



Fallen

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Chapter One

“See that one? She is for you.”

Gabriel Wilder glanced up, his gaze landing upon what appeared to be an almost ethereal figure standing in the doorway of the shop. Expression hesitant, she seemed unsure as she stepped inside, her big blue eyes scanning the room. Her pretty gaze landed upon him briefly before it skittered away. As if she didn't like what she'd seen.

Or more likely, he scared the hell out of her. A common reaction when women like her looked at a man like him.

“She's nothing special.” He glanced away, watched out the window as the winter fog slowly rolled in. Another dark and gloomy night, the one difference being that there was an angel in their midst.

An angel who should run the hell out of there and never look back.

“Liar.” Ryder Mendoza shook his head as he cleaned up his equipment. “Darla said she had a feeling it might happen tonight. She thought it was going to be me.”

Gabe had no idea what Ryder was talking about. He studied the woman covertly out of the corner of his eye. Long, pin-straight blonde hair flowed down her back; a pert nose wrinkled as she stared at the myriad of sketches lining the wall.

Images flashed—the angel naked, on her knees, lips parted in preparation of him. Slowly he would sink himself between those lush lips, and she would take him. All of him, a little moan vibrating around his cock as if she enjoyed it. As if she'd been made for him.

Gabe shook his head, pushed the romantic thought from his mind. No woman was made for him; that point had already been driven home enough.

"She looks scared out of her mind. She doesn't belong here," he muttered, disgusted at his train of thought. At his wishful thinking.

Sweet little things didn't give him a second glance. He was too hard, too big, too damn scary, and he knew it.

It didn't stop him from lusting for them on occasion. He couldn't help himself. It was as if he was drawn to a certain type.

A certain type he could never have.

"Because she recognizes you even though she doesn't realize it. I bet that's why she's here. Trust me, brother. We've waited for this moment. I just never thought you'd be the first."

"And how the fuck do you know she's here for me?" More of the mystical shit, he was sure. Ryder had been playing the magic card for so long it had become a part of him.

Gabe wasn't a believer. It didn't matter that he worked at Tattoo Voodoo. He'd been told enough about his murky past, though he didn't quite understand it.

It didn't matter that his sister was the one who taught Ryder everything he knew. Darla focused on Ryder because he absorbed everything she said like a sponge. Gabe was the negative one. He always had been.

"She's looking at you right now."

The woman blinked; a long sweep of golden brown lashes lifted to reveal her gaze trained upon him. Her expression now open, inquisitive, with her head cocked to the side. Lips pursed, she took a step forward, then another, headed straight toward him. Until his sister interfered, stopping the young woman in her tracks with a greeting and a smile.

"She's pure. Untouched. She's perfect for you," Ryder murmured low, his gaze locked on her as well.

"I don't do virgins. And how the hell do you know she's pure?" As if he'd want a timid woman in his bed, scared witless and her legs clamped so tight it would take a

crowbar to pry them apart. She'd cry when she saw him naked, she'd scream when he entered her, and yeah...

No.

"I think you'd want with this one, Gabe. She's yours. You two belong together. She's why you're here."

"Don't you mean I'm why she's here?" He talked in circles, his friend, this man who was more like a brother, more like family. He only had Ryder and Darla. Gabe grunted and shook his head, disturbed by Ryder's words, irritated by the irrational emotion that swirled within him. Curiosity, lust, denial, all of it a potent mix that filled his head and made his temples ache.

All over a woman, a girl really, if what Ryder said was true. If she was as pure as his friend implied, she'd be too good for him.

The thought of that, of never sampling her because of her supposed purity, made him sick with disappointment. An edgy, almost indescribable anger filled him, and he shoved it away.

He never felt like this. Women came and went. And he was okay with that.

"I'm not interested." Gabe turned so his back faced her. He couldn't stand watching her any longer. His entire body was taut, and his hands clenched into fists. Overwhelming need pulsed through his blood, filling his cock, and he glanced down, caught sight of the slight bulge beneath the fly of his worn jeans.

Taking a deep breath, he thought of his older sister mere feet away. An instant deflator and just what he needed to forget the unwanted emotion curling through him.

"She's yours to claim, bro. If you don't want to take up the offer, then you're giving her away to someone else. Such a waste." Ryder shook his head; his mouth formed into a grim line.

"You talk crazy shit just like Darla," Gabe muttered, pissed that he wanted to believe it. That the pretty woman who lingered behind him, whose delicate scent

reached his nostrils and made them twitch, was made for him. All the mystical fate crap drove him insane, especially because there wasn't any need for it, and there definitely wasn't any proof.

Many thought his sister a witch. The voodoo part in the name of the shop didn't help the rumors. She was strange, kept to herself, was overprotective to a fault of what she considered hers. She could slay him with a look, would probably kick his ass in a fight to the death. She'd also protect him to the bitter end if he found himself in danger.

Darla was tough. She scared the shit out of him when she was angry, and he was a big guy, a little over six feet and two hundred pounds. He didn't like messing with her, was all about keeping the peace.

Easier that way.

"Oh, Gabe." Her singsong voice washed over him, tensing his shoulders, and he stood straighter, afraid to turn around. Afraid of what he might find when he did. "Gabe, you have a customer, honey. She requested *you* specifically."

Darla never called him honey unless she was trying to impress. He had a strong feeling he knew whom she was trying to impress.

Slowly he turned to find his supposed angel standing next to Darla. A complete contrast, the two women were. Dark and light, innocence and skepticism, his sister had seen it all, and through narrowed dark eyes. The angel stood next to her, hands clutched together in front of her, pale blue eyes wide as she tried to look anywhere but at him.

It pissed him off, her reaction. If she was coming to a tattoo shop, then why the hell did she act as if he was some sort of thug? Not like their shop was in the best neighborhood in town. She knew what she was getting into by coming here.

"Hey," he greeted, giving the blonde a curt nod when she finally deigned to look at him. "You asked for me?"

She nodded, her gaze darting upward to stare into his eyes for the briefest moment before it skittered away. "I've heard you're the best."

“Oh, really?” Gabe crossed his arms in front of his chest, cocked a brow. He hoped Miss Innocence got the double entendre. “Where’d you hear that?”

“From the Internet.” Her chin lifted, a defiant and surprising little gesture. The urge to turn her over his knee and give her a spanking was so strong he had to blink hard to force it away. “I saw your work, read all of the comments on the site. They all said you were the best.”

“I am,” he drawled. “You don’t look like the type who’d want a tattoo, though.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The now defiant tone went up a notch, and his hands itched to grab her. Smooth his palms over what he imagined would be a pert ass right before he smacked it.

He’d always had a thing for naughty little girls. “You look a bit too pure for a place like this, darlin’. Why didn’t you go to one of those trendy parlors downtown where they serve you tea and draw pretty daisies on your ankle?”

He leaned in close, his face practically in hers, and he silently marveled at her beauty, her utter calmness as he tried to intimidate her. Skin so creamy smooth it appeared velvety soft to the touch. He wanted to nuzzle his cheek against hers. Breathe in her softness, her sweetness.

As if she might cleanse his ugly, tattered soul.

“I don’t want to go to those places. I want the best tattoo artist in town.” She drew in a sharp breath, her exhalation drifting across his face just before he moved away from her. Sweet, minty breath that made him want to kiss her. Drink from her lips, take her mouth with a wild abandon that would leave them both breathless and weak.

Gabe ran a shaky hand through his hair, pushing it away from his forehead. It was too long, and it drove him bat-shit crazy. Her eyes watched his every move, a light shining in the blue depths that made him wonder.

Was she attracted to him? Did she feel the unmistakable pull between them as he did?

Fuck. He doubted it. His overactive imagination played games with him once again.

He hated his reaction to her. Why the trembling fingers? Why the incessant need pounding beneath his skin? It made no sense. He almost wished she'd leave. It would be easier, not having to face her, not having her so goddamn close.

"So you think I'm the best?" Pride surged through him despite his unease. He was pretty damn good, but he'd learned from a master, his sister. He picked up a few tips from another skilled artist, Ryder. Plus, he'd had plenty of freehand practice way back in the day.

A past he'd rather not remember. A time when he'd been good and before it all fell apart.

"Like I said, I did my research. I've seen your work. I know you're the best." She nodded, as if she'd just convinced herself. "I want you."

Gabe smiled. Sweeter words were never spoken.

Jordan realized her faux pas as soon as the words escaped her. She wanted him. Jeez. Could she sound any sillier?

Yes, he was darkly attractive in a scary, "I might jump you in a dark alley" kind of way, if she went for that sort.

She didn't go for that sort. And he was so...large. Wide shoulders, broad chest, and the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. Tattoos curled around his biceps. She swore she saw the wicked head of a dragon, and she wondered what other tattoos he had on his body.

He wore his black hair a little too long and was a bit of a rumpled sexy mess. Dark-as-sin eyes stared at her, watched her with an almost scary intensity.

As if he really saw her. All her secrets, her fears and dreams. Dreams she thought she'd never be able to realize.

Today, tonight, in this little shop in the bad part of town not far from her new apartment, she was realizing one. A tattoo in celebration of her newfound life—it was a permanent marking recording how she felt at this very moment.

She was a survivor, lucky, and so very thankful to be alive.

“You want me?” His deep voice reverberated throughout her body, rattling her thoughts, her libido, everything inside her. The amusement she heard in his tone made her want to smack him. The lock of black hair that tumbled over his brow filled her with the urge to touch him. Stroke his hair back with her fingers, allow them to drift across his stubble-roughened cheek...

“I have a drawing.” Jordan changed the subject, embarrassed by the direction of their conversation, the direction of her thoughts. She had no idea how to flirt with a man, certainly didn’t know how to handle a man such as him. “It’s not that good, though. I did it myself.”

Gabriel flicked his chin. “Let me see it.”

She scrambled for the top of her purse, searched through the mess that always seemed to fill it until she found the folded square of paper. Withdrawing it, she handed the paper to him, their fingers brushing when she did so.

A bolt of electricity shook her to her very core. Her fingers tingled, her entire body quivered, and she took a step back, desperate for some room.

Away from him, from his heat, his magnetism.

He opened the paper and studied the drawing, his free hand coming up to rub against his jaw. She heard the rasp of his beard, wondered what it would feel like if she touched it.

She’d never touched a man’s face before. Not a grown man, not a virile, sexy man with stubble on his jaw and a mouth too pretty, too lush compared to the stark lines of his face.

That mouth made her think of sin. Which made her think of...other things.

“Angel’s wings,” he murmured, his voice not betraying a hint of emotion, though she saw a troubled flicker in his eyes. “On your back?”

“Yes, along my shoulder blades.” She nodded, ignored the punch of nerves in her stomach. She would do this; she wouldn’t chicken out. She’d vowed long ago that she would never be scared again.

There was nothing to fear now. She’d already experienced the worst, the most horrifying things that could happen to a human being. And she was still alive to tell the tale.

“It’ll hurt.” His eyes locked with hers, dark and unyielding, and she returned the stare. “You’re just a little thing. I’m sure you don’t have enough body fat to cushion the needle much. It’ll be hitting bone.”

“I’m not afraid.” She lifted her chin again, secretly praying for strength. It both offended and thrilled that he called her a little thing. As if he thought she might be weak. As if he thought she might be attractive.

A crooked faint smile curved his too beautiful mouth, and she had the distinct feeling he didn’t do that very often. Smile. “I’m sure you’re not, angel. Give me a few, and I’ll sketch it. Then you can tell me what you think.”

“You’ll do it?” Hope filled her chest, and she took a step toward him, reaching out as if to touch him. She corrected herself, let her hand fall to her side, and he watched the entire thing through narrowed eyes.

As if he dared her to touch him. But she refused. And she felt like she failed a big test.

Yet she wanted to touch this man. She wanted to feel his hands upon her when he began to mark her skin. No adult man had touched her besides a doctor. No one had touched her with any sort of affection or love practically her entire life.

Affection and love, words and emotions she wasn’t familiar with at all. She needed to remember this was just a job to him. He didn’t want to harm her. He didn’t want to touch her in more than an impersonal manner. She meant nothing to him.

But he was giving her her angel. No longer would he be a dream or a prayer for help—her angel would be on her back. And she'd feel safe. No one could harm her now—at least, she tried to convince herself of that.

"I'll do it." He gave her a grim nod. "You want it tonight?"

If she didn't do it tonight, she'd probably never get up the nerve to come back. She had to do it tonight. "Yes."

"You want color?"

"No, just black-and-white. Like an outline," she murmured, studying her drawing still clutched in his big hand. "They're guardian angel's wings. Adding color would just make them look...garish."

He studied her oddly, this man with an angel's name. But he was nothing like her image of the archangel Gabriel. This man was certainly no messenger of God. He looked more like a man of sin, kin of the devil. As if he could lead the most innocent down a path of wicked pleasure.

Memories assaulted her, of a dark-winged man with a mouth made for sin. A man who promised to protect her and then left her alone, a man she still searched for to this day.

He reminded her of that man. Her memories of that day were fuzzy, dim at best, but something about Gabriel Wilder...

"We can do the tattoo in two parts if you'd like. If you think you might not be able to handle the pain."

"I can handle the pain just fine." She could. She'd suffered a lifetime of pain already, and she was only twenty-four. She could handle a needle moving repeatedly upon her skin.

He still watched her, contemplating her answer, no doubt. Probably thinking she was wavering. She returned the intense stare, refused to back down, and finally he gave a curt nod. "Fine."

Excitement raced through her veins, and she clutched her hands together in front of her, held them close to her rapidly beating heart. “So we’ll start tonight?”

“Tonight.”

Chapter Two

“You touch her, and she belongs to you. You know this, right?” Ryder asked as he wandered by, not lingering for the answer.

“I’m giving her the tattoo she wants, nothing else,” Gabe said through gritted teeth as he continued to sketch. He’d already balled up five sheets of paper, his frustration mounting with every attempt.

Damn it, it never came this hard, ever. He wanted this tattoo to be perfect, wings that his angel would take one look at and offer her immediate and enthusiastic approval.

My angel. What the hell was wrong with him? Her approval wasn’t important to him, not beyond her giving him permission to tattoo the wings upon her back.

Gabe’s entire body flushed with energy at the thought of touching her. She’d have to remove her shirt and bra for him to mark the spot she wanted. He’d need the entire expanse of her back exposed, and then he would have to touch her. Rest his hands on her skin, trace the needle upon her flesh. Mark her with his artistry, leave his impression that she would carry with her for the rest of her life.

He’d sported a hard-on since he realized he’d get the chance to work on her. Playing it cool had never been more difficult. Feigning indifference under the watchful eyes of Ryder and Darla proved just about impossible.

They knew. Ryder had gone to Darla, and the two of them watched him with speculative glances the entire time he spoke to the woman. He’d felt their gazes bore into his back, intense and seeking.

Did he even know the woman’s name? No, he’d forgotten to ask. It was best that way. Darla wandered over, curiosity written all over her face as she peered

over his shoulder, checking out his sketch attempt illuminated beneath the light box.

“Having trouble?” The amusement in her voice was clear, and he braced himself.

“Not at all,” he lied smoothly with a firm shake of his head, his hand moving quickly across the paper. “Just finishing this up for my client.”

“She’s lovely, isn’t she?”

He absolutely refused to look at her, though he could feel her presence. Sitting in the front of the shop, flipping through a magazine, he heard the turn of the pages, the quiet clearing of her throat. It was as if he was aware of every single movement she made, every single thing she did.

“Not my type.” He added a few extra touches, some detailed shading to the wings, his eyes never leaving the paper.

“That’s why she’s perfect.” His sister’s low voice told him she believed they were meant to be or some such shit. Just like what Ryder said to him earlier. All of it a bunch of crazy talk since no woman would want him, especially one as pretty and clean as the one who sat mere feet from him.

“You know I don’t believe in all that crap.” Why couldn’t they stop talking about it? If it wasn’t Ryder, it was Darla spouting her magical, fated nonsense.

“Such a shame considering she’s come here for you.” Darla tipped her head to the side. “You don’t recognize her? I’m not surprised if you don’t. I wouldn’t recognize mine either.”

A shiver went up his spine at his sister’s words. Was he supposed to recognize her? “I’ve never seen her before in my life.”

“That’s what you think.”

Gabe glared at her. “Quit with all the mysterious talk, Darla. How the hell do you know she’s for me anyway?”

“The aura around her, it glows. I knew the moment she walked into the shop she was for one of us. I just wasn’t sure who. Until she spotted you and she became rooted to the floor. Then I knew she was yours.” Darla smiled. “I must admit I’m jealous. We’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time.”

“You talk complete bullshit.” So why did a shiver move up his spine at Darla’s words? And why did that woman seem so familiar to him? He referred to her as an angel, which was a mockery in itself, but he couldn’t help it.

Darla’s expression turned grave. “You can’t stop it, Gabe. She’s here, and it’s going to happen.”

“What’s going to happen?” Gabe practically yelled, running a hand through his hair in frustration. Damn it, the woman had been in the shop for barely an hour, and she was already causing far too much chaos.

“The fight. Your personal battle. The moment you touch her, it will begin.”

“I have to touch her. I’m giving her a tattoo, for Christ’s sake,” Gabe muttered, returning his attention to the sketch. His gaze slid to the side to drink her in once more.

She sat oblivious to the turmoil and argument she caused. Beautiful and simple yet utterly complicated, she lifted her gaze, and her eyes met his.

Gabe looked away, pissed at himself for getting caught staring.

“Then it will all begin, just as we’ve been told.” Darla rubbed her hands together, a thin smile forming on her lips. “I’m prepared. You know you can count on me.”

“This is ridiculous.” Gabe shook his head, could feel a headache starting. The confusion, the stress, the overwhelming emotions that crashed through him brought it on, and more than anything, he wished he was at home, in the dark, in his bed.

With a sweet little blonde cuddled up to his side.

No fucking way.

“Hmm, well, keep telling yourself that.” Darla pushed from his desk. “Her name is Jordan, just so you know,” she said over her shoulder as she walked away.

Jordan. Damn it, he even liked her name. Had expected her to have some sort of feminine, frilly name, but instead it was Jordan. Simple yet strong.

He glanced at her again and watched as she turned the pages of an old, tattered magazine. She didn’t look very strong, and he knew without a doubt, she’d be anything but simple. Her eyes met his once more, and they stared at each other from across the shop. She didn’t shy away this time, and neither did he. She kept her gaze trained on him, though her fingers clutched the open magazine so tight he saw the whites of her knuckles.

“Want to see what I came up with?” He kept his voice a rough murmur on purpose to see if she could hear him. Why, he didn’t know. A test of some sort, to see if they had the connection Darla said they shared.

She nodded, and pleasure streaked through him as she tossed the magazine on the rickety table that sat next to her chair. Pushing to her feet, she strode toward him, her swaying hips unassumingly seductive, and the fit of her dark jeans emphasized the length of her legs.

Swallowing hard, he pushed the lustful thoughts from his mind and focused on the drawing before him. It was simple. He hadn’t deviated too far from what she came up with, though he added his own personal touches. He hoped like hell that she liked it.

Jordan came to stand beside him, much like Darla had done earlier. But his reaction to her closeness sent his heart rate into overdrive. She smelled sweet, reminding him of delicate flowers on a spring day. His mouth went dry when she tilted her head, flipped her hair with one hand over her shoulder. A little smile curved her lips when her eyes lit upon the drawing.

“Ooh, I love it.”

He looked up to find her staring at it in disbelief, her emotions written all over her expressive face. She was clearly pleased.

“You captured exactly what I wanted,” she continued, reaching out to trace one of the delicate angel’s wings.

Another surge of pride flooded him, and he tapped at the edge of the drawing with his index finger. “So this is what you want?”

She nodded, eyes still locked on the drawing. As if she couldn’t tear her gaze away from it. “Absolutely.”

“And you’re sure about this? You’ve already discussed payment with Darla, right?”

“Right.” Annoyance flickered across her face, faint but there—he saw it. “Why are you questioning me? Do you do this to all of your clients?”

Hell, no, he didn’t. He never cared if they were making the right choice or not. His sister always counseled her potential customers to make sure they were getting the tattoo for all the right reasons. Ryder did too. Gabe just took their money and gave them what they wanted, no questions asked. If they came stumbling back into the shop sobbing over their mistake, that wasn’t his problem.

But with this woman, he wanted to make sure she knew what she was doing. He wanted to ensure she really did want to get this tattoo. It was a major commitment based on its size alone, and he didn’t want her filled with regret afterward.

“It’s a large tattoo, and it’ll take me some time to complete. I just want to make sure you know what you’re getting into,” he explained calmly while inside he felt anything but. Staring at her sent his senses into overdrive, and having her so close was a test of sheer will.

“I know exactly what I’m getting into, and I want it.” She crossed her arms in front of her, displaying that little bit of defiance that seemed to flow within her. He liked ’em feisty—he always had—and she was a combination of pure innocence and surprising stubbornness.

He hated to admit it, but he found the combination damn sexy.

Gabe flicked the light box off, grabbed the piece of transparent paper, and stood. "Then let's do it."

Jordan sat in the wooden chair facing backward, straddling either side of the seat, and she hugged the back close. She sat completely still, her arms aching from lack of movement, with no shirt on and a towel pressed to her front in between the chair and her body.

She thought she might die from the pleasure.

He touched her, with gloved hands and a needle, yes, but his hands lay upon her flesh in an almost healing gesture, and her unprepared body could barely take it. The bite of the buzzing needle, the gentle press of his fingers where his hand rested just above where he sketched, it was as if he burned her. Touched her to the very depths of her soul.

She was being dramatic. And she was one who refused to be prone to dramatics, not anymore. Her past life had enough drama. In the hope to forget it, she moved out of town. Moved far away from where she grew up, far from where she suffered.

And she'd suffered. The wings were a representation of that, of how she'd overcome, how she'd found a savior in her dreams, in her sick and sad little mind. Her dream angel had changed her life, given her hope, and she never wanted to let that go.

To let go of hope was to let go of life.

Gabriel wiped at her skin with a soft white cloth, and she drew in a harsh breath. It hurt—she couldn't deny the pain that scorched her skin—but there was something beneath it too. She felt as if she were in a heady daze, her thoughts drifting, her body completely attuned to his. If she glanced down, she could see the hard strength of his denim-clad thigh straddling the side of her chair. If she concentrated enough, she could feel his warm breath drift across her back.

If she thought about it too much, she could imagine him pressing his front to her back, the heat of him enveloping her, drawing her in. His sheer strength would overwhelm yet make her feel protected, and she wondered what it would be like. Having those thick, strong arms banded around her, holding her close. Her fingers stroking his biceps as his mouth took hers in a gentle but savage kiss...

"I'm almost done." His voice was like a low growl, rippling along her skin in delicious pulses, and her stomach danced with nerves. He hunched over her, the needle moving rapidly back and forth on her flesh, and she winced. "Just doing a little shading, and then we should be finished."

Disappointment washed over her, making her loneliness keen, almost palpable. She didn't want to be finished. What would she do next? She had no one, knew no one in this new-to-her town. Just her little studio apartment and the few belongings she owned. She'd rented the place furnished, and though the furniture had seen better days, she could consider it temporarily hers.

She didn't own much. Personal items, some clothing, a few sentimental pieces, but not many since there hadn't been a lot in her life to be sentimental about.

"There you go." The buzzing stopped, revealing just how quiet the shop had become, and he wiped at her skin again with the cloth. It lingered there, a slow swipe that almost felt like a caress, the heat of his fingers, even through the thin plastic glove, marking her almost as permanently as the ink he'd just pressed into her skin.

Overreacting, she told herself, pressing her lips together. She closed her eyes and breathed deep, tried desperately to ignore the riot of emotions that swirled within her at his closeness. At his touch.

"Do you want to see it?" His quiet voice wrapped around her, rumbling deep from his chest. It vibrated through her skin, and she opened her eyes and glanced at him from over her shoulder.

“Yes, please.” She sounded meek, like a good little girl, and she cursed herself inwardly. This man was bold, strong, with a dangerous air, and sweet girls who didn’t protest were most likely not his style.

As if she had a chance with a man like him. As if she *wanted* to have a chance with a man like him.

Why did she think such things?

He grabbed a hand mirror from his tray and gave it to her, then pointed to the wall mirror not far from where she sat. Grasping the towel to her chest with one hand, she held up the mirror and studied the reflection of her back, amazed at what she found.

He’d captured it perfectly, what she wanted. The wings feathered down the slope of her shoulder blades, ethereal and delicate yet solid and almost...real. Her skin was red, it ached from hours beneath the needle, but she didn’t care. She rolled her shoulders, watched as the wings twitched and fluttered, and she released a little sigh.

“You don’t like it?” He sounded worried, and for some reason she found that touching.

“I love it,” she breathed. She couldn’t stop staring at it as she held the mirror this way and that. “It’s exactly what I wanted.”

He didn’t answer. She heard the clang of his equipment as he put it away, his determined, booted steps as he moved about his work area. For her privacy, he’d put up a screen, and she glanced around the far edge, noticed the shop was virtually empty. A glimpse of the clock on the wall told her it was late, and she wondered just how safe it would be to walk outside to her little car alone.

A hand suddenly appeared in her face, long, blunt tipped fingers wagging. “The mirror?”

She gave it to him, and he traded it for her shirt and bra, which she accepted with flaming-hot cheeks. “Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t recommend wearing your bra.” His back was to her as he put things away in the drawers that lined the wall. “I’ll give you an instruction sheet as to how to take care of your tattoo during the recovery process. I assume someone can help you with it? Since it’s on your back and hard to reach?”

No one could help her with it. She was totally and completely alone. “Of course,” she lied, surprised at how smooth the words came out.

Jordan watched him carefully, his broad back to her, and she figured she was safe. Letting the towel drop, she tugged the loose T-shirt over her head with a wince, her shoulders burning with her every movement. When she pushed the tangle of hair out of her face, she discovered he’d turned around. His gaze blazed with banked heat as he stared at her.

“Sorry,” he murmured, yet he didn’t appear sorry at all. He wouldn’t stop looking at her; his gaze roamed over her from the top of her head down to her fake Converse-covered feet. Her cheeks flamed with heat, and her gaze skittered away. She was uncomfortable with the sudden shift in the air.

This man...drew her in, and she couldn’t quite explain why. He was familiar—she’d known it from the moment she saw Tattoo Voodoo’s site on the Web. Searching the Internet on her little-used laptop she’d picked up for a song on eBay, she’d been looking for a local tattoo artist. Happening upon their site, she’d studied the art, the photographs of everyone who worked in the shop, and from the moment she set eyes on him, she’d felt it.

He’d mean something to her. What, she wasn’t sure. It could be as simple as the man who gave her the tattoo she wanted to something much more, something complicated and twisted and...exhilarating.

The man left her exhilarated just looking at her.

“You already paid Darla.”

“Yes.” The breathy whisper of her voice startled her, and she leaped from the chair, went for her purse, which rested on the countertop, so she could stuff her bra inside it.

Right next to where Gabriel Wilder stood.

He handed her a piece of paper the moment she approached. "Instructions for you. About your tattoo."

"Thank you." She folded it into a square and shoved it along with her bra into her purse, her fingers tingling from the brief contact. She needed to go—she'd overspent her stay—but something made her linger.

Someone made her linger, more like. His body heat reached for her, warm and inviting yet intimidating, scary. Danger radiated from him, forbidden allure that drew her in despite the voice of common sense ringing in her head. The stern voice that told her to stay away, run away, and never look back.

Jordan ignored it. Her new life was one of taking risks, asking for what she wanted, and much like the decision to get a tattoo, she decided to go for it with him. This man who made her think of bold and reckless things.

"It's late, and I'm parked kind of far away." She quit talking when he lifted his head sharply, his dark gaze meeting hers. As if he knew what she was about to ask and didn't want to hear it.

She went on anyway.

"Is there any way I could get you to walk me to my car? Please?" She added the please because how could he resist it? A lone woman in the dark of night needed accompaniment to her car. He might not look like a gentleman, but he wouldn't be so rude as to refuse her.

He already stood close, but he took a step forward, bringing him so near she could reach out and touch him, could smell his intoxicating scent as it wrapped around her. "Despite what you want to believe, I'm not a nice guy."

His statement made her blink. "What?"

"I'm not a nice guy. You think I'll walk you out to your car to make sure you're safe. Take the keys from you so I can unlock and open your door like I'm some sort of gentleman trying to impress you." He shook his head, his gaze intense, his hair

falling into his eyes. "I won't do any of that shit. I'm not what anyone would consider *safe*. Trust me."

"Oh." She blinked again, startled by his minispeech, at his bold declaration that he wasn't nice or safe. He made safe sound like a dirty word.

She should be all about safe and nice now. Her old life had been nothing but sadness and fear and death. So much death, almost her own until she'd been saved.

It was a miracle she was still alive, all the doctors had said. That she could walk and talk and function like a normal human being.

So dallying with a man who claimed he wasn't safe, entrusting herself to him, was ridiculous. Crazy.

Yet she wanted to do it. She knew he wouldn't hurt her. He reminded her of her guardian angel, the one who abandoned her after saving her from her death that one horrible day.

The more she looked at Gabriel, the more she thought she might've found him.

"So you won't walk me to my car." She studied him, her gaze never wavering from his, and he crossed his arms in front of his chest. The movement emphasized the sheer size of him, a display of strength she should've found intimidating.

It aroused her. She'd read enough, she'd watched enough, and long, long ago, during another life, she'd experienced a bit to recognize arousal when she felt it.

And it coursed through her now, warming her blood, heating her skin, making her lips tingle and her nipples tighten beneath her T-shirt. She rubbed her arm across her chest, hoping he wouldn't notice.

His gaze dipped, following her movement, and his eyes widened the slightest bit.

He most definitely noticed.

"I can't guarantee what might happen if I do walk you to your car." His voice turned gruff, his expression stony.

Ah, his answer felt like a dare. And she couldn't help but want to take him up on it.

"I'm willing to take my chances," she said, and his eyes flamed even brighter.

"It's your funeral," he muttered, pushing away from the counter.

No, more like her rebirth.

Chapter Three

The woman was stone-cold loco.

Gabe shook his head, watched her out of the corner of his eye as he moved about the shop. He gathered his keys and hooded sweatshirt, switched off the remaining lights so the shop became shrouded in darkness. Only the sound of the ticking clock on the wall filled the room, and he swore the soft inhale and exhale of her breathing.

Jesus. He could even hear her breathe, and damn it, it turned him on. His body instantly reacted, his cock harder than stone, and he hadn't even really touched her yet.

Well, he'd touched her. Soft, soft skin even through the gloves, warm and inviting, the smooth expanse of her back had overwhelmed him. He'd studied the spot where the top of her jeans gaped at the back of her waist while he etched into her skin. It gave him a glimpse of simple white cotton panties. The sight of them had made sweat form on his forehead, made his hands shake the slightest bit.

He'd paused and taken a deep breath, commanded himself to get his shit together.

This wasn't good. It wasn't normal. And yet he couldn't stop it if he tried.

She waited for him by the door, patient and trusting, her expression neutral. Not a flicker of worry crossed her face, and it should. He hadn't lied when he'd told her he wasn't nice. Oh, long ago, he'd been as pure as the driven snow; they all had been. But now he was a mean son of a bitch who only cared about himself. He felt a twitch of obligation for his sister and his best friend, but that was it.

They accepted him anyway. As did this woman, this...foolish little girl who behaved as if she didn't know any better. Who strode into a tattoo shop on the worst side of town, wanting him to turn her into an angel, for fuck's sake.

Eerie how he'd thought of her as an angel when he first saw her and she'd wanted the wings. As if she knew what they had once been, all three of them. And how well those wings fit her skin, how beautiful they'd turned out despite his reluctance to work on her. Despite the edgy sensation that had come over him, the tremor in his hands, the dizziness.

She set him on edge, and no woman had ever done that before.

He approached the door, stopped just before the spot where she stood, and she blinked up at him with wide eyes. She held her purse in front of her, a tattered cloth bag that had seen better days, and he realized her clothes appeared as if they'd seen better days as well.

Not much money on this one and yet she'd forked over a pretty penny for the tattoo. She must've really wanted it, saved for it or something.

"Ready?" He kept it short, his tone curt on purpose. Didn't want to give her any silly ideas, because he had a feeling her head was full of them.

If they came close to any of the strange, unwanted emotions he felt toward her, then yeah, they were crazy.

She nodded her answer and he opened the door, closed his eyes briefly as she passed. Her sweet, clean scent drifted up and around him, and he was hungry. For her, for her flesh, her mouth, her everything.

Control yourself.

He locked the door, desperate to get her to her car and get the hell out of there. As far away from her as possible. She was nothing but trouble. He could sense it. The swirling fog didn't help his mood, but damn it, a sensation of foreboding came over him, dark and unfathomable.

Hell, he could even sense the change she would bring to his life if he let her in.

A grimace curved his lips as they crossed the empty street toward the also empty parking lot. Wouldn't Ryder and Darla love to know he sensed something about her? Not that he'd ever admit it. He'd never hear the end of it if he told them.

An old compact car sat nearby, its paint faded, the body style indicating it was made sometime in the very early nineties. It had to be hers—there wasn't another car in the lot—and she walked toward it with purposeful strides as only an owner would.

“Yours?”

She turned to look at him, and he cocked a brow, waited for her answer. The little chin lifted again, and he wanted to cup it. Curve his fingers around it and draw her close, closer. Until her mouth was at level with his and he could taste her, lick her plush lower lip. Hear the little moan that would escape upon first contact...

“It's old, but it runs,” she explained, her tone defensive.

“Hey, I don't care.” He held his hands up in front of him. “As long as it runs, right?”

She nodded, and his hands slowly dropped to his sides. Neither of them said a word, just stared at each other, and it made him increasingly uncomfortable as each second ticked by. As if she could see right through him, see everything he kept carefully tucked away. All the dark and ugly stuff, the tortured thoughts that no person, certainly no woman, would ever understand.

“Well, thank you for walking me.” She jolted him from his trance when she whipped a jangly keychain from her purse and unlocked the door, then yanked it open. “And thank you for the tattoo. Your work is beautiful.”

“Thanks.” He wouldn't refuse her compliment, and he tried not to be rude. Damn it, he did the woman a favor walking her to her car, nothing more.

Flashing him a faint smile, she climbed into the Honda, settled her little self into the seat, and stuck the key in the ignition. She left the door open, and he waited, wanted to make sure the car would start. Yes, he could be a selfish asshole,

but he knew enough to stick around and make sure she drove away before he went to get his bike parked at the back of the shop.

She attempted to start the car, the battery tried to turn over, but then...nothing. She turned the key again, her face determined, her mouth in a firm line, but still nothing.

Gabe ran a hand through his hair, wondering what the hell could be next. Was he being tested? If he lingered around her any longer, surely he would lose. "Doesn't sound good."

"No, um, it doesn't." She tried one more time, but it was no use.

"Sounds like the battery's dead."

"Yeah." She slumped in her seat, stared unseeingly at the steering wheel. "My car is always so dependable. I just bought a new battery six months ago."

"Huh." He shrugged, his mind scrambling. What should he do? Call a tow truck? Get her a taxi ride home? It would probably take forever to get here, but he had some cash. He'd pay for it. Gladly.

Gabe needed to get her away from him. Before he did something stupid like yank her into his arms. Kiss her. Tear her clothes off and explore every inch of her body...

"This is embarrassing." She smiled up at him, and it was like a punch right in the gut. She was too beautiful for her own good. And he was a sucker for falling for it that easily. "I just praised the car, and now it won't start."

"It might be a simple fix." He flicked his chin at her. "Want me to check under the hood?"

"Oh. Sure."

She tugged on the pull by her left knee, and he popped open the hood. Glancing down, he cursed the darkness, the broken lamplights that sat useless above him. He couldn't see shit, couldn't tell what was wrong with it. And damn it all to hell, this most likely meant he'd have to offer her a ride home.

On his motorcycle, where she'd clutch him close and press her chest into his back. So he'd feel her breasts, unbound by her bra, her hands on his flesh, so he could die a slow, torturous death.

"I can't see anything." He let the hood drop. It landed with a loud clank, and she startled at the sound. "Want a lift home?"

Her mouth dropped open. "You're offering me a ride?"

"Yeah." Gabe shrugged. "On my motorcycle, though. Just warning you."

"I don't live far, so it wouldn't take long."

"Really?" Shock laced his voice. He never would've figured she lived anywhere near this part of town.

"Mmm-hmm." She climbed out of the car, shut the door, and locked it. "I live in a studio apartment on Third Street."

Dead center in the crap part of town. This revelation shocked him even more. Why did this pretty little angel live around here? Did she live alone? With family, with a—oh hell, he hoped not—with a man?

"You could've walked," he said instead, jealousy clawing at his gut at the thought of another man putting his hands on her.

Yeah, he was a freaking idiot to even think like this.

"I could've." She came over to where he stood at the front of her car, her nearness spiking his temperature by about a thousand degrees. "But it's not really a good neighborhood." Her nose wrinkled.

"Not the kind of neighborhood a little girl like you should live in," he muttered.

"I'm *not* a little girl."

Oh, she didn't like that. Well, good, he didn't like any of this either.

Leaning down, he got right in her face, watched those pretty baby blues widen, her damp lips part. She was primed for kissing, and no way would he do it. No matter how much he wanted to, he had to hold on to some bit of control.

“Could’ve fooled me,” he murmured, his entire body tightening when her tongue sneaked out to lick nervously at her lower lip. A lick he felt right on the tip of his dick.

Jesus.

“Are you going to take me to my place or not?” She ignored his taunt, which was probably best.

She studied him with watchful eyes, her raggedy purse hanging from her shoulder, slender arms crossed beneath her breasts. Tight nipples poked at the thin cotton fabric, and his mouth watered at the sight.

“Let’s go,” he said gruffly. He turned on his heel and headed back to the shop. She followed. He heard her footsteps on the rutted gravel of the old asphalt lot, but he refused to look back.

Afraid of what he might do if he did.

God, he infuriated her. Darkly gorgeous with the snide words and yet enough concern he couldn’t abandon her, Gabriel was a contradiction. A contradiction that felt solid and warm as she rode behind him on his motorcycle.

Her thighs pressed against the outsides of his muscular ones, the engine humming between her legs. Her arms wrapped about his middle, hands resting loosely on his firm stomach. Heat bled through his T-shirt, searing her fingers, and she wondered what he would do if she slipped her hands beneath his shirt.

Breathing deep, she inhaled his scent, which permeated the sweatshirt he’d given her to wear. It was way too big on her. The sweatshirt had fallen almost to her knees when she slipped it on, but she was thankful she wore it. The night was cold, the fog gloomy and almost mysterious, and she marveled at the pure heat he radiated despite the weather.

Was she brave enough to invite him in? Her apartment was shabby, but she didn't really care. Not like any of that stuff belonged to her. Besides, what would she do once she got him in there?

The idea of big, badass Gabriel Wilder filling her teeny apartment was almost too ridiculous to comprehend.

He'd turn her down anyway.

The bike leaned right, and he let up on the gas, turning at the next light. They were a few blocks before her actual street, and she wondered if he might be lost.

"You took a wrong turn," she yelled over the loud engine.

He shook his head, the wind streaking through his hair and making it an absolute wavy, sexy mess. He only had one helmet, and he'd insisted she wear it.

She felt distinctly like a bobblehead.

"Hey." She squeezed hard about his middle, hanging on for dear life when he took a sharp turn left down a narrow alley. "What are you doing?"

"We're being followed."

Those three words filled her with dread, and she whipped around, trying to check out the car behind them. But she saw nothing. The fog swallowed the street, the streetlights making faint upside-down triangles of orangey yellow light. Not one car passed as they waited in the dark alley.

"Dark four-door sedan, older model," Gabriel said as he slowly turned the motorcycle around and brought it to a stop so they faced the street. "Black or dark gray in color. I couldn't tell. Sound familiar?"

"Not at all." She swallowed hard and clutched him harder. She was thankful this happened when she wasn't alone. What would she have done?

What would anyone want with her?

"Is it standard procedure for you to be followed?" He sounded as if he believed it might be.

“You sound like a cop.” She’d talked to enough of them after everything became exposed. Had felt resentment toward them too, that they hadn’t been aware of what had been happening to her. What had happened to certain members of her family, all of them long gone now.

Then she realized her anger had been unwarranted, and she needed to focus on the one person who had done so much damage to her family, to herself.

Her mother.

And no way could she be following her. She was in prison. One of the sixty-one women currently sitting on death row in the country.

“I am definitely not a cop,” Gabriel practically growled, glaring at her from over his shoulder. She wondered if he took her comment as an insult. “We’ll need to sit for a few minutes. See if they pass by.”

Jordan shivered despite the thick sweatshirt and the hot man. She released her hold on him and immediately felt empty. Resting her hands on her thighs, she took a deep breath. “Then what?”

“Then I’m taking you back to my place.”

Chapter Four

He lived in an older house not far from her apartment building, in one of the last remaining old neighborhoods in that part of town. It was late and dark, and not too many windows from the various houses that lined the street were lit, so she couldn't check out the neighborhood as clearly as she wanted.

Why did she want to know everything about this man? He was a mystery, a purposeful mystery who withdrew and hid everything about himself from her. She didn't understand why.

She didn't understand her reaction to him either.

"Tell me the truth," Gabriel said the minute they entered his house. He flicked on a lamp, bathing the small living room in a gentle golden light. There was nothing gentle about the man who owned the house though. "Who the hell is following you, and why did you get me involved in it?"

"I told you the truth." Jordan took a deep breath, fighting to stay calm. It wouldn't do to go all irrational on him. It would only irritate him more. "I don't know why anyone would follow me. I'm new in town. I don't know anybody."

He cocked a dark brow, his expression full of doubt. And full of sexiness, she couldn't help but think. "Running from something, hmm? Makes sense. Sweet little girl all alone and new to the big bad city with the shitty car and no job. No job, right? Yeah, I thought so."

She didn't answer him. Simply shed the sweatshirt he let her borrow and laid it on the back of a chair. He didn't need to know her business. How she received a decent amount of money from her dead father's estate that she was living on and hoped to fund her education with. "You don't have to be so rude."

"You're the one who thrust me into this shit." He jabbed a finger at her, then ran a hand through his hair. He was angry. The emotion practically vibrated off his body.

"You didn't have to bring me here," she pointed out, proud that she sounded so calm, so rational. Inside she felt anything but. Nerves rioted inside her stomach, and her legs were shaky. "Take me home, then, if you don't want to get involved."

He stalked toward the double windows that faced the street and yanked hard on the string that opened the blinds. Staring outside, he slowly shook his head. "I have no idea if those assholes that followed us are still out there."

"I'm sure they're not. They probably weren't even following me. This is all just a huge mistake." She smiled and hitched her purse closer to her side. Her false bravado convinced even her that everything was going to be all right. "I'll just walk home. It's not far."

"I don't think so." He grabbed her arm, his long fingers circling about her flesh and burning her. "I'm not about to let you go outside by yourself. You're staying here tonight. I'll take you home in the morning."

She parted her lips, but no words fell, and she glanced down where his fingers encircled her upper arm. His skin was dark, a striking contrast against the paleness of hers. Goose bumps pebbled her flesh, and she swore she felt the gentle swipe of his thumb against her. A fleeting caress as if he couldn't help himself. And then his hand fell away, leaving her feeling empty.

So empty.

"I'll sleep on the couch, then," she announced, not pleased with the situation. She really didn't want to stay the night in his house. Not when he was so hostile toward her. What had she done to offend him so?

"I have a spare bed." Heavy emphasis on the last word. Her gaze met his. His eyes were dark, unyielding, and swirling with so many secrets she wanted to know.

"Great, well..." She hitched her purse on her shoulder again, nervously plucking at the worn shoulder strap. "I'm exhausted, so..."

“Come on,” he muttered, turning on his heel and striding down the short hall.

She followed him, her gaze dropping to his backside, firm and muscular beneath those dark jeans. She had the sudden urge to touch him there. Slip her hand inside the back pocket and give him a squeeze. She’d seen actors do that before in movies, on TV. She’d seen it in public when she was out. Young couples walking arm in arm, their hands cozy in the back pockets of their lovers.

Envy filled her, and she shoved it away. So her mother had stolen many years from her. So what? She was living her life now. She would find a man to love her and take care of her, and she knew it couldn’t be this man. No way, no how. He wasn’t *nice*. He wasn’t interested.

“Here you go.” Gabriel threw open a door and flicked on the overhead light. The room was simply decorated. A dresser, a large bed, and a lamp on a single bedside table. He strode into the room and yanked the chain on the ceiling fan, and it slowly started to whirl, stirring the slightly musty air of the room. “I rarely go inside here, so it’s a little dusty.”

He went to the window and cracked the blinds open, then slid open the window. Cool air flooded the room, and she shivered, wrapped her arms around herself. “I don’t think I want that open.”

“Only for a few minutes. Get the crappy air out of here first.” He ran a hand through his hair, scattering it this way and that. Yet again she was hit by just how breathtakingly handsome he was. His rudeness and large size didn’t intimidate her in the least. She had a feeling that with the right woman, he would protect her to the very ends of the earth. Would do anything to defend her, no matter what it cost him.

She found the thought comforting. Arousing...

“Okay, uh, I sleep in pretty late since I keep late hours, so—”

“I won’t disturb you when I leave,” she interrupted. She woke early, always ready to conquer the day, though conquer what, she wasn’t exactly sure.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said, his normally rough voice soft. He sounded almost offended. “I want you to wake me before you go so I know that you’re safe. You just might have to knock a few times to wake me up. That’s all.”

“Oh.” She immediately felt silly at feeling so defensive. “Well, thanks.”

“If you need anything, let me know.”

“I’ll be fine.” She gave a jerky nod, wishing he would leave. The room felt too small with him standing in it. He was just so big. Even his presence was larger than life. Overwhelming. She could smell him, she could see him, every single inch of him, and if he didn’t leave soon, she just might throw herself at him and beg him to fuck her.

Jordan frowned. Couldn’t believe she even had that thought. She never used that word, never even thought that word. What was wrong with her?

“Good night.” He slipped through the door and pulled it shut, and she slumped onto the edge of the bed, then lay completely across it.

She rolled on her side and glanced up at the ceiling fan, watched it spin around and around, and her eyes slid closed; her breath evened out. She was so tired. Her back ached, and she should take some ibuprofen for the pain.

But she was too sleepy. Later, she told herself as she started to drift off. Certainly this big bad tattoo artist had some sort of pain reliever hidden in the cupboards of his house. Certainly he would help her out.

She hoped.

* * *

She dreamed.

Of a man, a heartbreakingly beautiful man, his body large, his sharp features shadowed in darkness. His burnished skin gleamed in the light that flickered from a nearby fire, and he wore no shirt, revealing a sculpted chest, broad shoulders. He came to her, his arms strong as he lifted her with ease, his body warm as she nuzzled her face against him.

“You are safe,” he whispered, his voice gruff and so, so familiar.

She felt safe in his arms, and she hadn’t felt safe in so long. He set her down on a narrow bed and turned, his back to her, revealing a beautiful span of feathered wings.

They were inky black, as dark as his hair, his eyes, the trousers that he wore. He was an angel. A black angel.

Or a devil. She couldn’t be sure. The wolfish smile curving his beautiful mouth when he turned back around made her heart race. She’d prayed to be saved, but not in this manner. Not by a man such as...he. Confusion swirled within as he came back toward her, his arms extended, the smile still on his face.

“You are mine now, Jordan.” His voice was assured, almost daring her to contradict him, and she swallowed the protest that wanted to drop from her lips.

“Mine,” he whispered as he hovered over her, and his mouth pressed against her forehead.

Her eyes slid shut, and he touched her, his hands on her breasts, squeezing, forming them to his hands. She arched into his touch despite her fear, circled a hand about the back of his neck to hold him closer. He angled his head, his mouth brushing against hers, and she sighed with pleasure.

“Say you belong to me.”

“I belong to you,” Jordan said without hesitation.

“I gave up everything for you, Jordan. *Everything*.” He paused, her angel, letting his words sink in. “We are bound together. It was supposed to be your time to go. I saved you. You’re mine forever now.”

“Forever,” she whispered, drawing in a harsh breath when his hand moved to rest between her legs.

He stroked her there, and she dampened. Heat flowed throughout her body at his touch, at the fire in his eyes, at the intensity of his words. She belonged to him. She owed him everything. He took her from death and gave her life.

“Love me, Jordan.” Now she was naked, his fingers slipping between the swollen lips of her sex, and she cried out at the sensation.

“Who are you?” She struggled to see him, to make out his features. He sounded so familiar, felt even more so.

“You don’t know me?” He sounded hurt, wounded, and he withdrew. The heat that was once there now gone, she felt lonely, empty. Incomplete.

“I do—I do! I just need to see you.” Desperately.

“Open your eyes, Jordan. I am closer than you think.”

“You saved me once...” She let her words drift away, her meaning clear. He’d saved her and left her. She wanted him back.

“And I will save you again. Again and again and again, whenever you need me, I’m there. You belong with me, Jordan. What we can have together will be unlike anything you’ve ever experienced.”

His promise sounded delicious. She wanted to belong to him so badly. “Tell me how.”

“Come to me.” His mouth drifted across her cheek, his lips damp, full, his tongue darting out to lick at her flesh. “Open your eyes and find me...”

* * *

“Jordan.” Gabe touched her shoulder and gave it a little shake. Even through the thin fabric of her T-shirt, her skin was burning hot. Despite the cold of the room, she’d fallen asleep with the window still open and the fan going. He trailed a finger down the length of her arm, marveled at the softness of her skin. The smooth texture, the vibration that moved through him at the seemingly innocent touch...

Snatching his hand away from her, he shook his head. He should’ve checked on her sooner, made sure she was safe. What if one of those assholes who were following her sneaked in and snatched her from the bed? He would never have forgiven himself.

Well, if someone was really following her. Shit, he had no clue, but it had been pretty suspicious. The nondescript car had trailed behind them at a lengthy but telling distance, and it had pulled out from the curb just down the road from the shop at exactly the same time he roared out of there on his bike. There was no reason anyone would follow his ass, so it had to be because of her.

The pretty little angel who lay sleeping in his guest bed, moaning so loudly it woke him up. He swore he heard her say his name.

His cock was hard as a rock because of it.

“Jordan.” He shook her again and, unable to stop himself, let his fingers drift over the silky softness of her hair. It was as if he had no control when she was close, and that little thought more than disturbed him. “Jordan, darlin’, wake up.”

“Hmm.” She shrugged away from his touch. That sexy little sound low in her throat went straight to his dick, and he swallowed hard.

How was he going to survive this when his body reacted to the simplest of things? Damn it, he wanted her, and he wasn’t sure how long he could fight it. Above all, he prided himself on his control. Control with everything in his life.

The moment he met this woman, it was as if all that control went flying out the window.

She rolled over onto her back, nudging against his thigh, and he told himself to move. Scoot away from her so he wouldn’t feel the heat of her body seeping into him, nor see just how beautiful her face was even in repose. Her plump pink lips parted, thick eyelashes like fans lying against her skin. Her long blonde hair spilled all over the pillow, and he had the sudden urge to curl his fist in those silky strands and tug. Tug her up to his mouth and kiss her until neither of them could breathe.

Releasing a shuddering breath, he touched her. He streaked his fingers across the line of one slender shoulder, down the length of her arm, her skin soft as a cloud. She sighed as if she gained pleasure from his touch.

“Gabriel...”

He clenched his jaw tight; his head pounded. Damn it, she said his name again, the sound so sexy, so devastating to his senses he closed his eyes. Breathed deep. Felt her shift beneath his hand as if trying to get him to touch her more, and just like a stretched-too-thin rubber band, his control snapped. It all left him in a shuddering rush as he gathered her in his arms, his hand bracing the back of her head.

Her lids flickered open, confused blue eyes staring up at him. “Wh-what are you doing?”

“You’re dreaming about me,” he said through gritted teeth. “You said my name.”

She watched him, the sleepy expression on her face tearing him up inside. God *damn*, she was beautiful. It hurt to look at her for too long. “I did dream about you.”

Her voice was firm, as if she’d just had a realization, and then her hand sneaked up to cup the side of his face. Her fingers tickled his cheek before she drew them along his jaw. “We’ve known each other a long time,” she murmured as she touched his mouth with the tips of her fingers. “And we’ve finally found each other again.”

Gabe had no idea what she was talking about. Couldn’t think beyond how much he wanted to kiss her. Touch her. Undress her slowly, kiss every bit of soft flesh he revealed reverently until he had her naked. His hands would roam all over her silky skin, cup her breasts, dip between her legs. Was she hot for him? If he tested her there, would his fingers become drenched with her cream?

The thought of impaling her on his cock, fucking her senseless until he couldn’t think or breathe or taste anything else but her, drove him to the brink of insanity.

“Kiss me, Gabriel,” she urged, her index finger running along his bottom lip. Her gaze shifted there, staring at his mouth as if she was fascinated by it. Fascinated by him. “I want to know what you taste like.”

He lowered his head and did as she asked, unable to resist her demand. A spark lit between their mouths with just one touch, and he sank into her. Parted

her lips with his tongue and thrust deep, tasting her sweetness. She clung to him, grappling his shoulders, little mewling sounds vibrating deep in her throat.

And still he kissed her, their mouths connecting again and again, their tongues dancing. He devoured her as if he was starving. His hands wandered all over her. Cupping her breast, he then slid his hand across her stomach, wrapped his fingers about her hip, and hauled her close. She went willingly, her eager moans twisting his insides and inflaming his dick.

“Gabriel.” She whispered his name when he broke the kiss, a soft plea that struck him deep. Tilting his head, he blazed a path of fire down the column of her neck with his lips, licking her skin, sucking the spot where her pulse beat mightily beneath his lips. “Please don’t stop.”

Her words gave him pause. He should absolutely stop. He didn’t even know her and yet they were already entangled on a bed, her breast in his hand, his mouth on her neck. She slipped her arms around him, her hands splaying across his back, and she tugged him closer. He went willingly, toppled onto her so she lay sprawled beneath him on the bed, her legs spread wide to accommodate him.

Damn it, he should stop.

Fuck it.

Gabe kissed her once more, sucked her tongue between his lips, heard the little gasp of pleasure she gave. She slid her hands up and down his back, her soothing touch making him shiver, and he tightened his hold on her breast. Felt the unmistakable prick of her hard nipple brush against his palm.

Flicking his thumb back and forth, he played with it, felt her nipple harden further beneath his touch, and she stiffened for the briefest moment before she relaxed into the mattress.

“That feels so good,” she confessed, whispering the words against his lips.

It did. It felt damn good, touching her, being with her. She was so responsive, so soft and sweet and passionate in his arms. Her legs moved restlessly against his,

and she shifted so she could wrap one arm around his neck, her fingers sinking into his hair. It was as if she couldn't stop touching him.

He could relate. He didn't want to stop touching her either.

Slipping his hand beneath her T-shirt, he caressed the soft skin of her stomach, the valley between her breasts. She trembled beneath his touch; he heard the hitch and catch of her breath as he grew closer to his destination. She wore no bra. She'd never put it back on, because of the tattoo...

"Does your back hurt?" He glanced up at her, his gaze meeting hers. Her eyes were hazy, as if she was in a daze, and she shook her head once. When he continued to stare at her, she shrugged her slim shoulders, her gaze skittering away. "A little bit. But I don't want you to stop because of it."

He stroked her stomach, reveling in the silky smoothness of her skin. She moaned softly and arched into his hand. He didn't want to stop either. It was as if something had come over both of them, propelling them toward this very moment. From the first time he'd seen her, he knew something would happen between them. He wanted to deny it—hell, he wasn't one to find himself drawn to a woman. Filled with this overwhelming need to have her, take her, any way he could get her.

It wasn't normal. None of this was normal. Especially the fact that he couldn't seem to stop it.

"Gabriel." She whispered his name again, and the sound of it in her sweet, whispery voice tore him up inside. A battle warred within him—should he do the right thing and stop or keep on kissing her until the both of them lost their breath?

Ignoring the battle and the doubts, he bent his head and took her mouth in an explosive kiss, his tongue thrusting brutally into her mouth. He felt as if he tested her, wanted to see how she would respond to his roughness. She clung to him, pleading whimpers coming from her with his every kiss and stroke, and he knew without a doubt he could strip her bare and have her within seconds.

The thought of being inside her hot, tight body made his head spin. He wanted to fuck her, fill her with his cum, mark her as his. He had to get inside her.

You don't even know her.

It felt as if she'd been made for him.

There is more here than you realize. You must face it before you take her.

"Touch me," she whispered, arching beneath him. His mouth still connected to hers, he slid his hand up, curled his fingers around the bare flesh of her right breast, and she sighed with pleasure. He circled her nipple with his thumb, bent his head as if he was about to kiss and suck her there, and then it hit him.

She couldn't be trusted. He'd only just met her. Damn it, he couldn't be trusted either, not with her so close. What they were doing was...too fast. Too crazy.

Too fucking much.

Gabe broke the kiss and stared down at her sweetly upturned face. Her mouth swollen from his kisses, cheeks flushed, strands of hair sticking to her cheeks. Her lids fluttered open, beautiful blue eyes meeting his, and her brows crinkled in confusion.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't do this." He shoved her away from him and flew off the bed, needing distance. Lots and lots of it.

"Do what? Kiss me? Put your hands on me?" She touched her lips with tentative fingers, her gaze meeting his. "But..."

"Stop." He ran a hand through his hair, rested his hands on his hips. His cock raged beneath the front of his jeans. He'd fallen asleep in them, and now his lower extremities felt strangled by the denim. "Don't try to convince me. Don't tell me we knew each other before, because I don't believe it. Just...stop."

He fled the room before she could say another word. Before he could fall under the spell of her sweet face, her softly whispered words, and her delicious sweet lips. Kissing her, touching her, holding her had felt...amazing.

Indescribable.

Dangerous.

Gabe stalked into his bedroom and slammed the door behind him. Shucked his jeans, ignored his painful erection as best he could. Dived beneath the covers in just his boxer briefs and yanked the sheet up to his chin. He was running away. Running away from a little girl who should mean nothing, who shouldn't scare him, because damn it, he was a badass. He'd been told that more than once.

Shivering, he rolled on his side and closed his eyes. Tried to ignore the fire still pulsing in his veins, the strange, erratic pounding in his otherwise empty chest. More than anything, Jordan made him feel *alive*.

And that scared the shit out of him.

Chapter Five

Gabriel took her back to her apartment the next morning in relative silence, communicating with her in simple yes-or-no answers and even the occasional grunt. Like he was some sort of Neanderthal.

A gorgeous, sexy Neanderthal, Jordan thought sulkily as she held on to him. They zipped through the busy city streets, Gabriel weaving his motorcycle through the traffic at breathtaking speed, and she wondered if he was in such a hurry to get rid of her.

Of course he was. He'd made that especially clear last night. After giving her the most intensely arousing kiss of her life, he'd yanked away from her as if she was diseased.

Jerk. No good, sexy jerk.

She squeezed her arms tight about his middle, just to feel his abs flex beneath her hands. Torturing herself. He was rock-hard, masculine perfection. And he hated her.

Gabriel parked his motorcycle in the apartment building parking lot and cut the engine. She pulled the helmet off her head and handed it over to him, desperate to ignore the sparks spiraling up her arm when their fingers accidentally brushed.

Didn't he feel this? This...connection between them. It was there. So obvious every time they touched, every time they looked at each other.

His gaze flicked away from hers, and he turned his head. Stony profile etched by the meager morning sunlight. He'd woken up early, pounded on her door that he was ready to go. Let her know without a doubt how he really felt about her being at his place.

“Ah, Christ,” he muttered, shaking his head.

“What’s wrong?” She glanced over his shoulder, saw two men headed in their direction, grim expressions on their faces.

“Who are the suits?” Gabriel jerked his thumb in their direction.

She tightened her arms around his waist. She realized she’d never let go of him. “They look like cops.”

“That’s what I thought.” He looked at her, really looked at her with those fathomless dark eyes. Disgust wasn’t on his face, oh no. More like fear, confusion, irritation. And just the sight of that jumble of emotions gave her a glimmer of hope. “Who the hell are you?”

“I-I don’t know why they’re here.” They were headed right for them. And they looked familiar. She’d told no one she’d moved. No one.

So how did they find her?

“Jordan Sumner?” The older one spoke first. He wore a navy blue rumpled suit, his receding hairline in odd contrast with the bushy mustache nearly covering his upper lip.

“Yes.” She climbed off the motorcycle and stood on the sidewalk in front of them. Felt Gabriel’s gaze boring holes in her back. “How did you find me?”

He smiled kindly. He’d always been nice to her, ever since she first met him all those years ago. “We have our ways. Jordan, honey, we need to talk to you.” He shot an irritated glance in Gabriel’s direction. “Privately.”

“He can hear.” She wanted him to hear. Then he would understand what was going on. “We can talk about it now.”

“Let’s go to your apartment,” the other detective piped up. He glared at Gabriel as well.

She turned to study him. Straddling his motorcycle, he was clad in a charcoal gray T-shirt, beat-up black leather jacket, and worn jeans with black work boots,

the epitome of the bad boy. Raven-colored hair and matching eyes, a face rough with stubble since he hadn't shaved this morning. He radiated wickedness.

Jordan hadn't realized just how appealing wickedness—Gabriel's sort of wickedness—could be.

"Come with me," she murmured to Gabriel, her gaze locked with his.

He watched her, a lock of dark hair tumbling over his eyes. He swallowed visibly, and her gaze mentally traced the lines of his strong neck, and she wished she knew the taste of him there.

Soon. She would know soon. This she felt with utter conviction.

"Fine," he muttered as he slid off the bike with the grace of a panther. A predatory stalk infused his walk as he came toward her, cupping her elbow with his hand in a gentle, protective gesture. "Let's go."

She tried to stop her limbs from shaking, tried to absorb Gabriel's strength as she led the men to her apartment. What could the detectives want? Did it have to do with her mother? It had to. But why? Her mother was locked away on death row at the women's prison. Jordan was finally safe. She'd never have to worry about her again.

Right?

The detectives settled themselves on the worn couch, and she sat on a rickety armchair that faced them. Gabriel chose to stand, arms crossed in front of him, biceps bulging. She caught sight of that tattoo again, the dragon's face breathing fire showing more prominently from beneath the sleeve of his shirt, and she had the sudden urge to trace it with her fingers.

Focus, Jordan.

Breathing deep, she offered a wan smile to the detectives. "Tell me what's going on."

The younger detective, Phelps, nodded in Gabriel's direction. "Who's he? Your bodyguard?"

“A friend,” she offered softly, heard the unmistakable snort come from Gabriel, but she ignored it.

“It’s about your mother, Jordan.” Detective Millerton got right down to business. “Her conviction’s been thrown out on a technicality.”

She drew in a sharp breath, her heart rattling so hard her chest hurt. “Is she getting out of prison?”

“No.” Millerton shook his head. “It hasn’t come to that, but she’s being taken off death row as we speak. There will be a new trial. They’ll need your testimony again. The district attorney sent us to talk to you.”

“How...” She cleared her throat, searched desperately for composure. “How did her conviction get thrown out? What sort of technicality?”

“It was discovered that a juror had read articles and even watched a TV show about your mother and her crimes. She’d purposely tried to get on the jury so she could be a part of the case. It fascinated her—your mother fascinated her—and she started writing to her about six months ago and confessed what she’d done. Your mother turned the letters over to her attorney, an investigation was begun, and they tossed the conviction based on juror misconduct.”

Why anyone would be fascinated with what her mother had done to her and other members of her family was beyond Jordan’s comprehension.

“So what’s next?”

Millerton launched into an even longer explanation as to what she needed to do, how she shouldn’t worry. She listened with half an ear, her mind whirling with thoughts of her mother. How sweet she looked, how she fooled everyone with her thoughtful ways and kind disposition. Behind closed doors she’d been mean. Ruthless. Unforgiving. She’d killed Jordan’s grandma, she’d killed Jordan’s father, and she’d almost killed Jordan.

Jordan still wondered why she hadn’t died by her mother’s hands.

She glanced in Gabriel's direction. He seemed to hang on every word the detective uttered. What must he think of her now? Would he still act like a judgmental jerk and be rude to her? God, she really, really hoped not. The very last thing she wanted to deal with right now was rudeness. Meanness. She needed comfort. She needed someone to hold her in his arms and tell her it was going to be all right.

She needed Gabriel to do that. Despite the fact that she didn't know him, she needed that more than anything.

Because secretly, she believed she *did* know him. Very well.

Finally the detectives stood, as did she, and she walked them to the door. Offered them each a soft thank-you and good-bye and then shut the door behind her. Realized that Gabriel hadn't moved from his spot where he stood in the living room as if rooted to the floor.

"Your mother tried to kill you," he said when she stopped just in front of him.

Jordan nodded but didn't say anything. There was nothing to be said.

"She poisoned you?" He sounded incredulous.

"For almost five years," she admitted, the words barely audible.

"Jesus." He then did something so surprising, so unexpected, all the breath rushed out of her in one fell swoop. He crushed her to him, his arms like steel bands around her, one hand sliding down her back in a soothing gesture. "I..."

"Don't say anything," she interrupted, her voice muffled against his chest. His warm, hard, well-muscled chest. "You don't have to say anything. Just...hold me."

He touched her shoulder blade, and she winced. Felt him press his fingers into the bandage he'd placed there himself last night, and it took everything she had not to cry out. "You need to clean your tattoo."

"Will you do it for me?"

"Yeah." He sounded reluctant and she wanted to smile.

She had a feeling if she asked, this man would do whatever she wanted.

* * *

"Tell me." Gabe let the shop door slam behind him, the bell that normally indicated a customer's entry clanging violently. He strode across the room to where Darla sat calmly looking through a magazine at a table. He yanked the chair across from her out and fell onto it. "Tell me about Jordan."

She glanced up at him with those dark, mysterious eyes. They claimed to others they were brother and sister, though they weren't by blood, but they certainly looked enough alike. "Tell you what about Jordan?" Her voice was deliberately nonchalant, which made him want to kick something.

"How are we connected? I know we are. I just don't know why."

He waited for Darla to start talking. He needed an explanation. No matter how much he racked his brain, he couldn't come up with anything. After listening to everything those two cops had to say, the few bits of information she had to offer once they left, he had a glimmer of recollection. Nothing solid, nothing real.

It was driving him crazy.

"You honestly don't remember her?" Darla's perfectly arched brows rose, her lips pursed in a little pout.

Gabe practically growled. "Don't gimme your bullshit, Darla. I'm not in the mood for it. Tell me how I know her."

"The reason you're here is because of...her."

He waited, impatience bubbling inside of him.

"You fell for her, Gabe."

No shit, he'd fallen for her, and hard. It made no damn sense. She was completely and totally not his type. At all. And yet he wanted her. The kiss last night still lingered in his mind. Hell, his lips still tingled from touching hers.

"The scars on your back, the sense of incompleteness, the reason you can't remember anything of your childhood is because you never had one. You fell eight years ago and turned into a full-grown man in your early twenties," Darla went on.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” His head spun at her simple yet confusing explanation.

“I can’t believe you don’t remember. *I* remember. Ryder remembers,” Darla murmured almost to herself. “Why don’t you?”

“Remember what?” He pounded his fist on the table, making Darla jump, and she glared at him, the anger clear in her eyes.

“Don’t act like that with me. I can’t help it if you have no memory of what happened to you.” She sighed once he mumbled a quick apology. “I don’t know many details myself. Just what you told me after I found you.”

“Fill me in on what you know.” His brows furrowed. She found him? What the hell did she mean by that?

“We all come here for a reason, Gabe. And usually that reason is a person we fell in love with. Human emotions are powerful motivators.” She smiled faintly.

“I’ve never been in love with anyone in my life.” He spoke those words with such cocksure authority he sounded arrogant even to his own ears.

And knew within an instant Darla would prove him wrong.

“Ah, but you have. You just don’t remember it. And you *were* in love with her. Though she was young and not ready for you then when you saved her. Saved her from a horror no one should have to suffer. You’d been assigned to her. It was your job to watch over her, but it was her time. She was supposed to die.” Darla paused, her voice going soft. “That’s why you did it, you know. Because you felt that you’d failed her and you had to save her.”

“A sacrifice.” The word fit. He thought of the earlier explanation by the detective. The story of her mother poisoning her to the point of almost killing her, and how it had taken years for Jordan to recover.

Gabe closed his eyes and breathed deep. The pain of Jordan’s suffering filled him, made his heart ache.

“Exactly. A sacrifice for her. You gave up everything. Your life was easy there. Easier, at least. And now you’re here and stuck, but luckily enough I found you and took you in. And then we found Ryder and took him in as well. Established a good life with a profitable business. I can’t complain.”

“You’re talking in circles.” His head spun right along with them, and he opened his eyes to glare at her.

“Because I don’t feel right in telling you everything. You need to figure this out on your own, Gabriel. You need to reach deep within yourself to find her again. Find yourself again. You’re not what you think you are.”

“I’m just a man.” He rubbed at his chest, against the spot where his heart was supposed to be, and it felt hollow, cold. Earlier it had thumped to life, when he’d held Jordan in his arms and offered her comfort. Nothing more and nothing less than simple comfort.

She’d needed it, only from him.

“No, you’re not, brother,” Darla said, her voice soft, her gaze beseeching. “You’re much, much more.”

Chapter Six

Jordan lurked outside the front of Tattoo Voodoo and glanced in the window, saw that Gabriel moved around in the back of the shop. Same place where he'd worked on her. His strides were long, purposeful as he went about his task, yet he also moved with an easy grace, so surprising to see in such a large man.

A little sigh of longing escaped her as she studied him. She hadn't seen him since yesterday when he left her apartment, surprisingly restrained. That simple hug he'd given her had been anything but. She'd felt warm, protected, and soothed. He'd taken her into the bathroom and checked her bandage, cleaned up her tattoo. His touch was gentle, careful when he heard her hiss with pain.

She'd fallen asleep soon after he left and slept through the entire night. Hung out at her apartment all morning in the hopes he would come by, but no such luck.

So she went and sought him out.

Her gaze roved hungrily over him as she watched him work. He wore a faded black T-shirt and jeans that clung low to his hips. She knew this because he reached up to shove something high on a shelf, and she caught a glimpse of his flat stomach, revealed with the movement, his pants hanging low.

Yearning swam within her veins, made her stretch her shoulders, tilt her head. She wanted him with a fierceness completely foreign to her, and she didn't understand. She'd dreamed of him for days. He'd invaded her thoughts until she felt consumed by him. His face, his voice, his harsh words, his delicious kiss.

Gabriel. The man with the angel's name. Quite ironic.

Now she'd come to him, but she couldn't quite gather up the nerve to go through with it. Fear made her stay outside. Fear of rejection, of his ridicule, of his laughter when she told him what she wanted.

She wanted him. And she wasn't going to leave until she got him.

A tinkling bell sounded, warning Jordan the door opened, and she turned to find the other Tattoo Voodoo artist studying her. He was almost as gorgeous as Gabriel, with thick, dark brown hair and warm golden brown eyes. Friendlier, with a more open face, and certainly not as surly as her Gabriel.

My Gabriel. How she wished...

"Hey, are you all right? Do you need something?" He smiled at her, his expression gentle, questioning.

Her cheeks heated with embarrassment, and she shook her head. "I'm fine."

"You want to come in?" He opened the door wider in invitation.

"I'm trying to work up the nerve." She pressed her fingers to her lips the moment she said it. The man threw back his head and laughed.

"He's an intimidating son of a bitch. I'll give him that. But he won't bite. Too hard." The man smiled, and she was momentarily dazzled. "Come in."

She did so, murmuring an appreciative thanks as she entered the shop. The man nodded and introduced himself.

"The name's Ryder."

"Jordan," she replied, glancing about the little waiting area. It was empty. She noticed Darla wasn't around, and there didn't seem to be any customers in the place either.

"I'll tell Gabe you're here." He went to the back of the shop, and she could hear the low murmurings of the two men talking, the unmistakable sound of Gabriel's voice. She shivered, rubbed her upper arms with her hands, and whirled around when she heard him approach.

“What do you want?”

No “hi, no how are you,” just the usual brisk, almost rude tone, the irritated flicker in his dark-as-sin eyes. He had secrets, this man. A wall he put up to warn her off, and she wanted to tear it down. Reveal everything he didn’t want to share.

Such a confusing contradiction he was. Mean and sweet. Gentle and rough. For some strange reason, she liked both sides. They intrigued her.

She wanted more.

“I need to talk to you,” she answered simply.

He stopped short at her words, studied her carefully. As if he expected her to say something else, but she kept her mouth shut, kept the mystery going.

If he wanted to be mysterious, fine. Then she could be too.

“What do you need to talk to me about?”

“I think you know.” Her heart rate increased, and she waited in breathless anticipation for his answer.

“I don’t know,” he said carefully. “Why don’t you enlighten me?”

She stepped closer, his nearness making her knees quake, and she touched him. Rested her hand against his forearm, felt again the zing of awareness whenever their flesh connected. “You come to me in my dreams.”

Gabriel shook his head, a smirk lingering at the corners of his mouth. “Lots of women say that.”

Ignoring his cocky insult, she rested her hand on his chest, her fingers curling into the soft fabric of his T-shirt. “I’ve told you already. We’ve met before.”

He jerked away from her touch. “I don’t think so.”

“I know so. Tell me who you really are, Gabriel Wilder. You’re not just a man. You’re more than that.”

Panic washed over his face for the briefest moment before the stoniness reappeared. The mask he wore so well. He backed away from her, shaking his head slowly. "I have no idea what the hell you're talking about."

"Tell me the truth, Gabriel. Tell me who you are." She paused, desperate to know, and she took a step toward him. She was desperate for an answer. "Tell me *what* you are."

Still shaking his head, he turned away from her, running into Ryder on his way to the back of the shop. Their shoulders bumped, Gabriel shooting him a dirty look before he hurried away.

"You want me to talk to him?" Ryder offered after he watched him go.

"No." She shook her head, disappointment filling her. She'd gone about it wrong, upsetting him when she thought that maybe she could reach him. She thought it would be easier, especially after yesterday. He knew everything about her. Now it was her turn to learn everything about him. "I'll come back another time."

Jordan fled the shop before she became too emotional, fighting back the sting of tears that threatened to flow. She stood in front of the building, breathing deep, desperate to calm herself, and she closed her eyes, let the last few minutes wash over her. Reliving the moment with Gabriel, being so close to him, what it had felt like touching him...

Her eyes popped open, and there he was, as if she'd conjured him in her imagination. He positively glowered at her, his face a mask of steely determination, his eyes as cold as ice.

"You're asking for trouble." His low, controlled voice was heaven to her ears despite the anger that rang there.

"I'm only asking for the truth." Excitement fizzed through her at her second chance. "Please tell me who you are, Gabriel."

He studied her, his gaze roving over her face, down her body, an almost physical touch by the glint in his eyes. She shivered, released a shuddering breath, overwhelmed by her reaction to him, and he stepped toward her. Reached out and gripped her upper arm so he could pull her closer.

“I’m not sure.”

She blinked up at him. “What?”

“I said, I’m not sure.” His mouth was grim, his grip firm, though she felt the subtle stroke of his fingers on her arm. It calmed her and yet made her heart race.

“I don’t understand.” She shook her head, confused.

“I don’t either.” He released her, and she immediately felt empty. “But you need to leave me alone. It’s best.”

His words lanced at her heart, rending it in two. “I don’t want to.”

“You fucking have to.” He grabbed her again as if he couldn’t help himself, this time his long, sure fingers wrapping around both of her upper arms. He gave her a little shake, his gaze boring into hers, and she stared up at him, helpless. Lost. “This won’t work. Whatever you’re trying to do, whatever it is you’re trying to pull, it...won’t...work.”

Heavy emphasis on the last two words spoken, he shook her again, his fingers biting into her flesh, his nearness, his scent making her dizzy.

“Why do you hate me so much?” Her voice was a mere whisper, her words, her mind tortured.

“I don’t hate you.” He tugged her closer. Her breasts brushed against the hard wall of his chest, and she almost moaned in ecstasy at the connection. “The very last thing I feel is hate toward you.”

Lust? Yes. Yearning? Oh yeah. Gabe felt all sorts of things toward this woman, none of them he could express, none of them he could expound upon. To pursue her

would be a mistake. Allow himself to indulge in her for just a little while? No, it wouldn't work.

Once he indulged, he wouldn't be able to stop. She was addictive. He knew it. Her face, her scent, her touch, he wanted more of it. All of it. All of her. Now.

"Gabriel." She whispered his name. No one else called him that. He was just Gabe, had been for years.

He couldn't take it anymore. The naked longing in her voice, the potent desire in her pretty blue eyes—all of it was too much. He backed her against the wall of the building, pressed her into it, his hands still on her arms, and he stared into her face. Ready to drive his point home once and for all.

"Tell me, Jordan, have you been with a man before?" He was testing Ryder's theory of her being a virgin. Jealous if she said yes, perversely pleased if she said no.

Her eyes widened, and she stared up at him mutely.

He gave her yet another little shake of her shoulders. "Tell me, sweetheart. Have you been naked with a man? Fucked one? Opened yourself and allowed him to sink his cock deep inside your tight little body?"

Her breathing rapid now, he saw the telltale fluttering of her pulse at the base of her neck, and he wanted to kiss her there. Press his lips to her flesh and nip and lick at it, suck it until he marked her.

He wanted to mark her. Claim his territory like some sort of dog in heat. What the fuck was wrong with him?

"There was a-a boy a long time ago," she stuttered, swallowing hard before she continued. "My boyfriend in high school, when I was fifteen and before everything...changed."

“What changed, darlin’? You move yourself into a convent? Set up residence with the nuns so they could watch over you?” He joked, he pushed, and he saw the flare of anger in her eyes, tinged with unmistakable hurt.

Gabe immediately felt like an asshole. How could he forget?

“You know what happened,” she mumbled, her gaze skittered away from his, and he reached for her. Cupped his hand around her defiant little chin and lifted her face so her eyes met his once more.

“I do. You’re right, and I’m sorry. But I’m not an understanding sort of guy. I’m not the man for you. I don’t get my girl flowers, and I don’t take her on dates. Hell, I don’t ever have *a girl*. I meet someone, I’m attracted to ’em, and then I fuck ’em. End of story.” He didn’t allow anyone to get too close. It was hard to share intimacies about his life when he didn’t understand himself.

“You’re crude,” she breathed.

“Yeah, learn that lesson now and walk away. I’d fuck your head up if you let me in. I don’t think you could take me.” He backed away from her, immediately missed having her so close, and he pushed the thought aside.

This woman, this silly little girl wasn’t the one for him despite what Darla said. No matter how often they were thrown together, it wouldn’t be a good thing.

Liar.

Jordan stood where he’d left her, her body backed up against the rough old brick of the building, her breathing rapid, chest lifting and falling with her every inhale and exhale. She was beautiful, ripe for the taking, ripe for the fucking, and the need to tear at her clothes and sink his cock deep was so strong he had to clutch his hands into fists to restrain himself.

“Kiss me,” she whispered.

“What?” He shook his head, disbelief filling him. Had she really just said that? It was like a repeat of that night at his house.

“Kiss me again and prove once and for all there’s no connection. Kiss me and then tell me you don’t care about me anymore. Just do it.” She paused, nibbled on her lower lip in that completely endearing way of hers. “I have to know what it feels like to have your mouth on mine again.”

Damn it all, he wanted to experience it again too. He planned on kissing her as he had the last time this happened. Hard and brutal and fierce, taking from her without giving any of himself in return. She’d hate it. She’d want him to take it slow, be gentle and sweet, but he didn’t have a gentle and sweet bone in his body. He hadn’t had one in a long-ass time.

Gabe went to her, furious with himself, his feelings, his reaction toward her. He tugged on the ends of her hair and tilted her head so her mouth was ready for his. Her whispery gasp sent a jolt of pleasure through him. If he hurt her, he didn’t care. He was that focused on her lips, her eyes, the feathering of her breath across his face.

Slowly, with all thoughts of brutality melting away, he sank his head and brushed his mouth against hers.

Jordan hadn’t expected that. His anger had been palpable, his defiance in his face as he pulled her hair and positioned her how he wanted her. The heat and fury in Gabriel’s eyes were unmistakable as he glared down at her just before his lids slid shut and he took her lips with his.

The kiss, with so much potential to be hard and punishing, was gentle. Almost sweet. His lush mouth fused with hers, lips parted, breath hot as he sampled her. His tongue teased at the seam of her lips, and she opened for him, moaned when his tongue swept in, swept over her.

Gabriel cupped her face as if she were a precious treasure he cherished. His calloused fingers stroked over her cheeks, his kiss deepened, and she clutched at

him, her hands slipping around his middle. She was desperate for more, desperate for him.

It was exactly how she thought it would be. How it should be. The kiss that night at his house had been thrilling too, and it excited her to think of all the possibilities with Gabriel that lay before them.

And then he was gone. His heat, his strength, his lips, his tongue, all of him gone, and when she opened her eyes, he stood away from her, the entire expanse of sidewalk separating them.

She felt abandoned as she leaned against the scratchy wall, her head spinning, her vision hazy. Her fingers digging into the brick for support, she studied him, saw that his breathing was labored. He ran his hand through his hair once, twice, and then swore. A particularly wicked swear she wasn't at all used to hearing.

But considering the choice words she'd heard him speak since first meeting him, she figured she needed to get used to it.

"This"—he pointed at her, an accusatory index finger—"is what I'm talking about."

"I want more of it," she admitted, her voice small, proud that she'd said it.

He groaned, both hands tunneling through his hair now. As if he could hardly stand it. "It's too much."

"It's wonderful."

His gaze cut to hers, sharp and so very hard to read. Pleasure suffused his expression, pleasure at her confession, she could only assume, and an answering pleasure blossomed in her chest.

"You won't quit until you get what you want."

She shook her head. "Meet me tonight after you get off work."

"I'm working late. Closing the shop." It was a weak excuse, and she knew it.

“I don’t care.” Where did this boldness come from? This assured, asking-for-what-she-wanted woman? She’d never behaved like this before, but there was something about him...

She knew she had to have him.

“You know where I live,” she continued, her voice a husky murmur.

His eyes flared with heat. “I do.”

“Then meet me there. I’ll be waiting for you.”

This time she was the one who walked away. She pushed away from the brick wall, flashed him a smile, and turned on her heel, headed toward her apartment building. She refused to look back, but she could feel his hard stare, directed right at her backside, no doubt, and she put a little extra swish in her step.

She swore she heard his ragged moan follow her.

Jordan smiled all the way home.

Chapter Seven

She dreamed again. As always.

This time of her mother. The nightmare she'd had many, many times before. The nightmare had been her reality for an endless number of years.

She lay in bed, on a narrow twin mattress that creaked every time she moved. She hated that creak, tried her hardest to keep still, but it was no use. And every time the bed creaked a bit too much, her mother entered the room, a stern expression on her tired face, her lips thin. She narrowed her eyes and then her mother glared right at her.

"Stop moving!" her mother hissed, and Jordan nodded.

"Yes, ma'am," she whispered, scared to even talk. Her body ached, her head hurt, and she felt heavy, as if her arms weighed a thousand pounds each and she couldn't lift them. It made no sense since she could see her arms were nothing but sticks, hardly any fat on them, no muscle, just skin and bones.

She was frail, fragile. Her breath rasped in her lungs, her heart ached with every faint beat, and she wanted to throw up.

Her mother brought the bowl of broth to her, as usual. Her meal was given to her on a beautiful antique silver tray, in a fragile white china bowl with little pink roses at the bottom. Her mother set the tray in front of her. Watching her take every sip, every bite until the bowl was empty.

She had to drink everything, or her mother wouldn't be pleased. And most of the time, after she ate the broth, she couldn't remember anything at all. She'd slip into such a deep sleep, days would pass. Weeks.

Months.

Then she saw him. Hovering over her like some sort of protector, her guardian. He was beautiful. A face chiseled from marble, dark eyes and hair, and a body so large she knew he would protect her no matter what.

So why didn't he protect her now? When she was dying?

"Why?" she croaked, her voice rasping from her too-dry throat, her body heaving with exertion at saying one measly word. "Why won't you save me?"

She saw the golden tear slide down his cheek until it dropped from his firm jaw. She could feel his sadness. She absorbed it much as if it was her own, and she closed her eyes, felt the tears prick the corners.

Sadness did nothing. It didn't help her. He didn't help her. And that made her angry.

"Damn you," she whispered. "Talk to me. Tell me you love me. Tell me you'll save me."

She thought she heard the murmured endearment close to her ear, so close she swore she felt the warm breath, the damp lips of her protector. A man who really wasn't a man at all, but a creature sent to her from whom? From where?

Jordan didn't know, but she admired his white wings, even in her thoughts. They fluttered gently, a warm breeze drifting across her skin, and she wanted to reach out and touch them. See if they were as silky as they appeared.

And then he turned dark, his wings black as night. His face angry, enraged as he stuck it in hers and stared. Stared at her with hard, fathomless eyes as he urged her to go. Pick herself up and go.

He made it sound so easy. As she released another shuddering breath, she could feel the effects of whatever was in the broth her mother fed her take over. She knew it wasn't easy. It would never be easy.

She'd rather be dead. At least then she could be with her guardian angel forever.

He'd banished the thought with a silent roar and picked her up. Physically picked her up and carried her out of the house. His hands all over her, branding her, his accelerated breath rough in her ear, caressing her, she rested her head against his chest.

And felt the rapid beating of his heart.

"Safe," he whispered. "You'll be safe now."

He took her outside, and the neighbors came running. They saw her collapsed on the front lawn, and when she spoke of the man who'd carried her up, she saw the confusion on their faces. Her man, her angel was gone.

Gone.

Jordan's eyes fluttered open, and she stared up at the ceiling. Her man, her angel wasn't gone after all. He was coming to her.

Tonight.

* * *

Jordan hated that she had the dream again. That particular dream hadn't come to her in a long time, and she was thankful for it.

She wondered what triggered it.

Taking a shower, washing away the sweat and the remnants of the nightmare that still clung to her made her feel a little better. Glancing at the clock and realizing it was already past eleven made her feel even more so.

He would come to her tonight. She knew this. It was time for her to prepare.

But how did a woman go about seducing a man? What sort of preparations could she indulge in? She recalled long-ago-repressed memories of her old high school boyfriend, the sweetly handsome Danny. With his brown hair and warm eyes, his gentle hands, and equally gentle lips. He'd kissed her much and often, never taking it too far, always respectful, and she'd liked that. Had become the more aggressive one once she realized he was receptive.

Jordan frowned as she toweled herself off. Memories of Danny always led to memories of the night her mother caught them together. Jordan sitting in his lap, her legs straddling him, his hands cupped about her jeans-covered backside. They'd been kissing and grinding against each other as teenagers were wont to do, and it had felt so blissful, so deliciously wonderful Jordan thought she might die from the pleasure of it.

All pleasure washed away at the sound of her mother's shrill voice. At the sound of her threats and the smacks she gave Danny about the arms and shoulders with her bare hands. She'd driven him out of the house that night like she was some sort of crazed banshee, screaming and flailing and talking of sin. Screaming of redemption. Hollering about her daughter the slut.

Jordan knew from the glint in her mother's eye she was done. Kaput. And she'd been right. She'd been pulled out of school and put on home study. Had a Bible shoved in her face and was told to memorize it. Had been locked away in her bedroom with the blinds pulled and the phone taken away, and she could speak to no one else. See no one else but her mother.

Then she'd become sick. So sick she thought she would die. So ill, she had hallucinations of a gorgeous winged creature who told her he belonged to her. He came to her every day, but he never saved her.

She'd desperately wanted to be saved. Had finally dreamed he'd indeed saved her, and it had all felt so real.

But when she'd woken up in the hospital and asked the police detectives what happened to the man who had saved her, they had no idea what she spoke of. Had gently told her she must've dreamed it since her mind was so foggy from poison.

The daily poison she'd received from her very own mother for years.

So she'd carried on with her life. Watched her mother tried and sentenced to prison. Endured years of therapy both physical and mental, conquered walking once more when all doctors had given up hope.

They thought she'd die. She proved them wrong.

Jordan believed there was a reason she lived. Not that she had a higher purpose or could save the world, no. She believed she would meet *him* again. Would find him and thank him and give her undying loyalty to him.

Gabriel Wilder, she knew without a doubt, was the protector of her past.

Oh, she told herself more than once it was nonsense. Tried to be rational, normal, when she hadn't felt normal in years. He was a man, a surly giant of a man who didn't want to deal with her. Who looked at her as if he'd rather be anywhere but with her. Who told her to leave him alone, who claimed he wasn't nice, who actually bragged about being a jerk.

But that kiss...the way he touched her, held her face, his lips soft and warm and seeking. It said he wanted her.

And she wanted him. Was drawn to him like no other, and she secretly believed he might be her long lost protector.

She also secretly believed she might be completely insane. The poison might still linger in her system, making her delusional.

Jordan couldn't help but smile. Couldn't help but think she enjoyed being delusional when it involved Gabriel being in her life. Coming over to her apartment. Grabbing her and pushing her against a wall and having his wicked way with her...

Walking into her tiny bedroom, she went to the beat-up old dresser and pulled the top drawer open. Searched through her meager pile of panties, pulling out what she might consider her sexiest pair—black cotton with a hint of lace at the legs and waist. She dropped the towel and stepped into them. Pulled on a pair of black yoga pants and a pale blue T-shirt, neglecting a bra.

If all went the way she wanted it to, it would only get in the way.

A knock sounded at her door, and she rushed to the living room, undoing the lock and throwing the door open. A glowering Gabriel stood on her doorstep, his hair ruffled by the wind, expression fierce. Her mouth went dry at the sight of him.

She knew he would come, but to have him here, in front of her, looking so big, bad, and delicious, it was overwhelming.

“You didn’t ask who it was. You didn’t even look through the peephole, I bet.” He strode inside her apartment, pushing past her, and she quietly closed the door, turned the lock back into place.

“I knew it was you,” she answered, and he turned to face her. His eyes blazed with what at first she thought was anger but realized now was worry.

Her heart expanded, and she wanted to smile but kept it in check. He was worried. About her.

Yet another glimpse at his tender, protective nature.

“You didn’t know it was me for sure. Promise me you’ll always ask who it is and always look through the peephole.” He thrust a finger at her as if making his point, and she nodded mutely. Wishing she had the nerve to go to him and hug him tight.

She remained where she stood and realized he was studying her. His gaze roved over her damp hair, her plain T-shirt, and faded yoga pants. She suddenly felt silly and extremely unsexy. It was time to face facts. She was relatively broke and with no sexual experience whatsoever beyond the grope and make-out session with her teen boyfriend, and that had faded to a distant memory. This man before her who vibrated vitality, who was the sexiest thing she’d ever seen, there was no way she could impress him.

She would simply have to...be. Herself. Hopefully he wouldn’t turn her away.

“Did you just get out of the shower?” His voice was low, so low she could barely hear it, and she nodded mutely again.

He rested his hands on his hips and glanced down at the ground. Then threw his head back and stared up at the ceiling. She stood before him, waiting for his next move, waiting for him to say something, anything, and then he was there. His arms went around her, his face buried against her neck and inhaling deep. She

gripped his shoulders and held on for dear life, shuddering when she felt his hot breath feather across her neck.

“God, you smell good,” he whispered, and her breath stalled in her throat when she swore she felt him lick her.

Lick her.

“Taste good too.” He licked her again. Licked her and kissed her and nibbled on the spot where her pulse throbbed mightily. She melted in his arms, her legs turned to water, and she gripped his shoulders tighter.

He lifted his head, his ragged breathing loud in the quiet of the room, the glint in his dark eyes hypnotizing her. “Darlin’, where’s your bedroom?”

“B-back there,” she stuttered as she waved her hand behind her, feeling ten times the fool. She felt in over her head. Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea. Maybe she wouldn’t be able to handle it, handle *him*.

A calm washed over her as she stared into his eyes, saw the faint smile curve his delectable lips. Okay, she *could* handle this. She was stronger than she thought. She’d been through more than the average person would ever have to suffer. She’d survived her mother’s wrath, and she had a chance to live again.

She was going to embrace it.

She was going to embrace him.

Gabriel.

She was light as a feather, but that was no surprise, Gabe thought as he scooped Jordan into his arms and started down the short hall toward her bedroom. He was careful with the way he touched her back, for he knew it still healed. She looped her arms around his neck, and it was her turn to press her face against his neck. He felt the brush of her lips, and he nearly stumbled. Felt the dab of her hot, wet tongue and almost crashed into the wall.

“Salty,” she murmured just before she gave him another lick, and *holy shit*, he about knocked her head against the doorway of her bedroom when he entered. With gratitude he deposited her on the bed. Let her fall to the mattress, where she landed with a slight bounce.

A bounce that jiggled her breasts, which he noticed were bra free. Those pretty little hard nipples poking against the fabric of her T-shirt were testament to that. She scooted backward so she lay propped against a pile of pillows, her gaze locked on him, and slowly, teasingly he removed his shirt. Tugged it up over his abs, his chest, then over his head, tossing it on the floor, letting her get a good look at what she was about to get involved with.

Because they were getting involved. He could protest all he wanted, but it was too late. He was in deep. Just the thought of her being with anyone else made him want to kill her phantom lover, and it was just a thought, not even a real person.

He couldn't lose her. She belonged to him. And he was about to make her his.

Her mouth dropped open as her gaze roved over him. She looked as if she appreciated what she saw, but he couldn't be sure. He was a rough-looking character, prided himself on it even. Tattoos circled each bicep, curled down either side of his torso. Vibrant, strong tattoos that represented parts of his life, the life he'd only been able to remember for the past eight years.

“You're beautiful,” she whispered, and he was oddly touched at her compliment. No one had ever called him beautiful before.

“I should scare the hell out of you.” His hands went to the front of his jeans, and he worked one snap undone, then the next. Her gaze locked on his busy hands with wide eyes.

“You don't scare me,” she confessed.

“Good.” He finished undoing his jeans and let them fall from his hips to his knees, kicking them off. “Take off your shirt.”

Her eyes went even wider if that was possible, and she wrapped her arms around herself. “But...I don't have my bra on.”

“Perfect,” he practically growled as he rested a hand over the front of his boxer briefs, fingers gripping his straining erection for the quickest moment. “Take it off, darlin’.”

Without a word of protest, she sat up, reached for the hem of her T-shirt. Slowly, teasing him just as he’d teased her only moments before, she drew the shirt up. Revealing the gentle slope of her stomach, the undersides of her breasts, then the full glory of her breasts, for they were most definitely glorious. Perfect, round, and topped with berry pink nipples. Nipples that were hard and beckoning him for a taste.

She shed the shirt and thrust her shoulders back, looking every inch a goddess. A sweet little virginal goddess with shaking hands and wide blue eyes, she leaned back and gripped the waistband of her black pants.

And shed them with one quick yank so she sat before him in just her panties.

Little black panties trimmed with bits of lace that barely covered her hips. His mouth dried at the sight of her. “Roll over,” he rasped. “On your stomach. Roll over.”

She did as he asked with a little frown. Clutching a pillow to her chest, she rolled onto her stomach, revealing the sweeping curve of her back, the bandage covering the tattoo, and the sweet little rise of her ass. Just as he thought, the panties barely covered her cheeks, and the urge to stroke her there—kiss and lick and bite—was too strong to ignore.

He fell onto the bed, his head level with her ass, and he squeezed her with his hands. As he kneaded the sweet, plump flesh, he heard her shuddering moan, and his cock jerked in reaction.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice raspy.

“Worshipping you,” he whispered as he bent down and kissed her. Just below one cheek, right at the spot where her ass met her thigh, and he could smell her. Her unique, feminine scent washed over him, filled his lungs, his head, and God, the need to taste her was overwhelming.

“Gabriel,” she whispered in agony when he trailed a finger along the leg of her panties. Saw the goose bumps pebble her flesh where he touched her.

“I’m going to take my time with you,” he promised as he continued to trace her skin. She was so soft, completely untouched by any man, and a surge of pride and possessiveness filled him. This woman would belong to him and no other. She would never know the touch of another but him.

“Good, because when you’re finished I’m going to take my time with you,” she promised in return over her shoulder, and he laughed.

The sound was rusty, almost unrecognizable, but yes, he was most definitely laughing.

And he could hardly believe it.

Chapter Eight

Jordan dropped her head against the pillow, overcome by Gabriel's touch. He tugged her panties from her hips, down over her bottom until they tangled about her thighs, around her knees. She heard him chuckle, felt his lips brush against the back of her thigh, and she thought she might die from the pleasure of it.

He tugged the panties completely off, and then his big hands wandered up her legs, in between her thighs, and spread them wide. Embarrassment made her duck her head farther into the pillow, and she closed her eyes. She could literally smell herself. She was so wet between her legs it was mortifying. She could feel the dampness coat her inner thighs, and then, oh God, and *then* she heard him inhale. As if he smelled her.

Arousal hit her swift and hard, making her weak. He nuzzled against her hot, aching center, his lips pursed as he dropped a kiss upon her. She jolted beneath his mouth.

"On your knees, babe," he urged, and she clambered to her knees as he asked, waiting in breathless anticipation for his next move.

He didn't disappoint.

He rolled over on his back and slid between her legs, his big hands locked about her hips as he stared up at her. "Sit on my face. Let me taste that pretty little pussy."

Her entire body heated at his words, at the image they brought forth. "Gabriel..."

She found him smiling up at her, looking almost...boyish. Though there was nothing boyish about his intent. His rough fingers stroked her skin, and he pulled

her down, though she went willingly. Felt the warm brush of his breath across her heated damp folds, watched in fascination as he tilted up and pressed the softest openmouthed kiss on her...pussy.

Her entire body shivered at the contact.

“God.” He groaned against her; then his tongue sneaked out, and he licked her. Licked her entire slit back and forth, tickling her folds with the tip of his tongue, tracing her opening with a slowness that drove her crazy. “You taste so good.”

She could not believe this was happening. That he would want to perform such an intimate act upon her. Yes, she knew it could happen—she wasn’t stupid—but she certainly never expected it to happen to *her*.

And happen so well. The man was an expert with his tongue.

He flicked at the swollen little knot of flesh at the top of her slit, sucked it in between his lips, and she cried out. Pausing, he glanced up at her, his lips damp with her juices, his dark eyes full of pure wickedness.

“You like it when I suck your clit?”

He said the naughtiest things, and she loved it.

“Yes,” she whispered, thrusting her hips toward his face. “Do it again.”

“Ah, my sweet little angel,” he murmured before he returned his attentions to her pussy. He devoured her with a single-minded focus that took her breath away.

Strange, wondrous feelings threatened to flood her, and she held herself still. Let the pleasure wash over her, bit by bit, lapping at her like the gentlest of ocean waves. Again and again it hit her, her skin pulsing, the spot between her legs growing more tender, tingling with every swipe of his tongue, every suck of his lips. Two thick fingers pushed inside her, stretching her wide, and she winced against the stinging pain.

A pain she relished. Everything felt so good, what he did to her. Felt so right. She moved with him as his fingers thrust inside her virginal passage, the waves lapping over her skin faster now, growing more intense. He continued to suck her

clit, his tongue lashing about it, his fingers pushing deep. His other hand slid around to cup one buttock, fingers teasing at the crack of her ass, and she fell apart. Shattered against his mouth, felt her cream dampen his thrusting fingers, his busy lips.

She cried out his name as the shudders took over her body, wave after wave of pleasure crashing over her. Her eyes slid closed, her entire body trembled above him, and she would've collapsed if it hadn't been for his strong hands. They guided her over him so that she fell onto the bed in a languid heap, her arm tossed over her eyes. And still her body trembled with the aftereffects of the most intense orgasm of her life.

"Mmm, you're a naughty little thing." Gabriel appeared above her, a smile curling his lips. He kissed her. His lips tasted salty and sweet, and she realized she tasted herself.

She deepened the kiss, her tongue sweeping his mouth, and he chuckled, pushed at her shoulders so their mouths parted. "A very naughty little thing." His brows lifted as if he knew exactly what she was doing, enjoying the taste of herself on his lips.

Her cheeks flushed. He cupped her chin with his fingers and gave her a quick kiss. "Have you ever come before?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" Why was he asking her that?

"Well, you're a virgin, right?" When she didn't answer, he continued on. "You are a virgin, Jordan. I know you are. And I figured that maybe you'd never..."

"Never with a man, but um, yes. I have had an orgasm before," she admitted.

His eyes darkened even more if that was possible, and his fingers tightened about her chin. "I'd like to see that some time. You touching yourself and making yourself come. Would you do that for me?"

"I—" She would do it for him, but she really didn't want to tonight.

She wanted his touch and nothing else.

“Not tonight.” He kissed her again, and she wondered if he could read her mind. She wouldn’t doubt it. “Tonight is all about you.” Another kiss, this one longer, a little more openmouthed. “And me.” This kiss featured a fair amount of teasing tongue, which succeeded in making her groan. “Together.”

Their mouths met hungrily. Hot and wet and deep, the kiss went on forever. Forever and ever until she thought she might drown in it. Her hands wandered all over him. Fingers threading through his silky hair, streaking across his broad shoulders, her hands slipped down his muscular back, and she felt the thick ridges of two scars right at his shoulder blades.

She frowned. *Strange.*

Her hands wandered farther down, squeezed at his equally muscular backside, marveling at his firm skin. He still wore his underwear. She could feel the thrust of his erection pushing against her belly, and she wanted all of him bare. Now.

She tugged the waistband of his underwear down, pulling them down so his butt was exposed and she could give him a fair squeeze. He groaned against her mouth and ground himself against her, and she spread her legs farther. Wishing he was already inside her.

Enjoying the anticipation that curled through her.

“I like it when you touch me,” he murmured in her ear just before he bit the lobe.

She shivered. “I like touching you.”

“This is going to be good between us.” He lifted away from her so he could stare into her eyes, his fingers tracing her cheek. “So good.”

She nodded her agreement, overwhelmed by the passion in his eyes, the way he was wrapped all around her. His capitulation for her, for this was almost unbelievable, but she wasn’t going to protest.

She realized more than anything, she needed this man. Now that she’d found him, she couldn’t imagine her life without him.

He shucked his underwear as best he could, and bare skin finally made contact with bare skin, sending a sizzle of awareness shooting through her blood, flooding her. Would it hurt when he entered her? He felt huge, hot, and heavy against her belly, and she swore she felt a damp spot where his cock lay against her. Reaching between them she touched him, her fingers clamping around his thick erection and squeezing gently.

“Shit,” he muttered, and she wanted to laugh. “Keep touching me, and I’ll put an end to the night before it’s hardly begun.”

“Can’t have that, can we?” Where did this flirty side come from? “But I want to touch you. I’ve never...touched a man like this before.”

He rolled over onto his back and held his arms out as if in offering. “I’m giving you the chance.”

Jordan took it, practically leaping on top of him as he lay sprawled across the bed. She ran her fingers over his chest, tangled them in the slight bit of dark hair that grew in the center. Streaked her fingers across his ripped abdomen and giggled when he flexed beneath her touch. He was beautifully made, the most gorgeous man she’d ever seen, and she glanced up. Met his hooded gaze, realized that this man belonged to her. All hers to do with what she pleased, and the idea excited her so much she reached out. Grabbed hold of his cock and stroked once down, then up.

Gabriel released a shuddering breath, his head falling back against the pillows as he closed his eyes. “Jordan,” he whispered.

A thrill shot up her spine as he said her name. She continued to stroke him, and when that proved not enough, she bent over him, licked a path across the flared head of his cock. He grunted, moaned when her lips enveloped the head, and she tasted the creamy liquid that dripped from the slit, groaning at the salty flavor.

As fast as she bent over him, she found herself on her back just as quickly. Gabriel hovered above her once more, face determined, cock pushing at her entry, and she spread her legs, ready for him.

Almost.

She started to tense up when she realized the gravity of the situation. It was going to hurt; there was no denying it. He was just so amazingly huge. She stared up into his face and saw the grim determination there, the tenseness in his jaw, the firmness of his lips.

"I don't want to use a condom," he admitted, hanging his head over her. With a sensuous thrust of his hips, his cock glided over her hot center, teased at her wet folds, and she arched her hips up as if to capture him.

"I've never been with anyone else. And I can't get pregnant. Not after what my mother did to me." Her mother had destroyed so much of her, but she didn't want to focus on it. Besides, she really didn't want to use a condom either, though she didn't know the difference.

"I've been tested recently. I'm clean." He studied her with an intensity that stole her breath, stole her heart. She melted beneath him, her legs tangled with his, a foot rubbing against the hair-roughened skin of his muscled calf.

"Take me, Gabriel. Make me yours," she urged in a breathless whisper.

Gabe closed his eyes and swallowed hard. Tried to push past the overwhelming sense of importance that shadowed his next move, but it was no use.

His hands shook as he reached up and smoothed the hair away from her face. She gazed up at him with such trusting eyes. Everything shone in them, every emotion, every fear, every bit of trust she held in him.

And she trusted him. He knew this without a doubt, and suddenly he didn't feel worthy.

He wasn't worthy. He just...wasn't. And that she believed in him so, even after he'd let her down before, recently, in the past, she still gave herself to him.

"It's going to hurt," he murmured against her ear, kissing her there, tenderly. He was full of such tender feelings toward her it confused him.

"I know." She nodded and breathed deep, and she sounded so brave. "Please, Gabriel. Just do it."

Slowly, with infinite care he pushed inside her. First just the head of his cock, and the sensation of her hot, inner muscles clamping around him made his eyes cross. She tensed beneath him again, her entire body strung tight, her breathing erratic, and he whispered sweet words in her ear. Comforting words, sexy words. He wanted to drive her wild, wanted to ease her fear.

She softened around him, he felt the wet gush of her cream dampen the head of his cock, and he pushed farther, his breath lodging in his throat at the feel of her. Tight, silken heat enveloped him, her breathless little whispers urged him on, and he thrust. Deep. Filling her to the very hilt.

"Oh." She gave a breathless little cry and arched beneath him, almost as if she wanted to buck him off, and he stilled above her, let her body get used to him. She settled against the mattress, her eyes tightly closed, her chest lifting and falling with her every breath. Her breasts jiggled with the movement, drawing his gaze, and he realized he'd neglected her there.

Christ, he was a selfish ass.

Dipping his head, he rained kisses on her sweet, lush flesh, breathed deep of her fragrance. Her skin was so soft, her nipples rock hard, and he nuzzled at them. Licked them with the tip of his tongue, drew one into his mouth, and sucked it deep.

"Gabriel," she whispered, her hands settling on his head, fingers tightening in his hair. He felt her loosen around his cock. Her entire body eased, and slowly, so slow he hoped she barely noticed, he withdrew from her.

And then sank back in.

A sigh of pleasure escaped her, and he did it again, sucking her neglected nipple into his mouth all the while he fucked her with slow, easy glides. In and out, deeper and deeper he went, her wet, tight tissues dragging along his length, making him fucking crazy. Making him see stars.

Goddamn *stars*. That had never happened before.

Not like this.

"It feels so good," she murmured when he released her nipple to stare at her. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted, a rapturous expression on her face, and he never wanted to forget it. That look on her face the first time he entered her. The sound of her sighs, the creamy noises her pussy made every time he slid deep into her body.

He wanted it all burned onto his memory. Forever.

"Open your eyes," he commanded, and her lids lifted. Hazy blue eyes met his, and she smiled. Reached up and cupped the side of his face.

Her simple touch unnerved him, and he turned his head, pressed an openmouthed kiss to her palm. Faster and faster he filled her until their hips bumped, their sweat-dampened skin slapped against each other, and he knew he was close. So damn close.

"Come for me," he commanded hoarsely, reaching a hand in between their connected bodies so he could flick her swollen clit. He circled it, played with the little bit of flesh until she was arching into his touch. Breathy little sighs sounded deep in her throat, indicating she was close, so close he hung on the edge too.

She fell apart with one more flick of his fingers, and he thrust once, hard, tensing just above her before he spilled himself into her. Again and again, his semen jetted out of him in shuddering streams, filling her completely until he collapsed on top of her in an exhausted heap.

Without a doubt, he played a dangerous game with this woman. Something he'd never done before in his seemingly short life. A thump stirred somewhere in the vicinity of his chest, startling him, and he rolled off her, rubbed at the spot between his pecs.

Another kick and thump, harder this time, almost as if it tried to establish a rhythm, and he turned his head. Drank his fill of the sated woman who lay next to him, a lazy smile curling her lips as her gaze met his. She reached out and settled her hand on his stomach, her fingers skittering down terribly close to his cock.

And his cock eagerly responded with an interested twitch.

“I could do this all night,” she whispered playfully. Her eyes glowed, her skin was luminous, and he’d never seen her more beautiful.

All because of him, he thought. She looked that way because of what he’d just done to her. What they’d just done to each other.

“Well, get ready, darlin’,” he growled as he lunged for her, earning a sweet little giggle from her as he pressed her into mattress yet again. Dropping a kiss to her lips, he stared down at her. “Because I plan on fucking you all night long.”

Her eyes darkened, and she curled her hands around the back of his neck, hauling him down so their lips hovered close. “I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

As their mouths met in a hungry kiss, he planned to whisper dirty things in her ear all night.

Chapter Nine

The incessant knocking made her head throb, and Jordan groaned, rolled over onto her side.

Right into the solid, hot body of a sleeping Gabriel lying next to her.

She smiled and stretched, opened her eyes to study him. God, he was gorgeous. Beautiful masculine face covered with dark stubble, lips soft, long black eyelashes lying against the fragile flesh just beneath his eyes like fans. Thick, dark brows, a straight nose, and high cheekbones that made her think of exotic places. He was like no other man she'd ever seen.

And he belonged to her.

Jordan giggled, muffled the sound with her hand. What would he do if she slid beneath the sheets and touched him? Stroked him until he was hard and then wrapped her lips around his cock and took him deep in her mouth?

Her pussy dampened at the thought.

The knock sounded again, louder this time and even more insistent. Gabriel roused, his eyes cracking open, and he sat straight up, the sheet pooling around his hips.

She stared unabashedly at him. He had the most perfect body she'd ever seen, and she couldn't believe her hands and mouth had been all over that perfection last night...

"Quit looking at me like that," he growled, though there was no anger in his voice. "Who the hell is knocking on your door?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. She really didn't care. Not when she had *him* in her bed.

"Let's go find out." He crawled out of bed and tugged on his jeans and nothing else, leaving a few buttons undone and revealing a fair amount of rather intimate flesh. She could see his dark, curling pubic hairs, and her mouth dried at the sexy sight.

"Damn it, woman, quit looking at me like that," he growled again, running a hand through his hair. "Get out of bed, and let's go answer that door."

She scurried from beneath the sheets and threw on her T-shirt and yoga pants, not bothering with underwear either. Gabriel followed her to the door, peeking through the peephole before he turned to look at her.

"Some guy."

She looked as well but didn't recognize him. He looked pleasant enough, older, probably in his fifties and very neatly attired. "I don't know him."

"Salesman?"

"A very patient one." Curiosity got the better of her, and she turned the lock. Flashed Gabriel an unsure smile as her hand rested over the knob. "Should I open it?"

"I'm here." His gaze met hers, dark, intent. She knew he would never let anyone or anything harm her. "I'll protect you."

Those three words warmed her heart, seared her soul. Opening the door, she smiled at the man, felt the looming presence of Gabriel standing just behind her. "Hi."

"Well, hello to you too, hon. Are you Jordan Sumner?" He smiled, the epitome of easygoing nonchalance. He had a thick Southern accent, and they were nowhere near the South. His face was pleasantly average, nondescript. Only his eyes were unusual—pale, icy blue.

A shiver moved down her spine, and Gabriel placed his hand on her shoulder. "Who are you?" he asked the stranger.

The man's gaze flicked up to Gabriel and immediately dismissed him. Odd. "I'm here to talk to Jordan. Loretta sent me."

Jordan's skin went cold. Her stomach hollowed out, and she wobbled on her feet. Only Gabriel's steadying hand on her shoulder kept her from falling to the floor. "My mother sent you?" Her voice squeaked. She was surprised she could get the words out.

"Mmm-hmm." He tipped back on his feet, as calm as he pleased. A wind came up, blowing his sandy blond hair around his head, and she swore she saw a flare of something in his eyes.

A flare of darkness, of evil.

"She wants to talk to you." He smiled and nodded. "Yep, you see, she's going back to trial, and she needs your help."

"My...*help*?" Jordan was incredulous.

"She sure does. She wants you to talk to her attorney. Wants you to testify for her, because she knows you know she didn't mean it."

"She didn't mean what?" Jordan knew what he referred to. She just wanted to hear him say it.

"What happened to you. She didn't mean for it to happen like that. It was an accident." The man smiled affably, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Fury filled her, and she clenched her hands into fists. She felt Gabriel's fingers tighten on her shoulder, as if he sensed he should hold her back, which was a smart move. She was damn tempted to lunge at this man and beat him senseless. Then he could take his bruises and her curses back to her mother as a sort of message.

She relished the image but knew she would never do it. She wasn't that cruel.

Sometimes she wished she could be.

"Listen, asshole, I don't know how much you know about this, but her mom poisoned her for years and tried to kill her. It wasn't an accident," Gabriel said from behind her, his voice dark.

"Hey, hey, whoa. No need for coarse language." The man held his hands up in front of him as if defending himself. "I'm not here asking for trouble. I just needed to deliver this message. You should consider it, Jordan. She is, after all, your mother. The only family you have left."

"The only family I have left since she killed everyone else I loved," Jordan choked out. Tears threatened, and she tried to swallow past them. They made her feel bitter, those tears. Bitter and stupid and useless, for she'd shed enough to last a lifetime. Twenty lifetimes.

"You need to go." Gabriel stepped from behind her so now he stood in front of her as some sort of shield. He reached behind him and moved her so this man, this stranger sent by her mother couldn't see her. "You've delivered your message. Now you can leave."

"You want to say something to your mother? I can give her the message," the man asked, standing on tiptoe and trying to look over Gabriel's shoulder.

"Tell her she can rot in hell," Jordan mumbled.

The man heard her say it. She could tell, and his quiet exhale was audible. The shuffle of his feet was loud against the rough concrete of her front stoop. "You shouldn't have said that, hon. Those are harsh words."

"Harsh words that she means, fuck face, so get lost." Gabriel slammed the door in the man's face and turned to look at her. The anger evaporated in a second, his expression turning to concern, and he yanked her into his arms. Held her close and set his chin on top of her head.

"Are you all right?"

"You called him a fuck face," she said, her voice muffled against the warm expanse of his chest. She breathed deep, inhaled him, her lips brushing against his bare flesh. He smelled musky, masculine. Delicious.

Just like that, she wanted him.

He chuckled. "He *is* a fuck face, coming around here saying your mother wants to talk to you. What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know. I don't know how they're finding me. I moved away from my hometown so I wouldn't have to deal with this stuff any longer, and now..."

"Now it's as if it followed you here," he finished for her. His fingers curled about her shoulders, and he held her away from him so he could stare into her eyes. "How do you think he found you?"

"I don't know." She glanced down, caught sight of Gabriel's unbuttoned jeans, and her mouth went dry. Reaching between them, she twisted her hand, her fingers zeroing in on that particular location, and traced the line of black hair that led from his navel down to a treasure trove of delight. "I don't want to think about it now."

"Jordan..." he said warningly, and she shook her head, let her fingers delve deeper.

Until they encountered very warm, very hard skin.

"Take me back to bed, Gabriel," she demanded, her fingers wrapping around his cock. "Let me forget about this for a little while longer."

"I need to figure out what's going on," he said, his voice strained as she started to stroke him. "So I can protect you."

"You're not my guardian angel anymore." She looked up at him, saw the confusion and the confliction swirl in his gaze. He didn't know what to think. Neither did she.

So it was better to just let go and...feel. Her brain hurt if she thought too much about all of this. She'd much rather lose herself.

In him.

"I need you to tell me more." Gabe settled himself in the old wooden chair, straddling it so his arms looped over the chair back.

Darla sat across from him at her desk, her fingers clacking away on the keyboard of her laptop. "About what?"

"About Jordan. And me."

She looked up, her amused gaze meeting his. "You had sex with her."

He was taken aback. "How do you know?"

"You look different. Not so dark, not so restless. Though certainly still determined, I can see that. But that's good. It means you care." She typed away, her fingers flying, and Gabe watched in fascination. Darla was the sort of woman who was good at everything she did once she set her mind to it. "Have you told her you love her?"

"Hell, no," he said gruffly. No way did he love her. He barely knew her.

"You will." Darla sounded so positive he wanted to withhold the words forever just to prove her wrong.

But that would be really stupid. And heartless.

"You're not answering my question," he practically growled. Damn, this woman frustrated him sometimes.

"About Jordan? What more do you want to know? Why don't you ask her yourself? She is with you, isn't she?"

He glanced over his shoulder out into the shop. Saw that Jordan was chatting up Ryder, laughing at something he said. No doubt Ryder flirted, because he was good at it. Extraordinary at it, really, since all the women flocked to the asshole when he flashed that smile.

Including his woman.

Jealousy curled through him and settled in his gut. He pushed it off. He was being stupid. Ryder was his friend. No way would he step in on his territory.

Jesus. Gabe scrubbed a hand over his face, scratched along his stubble-covered jaw. He hadn't shaved in days. He wore the same clothes he wore yesterday, though at least he'd showered.

Jordan had turned him into a raging beast who didn't care about anything else but *her*. He wasn't sure if he liked it.

"She's out there with Ryder." Gabe flicked his head toward where they stood.

"Good." Darla's expression grew serious, her eyes locked on his. "Don't let her out of your sight."

A shiver slithered down Gabe's spine, and he sat up straighter. "What do you mean? Why?"

"Because she's in grave danger. It's all started. Your circumstance—I don't know if we'll all be the same, but from everything I've read, I think we'll all have a similar fight eventually," Darla said earnestly.

Gabe shook his head. She made no sense. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you defending Jordan to the bitter end. You'll need to save her, Gabe. Save her life, save your own. If you can fight off the evil that lurks around her, then you'll both be fine." Darla smiled. As if that one little explanation would make it all better.

"As usual, you talk crazy."

"No, I speak the truth. Has evil reentered her life?" Darla lifted a delicate brow, her arms crossing in front of her as she leaned back in her chair.

He thought of the cops bringing her the bad news about her mom's conviction. The man this morning who looked so cheerful, yet was anything but. The man had an aura of black around him, an easygoing way that belied the truth.

The man was wrong. Bad. Gabe had sensed it from the moment he looked at him.

"Yes," Gabe admitted reluctantly. He explained briefly what had happened in the last couple of days.

"A messenger." Darla nodded and tapped her index finger against her pursed lips. "Interesting."

“Yeah, he was a messenger from her mom,” Gabe reiterated, uneasy with her supposed crazy talk.

“Well, her mother is merely a representative of Satan. Don’t you see it, Gabe? They’ve come for you.”

“Who?”

“A disciple from hell, I assume.” Her voice lowered, and she glanced about the tiny office. As if someone might be lurking in the cluttered corners, listening to their conversation. “They want her, but they want you too—to bring you back. You’ve been in a limbo state for so long, and now they want their chance.”

“Their chance for what?” Damn it, he hated when Darla talked in circles, which it felt like she did all the time.

“We fell from heaven, Gabe. We disgraced ourselves to God because we fell in love with humans, and that wasn’t our destiny. We basically screwed with destiny.” A wry smile twisted her lips. “And so we’ve paid ever since with our loneliness, our self-alienation. Luckily enough we found each other and created this business. I’ve heard of others who can’t take it. Who’d rather kill themselves than suffer through it and find their way.”

Her words were dark, full of sadness, and Gabe hung his head, overcome with the vision she conjured.

“Now that you’ve found the one you fell for, you’re being tested. Will you be able to fight off the evil that wants the both of you? Will you fall even farther and end up in hell? Or will you fight for the woman you love and rise above it all?”

“I don’t...” He was going to say *love her*, but shit. All this destiny talk was starting to get to him.

He didn’t like it, but it was getting to him.

“Tell me, Gabe.” Her tone was serious, her expression composed. “Will you fight? Do you need us? You know Ryder and I will always stand by your side.”

“Stand by my side for what? Shit, Darla, I don’t even know what I’m up against.” He ran a hand through his hair, glanced out toward the shop again. Caught sight of Jordan, who now sat alone, her gaze wandering around the room. Her eyes met his, and she smiled. It lit up her whole face, made her eyes sparkle, her cheeks flush, and she looked down for a brief moment before her lids lifted. Her eyes met his once more.

Gabe sucked in a harsh breath and looked away, overwhelmed. Damn it, he didn’t need all this trouble she brought him. Trouble and lust and evil and darkness and sex and love and closeness. He cherished the closeness above all else. Yeah, he had Darla and Ryder, but he’d never felt so close, so vulnerable with another person until he met her.

Jordan.

For some strange and twisted reason, he liked it. He liked her. Cared about her, even. And yeah, he knew it was coming. He was going to have to face it sometime, but right now, no. It was too soon.

He was going to love her. And fight for her. He needed to prepare for it. Figure out exactly what he needed to do to defend her against this supposed evil out to get them both.

Darla never answered him, and when he looked at her, he knew she’d watched him watch Jordan. She wore a bemused expression, and she shook her head. “You’ve got it so bad. It’s really cute, actually.”

“Fuck that. It’s not cute,” he snarled, feeling like an ass. He slumped in his chair, stretched his legs out in front of him like an insolent child.

“It’s adorable. You’ve been brought down by a sweet little fluff of a woman. She looks like she wouldn’t harm a fly.”

“She’s stronger than she looks.” How he admired her, her strength, her determination. She was a formidable woman. “If she can survive what her mother did to her, she can survive anything.”

“Then you two make a great pair,” Darla said, her voice soft. “I bet you’ll conquer this battle together. We will all conquer this together.”

Gabe hoped Darla was right.

Chapter Ten

Jordan woke up shivering, a thin sheen of sweat covering her entire body. She clutched the sheet in fisted hands and closed her eyes, but images flashed. The man who came to her door, smiling with his ice blue eyes, reaching for her, his fingers clamping around her neck. Those eyes had turned bloodred, and he'd opened his mouth, letting loose the most terrifying screech she'd ever heard.

Lids snapping open, she rolled over onto her side and found the spot next to her...

Empty.

The indentation from Gabriel's head was still on his pillow, but he was nowhere to be found.

Sitting up, she ran a shaky hand through her hair, blew out an equally shaky breath. "Gabriel?"

No answer. Her apartment was eerily quiet, and she wondered if she should slip out of bed to go in search of him. No way would he leave her—would he? No. He'd talked to her earlier, talked in circles about evil and being careful and being prepared. She'd known evil through her mother and believed she could face nothing worse.

But from the way Gabriel had been talking, maybe she was wrong.

She slipped out of bed, grabbed Gabriel's T-shirt from the floor, and put it on. It enveloped her, fell to her knees, and his spicy clean scent rose from the soft fabric. Breathing deep, she headed down the hall to find Gabriel sitting on the couch, his phone pressed to his ear, clad only in jeans.

Jordan glanced at the clock on the microwave in the kitchen and saw that it was past one in the morning. Who could he be talking to?

“Yeah, I gotta go. Okay talk to you later.” He hit a button and let his hand drop, releasing the phone on the couch cushions. “Hey. I didn’t know you were up.”

“I, uh, I had a bad dream.” She shuffled her feet, feeling foolish and more than a little uncomfortable. Like she’d walked in on something she wasn’t supposed to see.

“Come here and tell me about it.”

She went to him and sat next to him on the couch. He reached for her and pulled her close. His arm looped over her shoulders, his fingers reaching to thread through her hair. “There’s not much to tell,” she murmured.

“You’re pale. And you’re shaking.” He hugged her close, his hand squeezing her shoulder gently. “I want to know what happened.”

“The man was in my dream. The one who came here, who said he was sent by my mom.” She settled her head on his shoulder, pressed her lips to his skin in a brief kiss. “He stood in my doorway, and his eyes...they turned red. Then he screamed and reached for my neck, and he was choking me.”

“Sounds awful,” Gabriel murmured.

“It was.” She glanced up to look at him. “Who were you talking to?”

“Darla.” It was all he offered.

Jealousy filled her, which was ridiculous. She knew Gabriel thought of Darla as a sister, even called her his sister, though they weren’t blood related. He’d shared that bit of information with her last night just before they fell asleep wrapped all around each other. After a long, amazing evening of having sex.

Lots and lots of sex.

Jordan slipped her arm around his middle, her hand resting on his bare stomach. His skin was warm, taut with muscle, and she stroked him, felt him shiver beneath her touch.

She was so sick of the bad dreams. They'd plagued her for years. She'd even taken medication to help her sleep, but about a year ago they just...stopped. Until she met Gabriel. Now they came at her full force, different ones even. She didn't like it. Was sick of it, really. Couldn't she just have a normal life? Find a man, fall in love with him, and live happily ever after?

Of course, her life had never been normal. And Gabriel was no normal man. She wasn't sure if he was even completely human. Late at night when she lay near him, on him, she couldn't hear his heart. It was as if he didn't even have one in his chest.

So how was he even alive?

"Darlin', are you trying to get in my pants?" Amusement laced his deep voice, startling her from her thoughts.

Her hand had somehow dived beneath the waistband of his worn jeans. "Maybe," she said with a smile.

He didn't stop her when she undid the snap and zipper of his jeans. Not that she believed he would. He was going to benefit from her search most assuredly. He didn't stop her when she got onto her knees in front of him. Her hands smoothed up from his knees to his thighs, pushing inside so that he spread his legs. She scooted closer and spread his fly open, revealing the fact that he wore no underwear. A new habit she definitely approved of.

His hard cock strained against the restrictive denim, and she reached in to pull him out. His hands went to his jeans, and he lifted his hips, pushing them off. She helped him get rid of them, pulling them from his legs so they lay on the floor in a tangled mess. His cock rose before her, long and thick, the head glistening with precum.

She licked her lips at the sight of him. They'd done so much in the precious little time they'd been together, and this was one the thing she'd been craving the most. Ever since she'd had a taste of him that first night, she'd wanted more.

More, more, more. He made her greedy, this man. As if she needed to make up for all of those years she hadn't had sex, she wanted him constantly.

"Take off your shirt," Gabriel suddenly demanded.

She yanked his shirt she wore off her and revealed her nude body. She heard his inhalation, glanced up to find him staring at her with those dark, dangerous eyes, and his mouth firmed. Her smile grew, for she knew she tested his control, and she liked it. Reveled in it, really, because who wouldn't love driving a man like Gabriel out of his mind with lust?

Reaching for him, she curled her fingers around the base of his cock, earning a grunt of approval. Leaning forward, she studied him—the slightly flared head of his cock, the thick length of it, the map of veins ridging it. She touched them. Her index finger traced one, then another. Light, fleeting touches that teased and taunted. His breathing increased when she replaced her finger with her tongue. Licking him, she tickled the ridge just beneath the head, lapped at the very tip of his cock. Kept her eyes locked with his as she circled him with her tongue, and he groaned loudly.

"Keep that up, and I'll come," he muttered.

"Maybe I want you to come." She enveloped him in her mouth, sucking gently on his cockhead. Her tongue swirled, her lips tightened, and he tensed beneath her. And when she cupped his balls and squeezed, he just about shot off the couch.

"Jesus, Jordan." He tangled his fingers in her hair, smoothed it away from her face so he could watch. He liked to watch—she'd learned that quick enough. And she didn't mind, for she liked watching too.

She continued her gentle assault, taking him deep, as deep as she could without gagging herself. He bumped the back of her throat, and she moaned around him. Loving that he trusted her enough to perform such an intimate act, though she doubted it had much to do with trust on Gabriel's part at this very moment.

No, he looked a little too enraptured by what her mouth was doing to him to worry about that.

Jordan sucked and squeezed, licked and stroked, working him into a frenzy. Between her legs she dripped, and if she had more hands, she'd touch herself, but her hands were already full. Full of Gabriel, touching him everywhere, and she felt incredibly greedy.

Incredibly free.

"I can't take it," he mumbled, reaching for her. She withdrew him from her mouth with an audible *pop*, and then his hands wrapped around her, hauling her up so she straddled him on the couch. Her knees were on either side of his lean hips, his cock brushing against her hot, aching pussy. "I don't want to come in your mouth."

Her entire body tingled at the thought of him doing just that. "I really wanted you to."

He laughed. Threw back his head and laughed, the sound sweet to Jordan's ears. He didn't do it often, but when it happened, she cherished it. "Later, darlin'. I'll come down your throat later, I promise."

She shivered, and he chuckled again, his hand curling around the back of her neck and bringing her down for his kiss. "I know you like it when I talk dirty to you."

"I do," she breathed against his mouth, anticipation curling through her veins. She didn't want to kiss him, not yet, because when she did, she would become lost. Lost to the fog and the haze his masterful lips and tongue pushed her under. And she went gladly. She always went gladly, but she enjoyed the buzz of longing too. That sweet, hypnotic *hum* just before their lips connected.

"What if I asked you to talk dirty to me?" His fingers twirled in her hair, pulling it tight, and the stinging pain made her gasp in pleasure. "Whisper in my ear everything you want me to do to you, darlin'. Tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you."

She gazed deep into his eyes, her mind aw whirl with all the possibilities. Could she do it? Could she whisper naughty suggestions in his ear without getting

embarrassed? He certainly had no qualms in telling her everything he wanted to do to her in graphic detail.

Dipping her head, she brushed her lips against his ear.

And proceeded to tell him everything she wanted him to do to her.

“I want you to touch my pussy and tell me how wet I am,” Jordan whispered in his ear, her lips brushing against the sensitized flesh. “I want you to slide your fingers deep inside me, and I want you to play with my clit and make me come. And then, when my body is still trembling from my orgasm, I want you to push inside me with your cock. I want you to fuck me hard, Gabriel. So hard I just might pass out. Can you do that for me?”

Gabe shuddered, more from her words than the fact that her tongue was flicking at his earlobe. God damn, did he train her right. Only a few days together, and she already knew exactly what to do, exactly what to say to push his buttons.

As if they were made for each other.

We were. We were made for this. I love her, and she loves me, and we'll be together forever.

He pushed the prophetic words from his mind and focused on the delectable little piece squirming in his arms. Her breasts brushed against his chest, her hard nipples driving him wild. The wet glide of her pussy against his pulsing dick drove him even wilder. He wanted to sink himself into that tight, creamy heat. Wanted to lose himself in her just one more night. One more night before he had to face the harsh realities tomorrow would bring them.

He had a feeling they would be harsh. His brief conversation with Darla only reiterated the sense of foreboding he'd felt all day.

“Baby, you’ve been keeping a secret from me.” She shifted back to study him, her brows drawn down in what looked like worry. “I didn’t know you were so good with the words. My dirty little girl.”

She smiled and pressed her forehead against his, their mouths so close they shared the same breath. "I learned from a master."

"That you did." He slid his hand down over one soft ass cheek, lingering there. He crept his fingers lower, teasing at her entry, and she gasped at his touch. "You like it when I play with you there, darlin'?"

"I do," she said with a sigh, her mouth shifting closer to his. "Touch me there again."

He did, just as their lips met and clung. He thrust his tongue inside her mouth just as he thrust his finger inside her tight pussy. She groaned, ground her lower body against his thrusting finger, and he added another one. Filling her up, fucking her nice and slow.

His cock twitched, desperate to get inside her, but he wanted to make good on her request. Withdrawing his finger from her, he searched her folds, teased her clit. Circled and pinched the swollen, greedy little piece of flesh as he continued to kiss her. She whimpered against his mouth, her lips falling away from his as he focused all his attention on her clit. Her breathing increased, became heavier, and he watched her. Loved the way she circled her hips, savored the cream that coated his fingers.

Her unique scent wafted up between them, and he leaned in, tugging on her clit with his fingers as he tugged on her nipple with his lips. Her hands came around to curl about his head, fingers threading into his hair and holding him close. She was wrapped all around him, practically smothering him, and he relished it.

Couldn't get enough of her.

"I'm coming," she gasped just before she fell apart. She shuddered, her cream rained all over his thrusting fingers, and he bit her nipple, just hard enough to make her scream in pain. In pleasure.

And just as she requested, he watched her. Waited until she came down from her orgasmic high but was still shaking in his arms, and he thrust up. Pushed his cock deep inside her, as far as he could go.

“Ooh,” she moaned, clasping his shoulders with her hands. She rose up on her knees, her inner walls sliding along his cock, and then she sank back down, the both of them crying out with agonized groans.

“Ride me, angel,” he urged, his hands wrapped around her hips, guiding her. She slid up and down his cock, faster and faster and he knew he was close. Too damn close.

“I’m going to come again,” she admitted, her teeth sinking into her lower lip.

“Come for me,” he whispered. “I’m close too.”

They strained against each other, and Jordan fell over the edge first, her entire body shuddering around him. The rhythmic clasp and release of her inner muscles around his cock sent him straight into orgasm, and he shot himself deep. Filled her with his semen as it spilled from his cock again and again.

She collapsed on top of him, their bodies hot and sticky with sweat. Her hair fell in his face, sweetly fragrant, and she clasped him tight. Overwhelming emotion flooded him, made him want to say things, words he wasn’t sure he meant. But he’d never felt like this.

Never.

“Take me to bed, Gabriel,” she whispered in his ear. Her voice was low, a little breathless, and she sounded tired.

She climbed off of him, and he stood, sweeping her into his arms. Cradling her beautiful naked body against his, he took them back into her bedroom and set her gently on the unmade bed. Watched her as she rolled over onto her side and pulled the sheet and comforter up over her. “Come to bed,” she urged as if it was the most natural thing ever, and he realized with a shock it was.

It just was.

Gabe slipped into bed beside her and pulled her close.

And slept.

Chapter Eleven

"I'm starving." Jordan made the declaration to no one in particular since no one seemed to be paying her any mind. She was hanging out at Tattoo Voodoo because, for whatever reason, Gabriel refused to let her be out of his sight, and it was way past dinnertime, which meant her stomach was growling.

Darla sat at the reception desk, talking with a potential client. Ryder was finishing up with someone. She could hear him giving the recitation of how to take care of their new tattoo. And Gabriel was hard at work in the back of the parlor, sketching an elaborate tattoo all over a burly young guy's back.

She enjoyed hanging out at the shop, but it was no fun when everyone was busy. She'd already looked through all the magazines. Most of them were old or tattoo oriented, and she had the tattoo she wanted. No need to look at any more.

Though she had to admit she wouldn't mind getting another one after this one healed, and it was coming along quite nicely. And she had the most superb artist wrapped around her little finger...

Jordan watched Darla lead the potential client over to the small alcove where they kept their books of the various tattoos they'd all done. Outside it was dark, past eight o'clock, and the fog was starting to roll in. There was a sandwich shop two doors down she'd been to before, and she knew they stayed open late. It would only take a few minutes. They would hardly miss her.

Grabbing her purse, she slipped out the front door with no one the wiser.

The air was cold, the breeze that hit her downright frigid, and she tucked her sweatshirt tight around her, bent her head against the blowing wind. The sidewalk

was virtually abandoned, and she saw the glowing lights of the sandwich shop just ahead. Hurried her steps as her growling stomach pushed her on.

Didn't even see the man who stood beneath the overhang of the bike shop that was closed for the night. He materialized out of the darkness, his teeth gleaming in the night, and his hand clamped about the crook of her elbow. Yanking her back under the overhang so no one could see them.

"What are you—"

"Shut up," he snarled, his vicious tone at odds with that eerie smile. "I have a message for you."

She struggled against his hold. Knew without a doubt this was the man her mother had sent to talk to her. She recognized his face, the creepy smile, though he sounded ten times more hostile than the last time she'd seen him.

"Stop fighting me." He gave her a little shake and thrust his face in hers. Those pale, pale eyes stared deep into hers, and she flicked her gaze away, frightened. His other hand came around, and he grasped her chin firmly, forcing her to look at him. "You need to do right by your mother."

"Like she did right by me?" she yelled, angry that he manhandled her in such a way. Mad at herself for slipping away from Gabriel for even a brief moment. How stupid could she be, all for a freaking sandwich?

His grip tightened, and she winced. "She is your blood, your only blood. Don't abandon her now or..."

"Or what?"

His face drew nearer, his eyes turning the faintest shade of red. She swore they glowed in the darkness. "Or you'll pay. With your life."

Her stomach felt as if it fell into her toes, and her entire body went cold. "Wh-what does she want me to do?"

"Come back home, Jordan. Visit her in prison. Testify for the defense." He shook her as if he could shake his words deeper into her brain. "Get rid of the boyfriend. He'll only make it worse for you, you know."

She stared into his menacing face, wishing he would say something else. Anything to give her a clue as to what was going on. "How?" she whispered.

"As if you don't know. Trust me. If you want to put him up as a sort of sacrifice, I have no problem taking him down. I'll send him where he really belongs." The man smiled again, affable and pleasant, though his glowing red eyes said he was anything but. "I may look like your regular nice, neighborly sort, hon, but I will tear that man from limb to limb and rip out his throat. Don't doubt me."

Jordan knew by the way he spoke, the look in his eyes, he meant every word. "I-I don't."

"Good." He tilted his head toward her. "So do we have an understanding?"

She stared at him, scared as to how she should answer. Words failed her, so she gave a single nod instead.

"Good." The word was spoken softly, too softly. He released his hold on her, gave her a pat on the back, and pushed her in the direction of the sandwich shop. "Now go get your dinner like a good girl. I know you're hungry."

Her appetite had evaporated the moment he grabbed her.

Jordan started walking toward the deli, glancing over her shoulder to find the man had emerged from the shadows and now stood on the sidewalk. Hands shoved into his pants' pockets, looking as kindly as he pleased.

"Don't tell your boyfriend we talked," he called after her.

She whirled around to face him. "Or?"

"Or he'll be dead by morning." The smile grew, and he actually laughed. "Believe me."

She hurried into the sandwich shop and sat at one of the few tables within the place. No way could she order, not now. Her stomach cramped with nerves and worry, and she offered a quick smile to the guy who stood behind the counter.

“Hey. Want me to start something for you?” He recognized her. She’d been in there a lot lately. They were cheap and good.

“I don’t think so. I, uh, there’s a creepy guy outside, and I’m waiting in here until he leaves. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Hell no, I don’t mind.” He was young and liked to play tough. His face took on a grim expression, and he came from around the counter and went to the door. Opened it against the blowing wind and peeked his head out. “I don’t see anyone.”

She went to stand behind him, glancing over his shoulder. The sidewalk was completely abandoned, not a single person was outside, and the fog was completely gone. She looked up at the sky. Saw the swirling black clouds hurtling toward the moon at breakneck speed. Soon the clouds would swallow it whole.

“I, uh, I should go back to the shop.” She waved her hand in the direction of Tattoo Voodoo. “Thanks for helping me out.”

“Want me to walk you?” He turned to face her, his body still propping the door open, letting all the cold air in.

She smiled, thankful for his kindness. He really was a nice guy, and she appreciated the gesture. “No, it’s okay. Just...stand right here and watch me until I go back into the tattoo shop, okay? Please? I would really appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

Waving at him, she ran toward the shop like a little kid, her shoes slapping hard against the concrete sidewalk. No smiling man lurked beneath the overhang of the bike shop or anywhere else that she could see. She caught sight of Darla sitting at the reception desk. Alone. Her eyes narrowed when Jordan stopped in front of the glass door, and she wondered if she looked as shaken up as she felt.

Waving again at the sandwich shop guy who still stood watch, she went inside the shop.

And mentally prepared herself for the questions that were soon to follow.

“Something happened to her, and she’s not telling you,” Darla practically hissed in Gabe’s ear.

He cleaned up his supplies, wincing when he felt a twinge in his lower back. He’d worked on that tattoo for hours, and he was exhausted. His body ached all over from holding the same position for so long. “What are you talking about?”

“She snuck out, Gabe! She was outside, I don’t know where, but she came running from the direction of the sandwich shop like she was trying to outrun the devil himself.” Darla shoved at his shoulder, so he had no choice but to turn around and face her. “She didn’t bring back a sandwich from the shop, which is weird in itself. I asked her where she’d been, and she changed the subject. She looked really rattled. She *still* looks rattled. I think someone confronted her.”

“Like who?” And why the hell would she not tell him? It made no sense. She knew he would protect her no matter what. That she could come to him and tell him anything, share any fear.

So why would she be secretive if some creep harassed her outside the shop? And why did she go outside in the first place? He’d told her explicitly not to leave without him.

“Maybe that guy you told me about. I’m sure he’s some sort of demon sent from hell in disguise.” Her lips tightened when she saw the slightly amused expression on Gabe’s face, and she shoved at his chest. So hard it frickin’ hurt. “I’m being serious, asshole! You think this is a joke? You think what I’ve told you is all a bunch of crap? Because it’s not, Gabe. You’re a fallen angel, and Jordan is the one you fell for, and now a demon is after the both of you, ready to take you out. So you need to prepare.”

“It just all sounds so...”

“Crazy? Why, yes, yes it does. I completely agree. But guess what? You won’t think it’s so crazy when your pretty little girlfriend goes missing and you have no idea where she’s at. Because she’s dead in a gutter somewhere due to your negligence and total amusement over the situation.”

“Hey.” He grew solemn. Just hearing that set him on edge. “You shouldn’t say shit like that.”

“I know. Hurts, huh? Makes your chest ache? Makes you madder than hell? Well, good. Get mad. You need to. Your life and your girlfriend’s life, they’re both at stake. That asshole means business.” Darla paused, looked over to where Jordan sat talking with Ryder. “I bet he told her not to say anything. Sneaky bastard. That’s how they operate.”

Gabe was silent, watched Jordan as well. He’d been so busy the last three hours he hadn’t really paid attention, but Darla was right. Jordan did look upset, out of sorts. Oh, she pretended just fine. Smiling and laughing at whatever nonsense Ryder was talking to her about, as if she didn’t have a care. But her skin was pale, her eyes wide. And he swore when she tucked a stray strand of blonde hair behind her ear, he saw her fingers shake.

He hurriedly cleaned up his area, ignoring Darla’s questioning looks until finally she had to say something.

“Are you going to talk to her?”

“Yeah, but not here in front of you two.” Gabe jerked his chin in Jordan and Ryder’s direction. “I’ll call you later and let you know what she said.”

“What if she tells you nothing?”

He shrugged. “Then nothing happened.”

“No.” Darla shook her head slowly. “It’ll be a lie. Something definitely happened. I can feel it.”

So did he, but he wasn't about to admit to the hoodoo voodoo shit. The same shit that was feeling more and more real as each day passed. "She wouldn't lie to me."

"You hope not. What if he threatened her? He'll do whatever it takes to gain her compliance." Darla stepped closer to him, her voice lowering. "He must be destroyed. Somehow we must call him out, all three of us together. We could use Jordan as bait."

"Hell, no," he growled.

"She would be safe. We'd never let anything happen to her."

"I can't take that chance."

"Why not? Because you love her?" Darla shot him a knowing look.

Gabe remained silent, his mind a jumble of thoughts. "I gotta go. I'll call you later."

"Gabe—"

"No more, Darla," he interrupted, glaring at her. "I'll call you and tell you what she said."

He went to Jordan and touched her shoulder, felt her jump. Odd. Turning around, she smiled up at him, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "You startled me."

"You ready to go?" His voice was rough, his nerves frayed. Damn it, he knew Darla was right. And he would be sorely disappointed if Jordan denied anything had happened. He wanted her to be honest with him.

He wanted Jordan to trust him more than anything.

"Yes." She grabbed her purse from the floor and slung it over her shoulder. "Let's go."

He drove back to his place instead of hers since it was closer, and he wanted to be on his turf versus hers when he confronted her. She was quiet, overly subdued,

and when she entered his house, she didn't say a word. Merely headed back to the bedroom, shedding her sweatshirt along the way.

Gabe watched her walk down the hall, admiring the swish of her hips, the way her jeans fit her perfect ass. Damn it, his libido was getting in the way of a serious matter. He needed to talk to her but was unsure as to how to approach it. Fuck her senseless and then hit her with the questions? Maybe dig in deep and then fuck her senseless?

Funny how fuck her senseless always made itself into the equation.

With grim determination, he headed down the hall and into his bedroom. Saw that she'd stripped down to nothing, absolutely nothing, and was slipping beneath the comforter of his bed. Just like that he had an erection, and he knew he needed to have her first.

Then he'd talk to her.

Chapter Twelve

His big, slightly rough hands felt so good as they skimmed along her flesh. Sparks flared everywhere he touched, and Jordan rolled over onto her back, giving him better access. Gabriel took it, his hands sliding down her front, to cup her breasts, his thumbs streaking across her hardened nipples. They moved on to drift across her stomach, teasing her there, making her shiver until finally he cupped her mound.

She arched into his touch, her eyes sliding closed. Wanting nothing more but to forget. Forget the man who threatened her life and Gabriel's. Forget the fear that always seemed to take over her life. Focus instead on the way Gabriel's fingers stroked her expertly between her legs, making her wetter, making her want him more.

More than she thought possible.

"Baby, you are so wet," he growled as he leaned over her, stealing her breath with a deep kiss as his fingers continued to work their magic, pushing inside her. "You've been thinking about me?"

She smiled. She always thought about him. "Maybe."

"Hmm." The sound rumbled in his chest as he loomed over her, so big and broad he blocked out everything around her until all she saw was him. He smiled, looking like the wicked angel he was. "Well, I'm going to take that as a yes."

"Kiss me, Gabriel," she urged, and he did. His mouth took hers, his tongue sweeping inside, tangling with her tongue. She lost herself to his kiss, to the way his hands wandered all over her body, the way his fingers unerringly went back to that particular spot between her legs that made her feel as if she would spiral out of

control. Splinter into a million pieces that would never be able to be put back together again.

“I have no patience tonight,” he murmured against her mouth when he broke the kiss, and she opened her eyes. His breath was a hot rasp across her lips, and she inhaled, breathing the same air as he, connecting them as much as possible. “I’m not much in the mood for foreplay. I want you too much.”

“Then fuck me.” She smiled sweetly when she heard his groan, and with one sure thrust, he was inside her, filling her deep.

So deep.

Jordan moved with him, caught up in the sensuous bump of his hips, the withdrawal of his cock before he plunged within her pussy. Again and again he thrust, the delicious friction of his cock dragging against her swollen inner tissues making her cry out. She’d been primed for this since he asked her if she was ready to go at the shop, and already she wanted to come. Hovered right on the edge of her orgasm, and she willed herself to hold off just a bit longer.

She wanted to enjoy it a little more.

“Ah damn, Jordan,” he muttered, straining above her. Her eyes opened, and she watched him, her breath stolen by the beauty of him in the throes. His head was thrown back, mouth slack, tendons in his neck in stark relief as he moved within her. His biceps bulged as he held himself above her, a thin sheen of sweat glistened on his bronzed skin, and she leaned up, traced the dragon tattoo on his arm with her tongue. Tasted the salty masculine essence of his skin.

He groaned, settled himself more fully over her, and stole her breath with his ravenous mouth. Their tongues danced wildly, she stroked the firm muscles of his ass, and just like that she shattered beneath him. Cried out as the orgasm took over her body and her limbs quivered with the intensity of her climax.

“Yeah, baby, just like that,” he encouraged with a raspy whisper. Her eyes flew open to find his dark gaze locked on hers, and he increased his thrusts. She knew he was close. “Jordan...”

She loved the way he said her name. She loved the way he touched her, kissed her, made love to her. Fuck her, make love to her—it was all the same and yet not. When he kissed her so savagely and fucked her like a wild man, it was still a way he showed the depth of his feelings for her.

Because she knew they were deep. Extraordinarily deep. If only she had the courage to tell him she loved him...

He cried out, his orgasm sweeping over him. She could tell from the way he held himself still for that brief, delicious moment before he lost all control. He shuddered atop her body, spilled himself deep inside, and she heard him mutter against her ear the sweetest words she could ever imagine.

“Jordan, I love you so much...”

* * *

He said it. And the moment the words fell from his lips, it was as if lightning struck him from within. A tugging started deep in his gut, spiraling throughout his entire body until he felt as if he could shoot fire from his fingertips. He was hot, burning up, and he blinked hard as he stared down into her beautiful face, desperate to bring her completely into focus.

“I love you too,” she whispered, her hand settling upon his cheek. He was still inside her. His cock pulsed as if it too had been struck by lightning and filled with a mysterious energy, and he was still hard. Amazingly so, since it felt as if he just spilled himself completely inside her. “I know it’s probably too soon, and everyone will think we’re crazy, but I’m so much in love with you I don’t remember not feeling this way.”

Something kick-started in his chest, and he grimaced. He settled all his weight on one propped hand so he could rub at his chest with the other. It hurt, pounded so damn hard he thought Jordan might hear it, and he glanced down at her. Saw that she stared up at him with concern.

“Are you okay?” Her hand fell away from his cheek. “Gabriel?”

He couldn't even speak. His entire body felt on edge. Slowly, so slow she probably didn't notice he resumed his position over her and started to move within her. Fucking her once again in slow, languid strokes, and she moved with him, her mouth curving into a sexy smile.

"I love you," he whispered again, and he felt the thump inside his chest increase its pace. Harder and harder, faster and faster, and he realized at the very moment they came together so quickly all over again that he knew what it was.

His heart. He finally had a heart.

All because of her.

* * *

"I have something to tell you." Jordan lay sprawled across the top of him, her hand stroking the light dusting of hair at the center of his chest.

"What?" He curled his arm around her shoulders and held her close, pressed his lips to the top of her head.

She sighed and glanced up at him, their gazes meeting. "He came to me tonight. Earlier. He showed up outside of the shop, when I snuck off to grab a sandwich."

"Who?" His fingers threaded through her hair.

"*Him*. That man. The one my mother sent to talk to me." She paused, waited for him to say something else, but he remained silent. "He threatened me. More than anything, he made a threat against you. Against your...life."

"I'm not scared," he said confidently.

And that was what scared her the most. His utmost confidence everything would be all right. How could he be so sure? "You should be, Gabriel. He wants to kill you. He told me if I told you, you would be dead by morning."

"So you told me anyway."

Fear trickled down her spine. “I had to think about it. I didn’t want to tell you for fear something might happen.” A sob threatened to spill, and she held it back. “I couldn’t live with myself if you were to die, Gabriel, because of something I said...”

The tears came before she even got the last word out. Flowed down her face freely. She tasted them, salty and damp on her lips.

“I’m not going to die.” His voice was firm, full of confidence. “Not with you here. Not with Darla and Ryder by my side. And definitely not at the hands of that asshole.”

“Gabriel.” She rested her arms on his chest and propped herself up so she could really look at him. “When he looked at me, his eyes turned *red*. Red like he’s some sort of devil. It was one of the scariest things I’ve ever seen.” And she’d seen a lot in her life.

“He probably is some sort of devil,” Gabriel said softly as he drew his index finger down the side of her face. “A demon most likely. At least, that’s what Darla told me.”

Her jaw dropped open. “Are you serious?”

He nodded. “Dead serious. We’re dealing with angels and demons here. It sounds like complete bullshit. Trust me, I know. I’ve resisted it for years. Darla’s talked about this kind of stuff since the first time I met her, and Ryder is right there with her. I always thought they were crazy.”

“But they’re not,” Jordan whispered. A chill moved up her spine, and she shivered. Relief flooded her when Gabriel’s arm automatically tightened around her and drew her even closer. He offered such comfort when nothing else would work.

“No, they’re not.” He took a deep breath and slowly shook his head. “I never believed, because I never had a *reason* to believe. And then you walked into the shop and tipped my world on its side.”

She wanted to smile but kept it in check. She tipped his world on its side? He’d done much the same to her. “And then you became a believer.”

“Reluctantly.” He smiled at her, and it took her breath away. Would she ever get used to his decadent good looks, the powerful allure he had that drew her like a moth to the flame? “The more I talk to Darla and to you, the more that happens, the more I have to believe. I don’t have a choice.”

“No, neither of us do.” She settled her head on his chest once more, listened to the reassuring, steady beat of his heart. She didn’t remember ever being comforted by the sound before. “What now?”

“I’m going to call Darla and tell her what you told me. I want her and Ryder to show up here first thing in the morning.”

“Why?” She drew lazy circles on his chest with the tip of her finger. Could’ve sworn she felt his cock twitch and rise close to her hip. Not that she minded. She already wanted him again.

She’d always want him.

“Because we need to prepare. We’re going into battle, darlin’.” He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “And we’re going to need your help.”

Chapter Thirteen

"I stayed up all night contemplating this," Darla said the moment Gabe and Jordan walked into Tattoo Voodoo. "And we need to get you back home, so to speak."

Jordan's mouth dropped open. "Me?"

"Mmm-hmm." Darla nodded, shooting a meaningful glance in Gabe's direction. "We need to take her to the prison. She needs to talk to her mom."

"No way." Jordan shook her head, even backed up a few steps. He reached out to stroke her arm in a soothing gesture, but she flinched away from him. "I vowed never to talk to her again a long time ago. I haven't talked to her since it all happened."

"You mean you haven't spoken to your mother since she first went to jail for poisoning you?" Darla looked incredulous.

"No, I haven't." Jordan's chin tilted up. Defiant, beautiful. He couldn't help but admire her. Hell, he even noticed the appreciative glance Ryder cast her way, and he sent his friend a murderous look.

He was such a jealous bastard, didn't like anyone even looking at her.

"Why not?" Darla asked.

"Why would I? She tried to *kill* me. She poisoned me for years, watched me suffer in pain and drew it out—she enjoyed it. I'm lucky I'm not dead. I'm lucky I'm not as damaged as I could be." Jordan looked furious. Her face was suffused with color, and her eyes were wide as she glared at Darla. "I have neurological damage still. My muscles ache. I don't have very good dexterity in my fingers and hands. Sometimes it hurts when I walk too much. My legs ache, feel like they're going to give out, and my ankles too. I'm not even going into the mental damage."

"It's okay, darlin'," Gabe said, but she glared at him. All fury and fire and pissed-off woman. She was strong, stronger than she gave herself credit for. Stronger than he even thought. He could feel it practically vibrating off of her. The strength fueled by her emotion—it would get her far if she used it properly.

"That woman fucked up my life. I don't even want to talk to her ever again." Jordan practically spat the words out.

Darla and Jordan contemplated each other for a long, silent moment until finally Darla caved in first. "You must talk to her. It's the next step in the process."

"What process?" Jordan threw up her arms, looking utterly frustrated.

"To ensure Gabe is completely yours. That he is completely human. You know if the need came up, he could turn into...another creature. He's just never been called to do so."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Gabe glared at Darla, confusion filling him.

"The scars on your back, Gabe? They're from your wings. Your guardian-angel wings. But if you so chose, if you needed to, let's say, do battle with a few pissed-off demons? Your other wings—your fallen-angel wings—would sprout up and help you...move faster."

Gabe threw back his head and laughed. He couldn't help it. It was the most absurd, ludicrous thing he'd ever heard in his life. "You must be joking."

The stern expression on Darla's face told him clearly she wasn't. "I'm sick and tired of you not taking this seriously, Gabe. We're talking life and death here, specifically your life or death as well as your girlfriend's. When are you going to stop doubting and start believing?"

He studied her, saw that she wasn't going to back down. Jordan watched him as well, a wary expression on her face, and he wondered if she had a few doubts as well.

Gabe sighed, ran a hand across the back of his neck. His muscles were tight, his entire body was tense, and damn it, he knew he had no choice. Darla was right. In order for this thing, these demons—whatever—to be stopped, he needed to take it all seriously.

He needed to believe.

“You’re right, Darla. I’m...sorry.” Gabe rarely apologized for anything he did, but he had to with Darla. Reaching out, he grabbed hold of Jordan’s hand and gave her fingers a squeeze. “I need to be a believer. We all need to be, so we can fight this and end it. That includes you too, Jordan. You need to cooperate with Darla’s suggestion.”

“And what if I don’t want to?” she asked quietly.

Gabe looked deep into her worried blue eyes. She wasn’t being defiant. She was scared out of her mind, not that he could blame her. “I don’t want to make you do anything, darlin’, but if you want to survive this, I suggest you take Darla’s advice and we do what she says.”

Jordan released a pent-up breath, her skin going a little pale. “Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll talk to my mother.” A visible shiver moved through her. “But I don’t like this. And I won’t talk to her more than five minutes, tops.”

“I’m proud of you, babe.” He hauled her into his arms and held her close, let his mouth settle at her ear. “You’re so strong. I love you.”

She turned her head, her mouth brushing his cheek making his skin tingle. “I love you too. I want you to be with me when I talk to her. I can’t do it alone.”

“I’ll stand by your side no matter what,” he whispered and hugged her even closer.

He meant every word. It was a promise he made to her long ago, and he’d failed her all those years her mother poisoned her. Stood by and let it happen like a coward because he believed he had no choice. What sort of guardian angel did that?

Gabe would never fail Jordan again. No matter what.

No matter what.

* * *

The prison was a large, gray, nondescript monolith with a strange smell that permeated every room and an echo throughout that sounded almost haunted. Jordan had never been to a jail before. Never had to go through the process of being scrutinized, searched, pulling every item out of her pockets and having it scanned. Her sense of privacy felt violated, and she was only a visitor.

She couldn't imagine being an actual prisoner.

Gabriel stood stoically at her side. Doing as the prison guards said, never offering a smile or even muttering a single word. He just did as the guards asked, no questions, not even a flicker of emotion on his face besides the subtle tick in his jaw. She was probably the only one who noticed since they were so close.

As close as two people could get. He loved her, and she loved him.

The idea of it still sent goose bumps scattering all over her skin. That he loved her, had vowed to take care of her, meant more than anything that had ever happened to her before.

Finally, the guard led them into a holding room, where they were told to wait. This particular prison didn't do personal visits, at least not with her mother. It was to be held through thick, impenetrable glass via a phone. No physical contact, which was fine with Jordan.

She wasn't sure what she might do if her mother tried to touch her.

Nerves warred in her stomach, and she clutched Gabriel's hand so tight surely her nails were biting into his skin. He didn't protest. Merely sat next to her, as close as he could get in the bucket chairs that lined the wall. His shoulder brushed hers, their arms tangled, fingers intertwined. She held on to him as if he was her life source and she would fall apart if he let her go.

She wouldn't doubt that would actually happen if he did.

Finally a loud buzz sounded, and a guard appeared, ready to take them into the visiting area. Jordan and Gabriel followed the tall man into the long, narrow room.

"She's at the end of the room, the last alcove." The guard nodded once, kindness shining in his eyes. "Don't worry. She can't touch you."

Her mother might not be able to touch her or do physical harm, but she could still get her with words. A look. Jordan was afraid that was all it would take.

She let Gabriel lead her, let him be the one who saw her mother first. He yanked an empty chair into the alcove so both of them could sit there, and Jordan looked up. Saw her mother sitting down at a little counter behind the glass. Her expression was full of expectancy and...bitterness.

Jordan sat in the chair next to Gabriel, her gaze fixed on her mother's face. Loretta Sumner looked old. And so similar to her it was almost frightening. She knew she resembled her mother, but it had been so long since she'd seen her she'd almost forgotten. But there was no denying they were related. Her mother had the same bone straight long blonde hair, though hers was liberally shot through with gray. Her eyes were the same color, even their facial features, but her mother had gained weight through the years, so she was substantially chubbier.

It was as if she were hurtled back through time. Memories flooded her. Of her mother so sickeningly sweet to her when she was young. Most likely poisoning her father at that time until he finally died. Oh yes, and her grandmother, her father's mother. Her mom had taken her in to help take care of her, for she'd been in poor health after a traumatizing hip fracture that made her bedridden.

Her poor grandmother had never recovered. Dead at the hand of her mother.

Gabriel nudged her in the side with his elbow, jarring her from her thoughts. Her mother had grabbed the phone receiver from the wall and was pointing at hers. Jordan reached for it as if in slow motion and brought it to her ear.

“Jordan.” Her mother’s soft voice reached across the phone line and settled itself in her brain. Her stomach roiled, and she was afraid she might be sick. “It’s so good to see you.”

They’d discussed what she needed to say to her mother on the drive here. Darla had plenty of suggestions, as had Ryder. Gabriel had none, which was fine with her.

She was just thankful he was with her.

“Hello.” Jordan cleared her throat. She couldn’t even make herself call her mother Mom, or by her first name. “I was told you wanted to talk to me.”

The sugary-sweet smile curving her mother’s mouth made Jordan sick. “So you met him. What do you think?”

“I think he’s evil incarnate. Just like you.” She thought she might regret the words, but they fell easily from her lips.

Loretta’s eyes narrowed, and she clutched the phone tight. “You best watch what you say. There are other...forces involved here.”

“I know.” Jordan smiled. Couldn’t believe she was doing so. “He happens to be sitting next to me.”

Her mother barely looked at Gabriel. “He’s an easy mark. Too head over heels to use his head the right way. It will be a pleasure to know he’ll die protecting you.”

Gabriel growled as if he heard her every word, and Jordan shot him a quick glance. “Shouldn’t you be careful what you say? Isn’t everything monitored?”

Her mother laughed, but there was no humor backing it. “I haven’t made any idle threats or pointed the finger at myself. I have nothing to hide.”

Jordan stared at her. What had happened to her mother to make her turn out this way? She didn’t understand it. Didn’t know what could’ve gone so wrong to make her mother turn into this...evil person. “Why?”

“Why what? Why did I send my special boyfriend to you?” Loretta laughed. “Because I knew he would get the message across. He doesn’t want to screw around.

He means business, you know. And he's not above doing what he has to do to get what he wants."

"And what does he want?"

Her mother grinned and nodded in Gabriel's direction. "Him."

A shiver moved through her. This wasn't just about her facing her fears and dealing with her mother. Much bigger stakes were at play. Like the battle between good and evil. Between a demon and an angel, a fallen angel who hovered in a sort of limbo until he made his choice to either stay on earth or fall completely to hell.

Jordan looked at him then. Noticed he stared at her with a sort of grim determination that startled. He wasn't going anywhere, wasn't about to leave her side. She knew this without a doubt. If she could count on him now, she could count on him for a lifetime.

She was determined to fight for that lifetime with him.

"You're a pawn, Jordan," her mother said, her voice soft, almost a whisper. "Just like I'm a pawn as well. I'm used to my role in this little game. I've been playing it for years. I just assumed my time in the game was finished. But not any longer. I've been brought back out to draw you out. And in turn, draw him out too. It worked. Now he must face the consequences."

"He's not afraid," Jordan murmured, and her mother laughed.

"He should be. What you're about to deal with is far stronger than anything any of you have ever seen."

"There will be four of us. He has two others by his side." She paused, let the words sink in. Darla specifically told her to warn her mother of their existence. "Two others that are just like him."

"And you don't think my little boyfriend doesn't have allies by his side? He must."

"You don't know that for sure?"

"I know nothing for sure. Though I do know he is the strongest man I've ever known. His looks are deceiving."

"Gabriel is willing to take him on," Jordan murmured.

"Then you're both idiots," her mother said in a singsong voice, nodding toward Gabriel. "Will you testify for me, Jordan?"

Jordan shook her head. "You ask too much. You go too far."

"I had to try." Her mother shrugged. "I wish you both luck. You're going to need it."

"What do you get out of it?" Jordan asked, curiosity getting the best of her. "What is your reward for participating in all of this?"

"You say it as if I have a choice." Her mother laughed again. "I've never had a choice. This is just what I must...do. What I've been told to do."

"So poisoning me, trying to kill me, that's always been at the what? Command of someone else?"

"I'm not about to answer that, my dear. I'm going back to trial. I'm not stupid enough to implicate myself." Her mother shook her head. "I'm sorry you weren't more agreeable."

"I'm sure you are." The sarcasm in Jordan's voice was heavy and unmistakable.

"Good-bye, Jordan." Smiling, her mother hung up the phone, then turned her attention to the guard who stood behind her.

Jordan set the phone into the cradle on the wall and looked at Gabriel. He watched her with a dark intensity that almost scared her. Not saying a word, he offered her his hand, and she took it. Let him lead her out of the narrow room, through the long halls of the prison until they were outside and she could take a deep breath. Of fresh air not tainted by her mother and evil. She tasted freedom.

And a hint of foreboding. A shiver moved through her.

They hadn't yet escaped it.

“Her threats mean nothing,” Gabriel uttered as they headed toward Darla’s car. She sat behind the steering wheel, Ryder next to her, their expressions anxious, taut. “He lurks. I can fucking feel the bastard, which means he’s close.”

“You can feel him?” She glanced around the parking lot but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“Hell, yeah, I can. I’ve never experienced anything like this before.” He went to the back door of the car and opened it, waited for her to get inside. “You need to be careful, darlin’. He’s out there. And he’s probably not alone.”

“I’m not scared.” She repeated his earlier words, and he smiled. “I have you by my side.”

“And that just might be your downfall.”

Chapter Fourteen

The car died. Just fucking died with no warning, no sputtering of the engine, nothing. Darla slammed her hands on the steering wheel and cursed, glaring at Ryder, who sat next to her. Gabe didn't say a word, his entire body rigid as he stared out the window. He watched as the fog rolled in. It swamped the car completely and blocked the fading sun within seconds, shrouding them in darkness.

"What's going on?" Jordan clutched his hand as she scooted closer to him, both of them staring out the car window.

"There's a house up ahead. An abandoned one. I was looking at it when the car died." Darla flicked her chin in the direction of the hill just above them. "I can't see it now, though, with the fog coming in."

"It's them," Ryder said ominously, his hand curled around the door handle. "Or him. Whatever. He's out there. I can feel it."

"I can feel it too." Gabe brought their connected hands up to his mouth and pressed a kiss to Jordan's knuckles. "Stay in the car, darlin', and we'll go check it out."

"I am not about to be left alone out here." She shook her head firmly.

"You can't leave her alone," Darla echoed. "No way. She's coming with us."

A shiver of fear slid down his spine. "What if something happens to her?"

"What if something happens to her here? At least with us we'll know what's going on. Come on." Darla yanked the keys out of the ignition and shoved them in the front pocket of her jeans as she opened the door. Ryder did the same, both of them exiting the car with surprising speed.

Gabe reached for Jordan, yanking her into his arms and holding her close. The time was here. He knew it without a doubt. Breathing deeply of her fresh, sweet scent, he closed his eyes and buried his face in her hair.

"I love you," he whispered. "Stay close. Stay safe."

"Gabriel." She withdrew from him so their gazes met. "Promise me you won't do anything stupid—"

He placed his finger over her lips. "I'm going to have to do things you won't like."

"Right, like risk your life," she muttered when his finger dropped away. "I don't know what I'll do if you—"

"Get hurt? Don't worry." He shushed her with a press of his lips to hers. Sinking into her mouth, he deepened the kiss until their tongues tangled and his heart rate increased. He needed this; he needed her. Their connection, it gave him strength, courage. Courage he needed to face whatever demons lay in wait outside.

"Come on!" Darla pounded on the window, startling them both. "Stop making out, and let's go."

"I love you," Jordan murmured just before he opened the car door.

Those three words repeated themselves in his mind as he slipped out of the car, Jordan still at his side. As they started toward the abandoned house, all of them fell into line behind Darla, who led them there. For whatever reason she believed they were there. The man, the demon. Gabe wondered if he was alone or with others.

He hoped like hell he was alone.

They walked silently, the house suddenly appearing, though still in the distance. The dead leaves and broken twigs crunching beneath their feet was the only sound. Thick fog swirled around them, damp and clinging like cold fingers drifting across his skin. Jordan walked in front of him, her hair in its high ponytail bouncing with her every step, and regret filled him.

She shouldn't be here, suffering like this. She deserved happiness. A life full of light and joy, not darkness and pain. She'd already suffered more than any human ever should.

Gabe never wanted her to suffer again.

The house loomed up ahead, large and foreboding. Bare trees surrounded it, not a single leaf clung to their branches, and it all looked so barren. The house was three stories, white clapboard with a dark gray roof. The windows were boarded up, the paint peeling, and it looked as if no one had lived there for years.

He definitely wasn't one to be fearful, but he had to admit this house scared the crap out of him.

"He's in there." Darla stopped and turned to look at all three of them. "I can feel his presence."

"Will he show himself?" Jordan asked, sounding anxious.

"I doubt it. I think he wants us to come inside the house."

Ryder shook his head. "I'm afraid we'll be walking into a trap."

"It's a trap we must walk into," Darla stressed, glancing over her shoulder at the house. "I believe he's alone."

"Why would he risk fighting us if he's alone?" Gabe stared up at the house as well.

"Because he's stronger than we think. Don't ever forget that." Darla turned and headed toward the house once more. They all stretched out alongside her, a wall of four as they marched toward the front porch. The cement steps leading up to it were wide enough they could all stay in a line as they walked up the stairs.

Gabe went to the door first, his hand wrapped around the cold metal handle. Strangely, it turned with ease. It wasn't even locked. Opening the door, he poked his head in, saw that the vast room was completely empty save for one large cardboard box sitting in the center.

“Nothing’s in here,” he said, glancing over his shoulder to look at everyone. Darla’s eyes widened. Ryder shoved her out of the way as he lurched toward Gabe, but it was too late.

The hand clamped around his shoulders with a force that felt as if fingers—claws—whatever the hell they were, tore into his skin. Gabe yelled, tried to turn and fight off the creature, but it was no use. He was yanked into the house, the door slammed behind him, and he was thrown to the ground.

Something smacked him on the back of the head so hard, his skull knocked against the floor.

“It’s locked.” Ryder rattled the door handle, then beat on the solid wood with his fists. Jordan stood immobile, watching as Darla ran across the porch, pressing on each boarded up window as if she could get inside.

Jordan knew she wouldn’t be successful. The place was locked up like a drum. Ryder had been right. It was a trap, but only Gabriel was caught in it. The sick feeling in her stomach grew when a wicked murmur of glee sounded from within the house.

Just beyond the door she heard a horrible, loud thump, and she jerked at the sound. It was Gabriel; she knew it. The man, beast, whatever he could be, was hurting her Gabriel.

And if he had his way, he would eventually kill him.

“We need to get inside,” she said, her voice small, but neither of them paid her any attention. They were too intent on breaking through the windows, the door, whatever they could find. “Now!” she yelled, startling them both.

“I can’t get the goddamn door open,” Ryder said, his voice filled with frustration. He thumped his forehead against the door, defeat written all over his handsome face as he still clutched the door handle. “Damn it, he’s alone in there.”

“Come around to the back.” Jordan waved a hand and they all hurried to the back of the house. She spotted the single door, the rickety, narrow staircase that led up to it, and she ran up the stairs without hesitation. Jerked the door open with an ease that shocked her.

Just like Gabriel had done with the front door. She wondered if she was walking into a trap as well.

“Unbelievable,” Darla muttered from behind her.

“Wait a minute.” Ryder ran up the wooden staircase, his heavy footsteps jarring the structure. “Let me go in there first. Make sure everything’s okay.”

Darla rolled her eyes and stepped aside. “Let’s all just go in, Ryder. We’re wasting time.”

“Gabriel’s in there alone,” Jordan added.

“As if you need to remind me,” Ryder said, his voice grim as his gaze bounced from Darla to Jordan back to Darla again. “Let me just glance inside. You can walk in right behind me.”

He went inside without another word, Darla pausing on the threshold for only a moment, and Jordan stood beside her. Ryder crept into the dark space, glanced back over his shoulder, and nodded. Indicating he wanted them to come inside.

The door slammed in their face before they got a chance. Darla leaped back with a yelp, gripping Jordan’s arm so hard it hurt. “Damn it!” she yelled, pounding her fists on the solid door. “Ryder, are you all right?”

“What the hell?” Jordan heard Ryder exclaim just before another sickening thud, the unmistakable sound of a heavy body falling to the floor.

“He’s been hurt. Just like Gabriel,” Jordan whispered to no one.

Darla was already running back down the staircase, waving a hand at Jordan. “Let’s go! There’s gotta be another way inside.”

Jordan followed her, dread creeping down her spine. This wasn’t good, whatever was happening. The strongest players of their team were both trapped

inside with a demon. Possibly more than one demon. They didn't know. Not that Jordan doubted Darla's strength, but it was scary, having the men inside while they remained outside.

"There's an open window." Darla's harsh whisper reached Jordan's ears and she ran to where the woman stood. Both of them stared at the window, thin white curtains blowing toward them since there was no screen.

There was also no breeze.

"I don't like this," Jordan said, but Darla was already pushing herself through the window headfirst. Her booted feet dangled from the window ledge for the briefest moment before she fell in with a soft thud.

She got to her feet and looked through the window with a smile on her face. "Come on, Jordan. I'll help you in."

The window slammed just as Darla started to reach toward her, the curtains falling down and concealing Darla from her view. Jordan ran to the window and beat on it, but it was no use. She couldn't even hear Darla inside, let alone lift the window. It was as if it was made of solid rock—it weighed a ton.

She was completely alone.

It was as if she'd driven all three of them inside. Was she the key that unlocked the trap? The heavy responsibility of it all weighed on her shoulders. She glanced around, wishing she could see something, hear anything that could give her a hint of what would happen next, but there was nothing.

She couldn't wait outside any longer. She needed to make sure everyone was okay. Determination steeled her spine, and she walked around the house, looking for a way to get in. Every window was sealed shut, and no lights shone. She heard absolutely nothing. Even outside it was still.

Strange. And scary.

Jordan came to the doorway Ryder had entered, and she walked back up the old staircase, hopeful the door might open.

It did.

She slipped into the eerily quiet house and carefully closed the door behind her. Unease crept over Jordan's skin as she glanced about the empty room. It was bitterly cold inside, colder than it was outdoors, and that was saying a lot. There wasn't a trace of anyone or anything within. Thick white cobwebs coated the corners; debris and dust littered the floor. She passed the kitchen, noticed every single cupboard door hung open, and a rat scurried across the broken linoleum floor, almost making her gasp aloud.

A low groan sounded from the front of the house, and the hairs on Jordan's arms stood on end. It was Gabriel. She'd recognize the deep timbre of his voice anywhere. She hurried her steps, heading toward the front of the house.

A single light clicked on from the front room, and she came upon the open space. Gabriel lay on the floor on his back, another groan emitting from him. The man—more beast now—stood over him, rubbing his hands together as he nudged at Gabriel's shoulder with his clawed bare foot.

"Wake up. Your girlfriend is here." The man lifted his head, glowing red eyes piercing her where she stood.

Jordan tore her gaze from his and looked around in confusion. Where were Darla and Ryder?

"So pretty," the beast said, cackling when she glared at him. "And so angry."

Jordan stepped forward, her voice firm. "Get away from him."

"Make me," the beast taunted, then threw back his head and laughed.

How was she supposed to fight this...thing without Ryder and Darla at her side? She didn't know what to do. More than anything, she wanted to run to Gabriel and make sure he was all right. He still looked in one piece, though a trickle of dark red blood ran down the side of his forehead.

“Where’s your friends, hmmm?” the beast asked, as if he could read her mind. “This will be easy, dealing with only you. Rather unfortunate your big, mean boyfriend fell so quickly. He’s not as strong as he made you believe.”

Panic clawed at her throat, but she refused to show it. She stood taller, squared her shoulders, and took another step toward them. The man-beast crossed his arms and cocked a brow, as if daring her to come closer.

She couldn’t back down no matter how much she wanted to. Fear made her tremble all over, and she took a deep breath, fighting the emotion. She could do this. She could face this man, demon, whatever the heck he was. She didn’t have a choice.

Above all else, she needed to save Gabriel.

“Jordan!”

She turned at the sound of her name being called and saw Darla and Ryder running toward her, looking a little worse for the wear, but at least both of them were in one piece.

“You’ve made a mistake, challenging us,” Darla warned as stopped next to Jordan’s side. She sounded out of breath. “Three against one will make this easy.”

“She doesn’t count,” the man-beast said, flicking his clawed fingers in Jordan’s direction, though Jordan swore she heard his voice waver. “The mortal is no match for me.”

“Ah, but we’re not mere mortals. And you shouldn’t underestimate her.” Darla shook her head, a low tsking noise escaping her. Ryder stood on the other side of Jordan, all three of them facing the demon, who stuck his tongue out at them. His pointed tongue reminded Jordan of a snake’s.

“Yes, only stupid little fallen angels that have no purpose in life with the exception of finding the ones you fell for. Don’t you know how much easier it is to fall all the way? How much more exciting your life would be? Coexisting among the mortals is no way for creatures like you three to live.”

"I'm not tempted by your demon world, and neither is he." Darla jerked a thumb in Ryder's direction. "And especially not him." She pointed at Gabriel.

"Of course, because he's in love with the mortal." The demon rolled his red eyes, the effect so creepy Jordan shivered. "Stupid fuck. *She* can't save him. She's worthless."

"I can save him." Darla lifted her chin.

"So can I." Ryder stepped in front of Darla and Jordan, glowering at the beast.

"Oooh, are you two brewing for a fight?" The easygoing Southern accent reminded Jordan of the first time she met the man. It was rather disconcerting to hear it come from this red-eyed demon beast.

"I'm more than ready." Ryder swung his right arm, his large fist flying toward the demon, but he ducked at the last minute. Ryder's fist whistled through the air, and he nearly stumbled from the force of his momentum.

The demon danced around the still seemingly unconscious Gabriel, clapping his hands as he laughed. "You missed, you missed," he chanted.

Darla looked over at Jordan. "Step back. I don't want you to get hurt."

"But..." *What about Gabriel?*

"Step back!" Darla yelled as she turned away from her to lunge at the demon. She threw all of her weight on him, knocking the beast to the ground not far from where Gabriel lay, and they rolled around. Darla grabbing and punching wherever she could, the demon screaming as he flipped her to the floor, pinning her.

Jordan scurried back as Ryder went for the beast, his hands gripping at the black shirt the creature wore and trying to yank him off Darla. He wouldn't budge. She saw the strain in Ryder's face and arms as he tried to pry the demon off, but he wouldn't leave.

"Sweet angel pie, how would you like a nice demon fucking?" the beast crooned, reaching out to trace his claws down the side of Darla's face. He sat atop her, his legs straddling her hips, lower body pressed to hers. She turned her head,

her teeth snapping at his flesh, and he slapped her so hard the crack reverberated throughout the room. "Bitch. You'll pay for that."

Ryder yelled, literally threw himself on top of the beast, but the demon flinched his shoulders, sending Ryder toppling onto the ground with a loud *thump*. Jordan lurched forward, feeling helpless as she went for Darla. She lay on the floor moaning, her cheek red and swollen, three deep scratches embedded on her skin and seeping blood. Her eyes met Jordan's, and she shook her head, mouthed the word *go*.

Jordan shook her head in return. "No," she gasped, her eyes going wide when she glanced up and saw the dark shadow looming over the demon and Darla.

It was Gabriel hovering above them, his shirt gone. Big black wings spanned wide from the center of his back. Her mouth dropped open, and as if in slow motion, she watched Gabriel grab the demon by the scruff of his neck and toss him off Darla as if he didn't weigh a thing.

The beast rolled to the side, taking Ryder with the movement so that he lay beneath him. A low growl emanated from Gabriel, and he grabbed the beast, lifted him completely off Ryder, and threw him across the room. The demon slammed against the wall with a horrendous *thump*, falling to the floor, where he rolled back onto his feet. He lunged for Gabriel, and Gabriel dodged him, his leg flying out to the side. The demon tripped and fell to the floor not far from where Darla lay.

"Get the fuck out," Gabriel said, his voice rough.

"I'm stronger than you," the demon spat out, his voice weakening. "I'm stronger than all of you put together."

"Prove it." Ryder stood beside Gabriel, wings sprouting from his back now as well. Their shirts had completely disappeared.

"Yes." Darla loomed behind the beast, and the sound of her voice caused him to turn around, red eyes wide. Her feet didn't even touch the ground. As she stood there clad in only her bra and jeans, delicate black wings sprouted from her upper back, fluttering and generating the gentlest breeze. "Prove it."

Wild red eyes looked from Darla to Ryder to Gabriel, then stared straight at Jordan. He lifted his hand, his fingers curled, claws glittering with the remnants of Darla's blood. "This is all your fault."

She stepped forward, drawing closer to the three fallen angels who surrounded the beast. She wasn't scared anymore. Not when she glimpsed the arrogant confidence on Gabriel's face, the utter serenity on Darla's, the grim determination on Ryder's. These three would take care of her, fight for her until they had no more fight left.

Individually he could take them on, but together, the demon had nothing on them. His strength was weakening with every second that passed. The circle the three angels formed around him grew tighter and tighter, and Jordan swore he started to shrink, smaller and smaller. It reminded her of *The Wizard of Oz*, when the witch melted into nothing, and she wanted to laugh hysterically at the thought.

Could her life get any crazier than this?

"Get away," the demon yelled, his voice high-pitched as he stared wildly at all of them. "Leave me be! Leave me be!"

"Motherfucker," Gabriel growled as he stepped forward, his hand curling about the nape of the demon's scrawny neck. He turned, thrusting the hissing beast toward Jordan, and she reared back. "Tell him to go to hell, Jordan. Tell him!"

She stared into the face of the beast and swore she saw her mother's eyes staring back at her. Cold and calculating, no warmth, no love emanated from those eyes she'd looked into practically her entire life. Her mother had never cared.

The realization enraged her.

"Get out of my life," she murmured, her voice growing stronger with every word spoken. "Get out. Go back to hell where you belong!"

The beast howled, and Gabriel whirled around and dropped the writhing creature back into the circle the three angels formed. He stared at Jordan for a long, quiet moment, his expression full of such pride and love it nearly overwhelmed her.

Flashing her a quick smile, he turned back to the demon, his arms interlinking with Ryder's and Darla's.

A screech sounded, so loud Jordan slapped her hands over her ears to block it out, and then a puff of smoke appeared in the center of where they stood.

The demon was gone. Just like that.

Jordan collapsed to the ground in a heap of tears.

Chapter Fifteen

Gabe ran his hand down the smooth expanse of Jordan's back as they both stood beneath the hot spray of the shower. Her back was to him, her head bent as she let the water cascade over her hair, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He couldn't believe it was over, couldn't believe how fucking simple it had turned out. Darla, in her typical smug way, uttered a simple, "Told ya so," as they fled the empty house without a backward glance.

The scratches on her face didn't even faze her. Her cheek was so swollen her eye was almost swelled shut. But she'd been so damned gleeful as they climbed into the car and it started without a problem, he wondered if she would've driven them to a bar to celebrate.

But no, she'd dropped him and Jordan back at his place. Then she'd taken off with a squeal of the tires, Darla and Ryder laughing as they drove away.

Crazy woman. Brave woman. The fire Darla displayed earlier had been amazing.

Memories assailed him. How the demon grabbed him, yanking him into the house so quickly, then knocked him out. He'd feigned unconsciousness when everyone entered the room. He'd hated letting his friends get hurt, but he'd needed to do it in order to gather his strength and prepare his attack. It had been the only way.

And it had worked. The wings appeared as if he'd conjured them up in his imagination. He'd thought of everything Darla had told him and believed.

"Tired, darlin'?" He let his hand drift along the tattoo he gave her. First across one angel wing, then the other. It was healing nicely. He moved down to caress her

lower back, his fingers curling as he resisted the urge to touch her sweet ass. Having her naked and wet in front of him was proving a temptation he could hardly deny. He was exhausted, in pain, and yet he still wanted her.

He would always want her.

“Yes.” She stepped out from beneath the spray and smoothed her hair back with both hands as she turned to face him. A slight smile curved her lips as she blinked away the droplets from her eyes. “But I’m never too tired for you.”

He smiled and hauled her close. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

Their mouths met in a hungry kiss, tongues sliding against each other, hands wandering over deliciously wet flesh. His cock jerked, hardened in reaction to her nearness, and he wanted nothing more but to pick her up, press her against the tile wall, and fuck both of them into oblivion.

“I want you,” he growled against her throat as he licked her there. The water beat hard against his back, making him wince. The wings were gone, almost as magically as they’d appeared, but the scars where they punched through his skin were tender. His entire body ached from the force of the demon’s abuse, but it was nothing. Not when he had his woman in his arms.

“I want you too.” She clutched his head, her fingers tugging on his hair, so he lifted up and looked at her. “I love you.”

“Baby, I love you too.” Again their mouths fused, and he slid a hand down to her ass, lifting her up so her slender legs wound tight around his torso.

Gabe pressed her against the shower wall, groaning against her mouth when she thrust her lower body against him. He felt the alluring heat of her pussy, knew she was wet and creamy for him. Without warning he slid inside her, filling her to the very brim, and she cried out at his invasion.

“I couldn’t resist,” he murmured as he thrust slow and easy, in and out of her in a torturous glide. “I want you too much.”

“Oh, Gabriel.” The wistful sigh she gave went straight to his cock, and he pushed hard and deep, moving inside her with smooth, even strokes.

She moved with him, her hips lifting with his every thrust, and their mingled groans echoed in the shower, sounded high above the beat of the water splashing against the tiles. His entire body felt invigorated, his heart beating at an excessive rate, and he increased his pace. Fucking her, loving her, he lost himself inside her with only a few more thrusts.

His orgasm slammed over him, stealing his breath, it was so quick. He spilled himself inside her, felt the clenching rhythm of the hot inner walls of her pussy throb around him as she came too, and he shuddered above her. He was miffed that it happened so damned fast.

He smiled against her hair when he realized he could have her again in minutes.

Again and again and again. Forever...

“Gabriel.” She ran her fingers through his hair, and he lifted his head to stare at her. “It’s cold. Let’s get out of the shower.”

The hot water was long gone. The stinging ice-cold shower spray rained down on their skin, and he shivered. Reaching out, he turned off the water with a jerk, then gently set her on her feet. They clambered out of the shower as quickly as they could, toweling each other off and touching each other intimately as they smiled. He was hard again; she was wet. Her nipples were beaded little pricks of tight pink skin, and he leaned forward, drew one into his mouth, and sucked it until she pushed him away.

“Let’s go to bed,” she whispered, then ran away from him.

He chased her into the bedroom, fell on top of her so she was pinned between the mattress and his body. She laughed, a big smile on her face as she looked up at him, and he smoothed the wet hair away from her eyes. His smile faded as he continued to stare at her.

“What?” she asked when he was silent for a beat too long. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m so thankful you’re all right,” he whispered, bending down to kiss her gently on the lips. “I was scared, Jordan. I thought I might...lose you.”

“I was scared too,” she admitted, reaching out to curl her hands around his shoulders. “When he yanked you into the house and we couldn’t get to you, I thought he was going to kill you.”

“Notice how he could take us on individually, but once we stood together, he was defeated?” Gabe shook his head. “That’s something we need to remember for later.”

Her brows furrowed. “For later?”

“When it’s Darla’s turn and Ryder’s—I have a feeling they’ll need me. They might find the ones they fell for, you know.”

“Does that always happen?” Her fingers smoothed over his skin, making him shiver. His cock twitched and grew in reaction to her touch.

“Darla said no, it doesn’t. She said we were lucky.” He kissed her again, his lips lingering, savoring her sweet taste. “We *are* lucky. You know that, right, darlin’?”

“Oh trust me, I know.” She lifted her head and gave him a quick kiss. “I love you, Gabriel.” She paused. “You do realize I’m the only one who calls you Gabriel.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed.” He’d noticed it from the very start. “Everyone else just calls me Gabe.” He nuzzled the side of her neck, traced it with his tongue, and she shivered, her hands sliding over his back.

“Because you’re my savior—you saved my life when I should’ve been dead. My angel, Gabriel, sent straight to me from heaven.” She arched into him, his cock nudging against her swollen lower lips. He’d give anything to sink deep into her tight, wet heat. “And I never want to forget it.”

He laughed against her neck. "You really think you can forget all of this? What happened to us?"

"No." She squeezed him close. "It's all too crazy."

"No one would ever believe it."

"No one has to believe it," she whispered. "It's our little secret. And Ryder's. And Darla's."

"Wait till we have to fight their battle," Gabe muttered as he slid inside her. Again. Already.

Would he ever tire of her?

No.

"You really think we'll have to fight their battles too?"

"Of course. But just think how much stronger we'll be." He surged and held himself there, felt the throb of his cock, the clench of her tight pussy. Nothing had ever felt so good, so right.

"With you by my side, I can't go wrong," she murmured, a little moan escaping her when he touched her extra-deep.

He knew without a doubt she spoke the irrevocable truth.

THE END

Loose Id Titles by Karen Erickson

Fallen

Karen Erickson

After leaving the working world to become a stay-at-home mom, Karen Erickson realized she needed to get crackin' and pursue her lifelong dream of being a published writer. A busy mother of three, she fits her precious writing time in between chasing her children, taking care of her wonderful husband, and pretending she has a maid. She lives in central California.

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