man, Macy. And the boy with her isn't her son. It's Lilith, one of Lucifer's concubines. I'm sure you've heard of her. She tempted Eve."

"You mean Eve from the Garden of Eden?"

Gideon nodded. "Lilith is one of the oldest and most powerful demons. She changes shape at will to suit the moment."

"But I thought the snake was Satan."

Gideon finally took his eyes away from the pair to look down at her. "A myth. Contrary to popular belief and certain religious doctrines, Lucifer cannot set foot on this plane. So he has foot soldiers do his dirty work for him."

"Is the kid a demon?"

The sides of Gideon's eyes wrinkled. "No. The boy's human. She can't bear children of her own, so she steals them. Sometimes she plays house with them and other times she eats them. Supposedly she feeds off their innocence and becomes stronger."

Macy's eyes swung to the pair again. Nothing out of the ordinary, just a father out with his son. "Are you sure?"

Gideon grasped her chin and brought her around to look at him. "I can recognize my own, Macy. The air is rife with the smell of sulfur." He dropped his hand to rake it through his hair. "Damn it, why didn't I think of her before now?"

Macy studied the pair. Still nothing caused any of her internal alarm bells to go off. As they drew closer, she pushed herself away from the car. "Hey, I know that kid. I interviewed his sister, Cookie, a few weeks ago over in Bywater. No one would answer my questions except for her. She said people were too afraid to speak out because if they did, they would be marked for retribution." And it seemed the girl wasn't talking out the side of her neck after all!

The pair turned into St. Roch Cemetery. "Great place to take a stroll?" Gideon quirked an eyebrow. "You better call Tante Céline. We're going to need her help. While you do that, I'll follow Lilith."

Macy grabbed Gideon's arm to stop him. "Are you sure it's safe? You don't have your powers anymore."

"No, but we need to get the child away from her. Instead of eating ash tonight, Lilith will be dining on a different delicacy...human flesh."

Macy leaned into the car door, stunned at the revelation. "One ballroom dance lesson and I've fallen into a never-ending episode of *Creature Feature*," she mumbled. Gideon reached out his hand to steady her, but she shooed him away. "Don't worry about me, go after the kid."

Gideon lingered a moment longer. Finally he turned on his heels and sprinted down the sidewalk and disappeared into the cemetery.

With shaking hands, Macy fished inside her coat pocket and pulled out her cell phone. She punched the number seven. Sad, but true, she had the voodoo priestess on speed dial.

"Tante Céline at your service."

"This is Macy Beaumont, Tante Céline. Gideon and I have a problem—"

"I knew it!" the voodoo priestess cut in. "Damn demon couldn't keep his tail in his pants, could he?"

Macy rolled her eyes heavenward. *Creature Feature*. "No. He and I aren't having a relationship problem. It's a demon problem. We need you to come down to St. Roch's Cemetery as quickly as you can."

"Who are we fighting?" she asked evenly as if fighting demons happened on the hour, every hour. In her case, maybe she did. Uneasy, Macy started to pace.

"Gideon says it's a demon named Lilith."

"*Mon dieu!* You guys don't play around. I'll be right there."

Unable to sit still while she waited for Gideon's return and Tante Céline's arrival, she started to pace, eventually working herself up into a lather.

"Did you get a hold of Tante Céline?"

"What in the he—!" Macy rounded on him. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"I'm sorry." Gideon placed his hands on her shoulders to soothe her. It worked, just barely. "Were you able to get in touch with Tante Céline?"

"She's on her way."

"The sooner the better. Lilith took the child through a portal. And I only have a small window of opportunity..." Gideon's words trailed off. A late-model, pearl-white Chevy Camaro tricked out with black tinted windows and twenty-two-inch chromed rims brushed against the curb. The driver backed up, realigned the wheels, pulled forward and then stopped the car with a bounce. Tante Céline jumped out of the driver side.

"Patrolling the neighborhood?"

"I was just leaving the whole fryer sale at Piggly Wiggly about a block from here. Not really," the voodoo priestess grinned. "I was making my rounds when you guys called."

Macy studied the vehicle. Something seemed oddly familiar about the two-door sedan. Curious, she walked to the rear of the car. And like she half expected, the license plate read, RD2HVN. Her body started to vibrate with I'm-hot-on-fire anger. "It was you a few weeks ago who threw salt on Gideon and almost ran me over."

The voodoo priestess pulled on her ear. "I—ah...I didn't know you were human. I saw you with big guy here and I assumed you were one and the same." Tante Céline walked around her, aiming a white bunny rabbit's foot at the car's trunk, popping it. "I can let bygones be bygones if you can."

"That's easy for you to say." Macy advanced on her with her fists balled. "You weren't thrown like a human cannonball."

Gideon stepped in front of her, blocking her from dishing out a good ass whooping. "We're not here to fight. We're here to save a child," he reminded.

"Yeah, we're here to save a kid. Now can you two lend me a hand? I need help unloading the stuff we're going to need."

Macy walked to the back of the car and peered down at the small arsenal arranged neatly against pink crushed velvet. "Holy rollers. Do you have permits for all this stuff?"

"More or less." Tante Céline sniffed. "When you're fighting demons, you can't do things in half measures."

"Can't we just use the same stuff you used on Gideon?"

"Not the same. Lilith is a first order demon. She's thousands of years old and wickedly powerful. Almost as powerful as Lucifer. But if you really want to fight her with water balloons, be my guest, but I won't be rolling with you if you do."

Macy chewed her bottom lip. They couldn't go around toting weapons on the streets of New Orleans like renegades. Could they? With a resigned sigh, she replied, "We'll play it your way."

Tante Céline rubbed her hands together, her eyes sparkling with glee. "How good of a shot are you, Gideon?"

"I've never touched a manmade weapon."

"I just might have something that'll do the trick." She pulled a pink velvet bag toward them. She tugged on the bag's drawstring opening and pulled out a pair of silver-handled machetes. "These were my grandmother's favorite. The handles are made out of pure silver, smelted from metal salvaged from the gates of St. Christopher's Cathedral in Santo Domingo."

Gideon took the weapons from her. "They're beautiful," he whispered, flipping the hilts, trying the blades' weight.

"Beautiful, deadly and heads above the rest if you know what I mean. The scabbards are inside the bag."

"What do you want me to take?" Macy asked, her eyes roving over several handguns, a sawed off shotgun and a couple of slingshots.

Growling, Gideon stepped in front of her. "You're not taking anything. You're going to sit tight and wait for us here."

"Like hell I am! I've allowed a man to dictate what I can and cannot do for half of my adult life and I'm not going to allow you to. I'm going with you and that's final." Macy planted her hands on her hips, daring him to cross her.

Gideon raked his hand over his mouth. Grumbling, he turned his back on them as he shoved his arms through a leather halter containing two scabbards. "Give her the best thing you've got."

"Wimp," Tante Céline wisecracked, but to Macy she asked, "Any weaponry experience?"

"My grandmother taught me how to shoot a .38 and a squirrel gun."

Tante Céline reached inside the trunk. This time she pulled a wooden box toward her, flipped the brass latch, revealing a twelve-gauge shotgun and an ammunition belt.

Macy took the belt from her and buckled it around her hips. "These aren't ordinary rounds. They're filled with pure ionized salt. And for an added kick, the barrel was made from smelted crucifixes. It'll do the job or weaken her enough so Gideon can cut off her head." Tante Céline sliced her finger across her throat for emphasis.

"Thanks for the play by play," Macy muttered, slinging the embroidered shotgun strap over her shoulder. She paused when the other woman dumped a handful of chains in the palm of her hand.

"What are those for?"

"They're for protection." Tante Céline looped the necklaces affixed with every religious symbol under the moon around her fingers.

"I guess you're an equal opportunist when it comes to faith."

Tante Céline chuckled. "I like to cover all bases. Which one do you want?"

Macy eyed the talismans. "I was raised Episcopalian, so I'll take the crucifix." She extracted one of the chains and then slipped it over her head.

Tante Céline slanted her eyes at Gideon. "What about you, big guy? Have you become a convert?"

Gideon glanced at the religious stockpile she held out to him. His expression was unreadable before he looked away. "I know He exists. But considering my background, I think it is best I remain neutral."

"Suit yourself," Tante Céline replied, dropping the talismans back into the bag. Before she shut the trunk, she flipped open a canvas bag and pulled out its contents. "If you ever change your mind, I'll be happy to hook you up."

Macy understood the machete and shotgun, but she couldn't quite wrap her head around the super soaker and double-gallon tanks Tante Céline strapped to her back. "Don't tell me that super soaker came from a Toys R Us in Bethlehem."

Tante Céline giggled. "Good one. It used to belong to my nephew Stevie. Fill this bad boy with holy water and you have a bazooka on your hands. Now are you guys done with chitchatting and ready to go show that devil bitch what hell really is?"

* * * * *

Sweat ran down Macy's temples and her heartbeat raced faster than the greyhounds over in Mobile as they followed Gideon down the narrow walkways of St. Roch Cemetery. The cities of the dead gave her the willies during daylight hours. At night, she was close to pissing on herself as eerie shadows danced against the white marble of the cemeteries' above-ground tombs.

And her internal creep factor only grew when their small rescue effort finally entered a marble mausoleum located in the children's section. A little less than two-hundred square feet, the sepulcher's low ceiling and ice-cold interior triggered a bout of claustrophobia Macy never knew she had.

"I still feel the magic in this room," Tante Céline whispered. She walked over to a marble bench sitting in the center of the room. Large enough to sit two adults, the seat also contained a small statue of a little girl sporting two pigtails and a pair of overalls.

Tante Céline peered down at the bench's inscription. "Baby Madeline," she read. "You will always be Mommy and Daddy's beautiful baby girl." She snorted. "Pretty fancy digs for a three-year-old."

"Not if you loved your child."

"Can't relate." Tante Céline lifted her hand and yawned. "I haven't had the displeasure of pooting out any of my own." She glanced at Gideon, dismissing the subject. "So, what do we do now?"

What do we do now! Macy rounded on her. "What do you mean, what do we do now? Haven't you done this before?"

"Hunting demons, yes. Entering portals made by black magic? No."

"This is the blind leading the blind," Macy fumed, her fingers itching to wring the voodoo priestess's neck. "You're probably not even a real voodoo priestess, are you?" Tante Céline averted her gaze. Macy stepped in front of her and waved her hand in the other woman's face. "Hellooo! You are a real voodoo priestess, aren't you?"

"I was never raised to follow in my mother and grandmother's footsteps. I went to Dillard University to become a psychologist. In my sophomore year, I had to drop out to take care of both of them. My grandmother died of natural causes shortly thereafter. And my mother died of breast cancer a few months later."

"I might not be anywhere near the level of my matriarchs. And yes, I might have settled, but I like giving people hope and even peace of mind."

Feeling contrite, Macy replied, "I'm sorry for being such a know-it-all. I know a thing or two about settling."

"I can get us in. I don't have my powers, but I have my incantations which will open the portal. Are you sure you're both ready for this?" His question had been asked of them both, but Gideon's gaze was fixed on her. Even though Macy's insides quaked, she lifted her chin.

"I'm in."

"Me too," Tante Céline chimed in, hugging her superpower soaker to her chest.

Gideon turned away from them. When he spoke again, a litany of Latin verses spilled from his lips. As if angered by the interruption, the mausoleum pitched and groaned. The walls shook and an inch-wide crevice ran around the perimeter. Before he finished, a green whirlpool formed at his feet.

Tante Céline walked over and looked through. "Ready or not, demon, here we come. *Laissez les bons temp rouler!*"

Chapter Fourteen

Macy clasped the hand Gideon held out to her and together they jumped through the portal. Expecting fire and brimstone, she squeezed her eyes shut. And she didn't realize she was holding her breath until they landed on solid ground, the impact almost knocking the wind out of her.

"You can open your eyes now," Gideon whispered, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze.

Not humiliated in the least bit, considering her "I am woman, hear me roar" speech got her this far, she popped her eyes open and almost teetered in relief.

They'd landed in an empty dining room? Curious, she walked over to the nearest window and peered out. Several parallel-parked cars sat at the curb and a horse and carriage ride moseyed by with two drunken couples huddled inside. On the corner, a street sign read, Royal Street. "I know some people might think New Orleans is hell on earth, but this isn't funny."

Macy turned away from the window as Tante Céline came up behind her. The voodoo priestess looked left, then right.

"*Sacre Dieu!*" She gasped, pulling a set of rosary beads from her sweat pant pocket. "We've landed in the LaLaurie Mansion." Closing her eyes, she launched into the Hail Mary prayer.

Macy sensed Gideon's eyes on her. "The LaLaurie Mansion used to be owned by Delphine LaLaurie," she explained, turning away from the window. "Local legend claims Madame LaLaurie tortured and mutilated more than a hundred slaves in the upstairs attic."

"Is that why the place is vacant?" Gideon asked, drawing her attention to the room's lack of furniture.

Macy glanced up at an expensive chandelier hanging overhead. The street lights bounced off the fixture's hand-crafted crystal, forming diamonds on the hardwood floor. "No. The house was recently sold in foreclosure."

"We're in hell!" Groaning piteously, Tante Céline rocked back and forth on her feet.

"Get a grip, woman." Gideon admonished, his handsome face turning into a tight mask. "This is not hell. Trust me, you would know the difference. The Abyss is a cornucopia of torture. Flesh peeled from bone. Brains stirred with hot pokers. People stretched out on racks, shackled and screaming in anguish for all eternity."

Tante Céline stopped crossing herself and kissing her rosary beads. "You talk like you had firsthand experience."

Gideon nodded. "I commanded my own personal army made up of a legion of demons. I also collected souls and tortured the condemned." His voice cracked. Moved by his personal anguish, Macy walked over and wrapped her arms around him in an effort to absorb his pain. His large hands covered hers. "I was bred for it."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, babe. You didn't choose to be born into that world and you were never taught right from wrong."

"I hate to break up a Hallmark moment, but we have a kid to save, a demon to kill and we don't have a lot of time. She'll be gone by sunrise."

Gideon squeezed Macy's hands. "You're right, Tante Céline It's time to rock-n-roll."

With Gideon at the helm, they deserted the dining room for the mansion's elegant foyer. Running the length of the first floor, the entrance hall was well lit, most likely for security purposes, with recessed lighting and another large chandelier.

"This place is beautiful," Macy whispered, taking in the black and white floor tiles still shined to a dazzling luster and linen-papered walls.

"If I had not left all my wealth behind, I would buy this place for you. I can hear the pitter patter of little feet running up and down these halls."

Macy's stomach would have fluttered at the idea of raising children with Gideon. She just didn't want to raise them in the infamous LaLaurie Mansion. She wasn't the suspicious type, but she always knew a grain of truth came with every tall tale or rumor. "That's an endearing image, but I'm not keen on raising kids in a place with the local notoriety this place has."

Macy bumped into him at the foot of the stairs. She looked up at him and her stomach knotted. His golden gaze sparkled with tears?

He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her up on the step with him. "In spite of everything, you're willing to have my children?"

Tante Céline fell against the banister. "*Oy vey!* Here we go again with the Hallmark moments."

Macy ignored her. This was a serious moment for the both of them. She wrapped her arms around his waist and placed her cheek against his chest. She took comfort in the wild beating of his heart. "I would like nothing more than to be the mother of your children one day."

"And I'm going to enjoy making them with you," he countered, hugging her against him. As always, the warm press of his body and his scent—a mixture of vanilla and honey—ignited the flames of desire in the pit of Macy's belly. Of course, it wasn't the most opportune moment, but it felt right.

"Call me for the wedding," Tante Céline deadpanned, pushing away from the banister. She skirted around them to take the lead. "Now can we please get this show on the road? It's my turn to serve breakfast at church in the morning."

Macy's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Voodoo priestess, demon hunter, church volunteer. Is there anything you don't do?"

"I'm not in school," she mumbled. Having lost the wind in her sails, she fell back, allowing Gideon to take the lead once again.

When he moved to take the stairs, Macy grabbed hold of his arm. "Aren't we going to inspect the first floor?"

"It'll be a waste of time. Lilith is feeding off the evil energy still present in this house. She'll seek its center. To find her and the child, we need to go directly to the source."

Excited and terrified, Macy could barely breathe by the time they reached the third floor landing. Like the other two floors, the third was almost exactly identical, except for the closed door at the end of the catwalk.

"I could tell you two to wait here, but I would probably be wasting my breath." He chuckled when both she and Tante Céline nodded. "Come on then."

Once they stood in front of their last barrier, Gideon stepped forward and rested his palms against the shut door. "It's ice-cold."

Macy frowned. Her own attic maintained an average eighty degrees practically year round. "Doesn't heat rise?"

"Yes," Tante Céline sighed. "Everyone knows that when ghosts or paranormal activity is present the temperature drops." She shouldered her way between them to test the door. "Jackpot."

Gideon suddenly stiffened. "What's wrong?" Macy asked, anxiety upsetting her stomach like a ten-day-old sandwich.

He motioned for her to step forward. "Listen."

Macy stepped forward. She sucked in a deep breath so the mad beating of her heart wouldn't interfere with her judgment and laid her ear against the door panel. "It sounds like a playground!"

"Exactly." Gideon grinned, trying the latch. His grin widened as the frame gave way.

"*Sacre Dieu!*" Tante Céline groaned at the stairs leading upward. "Not another flight."

"No pain, no gain," Macy taunted, leaving her behind on the third floor landing.

The sound of children's laughter grew louder, more chaotic as they climbed. Macy tried to stifle her paranoia and send up a prayer at the same time that they would find the children safe. What would they find? Would the children still be alive? Or would they all be ghosts or something entirely different?

At the top of the stairs, they peeked over the ledge. Encompassing the entire top floor, the attic had a low-beamed ceiling and its size rivaled two basketball courts put together. Oblivious to their presence, a dozen children frolicked on the far side of the room. A few lay sprawled on the floor throwing dice onto a board game, others played jacks. Some sat in front of a TV, battling it out on a video game. And two girls, around

the age of six or seven, played hopscotch in a corner. Save the children's grayish complexions, the scene was idyllic, a veritable haven for the young at heart.

"They're playing like it's Sesame Street."

"More like a Nightmare on Elm Street." Tante Céline gawked, her eyes flitting from one scene to the other. "I think we might be too late."

"We're too late," Gideon confirmed. "But their souls don't belong here. If you two will help me round them up, we can set them free."

Macy mentally checked off each child from the collage she kept on her desk. With each body counted, her anger skyrocketed by degrees. "I'm all in," she ground out.

"Me too," Tante Céline volunteered.

"Who's hungry?" All of them peered over the ledge, the melodic voice interrupting their game plans.

"Lilith?" Gideon nodded. Macy's mouth dropped. "She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

All of the children stopped what they were doing and ran over to a woman robed in a white and gold unbelted kimono. She reminded Macy of a delicate china doll with her long, strawberry-blonde hair streaming behind her like a ribbon.

"Don't let her appearance fool you. Her outer façade is a phony veneer to trick you, to pull you in and seduce you. She has a heart blacker than any demon in the Abyss."

They watched as Lilith ushered the children over to a huge banquet table laden with every sweet and snack imaginable. She helped a few of the children seat themselves and made sure others had their own napkin before stepping back with a satisfied smile.

Her gaze flitted around the table as if counting each child. At the sight of an empty chair her smile slowly faded, and for the briefest moment, her ethereal mask shimmered, revealing a gray leather-like hide, a protruding brow and fangs.

"Oh...shit!" Tante Céline hissed. "Did you see that? She looked like the Crypt Keeper!"

Still unaware of their presence, the demon's attention turned to the child still sitting in the corner of the room. The boy from earlier in the evening. With a defiant toss of her long mane, she stalked over to him and snatched him up off the floor. "Come, my sweet, it's time for supper."

"I'm not hungry. I wanna go home!" the boy shrieked, trying to wrestle his arm from her grip, but she dragged him behind her like a five-pound sack of potatoes.

"You will go home, my precious, as soon as you have a bite to eat."

Alarm bells went off in Macy's head. It was the food. She was taking their souls by tempting them with food. Without waiting to see if they followed, Macy charged up the last two steps.

"Macy, wait!" Ignoring Gideon's warning, she stalked across the room toward Lilith and the boy. Hearing her intrusion, the demon spun around.

"Who are you?" she hissed.

"I'm a part of the neighborhood watch. We've heard you've been kidnapping children to supply your own romper room and we're here to stop it. Hand over the kid, Lilith."

The demon's dark gaze widened. Recovering quickly, she drew herself up regally. Literally. Her height grew to an unnatural seven feet. In spite of her unease, Macy held her ground.

"How dare you address me in such a manner, human?"

"She dares because she's with me." Macy smiled at Gideon's retort as he and Tante Céline came to stand on either side of her. "Give us the boy, Lilith."

Immediate recognition lit Lilith's green gaze, her lip curled. "I should've scented you a mile away," she sneered. "What I've heard is true. You're no longer one of us. But you never really were, were you, because of that whore of a mother of yours?"

"My. Mother. Was. Not. A. Whore!" Gideon roared, crossing his arms over his body and withdrawing the twin machetes strapped to his back.

"I'll screen you!" Macy crowed, palming her shotgun. "This chick is going down."

Lilith lifted her hands, a circle of bright red light pulsed in each palm. Her fingers twitched and a beam shot across the room, socking Gideon in the chest, propelling him backward into one of the low-bearing beams. The impact split his leather jacket down the back and burned a hole in his t-shirt.

Ignoring her own safety, she rushed over to him. "Are you okay?" She dropped to her knees and helped him to sit up.

"It just stings a little." When he touched his side, he belched a puff of smoke. "Excuse me...I think I just need a moment."

"Stay here and take it easy." She leaned over and kissed his forehead. "Once I'm done with her, she's going to feel more than just a sting." Macy lost some of her bravado when Lilith's cold gaze fell on her. To bolster her courage, she looked at the lifeless children grouped around the banquet table. "Tante Céline, are you ready?"

"I'm ready to rock," Tante Céline enunciated her words with several pumps of her super soaker.

Lilith raised her hands again, even crooking her finger at Tante Céline. No longer under the demon's scrutiny, Macy shot to her feet, the gun nestled to her breast like she'd been taught and a war cry on her lips, filling the attic space with a clamor that rivaled the children's earlier shouts.

Indifferent to their double flank attack, Lilith raised her other hand in Macy's direction. Crimson light pooled and burned bright in each palm, turning the flesh transparent. Macy willed her muscles to relax or she'd end up shooting too soon, wasting her opportunity.

Macy kept running, adrenaline overriding her fear, toward Lilith in a zig-zag fashion, disorienting the thousand-year-old spirit who had trouble keeping up with them. "Now!"

"Take a heaping helping of pure Grade A holy water blessed by Father Patrick O'Flannery," Tante Céline hooted, blasting Lilith with her blessed arsenal.

"Ah!" Lilith wailed, her arms spinning like twin pinwheels, her skin peeling away into a scorched canvas of burning flesh.

Macy looked down the barrel's center line. She found her mark and pulled the trigger, her shot piercing the demon's right shoulder, separating the tendon from the bone. With a primal scream, akin to nails running down a chalkboard, Lilith dropped to her knees.

Macy quickly reloaded. She cocked the barrel, took aim and then pulled the trigger. Lilith's other arm exploded in a geyser of blood and bone. She took the opening. Running forward, Macy dropped down next to the little boy huddled on the floor. She reached out and touched his shoulder. "Come on, hun, it's time to go home."

The boy scooted away from her. Great! He probably thinks we're just another set of kidnappers. She needed to reassure him somehow. "Your sister Cookie sent me to come and get you."

Upon hearing his sister's name, the boy's eyes widened.

"If you come with me, I'll take you to her."

"You swear," he whispered.

Macy lifted her hand and marked a cross over her heart. "Cross my heart."

Accepting her oath of honor, the little boy ran into her arms.

"No!" Lilith shrieked. "You cannot have him." Her hand shot out to latch onto Macy's upper arm.

WTF! Someone had forgotten the memo about demons and their ability to regenerate.

With Macy and the boy in tow, the demon stood up. "Seems you're going to meet your end sooner rather than later." Lilith cackled.

"I think I'm going to puke," Macy wheezed, suddenly overcome by sulfuric fumes. The smell of rotten eggs was the least of her worries. Lilith stretched her mouth wide, unhinging her jaw, reminding Macy of a snake readying for its next meal. Lilith's neck constricted, veins bulging under her tough leathery skin.

Hold up. The demon's next meal was going to be a Macy Beaumont special.

It was true. When faced with death, your life really did flash before your eyes. Macy choked back tears. Not over her imminent mortality, but the life she could have had with Gideon. Not only had she found security and real love, she had reclaimed her self-worth. Happy for the few short weeks she'd spent in heaven, Macy squeezed her eyes shut and prepared herself for the end.

Instead of the Light, Macy dropped to the floor. Her hands and knees slipped out from under her and she fell flat on her stomach. Disoriented, she opened her eyes. She'd fallen into a growing puddle of water at Lilith's feet.

Holy water. Tante Céline had saved her!

"Grab the boy, Macy. Then get out of the way, we're running low on artillery," Gideon barked.

Macy searched for the boy, finding him only a few feet away where she'd dropped him. His thumb was firmly planted in his mouth. Even though she was shaking uncontrollably, she scooted over and pulled him over to her. With her cargo cradled safely in her arms, she rose to her feet.

She barely made it a half a yard. Lilith lifted her off the ground by the leg. Not wanting to end up in the same precarious position as before, Macy twisted her body in an effort to free herself. She heard a loud pop at the same time a searing pain shot up her thigh.

Unable to hold onto reality and the boy at the same time, Macy released him. Her predicament seemed to pacify the demon because she pitched her like a sack of potatoes. Gideon...Tante Céline... and the children, still seated blissfully at the banquet table, hurtled through her line of vision as she flew past them, finally landing with a loud grunt several yards away.

"I don't think I'm cut out for this," she moaned, flopping onto her stomach. She tried rising to her feet, but her leg twisted at an odd angle and she fell to the floor.

"Mace, you okay?"

"I'm running out of ammo, Gideon!" Tante Céline yelled, drawing his attention.

Macy's head swam toward blissful nothingness. "Don't worry about me, babe. Just finish it." With her down and Tante Céline's water supply running low, they wouldn't stand a chance against the demon. And they'd all end up being toast.

Gideon wavered over whether to save her or the children, Macy was sure. Then with a bone-chilling cry, he spun on his feet, flung his arms wide and released the twin machetes at Lilith.

The metal weaponry twinkled and spun in perfect precision. Lilith lifted her hands to protect herself, but she was too late. The twin blades sliced through her fingers and neck, separating her head from her shoulders.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Tante Céline moaned while the headless body convulsed violently. Lilith's body buckled and started to collapse. But before her knees hit the floor, she burst into flames.

"One down, no more to go," Macy muttered, collapsing backward.

On the periphery of her consciousness, she heard Tante Céline and Gideon moving about.

"It's time to go home, Mace." Crouched over her, he looked withdrawn and his hands shook. Macy tried to form a smile, but it hurt too much. "Where does it hurt?" he asked, rubbing his hands all over her body.

"It hurts all over." Macy winced as she tried to sit up. "I think my Dancing Queen days are over for the immediate future. I think my left leg's broken."

"I'll get you a doctor as soon as we cross through the portal," he promised, picking her up from the floor.

"Ow!" she gasped, a sudden jolt of pain shooting through her leg.

"I'm down for anything at this moment," she panted. "Just as long as you don't drop me, fling me through the air or decide to eat me."

"I can only promise to abide by two of your conditions."

Macy chuckled and then moaned, her laughter having jostled her wounded leg. "I can live with that. Just get me to a doctor as soon as possible, please."

"Gideon, all the crumb snatchers have disappeared."

Macy glanced over to Tante Céline standing by the now empty banquet table. She held the little boy's hand, but the others were gone.

"They haven't disappeared, look up." Twelve orbs of light twinkled and frantically bumped against each other. A few even ran around the table. In due course, the orbs rose to the ceiling, finally disappearing through the plaster.

"Well I'll be," Tante Céline muttered. "We set them free after all."

Epilogue

"Let me get this straight. You found the kid with some guy outside St. Roch Cemetery." The police detective glanced down at his notes. "And when he saw you two, he got skittish and ran off?"

Macy looked away from the officer's intense scrutiny and pretended to watch the emergency room nurse remove her IV.

"Did you know about the Amber alert we had out for a Bobby Whitfield?"

"No, we just happened to be in the neighborhood. We have a receipt to prove it." She reached in her pocket and withdrew a store receipt.

"Thanks, I'll need it to verify your alibis," he drawled, taking the receipt she laid on the hospital bed. "*Naughty Essentials*. I know this place. My wife's been bugging me to take her there on our anniversary for the past four or five years, just never got around to it."

A little too much information. Macy took the receipt back and pocketed it.

"Do you need anything else from us?" Gideon asked.

"That'll be all. I have your numbers, if need be, I'll be in touch." Detective Dickson stood up and stretched his hand out to them. "Thanks again for finding the little guy, I can only imagine what could have happened if that freak would have been able to finish what he'd started. Hopefully it'll be the last of his reign of terror on the Crescent City."

Macy hoped so too, she couldn't afford to break another leg.

"Come on, babe, it's time to go home." Gideon lifted her and placed her in a wheelchair.

"Are we in the clear?" Tante Céline stood up when they entered the emergency room lobby.

"Hook, line and sinker," Gideon replied, sweeping Macy through the sitting area and out to the taxi waiting outside. "Of course, we need to make ourselves available if Detective Dickson should need to ask anymore questions."

"Well, I hate to kill and run. I have to flip pancakes in about six hours. After that, I have an appointment with a disgruntled husband, who wants to find out if his wife is cheating on him." Tante Céline walked around to the driver's side of her car. "Instead of spending money on a taxi, I can give you two guys a ride. It's on the way."

Macy took Gideon's hand as he helped her stand up from the wheelchair. "We'll pass, Tante Céline. Macy needs to stretch out in back. And it's easier for her to get in and out of a taxi rather than stuffing her in that."

Tante Céline saluted them. "Suit yourselves." She turned the ignition, then revved the engine. "Any more demons pop up, call me." She revved the engine again, then peeled away from the curb in a cloud of burning rubber and smoke.

Turning down the driver's aid, Gideon helped her into the backseat. Once she was settled to his liking, he climbed in next to her. Macy immediately nestled against him. "You know, we never had a chance to finish our anniversary. When we get home, cast or no cast, you're getting into that cowgirl outfit."

Still a little woozy from the pain medication they gave her, Macy tried to locate the cast in question. "But my leg."

Gideon chuckled. "Only semantics."

* * * * *

"Do you need any help?"

"I...ah, no." Macy grabbed her crutches. Pulling herself up from the toilet, she looked back at her backside reflected in the mirror. How in the world could she go out there with all this ass! "Ready or not, here I come." *All of it.*

She opened the door. Gideon stood on the other side, his muscular body resplendent in its natural state. He'd disrobed awhile ago, she was sure, since this was his idea. Instead of a costume, he wore a Stetson, a red condom and a full cock salute. Macy leaned heavily on her crutches, her knees suddenly weakening.

Gideon's eyelids drooped with lust. "Hello, cowgirl," he drawled.

"Where's the rest of your costume, Gideon?"

A lopsided grin curled his lips. *Saints alive he is gorgeous.* "It didn't make sense for both us to put on a costume. The less clothes, the sooner we can get down and dirty." Macy smiled at his wiggling eyebrows.

Without a word of warning, he swooped her up, carried her over to the bed and placed her on the soft surface. Crouching over her, he lowered his head to whisper in her ear. "You know, you should have left these in the box and just worn the chaps." He reached between them and tore away her red panties.

Macy slid her hands over his bare shoulders. His skin was so warm and soft to the touch. "I wore them to please you."

He rubbed the outside of her thighs. "Just like I'm sure it pleased you to have me tear them from you."

She leaned forward slightly to lick the side of his neck. The salty taste of his skin made her moan. He was better than ice cream. "You know it always does."

Chuckling, he fiddled with the top buckle of her chaps. Once undone, he slipped them down her legs and laid them aside. Coming back to her, he leaned forward and planted butterfly kisses over her injured leg. "I thought I'd lost you the other night." He rested his face against her hip. "Mace, I don't know what I'd do if I ever lost you."

His words made her shiver. "If I can help it, I'm not going anywhere, anytime soon."

Macy sucked in a breath. Gideon had reached her sex. With the broad side of his tongue, he parted her pussy lips. Macy jerked, her body bowing from the bed. He always knew how to draw an uncontrollable reaction from her body.

Her stomach tied into knots. He drew her clit in his mouth and sucked on her flesh until she squirmed underneath him. One minute she sighed into the soft mattress, the next she almost bucked from the bed.

Gideon crawled up her body to straddle her hips. Locking his eyes with hers, he rubbed the head of his cock against the opening of her sex.

"Do you want me to give it to you?"

Macy nodded.

Inch by slow inch, he slid into her. "Ahh...Gideon...you feel so good!"

"It's all for you, Macy. All for you," he panted, thrusting against her with long, easy thrusts.

Macy moaned. Even when he was gentle, he had her head spinning and her body ready to come!

Bending over her, he bit each of her nipples and then licked them as if to ease the pain. It was unnecessary because she felt only a delighted bliss!

Her prayers had been answered. She was blessed with a partner who finally got her. In spite of her strange quirks, extra pounds and almost insurmountable insecurities, Gideon loved her.

Even better?

She loved it when Gideon took the lead.

About the Author

Ever since the age of nine, KoKo Brown has had a love for the written word. So much so that she got the idea to publish her own newspaper. Turning a tidy profit from the very first issue, the publication was unfortunately put out of business by KoKo's grade-school principal, who didn't appreciate outside competition.

Undaunted, KoKo has never strayed too far from her passion, whether it was trying to bring some "liveliness" to her local newspaper's obituary page or trying her hand at erotic fiction.

When not writing, this Florida native likes spending time with family and friends, riding her Yamaha 650 Classic, surfing the internet or traveling to exotic locales.

Koko welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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