

Fallen Angel

by Krista Heiser

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Chapter One

Makenna Wilkensen felt the Darkling stir to life deep within her. Her mood, already soured from the last hour she had spent trying to balance the bookstore's accounts, darkened even further. She glanced at the calendar hanging above her desk. November 10th. Early by two weeks, which meant she'd need to adjust her work hours over the next few weeks to accommodate the Darkling's needs.

Trying not to focus on the as yet infantile presence within her, Makenna recalculated the figures only to come up short once again. *Damn it.* She pushed the calculator away from her and reached for her coffee mug. She needed a break and a refill provided the perfect excuse.

The realization that she couldn't trust her staff made her pause to lock the door behind her as she left her office. "They have no idea how lucky they are I make it a policy to never kill my employees," she murmured as she slid the key into the pocket of her pants.

As she moved in the direction of the stairwell leading up to the first floor, she couldn't help glancing longingly over her shoulder toward the reinforced steel door at the opposite end of the hall. Some people claimed to live at work, for Makenna it was a reality. The silver door opened into a spacious three-story apartment. As the owner and sole tenant of the building, she had spared no expense in remodeling and decorating the space.

What she wouldn't give to be able to go draw a warm bubble bath

and indulge in a good book right about now. Of course, it was out of the question. Her nightshift help would be leaving in an hour. She needed to resolve the monetary discrepancy and re-adjust the schedule before then. Pleasure would have to wait.

When she pushed open the stairwell door, she wasn't surprised to find the cybercafé filled to near capacity. She smiled at those customers who noted her passing but didn't stop to chat with any of them. Not that they minded. Most were busy chatting or posting comments on discussion threads over the Internet. Because most of her clientele were students, perhaps a few were even doing research for a paper.

Makenna stepped into the bookstore proper. As she moved through the labyrinth of bookshelves the smell of newly installed carpet competed with the rich aromas originating from the small eatery at the front of the store.

"Among the living again?" Rhea Johnston asked, grabbing the nearest coffee pot as Makenna approached the counter. Tonight she wore a bright lime green dress with a multi-colored wrap tied around her waist. A chunky necklace of colored glass lay against her ebony skin like a pirate's booty. "I just made this, so it should be nice and fresh."

"Thanks," Makenna said, watching the dark brew fill her mug as she considered the irony of her sales clerk's question. Her Lord had cast her aside and his enemy had delighted in transforming her into a creature neither dead nor alive. She smiled and gripped the mug with chilled fingers, savoring the warmth emanating through the ceramic.

"Let's just say I'm temporarily free of my crypt."

Rhea laughed and returned the coffee pot to its rightful resting spot as Makenna inhaled the aromatic bitterness of the house blend, delighting in the very real pleasure the smell gave her. The brew couldn't sate her awakening, darker thirst but she intended enjoy every last drop.

"Does that mean you're done?"

"I wish. Unfortunately, it's not looking good. Either I don't know how to use a calculator or someone's ripping me off." Makenna took a sip, thanking her regenerative healing powers for their quick response to the sting of burned taste buds. "I'm hoping it's me. I'd hate to fire anyone this close to Christmas."

Rhea grimaced but seemed unconcerned about her job security as she leaned against the counter. "Any idea who?"

"No, not really." Makenna had her suspicions but she had no desire to trade in gossip with an employee, not even one as likeable as Rhea. Especially when she didn't have any proof.

Hoping to distract the growing curiosity she could see in the woman's dark brown eyes, Makenna turned to survey the efforts of her hard work and determination. "How's business been tonight?"

The bookstore had opened a year ago and, although most of her serious concerns had been laid to rest, Makenna wasn't naïve enough to think the store was free and clear. The area had earned a poor reputation for commerce in the past and it was taking time to overcome the stigma. People didn't trust the neighborhood after dark. They expected thugs on the streets, homeless people sleeping in the

alleyways, and prostitutes grouped together on the corners.

The effort to clean up the city's image had been made possible only through great effort. The local University had added student housing on their downtown campus. City planners, taking this influx of viable consumers into consideration, had worked long hours trying to bring large and small business alike to the area. Makenna had been one of many to take advantage of the opportunity.

She had stumbled across an online article and, in less than twelve hours, she had decided to take a chance in moving here and opening the store. She had sold her old store—a new-age apothecary on the West Coast—and packed her house without setting eyes on her new city of choice. Luckily, it seemed to be paying off. Business was good and getting better. Her nocturnal habits and the odd hours she kept coincided with the needs of the nearby students. Although she had received a few complaints about her unavailability during the morning and early afternoon hours, there really wasn't a demand for her to open the doors any earlier.

"It's been pretty steady," Rhea said, sipping from her lipstick-stained cardboard cup. "Not too bad for a Tuesday anyway."

Although she stood several feet away, Makenna could smell the hot chocolate on Rhea's breath. She could also hear the woman's rhythmic heartbeat. She turned her focus back to the store. "No problem costumers?"

While not likely, the possibility existed. The late hours attracted trouble-makers as well as honest citizens. On more than one occasion Makenna or one of her employees had been forced to either

take action or pick up the phone.

"Not a one."

"Good. Let's hope it stays that way." She was about to retreat to her office and the dreaded accounting when the door opened, ushering in more than the brisk November air.

Makenna had seen many handsome men in her long-lived years but this one startled her into stillness. Even at this distance his bright blue eyes stood out in stark contrast to his black hair and tanned complexion. Tall, dark and handsome took off his gloves and shoved them into his coat pockets. His eyes scanned the bookstore. With a determined stride he moved past table displays, end caps, and bargain piles, not once glancing toward Makenna and her speechless associate.

Rhea's lusty sigh broke the spell. "He's not exactly hard on the eyes, is he?"

Makenna shook her head, her eyes following the lean figure.

"Lucky for me, I get to stare at him for hours on end every week. I never thought I'd enjoy an English class until he walked in and handed me a syllabus," Rhea said. Although she had raised two babies and had been married for almost thirty years, Rhea had decided to go back to college last year. The same day she had applied for admittance at the school, she had stopped at *The Scriptorium* to fill out an application for employment. Makenna had hired her on the spot and never had reason to regret her impulsiveness.

"He's a teacher?"

Rhea nodded. "Professor Gabe Anderson, in the flesh."

Makenna realized she wanted more than his name. She wanted to hear the cadence of his voice and smell the musky scent of his skin. "I think I'll go introduce myself. Make sure he's finding everything okay."

Rhea shook her perfectly coifed head. "Good luck. He may be pretty to look at, but the general consensus is that he's gay."

"What? Why?"

"Well, the way most women throw themselves at him and he shows not the slightest interest, I figure he's either gay or a Saint."

Makenna had a sneaking suspicion on why Rhea would think such a thing, but she kept her mouth shut. She really had no desire to discuss the many shortcomings of D'andre Johnston. She'd much rather keep the focus on the sexy English professor. "That would be a complete waste."

Rhea grunted in agreement before taking another sip of hot chocolate.

Coffee cup in hand, Makenna left her employee where she had found her and walked across the bookstore, noticing more than one admiring glance directed at the handsome professor. It seemed she and Rhea hadn't been the only ones to notice his entrance. The girls on the computers monitored his progress with hungry eyes, as did a couple of young women seated around the café's small, metal tables.

When Makenna approached, the man looked up from the jacket of the horror novel in his hands, a polite smile fixed in place. His eyes locked on hers and Makenna felt something spark between them. Yet, his expression and body language told her he either hadn't felt it or

refused to acknowledge it. But she could taste the pheromones his body threw at hers; the Darkling's ascendance made her sensitive to their presence. His hormones had kicked into high gear. He wanted her nearly as much as she wanted him.

She thought of Rhea's comment and had to smile. The man was far from gay.

Feeling empowered by his reaction, she stepped closer and glanced down at the book in his hands. The title brought a grin to her lips.

"Hm. A vampire fan?"

He glanced down at the glossy jacket and a rueful smile appeared. He almost looked embarrassed. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

His answer roused a wicked delight in the Darkling. She offered him her hand and a sensual smile, "Makenna Wilkensen. I own The Scriptorium."

His firm grip created chaos within her body. She knew the feeling was mutual; she could hear the blood rushing through his veins.

"Gabe Anderson."

"Pleased to meet you, Gabe. Is this your first visit?"

He shook his head, dropping her hand when he realized he had held it a moment longer than necessary. He frowned. "No, I've stopped by once or twice. I work at the University."

She nodded, "So my Sales Clerk said. You're an English professor?"

He nodded as he glanced over her shoulder, his gaze seeking and finding the petite brunette behind the café counter. "Rhea Johnston."

Intro to Prose Fiction." He met Makenna's eyes again. "She's a nice girl. Good student, too."

"I'll be sure to tell her." She flashed her dimples, knowing full well how they affected the male populace. She had been told time and again she looked like an angel when she smiled. She never knew how to answer.

His gaze lingered on her lips for a moment before he glanced at the book in his hands. "I'm glad to see this one in stock. I didn't think it was supposed to be in stores yet. Mind if I face it out? I've heard it'll sell better if people can actually see the cover art."

"Not at all. I take it you're a fan?"

His grin took her breath away. If her smile brought angels to mind, his reminded her of the devil. "You could say that." He flipped the book over and opened the cover. He handed the book to her.

Surprised and delighted, she glanced from his face to the black and white image in her hands. "So you're more than just a teacher. You're an author." She flipped the book over and read the title again. "I'll have to add this to my to-be-read pile."

"Please, don't feel obligated. I'm well aware it's not to everyone's taste."

It wasn't to her taste—most vampire books weren't—but she found she truly wanted to read it. Knowing the author usually had that effect on her. How many books had she read over the centuries just because a friend or acquaintance had written it? She hugged the book to her chest. "I'm sure I'll find it very entertaining."

"Seriously, you don't have to.."

"I want to." She looked at his book on the shelf and those to the left and right of it. Other than *Path to Redemption* she didn't see his name on any of the other jackets. "Have you published any other titles?"

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and shook his head. "No, this is my first."

"Really? Well, congratulations then. What an accomplishment."

He accepted her words with a smile but suddenly seemed ill at ease, as if he didn't know what to do or say next. The realization caught Makenna by surprise. She would have thought he'd be experienced in handling women. Jaded, even.

She decided to take a risk. "How do you feel about book signings?"

It would be great for the store. She had never done a book signing before but how hard could it be? Considering her late night hours, they could do several fun things with a vampire motif. Besides, she'd use any excuse to get the handsome professor back to the store, especially if it meant he was trapped here for hours on end.

"I don't know. Are you offering?"

She smiled. "I think I am. It'd be great for sales and it'd certainly help bring customers into the store. I see it as a win-win situation."

He put the book back on the shelf, staring at the glossy cover as he considered the idea. "Well. I guess from my agent's stand-point

I'd be foolish to say no. Although, I may not live it down if my colleagues hear about it."

"I'd like to say it would be our secret but the truth is I'm going to market the hell out of the signing. That is, if you say yes."

He made a pained face. "I suppose I'll live through the ribbing."

Makenna laughed and took a sip of her coffee, her gaze locked on his. "Why don't we work out the particulars over a cup of coffee?"

He hesitated but then accepted her offer. In silence they walked back to the counter where Rhea struggled to appear nonchalant.

Gabe politely returned the girl's high-wattage smile. "How are you, Rhea?"

"Oh, I'm good. A little tired but it's late, you know?" For all the effort she put into being casual, Rhea could not prevent a blush from reddening her face.

Gabe smiled. "Well, try to get some sleep before class. I wouldn't want you falling asleep on me."

Rhea shook her head, her expression becoming quite serious despite his teasing tone. "I would never sleep through your class, Professor Anderson."

The girl's apparent adoration grated. The Darkling urged Makenna to stake her claim but she managed to ignore it by recalling she had no reason to feel quite so possessive. At least, not yet. She took deep swallow of coffee and held her cup out to Rhea. "One more cup and then I'm done for the night." As the girl refilled her mug,

Makenna said, "If you would, please, get Professor Anderson a cup of coffee, too. How do you take it, professor?"

"Straight. And please, just call me Gabe," he said.

Makenna smiled, delighted by the warmth in his voice. "I will. And please call me Makenna."

Makenna noticed Rhea watched the exchange with interest as she placed a steaming cup on the counter in front of Gabe and handed Makenna's ceramic mug back to her. Whether it was envy or curiosity causing the tiny creases at the corners of her eyes Makenna couldn't guess.

Glancing around the store, Makenna noticed a few more customers had arrived while she had been distracted by Gabe and his book. "It doesn't look like this is anything you can't handle, Rhea, but I think I'll stay within shouting distance in case you need me."

She turned to Gabe and motioned to the tables and chairs nearby. "Would you mind if we discussed the signing here instead of my office?"

"Not at all."

"Great." She reached over the counter and grabbed a spare pen and order pad. "Follow me." She led him over to a small table with two chairs. She took one for herself and watched him slide into the one across from her, promising herself she'd finish the accounting just as soon as he left.

"Thank you for the coffee," he said, taking a careful sip.

"You're welcome." She sat the pen and paper down and sipped from her cup. "I know this is a little unorthodox but I'd like to do the

signing on a Friday or Saturday night. Considering our hours and the subject matter, I thought it fitting. What do you think? Are you available in the evenings?"

"Sure. An evening signing would be great. Although, I'm still not real comfortable with the whole idea." He looked distinctly uncomfortable but Makenna wasn't about to point it out to him. "I really only meant to see if you had the book in stock. I don't want you to think I came in here just to promote my book."

"I approached you," she reminded him, unable to keep from smiling. "I was also the one to suggest the signing."

"True," he said, returning her grin.

Makenna didn't want to give him any more time to reconsider the idea. "So? What works best for you, Friday or Saturday?"

"How soon do you want to do this?" He asked, hedging. "You said you'd want to do some promotional work. How long does that take?"

"Two weeks."

He stalled by taking a long drink from his coffee cup. When his piercing blue eyes finally met hers, Makenna felt the jolt down to her toes. The Darkling surged into awareness, fueling her desire. *This one, it cried. I want this one.*

He sat the cup down. "Let's do it on a Saturday."

Makenna distracted herself and the Darkling by jotting down his answer on the nearby ordering pad. "Now, how can I get in touch with you?"

She wrote down his address, phone number and email address, all of which he had made clear would route her through his office.

Despite the attraction, the man refused to give into temptation. He had not given her anything she wouldn't have been able to find out by accessing the University's very public website directory.

Makenna intended to work on that. Soon he'd be giving her more than just his contact information. He'd be giving her anything she wanted.

Chapter Two

Makenna drained the tub, toweled herself dry, and blew out the candles on the back of the stool without taking her eyes from the book's glossy jacket. Unlike most of her bubble bath reads, this one hadn't been tossed to the floor. Instead she had placed it well out of the path of any wayward water droplets by placing on the nearest high surface.

She had read it cover to cover in one sitting. Although she couldn't see the sun, she knew it had risen and hung high overhead. She had spent hours in the tub, re-heating the water until her skin had become water-logged. Of course, as she toweled dry, her skin smoothed to its normal ivory perfection within seconds.

She reached for her toothbrush and the tube of paste next to it. Going through the motions by rote, her thoughts circled back to the story and its characters. The book had riveted her. She hadn't been able to put it down and not because of the prose. The characters had come to life, not only in her imagination but in her memory.

She spit into the sink and set her toothbrush on the counter.

The story had been set in the Roman Empire and while the characters names had been unfamiliar, Makenna had known the true identity of both the hero and heroine within a few short paragraphs. The fictional Colin Marius and Alena had been modeled after Abriana and Cael. Makenna was sure of it.

But who had told Gabe Anderson, a human, about her dearest friend? Did he realize his brazenness in exposing so much of the truth would likely get him killed or worse? The least of his worries would be her brethren finding him. This world held dangers more profound than vampires and he may have unwittingly called them down upon his head. Of course, that depended on if a demon happened to read the book, which was unlikely but not improbable. Demons of all types were literate and many had taken to passing the years with the drivel lining her store's bookshelves.

And if they didn't read it, their thralls could always stumble across the book and bring it to their attention.

Makenna padded naked to her bedroom, gripping the book between numb fingers. She turned off the lights and the room became as dark as a tomb. Her vision adjusted almost as quickly as the light disappeared.

She crawled into the bed, unable to set aside the book despite her fatigue. More than the insight into the creation of her species, his explanation for what had happened to her dearest friend haunted her waking thoughts. "It's not possible."

What if it is?

She needed answers. She'd never sleep without them. Thank goodness it was winter. At least she would have an excuse to be bundled from head to toe.

She threw back the covers and jumped out of the bed. She tossed the book onto her dresser as she pulled out a pair of underwear and matching bra, a worn t-shirt and a pair of faded jeans from various

drawers. Once dressed, she stormed from the room only to return moments later to grab the book.

At the door to her apartment she slid on her tennis shoes and grabbed her coat, pulling the parka's hood down as low as it would go on her forehead. She stuffed the book into an oversized pocket in her coat before searching out her gloves.

She got as far as the service door leading out of the rear of the building before she remembered she hadn't put on any sun block. The sun might not incinerate her like the movies showed but, even with sun block lathered on, she knew she wouldn't escape unscathed. The thought made her pause on the doorstep and take a deep breath.

Rational thought returned. At first it wriggled in but, by doing so, it also opened a door to lucidity.

She had been about to rush out into the daylight without knowing where the man lived. Of course, he could be at the school but what if he was in class or had yet to arrive? She didn't have the patience to sit outside his office making small talk with the secretary.

She found his number easily enough on her desk. He had scribbled it on a piece of paper for her and she had tossed it on her desk when she had returned to her office. Holding the slip of paper in one hand, she punched in the numbers and waited for him to answer.

The phone rang and rang. No voicemail. No answering machine.

She hung up with a snarl and stripped off her coat. She would call the English Department and ask the secretary about his schedule. She grabbed the phone book and quickly found the number she needed.

"Hello? My name is Makenna Wilkensen. I'm looking for Professor Gabe

Anderson. Is he in today?"

She jotted down the secretary's reply. She couldn't have gotten luckier. Professor Gabe had an evening class tonight. If she couldn't catch him before class, she could wait outside his classroom and corral him there.

Since she was scheduled to work upstairs tonight, though, she would need to make sure someone she trusted had been scheduled to work with her. She shifted aside a stack of papers and exposed the weekly schedule she habitually taped to the corner of her desk. Andrew and Valerie had the early shift; she and Rhea were schedule to close.

She wasn't sure if she trusted Andrew and Valerie as much as she did Rhea, but if she wanted to catch Gabe, she didn't have much choice.

Resolved to wait, she stripped off her coat, hat, and gloves. She left them draped over the back of her chair as she retreated to her apartment.

Makenna awoke feeling refreshed and energized. She stretched until her toes curled. Then, with a languid grace, she slipped from her bed. The clothes she had discarded lay in a heap near the door. Considering she had worn them for mere minutes, she picked them up on her way to the bathroom.

As she spat toothpaste into the sink, the Darkling did some stretching of its own. Her hearing became painfully acute. Her eyeteeth extended and her fingernails grew into talons. Hunger and something darker raged through her, demanding satisfaction.

Makenna pushed against the darkness, forcing the Darkling into submission. As the enraged beast snarled and hissed at her, Makenna willed her body into its normal shape. Her fingernails retracted to normal length, as did her teeth. The only thing she couldn't defeat was the hunger. It gnawed at the edges of her sanity.

How many had she taken during the previous cycle? She had just moved to the area and had not dared take too many. A few homeless people and one bully from a local bar. Apparently not enough to sate the Darkling for long.

Once she had been the slave instead of the master. It had taken her thousands of years to suppress the Darkling, to separate it from her true consciousness. Before she had been able to battle and defeat the dark urges her transformation had spawned, she had murdered countless people without regard to their worth or meaning. When she had finally managed to regain a measure of control, she had vowed to never be at the Darkling's mercy again.

But she could never be free of its oily evil, either. Denying its most basic urges only made it stronger, more desperate to break free from her control. A balance had been struck and, until now, it had seemed to work. She allowed it to manifest on a regular basis, but she always superimposed her consciousness over its lust.

It seemed she would have to take a small detour before tracking down the handsome professor. She could not continue to deny the Darkling. Not without serious consequences.

She finished in the bathroom and left her apartment. Andrew had opened the bookstore almost three hours ago when the sun was still

high overhead. Twilight had just faded from the sky as Makenna joined him at the register. "How's it going?"

Her eyes rested on the steady pulse in this neck. His short, crew-cut dark hair left his neck vulnerably exposed.

"It's been pretty steady," he said, smiling and waving the next costumer forward. He turned on the charm as the girl approached the counter. A dimple flashed at the corner of his mouth. "Hi. Did you find everything you were looking for?"

"Yeah, thanks." The girl, a pretty little thing with a shy smile, handed him two paperback novels and a magazine.

Andrew rang up the items, announced her total, and tucked her purchase into a sack as she dug through her purse looking for her wallet. He glanced at Makenna. "Did you want to take over here and have me restock the shelves?"

"Not tonight. Think you and Chelsie can handle this place for a couple hours on your own?"

The girl handed him a crisp twenty dollar bill. "Here you go."

Andrew punched the amount into the register and gave her back some change. "Have a great day."

Makenna glanced over at the café where Valerie was fending off the advances of an awkward teenager. Andrew followed her gaze. "Sure. We can handle it."

"Good. There's a few things I need to take care of tonight." She looked around the store, surprised by the number of people browsing the aisles and sitting at the café tables. The cybercafé wasn't quite as busy as it had been last night but there were still a good number

of computers in use, too. "If it's still this busy, do you think you can hang around and help Chelsie close? Just in case I'm not back in time."

He sighed, regret in his eyes. "As much as I'd like the extra cash, I promised to take Jen out to see that new horror flick tonight."

"No problem. I'll see if Valerie can stay." She stepped out from behind the counter and walked to the front of the store. Behind her she could Andrew asking if the next customer in line had found everything he had been looking for.

Valerie's love struck companion had bent over to scribble something on a piece of paper he had pulled out of his backpack. The cherub-faced brunette met Makenna's eyes and grimaced over the boy's bent head. Her expression clearly said, "Why me?"

"Here. Call me anytime. I'm sure I can help you with your Chemistry," the boy said, shoving the paper toward Valerie. When he noticed Makenna standing next to him, he blushed scarlet and made a quick retreat.

"Why can't I ever get the hot guys to give me their numbers?" Valerie asked with a self-deprecating smile. She glanced past Makenna, made sure the boy's back was still toward them, and then tossed the paper into the trash.

Valerie wasn't beautiful. She might not even be considered pretty, but Makenna had always thought her cute. She had a softness about her which didn't have anything to do with the extra weight she carried. Genuine and sincere were two words Makenna had overhead her

other sales clerks use in reference to the young woman.

"Because the right one hasn't happened by yet," Makenna answered.

"Well, I hope the right one is at least the same age I am, if not older. Getting hit on by teenagers isn't exactly flattering."

Makenna laughed. "I came to ask a favor. I need to step out for bit tonight. Do you think you could stay and help Rhea until I return? She'll be in around eight."

Valerie seemed delighted by the prospect. Makenna knew the girl had just moved into a little apartment near downtown by herself. No doubt the extra cash would help her make her rent or put an extra bag of groceries on the table. "Yeah, sure. No problem."

Satisfied she had taken care of her obligations to the store, Makenna went to work. She dismissed Andrew from the registers and had him restock the shelves and straighten things up a bit. The next couple of hours passed in relative boredom. As she rang up sale after sale, referred book after book, she couldn't stop thinking about Gabe.

When the hands on the clock finally read seven, Rhea beckoned Andrew back to his register. "Pour me a vanilla cream coffee to go, would you? I just need to run downstairs and grab my coat."

Andrew nodded and reached for the nearest cup. By the time Makenna returned to the counter with her coat on and zipped, he had already finished securing the plastic lid.

"Thanks."

"Not a problem. You need anything else?"

Makenna shook her head, feeling anxious to be on her way. "No. I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

He nodded, his eyes drifting to the man standing a discreet distance away. A customer had arrived.

Coffee in hand, Makenna stepped out onto the lamp-lighted street. Her breath plumed on the night air. Thanks to years of practice, breathing came almost as naturally to her as it did to the humans who surrounded her. Rarely did she have to remind herself to mimic this most basic need.

The cold did not affect her as she walked from light into shadow and into light again. Although she was in no danger of becoming frostbit without them, she was grateful to her hat, gloves, and thick winter coat. Insulated from the cold by more than the layers of clothes separating her from the chilled wind, she could give her full attention to her surroundings.

The moon hid behind a thick layer of what promised to become snow clouds. Yet, the city did not appear dark and foreboding. Light splashed onto the street from every angle. Lamp posts cast a soft, ambient glow. Store-fronts spilled bright, florescent light in square and rectangles along the sidewalk. Headlights from passing cars illuminated the red brick road and the parallel parked cars along the main street through the downtown area.

People, most of them of college age, moved from one establishment to the next. Some moved in groups of five or more, a few in cozy couples. All of them clustered close together to block out the wind and benefit from what body heat their companions could generate in the pre-winter cold.

Makenna knew easier prey could be found. She turned her senses

toward the alleyways and side streets. She heard the scurry of tiny clawed feet and the rustle of garbage underneath. She also heard heartbeats. Some belonged to the vermin, some to the people who preferred the shadows. She kept walking, cautioning herself to be patient.

The rhythmic percussion of a single human heart drew her down a darkened side street. She eased her control over the Darkling. Her vision sharpened until everything—the graffiti on the side of the building, the discarded fast food cartons, and the human—were clearly distinguishable. The distorted colors did not distract her as the Darkling grew stronger and more focused. The human and the rat lurking further down the street became outlines of red and orange, the vividness in correlation to the degree of heat each produced.

Rancid, rotting meat assailed her as she drew near to the old man. The distinct odor of infection overshadowed the unwashed scent of his skin. As he smiled at her, thinking he had just found a sympathetic mark, he revealed missing and blackened teeth. Life had not been easy.

"Can you spare a few dollars, pretty lady? I haven't eaten in a week," he wheezed as he stood up and stumbled toward her.

Makenna pushed her gloves into her pockets, knowing if she didn't they would be ruined.

Pushing aside the last of her human sensitivities, she gave the Darkling ascendancy. Her fingernails curved into ruthless talons as her hands reached for the man. The inhuman claws pierced his skin to keep him from retreating, causing him to cry out in pain. Her teeth

elongated into fangs and her body quaked with bloodlust as the hunger rushed through her system. The ache in her empty veins pulsed in tune with his increased heartbeat.

The terror in his eyes and his agonized bleating only excited the savage monster she had unleashed. She pinned him against the alleyway's brick wall, and twisted his head to the side, exposing the liver-spotted skin covering his surging carotid. With a growl, she tore into his throat. The blood spurted into her mouth almost faster than she could swallow. Her fangs sank into the artery and siphoned the oxygenated blood, delivering it directly to her starving veins.

He stopped struggling, his pathetic mewling ceased, and he sagged against her. She felt his consciousness fade. The terror he had felt eased from her mind. Sated, the Darkling released him and stepped back, wiping Makenna's face with the back of her hand. While the beast was complacent, content with a fresh kill, Makenna superimposed herself over its will and pushed it back into the corner of her consciousness. She visualized walls and chains to keep it contained.

She sensed a dismissive disinterest and knew she had temporarily subdued the creature once again. Of course, such a meager meal would not keep it happy for long. She had bought herself a few days, perhaps even a week, but no more.

Frowning, she dragged the already cold body into the deeper shadows. Although her vision was no longer as sharp and true color had returned to her world, she could see the savage wound her teeth had inflicted knitting itself together. Only a faint scar would remain, one easily dismissed as an old battle scar from a life on the

streets.

She didn't exit the side-street as she had entered it. Instead she kept walking until she found another intersecting street and then another. It took her several minutes out of her way but she didn't mind. The extra time allowed her to enjoy the rush of warmth coursing through her body and warming her in the most interesting places.

Chapter Three

Gabe breathed a sigh of relief as the last of his students left the classroom. The last two and a half hours had been a test of his patience. Throughout his lecture he had been thinking only of the phone call he had taken earlier today, trusting his instincts to guide him through the intricacies of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

As the students' chatter faded, he sat down behind the instructor's desk and put his head in his hands. What the hell was he going to do? Pack her shit and toss it to the curb. That was the first thing he was going to do.

He still couldn't believe what she had told him. And over the phone, for God's sake! The shock of her betrayal and, even worse, the possible ramifications of the affair had been too much to grasp at first. Numb, he had told her goodbye and hung up the phone. Grabbing his books by rote, he had headed off to class. If he had been thinking, he would have cancelled tonight's session. But he hadn't been thinking. His mind had been railroaded by images of her with another man even as he began reading Act II.

He couldn't think much beyond dropping off his materials and getting out of the building, but he knew he didn't want to sit here thinking about Alyson. He grabbed his books and stood up, only to pause in mid-motion. He had thought himself alone but just inside the doorway stood the sexy bookstore owner he had met last night.

"Makenna?"

She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. She studied him for a moment with cool detachment and then stepped in between a row of desks. She stopped a few feet away from the instructor's desk, regarding him with dark eyes.

He could have sworn they were green yesterday.

He picked up his scattered lecture notes and tried to hide his annoyance. He wasn't sure why she had sought him out but, even more disturbing, he couldn't explain the instant attraction he felt. Last night it had made him uncomfortable, tonight the reaction irritated him. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Where is Abrianna?"

He shook his head, his brows furrowing in confusion. "Who?"

She withdrew something from a deep pocket within her black winter coat and tossed it on the desk between them like a gauntlet of challenge. "The woman in the book, her real name is Abrianna. Don't pretend you don't know."

He frowned and picked up the novel, the one she had taken out of his hands last night. The creased binding told him she had read it. He hadn't expected her to devour it in one evening. "I assure you that all my characters are fictional."

She snarled - actually snarled - at him. Gabe blinked. Were those fangs?

"Really? Then how do you know about us, about them?"

His eyebrows drew together in puzzlement, his gaze still locked on her mouth. "I'm not sure I'm following you.."

She closed the distance between them with a step and gripped him

by the throat. Her hold on him threatened to pull him over the desk.

He tried to suck in air but found it impossible. His toes scrabbled for purchase on the linoleum floor, forcing him to brace his hands on the faux-wood surface in an attempt to alleviate the stranglehold.

Makenna's eyes had darkened into inky blackness, not a speck of the green irises visible. "There's only one way you could know so much us. About her. So where is she?"

"Us?" He gasped out, his fingers prying at hers.

"Vampires. How do you know so much about us? What we were? What we've become? How do you know the things you put in that book?"

He gasped for air but not even a shallow breath got past her stranglehold.

She flung him away from her. He hit the chalkboard and bounced off it. Pain shot through his lower back where the small, metal shelf had pressed into him. Chalk fell to floor and broke into small, fragmented pieces. Somehow, though, he managed to stay on his feet. He rubbed his bruised neck, stunned by how easily she had manhandled him.

He rubbed his throat. When he spoke, his voice came out in a husky growl. "Are you insane?"

She bared what he could clearly see now as a pair of modest fangs. "No, I'm a vampire."

They were by far the best fakes he had ever seen. Too bad Makenna, who had seemed so sane and ordinary last night, had decided to take the fantasy just a little too far. He might have expected a

similar prank from one of his students but not her. She hadn't seemed the type.

And what was with the manhandling? She couldn't think he'd find it a turn on.

The fangs extended and stretched down toward her lower lip and fear sluiced through him. Fake fangs couldn't grow. But hers had. He had watched them slide out of her gums. Although his rational mind knew vampires did not exist, his instincts screamed otherwise. He stiffened in her grasp and stared into her black gaze. "Dear God.."

Her eyes narrowed a fraction and he knew he had invoked the wrong name. Her fingernails dug into his skin. She pressed him against the blackboard, adding to the bruise along his lower back, and leaned in close. The slick feel of her tongue across his jugular left him breathless. Her breath fanned his damp skin, making the hair on the back of his neck ripple in response. Even as he shivered with pleasure, he waited for the pain.

Then he was alone and she sat behind a desk in the second row, much like an eager student. He wondered if he had blinked, or if she had somehow put him into a trance because he hadn't seen her move. He took a single step away from the blackboard but stopped when she narrowed her gaze in warning.

He took a deep breath and told himself he had imagined the entire thing. Too much stress. Yet, he knew what he had seen and felt. More, everything within him urged him to flee from a predator he could never best. His primal self recognized the threat. Still he could not entirely accept it. He wiped a hand over his face. "This isn't

possible. Vampires don't exist. They don't. I'm just tired and stressed, and you caught me unprepared. The fangs are fake. They have to be."

"Let's not play this game."

He laughed. Where it came from or how it escaped past his fear-constricted throat he couldn't say, but the sound filled the room. A short bark of laughter full of disbelief and terror. "Vampires aren't real."

She licked her lips. A small pink tongue moisturized perfectly formed lips. He noted her eyes had regained a hint of the green he remembered from last night. "The thirst is under my control right now. But if you keep this irritating ruse up, I might just let the Darkling have you."

She held his gaze. Ensnared him more like. The last of his disbelief washed away, leaving him shaken. She must have sensed his weakening resolve because she sighed and moved away from him, motioning him toward the instructor's stool. "Why don't you sit down, Gabe?"

"I'd rather not." But he found himself sitting down anyhow.

Her smile made him wonder if she had given him a little psychic push, one strong enough to override his natural will. The thought didn't sit well.

She studied him for a moment, her gaze probing. "Either you're a superb actor, or you really had no idea that you were writing Abrianna's story. But how can that be?"

The question seemed to be self-directed. Gabe held his tongue as

he waited for her to work through the mystery. He wondered if she would share the answer with him, because he sure in the hell couldn't explain it.

She lifted her eyes to his. The green orbs dominated her small, exquisite face. "You really didn't believe in my kind, did you? Even though you wrote that book and seem to know things you shouldn't, you didn't truly believe."

She intertwined her fingers and pursed her lips. The lingering darkness faded from her eyes as she held his stare. "I think that makes your knowledge even more alarming. And intriguing."

"What knowledge is that?" Despite what he had seen and felt, the part of him that needed vampires to be a thing of myth and legend resisted the evidence of his senses.

"Well, for one, our origins."

"Are you trying to tell me the things I said about vampires in my book, in my novel - a piece of fiction, mind you - are actually true?"

She inclined her head, blond tresses falling over her shoulder. As she sat demurely perched on the edge of the chair, her hands folded and legs crossed, she looked nothing like the demon who had held him against the blackboard. In fact, as the florescent light fell on her head, she looked angelic. Pure and innocent.

If what she said was true, if his book had gotten the vampire origins right, she didn't just look like an angel, she had been one. Her softness, her beauty, her poise and elegance were not a guise but a facet of her truest self. Her original self. Looking at her now, at the silken fall of her hair, the clarity of her green eyes, and the

unblemished perfection of her skin, Gabe could believe she had once been a creature of light and air.

An angel.

A fallen angel. Cast not just aside, but thrown out of Heaven and into Satan's care.

His heart constricted. If what he had written in his book held any truth, he sat across from a creature both blessed and cursed.

He pushed away from the desk and lurched to his feet. His hands trembled as he raked his fingers through his hair. He looked at the floor, at the chalkboard, at the windows and desks, anywhere but at her. He paced along the front of the room, heeding her advice to stay well away from her. The word angel echoed and ricocheted through his head.

If what she claimed were true, if his source of inspiration had indeed led him to the truth, then his mother and sisters were right. God existed.

The idea left him cold. He glanced out the window, half expecting a bolt of lightning to crash down from the cloudless sky and pierce him. Every sin he had ever committed weighed on his conscience and a mantle of guilt settled on his shoulders.

He wondered if it was too late to start praying. To start believing.

He shuddered and realized if God existed, so too did Satan. Hadn't his dreams, or whatever they had been, named Satan as the source of all vampires?

He glanced at the woman-angel-demon-vampire who sat watching him

with a cool detachment. Her gaze said she knew the thoughts racing through his head and enjoyed watching him squirm.

A fallen angel. Beautiful, graceful, and deadly. What had she looked like before Satan had transformed her into a thing of darkness and violent needs?

"What do you want from me?" He asked her.

"I don't believe you just happened to guess the truth, Gabe." She leaned back in the chair. "But I'm not sure how you know the things you know." She paused, tilting her head to the side. "I need to know who told you about us. And why they let you publish this book. When I first read the book, I thought another of my kind had put you up to this, but now I'm not so sure. So why don't you tell me who told you about us?"

"I made it up," he said. Yet, as he sat staring at her, he wondered if he was telling her the truth. What did he know of vampires? He had no real concept of their limits and powers. Was it possible someone had planted the suggestions and given him a little supernatural push to get him moving in the right direction? Was it possible he knew another vampire? He certainly hadn't recognized Makenna for what she was. Could he be certain none of his friends or acquaintances were similarly cursed? Could Dane or Rich be immortal creatures forced to prey upon mankind? While Dane might find the whole idea intriguing and even somewhat appealing, Gabe couldn't see him biting his way to an immortal existence.

"You made it up." Her tone said she didn't believe him. "Many authors have written about our kind, Gabe, but none have come so close

to the truth. I might have thought it all a lucky guess if it hadn't been for one little thing. Your main character? I knew her. Her real name, if you don't know, was Abriana. And while she isn't the first vampire to be immortalized in fiction, there's no reason for you to have written her story. She didn't commit any atrocities. She didn't bathe in the blood of humans or impale her victims like others I could name. So, tell me, Gabe, just how did you happen upon her story?"

Gabe was grateful he was sitting down. He had never imagined the woman in his story, the tormented and guilt-ridden creature he had written about, could have walked this earth. He had credited her appearance in the novel to his imagination. That she had been real, had apparently lived for centuries as a reluctant succubus, repulsed him. "I had no idea she was real."

Makenna's lips pressed together in displeasure and her eyes darkened once more to pools of inky blackness. Gabe knew if she were to reveal her teeth right now the fangs would once more be elongated and glistening. He held up his hands much as supplicant would. "I dreamed about her. Hell, I dreamt the whole thing. All of it."

He glanced around the room. At the open doorway. "Should we be talking about this here? If you're worried about people discovering the truth, this isn't exactly the most private place we could have this discussion."

Her smile lacked warmth. "I'd hear them before they could get close enough to overhear anything, but, yes, we can take this somewhere else if you'd like."

Gabe nodded and once more gathered his materials. When he stood his legs felt less than steady beneath him. Although his gut told him not to do it, he offered her a nearby alternative to their current location. "We can go to my office. There's no one else in the department this time of night."

Makenna inclined her head. "Lead the way."

Gabe unlocked the English Department suite and held the door open so Makenna could pass through. While she paused to look around the tiny reception area, he opened his office door and deposited his course materials on the cluttered desk. He had left the room earlier without taking the time to tidy anything up, which meant he needed to reorganize the piles of papers he had laid out earlier before she would be able to sit down. He did this quickly and without much consideration to where he shifted the mess.

She appeared in the doorway. "Don't clean up on my account."

"If I didn't, there wouldn't be any room for you. Please, have a seat," he said, feeling rather inane. He realized he was treating her much as he would one of students, as if this were a simple advising appointment. But, the truth be known, he didn't know how he should be behaving right now. He'd never entertained a vampire before.

She sat down, legs crossed at the knee, hands clasped in front of her. Gabe thought she looked harmless, delicate even. Yet, he couldn't shake the memory of her effortless strength or soulless black eyes.

He wanted her gone. He wanted her to leave and never come back. If she disappeared right now, he could imagine none of this had happened. His world wouldn't be turned even more upside down than it already was.

The photo of him and Alyson at the lake caught his eye. A tide of loss threatened to further unbalance him.

He sat down in his chair and focused his attention on the woman - vampire- he had invited in. Had that been a mistake? Or did the invitation need only be given for one's home? Hell, was that myth even true? He couldn't remember. Not that it mattered because the damage had been done.

They stared at each other, and Gabe wondered if she were at a loss as well. He didn't know where to begin or how to end this. As much as he wanted her gone, he sensed she wouldn't be leaving until he had satisfied her curiosity. Under her steady gaze he grew uncomfortable. Not with fear, but with acute awareness of just how easily she affected him. He remembered the feel of her pressed against him, the damp texture of her tongue sliding across his skin, and felt his body respond as if she were just another beautiful woman.

Her lips curled up into an amused grin. "I see you're no longer afraid of me."

For a moment he wondered if she could see his growing erection through his slacks but then remembered how Abriana had known her victims were aroused. She had smelled it. Tasted it on the air. It only stood to reason Makenna might share the same ability. And he

felt confident she had the same supernatural allure. "I don't think I'm fully responsible for the reaction."

She laughed and sat back in the chair, more at ease than he had seen her since she had arrived. "I assure you, this time it's more you than me. I'm not even trying."

Heaven help him if she did. He'd be lost.

When she laughed again at his sudden blush, Gabe scowled at her. "I'm not sure what else you want from me, but I need to get home sometime tonight."

"I'm sure you do." She glanced at the same picture Gabe had noticed a few minutes ago. "She's very pretty."

He opened his mouth to tell her Alyson was most certainly not the reason he needed to get home but changed his mind. His disastrous love life was really none of her business. "Yes, she is. So, can we just get this over with? What is it you really want?"

Her gaze lingered for a moment on the picture before shifting to him. "I don't believe you could have learned about us through your dreams."

"I swear it's the truth."

"I think it's only part of the truth." When he might have argued further, she held up her hand to cut off his objection. "I think it's the truth as far as you know it. I can't sense that you're lying to me, which means you believe what you're telling me. But that doesn't mean it's what really happened."

He had had similar thoughts himself in the classroom, but he couldn't help wonder how she knew with such certainty that he was being forthright. "How can you tell I'm not lying?"

The feral smile she flashed made him stiffen in response. "Liars tend to have a faster heartbeat and they sweat more. I don't hear or smell a lie on you."

"You aren't exactly like her, are you?"

She shook her head, her green eyes growing dark. Not black. The Darkling hadn't made a reappearance. But her bright green eyes lost some of their luster. "No, I'm not. Our curses were just as different as they were the same. She was something else, a different kind of vampire, if you will."

Gabe didn't know if that admission should relieve or frighten him. He knew what Abriana had been capable of, just as he knew her limitations. He realized he couldn't be as sure of Makenna. His book had been more about the kind of vampire her friend had been. He wasn't even sure her type of vampire had made an appearance. "So, what kind are you?"

When she didn't immediately answer, he thought she would ignore the question. Given her reaction to the things he had put in his book, he realized she probably didn't want him to give him any more insight into her dark world than he already had. Knowledge is power. And he had given the world the knowledge through his book. But, who would believe the things he had written? The story sat on fiction shelves, told as a story meant to be entertaining.

Did she fear a sequel?

Would he write one given the opportunity?

He didn't want to think about it. Not now. Not when she sat across from him.

"You don't have to answer that," he said into the silence. "I shouldn't have asked."

Her eyes narrowed. "No, you shouldn't have. You already know too much."

"But no one will believe me," he told her, reaching for a pen. Nervous energy welled inside him. Doodling seemed to give him a quiet outlet, something he had perfected in college. "I don't even believe it."

"Yes, you do," she countered.

She took a deep breath and he wondered if it was for show. Did she need to breathe? He didn't know. He wanted to ask but feared her reaction. Her momentary friendliness had disappeared to replaced by a clinical detachment.

"I don't know what to do about you, Professor Anderson."

He wasn't certain he wanted to know what she meant by that. Something told him it wouldn't make him sleep any easier.

"I came here tonight fully prepared to kill you."

The doodling stopped. He met her merciless gaze and realized he would be powerless to escape her right now. No wooden stake. No holy water or cross to ward her off. Hell, he hadn't even eaten the garlic bread that had come with his spaghetti dinner. "And now?"

She tilted her head to the side. "I don't think it would be a good idea."

He blew out a pent-up breath, one he hadn't even realized he had been holding. His heart thudded against his chest and his pulse raced. "Well, that's a relief."

"Others may not feel so generous," she said, which set his heartbeat to racing even faster.

He hadn't considered there may be others who would find his story just as disturbing as she had. Until now, he had not given any thought to how many other vampires would read a story like his.

"It's not just my kind you have to worry about, Gabe." She leaned forward, intensity shining in her eyes. "I'm not sure what's going on here but I can assure you it's marked you in ways you haven't even realized. He's going to send his demons after you. And if they fail, he may just come visiting himself."

"Who?" He didn't want to know but couldn't stop the question from tripping off his tongue.

Her smile held no warmth. "Who do you think?"

Gabe refused to answer. He couldn't.

"Being American, you know him best as Satan, or the Devil. Either way, he's not going to like what you had to say about Abriana. Not one bit."

"So he's real, too?" He had known as much. If his book held an ounce of truth, as Makenna promised it did, then he had already decided God and Satan existed. He hadn't imagined either of them would come looking for him, though. Not actively, anyhow. The battle of Good and Evil had been a cosmic war too far removed from Flint, Michigan to ever come knocking on his door. "Shit."

Would God protect him?

The story of Job, a vague recollection of a Sunday School lesson, rose in his mind. God's protection had gone only so far for one his most faithful believers. If Gabe remembered correctly, which he couldn't be sure of, God had limited Satan in only one respect. Job's life could not be taken. All else, even his health, had been fair game. His wealth, his family, his body, all of it had been destroyed by Satan's hand over a simple bet between the ancient foes.

I'm no modern day Job, Gabe thought, seeking assurance where none could be found. How could he be certain God had not decided to test him, to challenge him? Could the Almighty have set him up? The idea chilled him to his very core. Why would God waste time on a non-believer whose faith had long ago dried up? It made no sense.

You're a believer right now, a voice whispered deep within him.

But I don't want to be.

The pen snapped and ink flooded his fingers and palm, soaking into the paper where elaborate crosses and fluttering angels had been drawn by an unsteady hand. Gabe cursed and flung the mess into the garbage, staring at the blue ink dripping from his knuckles. He grabbed a handful of tissues from the box next to his monitor and wrapped them around his fist. "I need to wash this off."

Makenna nodded, regarding him with knowing eyes. "I'll wait here."

He wanted to tell her to leave, that he couldn't take any more of her revelations or doomsday predictions, but he could only give her a curt not before he left her sitting there, surrounded by his work.

As he washed his hands in the restroom, the skin stained blue, he looked in the mirror and saw not the brilliant blue eyes he had gotten from his mother, or the chiseled profile his grandfather had passed onto him. Instead he saw a pale, frightened man.

On the walk back to his office his ears strained to hear the approaching apocalypse. The ticking clock, hanging between a set of classroom doors, pierced the silence like a grave pendulum.

Makenna glanced up from the paper she had been reading. "You look like hell."

"Thanks." He snatched the paper out of her hand. "Those aren't for public consumption."

"She's a pretty good writer," Makenna said, nodding toward the paper he'd tossed onto far corner of the desk. "It's too bad about her mother. Doesn't sound like she's going to make it."

"You shouldn't have read that. I promise my students that their journal entries are for my eyes only." He picked up another pen and rolled it between his fingers.

"I promise not to tell."

He sighed, not really caring that she had read the paper. He had scolded her more out of habit than concern. The woman knew how to keep secrets. Her existence depended upon the ability. "What am I going to do?"

Makenna shrugged. "I don't know. I need some time to think on all this."

He said nothing when she stood up and moved into the doorway. He couldn't formulate a single sentence. He could hardly think beyond the paralyzing fear.

"When did the books go out? How long have they been on the shelves?"

Her question gave him something other than his imminent demise to consider. He didn't have to look at a calendar or search through his editor's e-mails. The date of his big release had been etched on his memory for weeks. "They should have been on the shelves by the first of this month."

"That might give us a little bit of time."

"Us?"

She nodded. "This isn't just about you. One way or another, I would have found myself reading your book. And, even if you don't realize it, you wrote it for me."

He didn't have a chance to question her. She disappeared from his office, the suite, without a sound. He wondered if vampires could teleport themselves. It would explain her supernatural speed. And, if vampires and Satan and God could exist, why couldn't teleportation? It all seemed a bit farfetched.

He looked at his desk and found the photo of Alyson staring back at him.

Chapter Four

Aedan Breese, multi-millionaire CEO and one of the eternally damned, had been sorely disappointed with his hotel accommodations. Although the room had been clean and the bed crisply made, he hadn't been impressed. It had reeked of middle class. Mediocrity. Yet, compared to the house he now stood in, the hotel had been a veritable palace.

The simple, ranch-style house sat in the middle of the woods on a hard-packed dirt road somewhere north of the mid-Michigan city he had tracked the author to. As far as Aedan was concerned the only thing it truly had going for it was its solitude. A dense thicket of woods separated it from its nearest neighbor, making the small lawn an island amid trees.

He passed by the dirty dishes piled in the sink and an old yellow refrigerator, which had lost the faux wooden insets, leaving behind grime-incrusted glue on the silver pot metal. More disturbing was the cat hair and dirt collecting along the base of the cupboards.

Of course, the crimson droplets splattered across the room didn't help any. A bright red arc of arterial blood had spurting across the stove and cumbersome microwave on a nearby counter. Another jettison had stained the pale blue wall behind the kitchen table.

His underlings had not been kind to the inhabitants of the quaint little home.

"Clean this mess up," Aedan said, stepping over a severed finger that no doubt belonged to the body someone had tossed into the attached two-car garage.

Somewhere in the back of the house he could hear a woman's terrified sobs and incoherent babbling. He tried not to let the tantalizing sounds distract him, but the infusion of power her fear fed him infused his skin and made it damned difficult.

Three scantily clad succubi drifted into the room at the sound of his voice. Each woman bowed to him, showing more skin than necessary during the symbolic abeyance, before setting the room to rights.

Aedan left them to their work as he continued his appraisal of his new living quarters. Much to his disappointment - but not surprise - the rest of the house matched the kitchen. A light layer of dirt, some clutter, and specks of blood could be found most everywhere. It seemed his underlings had been enjoying themselves while he had busied himself with the sweet, little wench he had followed home.

"Sir," his senior assistant stepped forward, wiping the last traces of blood from his lips. He left a slender teenager's broken body on floor behind him. The boy must not have put up much of a fight because the only wounds Aedan could discern at a glance were to the neck. "I really think we can do better than this. Let me make some phone calls. Talk to my contacts."

Aedan raised a slender, pale hand and the big man fell silent. "While I appreciate your concern for my comfort, Niall, this place will do just fine."

Niall grimaced as he glanced around them. "It's unfit. Dirty."

Aedan nodded, lifting a worn afghan from the back of a recliner. He could smell the years on it. "The succubi will see to our comfort, Niall."

Although he looked far from convinced that such a feat could be managed, Niall did not raise another objection. Instead, he led Aedan down a narrow hallway toward the back bedroom where the woman's hiccupping sobs had quieted to a pitiful whimper. "She has been prepared for you. Just as you like."

Aedan could sense her terror. Her pain called to him, a heady ambrosia he found difficult to resist. He knew she had been tortured, and fed upon. Yet, the physical ailments his people had inflicted were nothing compared to the mental trauma she had suffered and continued to suffer.

A mother's fear. He could sense it. Taste it. Her main concern not for her own welfare but for her children.

"Did you kill all of her offspring?" Aedan asked, pausing outside the closed door.

"There is one left. I stopped the lesser demons from killing a girl-child."

Aedan nodded in satisfaction. Niall knew his job well. "How old is she?"

"I'd say she's about five- or six-years-old." Niall's cold smile would have done nothing to reassure the frightened mother. "She's a pretty little thing, too."

Aedan leveled a warning glance at Niall. "Keep her safe. No one is to touch her."

Niall inclined his head, but Aedan didn't miss the disappointment in the bigger man's eyes. The demon preferred the blood of innocents and innocence was often found in the young.

Aedan didn't bother repeating the order. Niall feared him more than he desired one small girl child. Confident his people would do as they were commanded, Aedan opened the door and stepped into the room. He motioned the two lesser demons on either side of the bound woman out of the room.

The pair, a man and woman of indeterminable age, slipped quietly past him. As the door closed behind them he could hear Niall issuing orders.

For a middle-aged woman with several children, the naked woman strapped to the bed, a cloth shoved between her teeth, had a certain earthiness about her that Aedan found appealing. Shoulder-length brown hair with streaks of blond threaded through it, pretty hazel eyes, and a body most men fantasized about. Only a few stretch-marks around her thighs and breasts marred her otherwise perfect skin.

Aedan sat on the edge of the bed. He ran a talon down her calf, watching the muscles flex away from his touch. "Your youngest yet lives."

Heartache seeped from her very pores as the implication of his words condemned the rest of her family. She cried now in earnest, gasping and choking on the cloth shoved between her teeth.

Aedan wiped away her tears, bringing the salty proof of her grief to his lips. Tasting her emotional pain, savoring it, he felt the

dark abyss within his soul gain strength. The blood he had taken from the woman's daughter had not pleased him nearly as much.

"My name is Aedan," he told her, running his hands down her side and across her stomach. He could feel her reacting to him, his casual touch igniting a primitive fear. Her flesh quivered beneath his fingertips. "I'm going to be borrowing your house for awhile. And you and I are going to become very well acquainted while I'm here."

She whimpered behind the gag, her eyes riveted on his face.

"Don't worry, though, I'm not going to rape you." To prove his point he reached over her and drew the covers across her naked torso, covering her from chest to knees. "At least, I don't think I will. We'll have to see how things turn out."

The faint relief he had sensed in her shattered. The fear surged upward, bathing him in its heady scent.

He rested his hand on her thigh. "Now, as you've discovered, I'm not alone." He smiled, revealing his fangs, as she trembled. "My people are going to be staying here as well. They're busy cleaning up the mess they made right now. Even though they're demons of the worst kind, they still like a tidy house."

Her fear and revulsion were threatening to take her beyond his control. He eased away from her and stood up. While she struggled to keep her mind from snapping, he took his time perusing the intimate details of the master bedroom. He lifted a framed picture from the dresser, noting they had been a handsome couple. He sat it down and turned his attention to the snapshots that had been tucked into the edge of the mirror. Pictures of her children.

He plucked an image of a gap-toothed little girl in piggy tails from its surface and turned toward the woman. He held up the picture so she could see it. "She's cute. And she's still alive. I want you to think of that every time you consider ending your own life. As long as you live, so does she."

Her eyes widened even further - something he had not thought possible - and her pulse raced. The pounding of her heart beat a rapid percussion against her ribcage. He could almost hear her panicked thoughts and the myriad questions his cryptic words had inspired.

He propped the picture up on the nightstand next to the bed, purposely placing it where she would be able to stare at it when she most needed a reminder of what was truly at stake. "I'm going to leave you alone now, but I'll be back. Why don't you try to get some sleep?" He smoothed down a wayward strand of her dark hair. "You're going to find that you're going to need all the rest you can get."

Leaving her to contemplate his words, Aedan retraced his steps to the living room. The teenager had been removed and the blood wiped off the television screen. Most of the family memorabilia had been cast into a large black garbage bag, leaving the walls and shelves bare.

One of the succubi had just plugged in a vacuum cleaner, but she paused before switching it on, waiting for some signal to proceed or desist. She kept her eyes demurely lowered, watching him from beneath dark lashes.

"Where is Niall?"

"Outside. With the wolves."

As soon as he stepped out of the room the vacuum roared to life.

He found Niall at the edge of the backyard with a trio of wolves. The animals followed him with their all too human eyes, their fur rippling gently in the breeze. How they could hear him approach when he had moved without sound or breath impressed Aedan more than he'd ever admit.

"I want to know the second someone steps onto this property," Niall said, his eyes glowing yellow in the darkness. The centers were slits of red fire. It was a small show of power, a reminder that this human form was only a shell for his true self to hide within.

The wolves shifted, alerting the demon to Aedan's approach.

Niall turned just enough to include Aedan in the circle, the demon eyes fading to human. "We're setting up a perimeter. I've sent out Daren and Suzanne for a few supplies and given the girl over to Katerine for safe-keeping."

Aedan nodded and dismissed the wolves by turning his back on them and walking back toward the house. He stopped on the back porch, Niall a few steps behind him, and took a seat on the patio furniture.

Niall leaned against the railing, arms crossed and legs slightly apart.

Aedan glanced toward the sky, noticing the endless black no longer held sway above the trees. Indigo skies threatened. Morning would soon chase him into the shadows. "See that my secretary is notified we've left the hotel. You can tell her I'm available by cell phone if an emergency arises. Whatever you do, don't give her an

address." He cast one last look toward the sky and tried not to let his frustration show. He had wanted to accomplish so much more this night. Although, he realized he shouldn't complain. He had found the writer almost by chance. "When I wake I'll need everything you can find on the writer."

"You can consider it done," Niall said.

Aedan did not question the man's confidence. Their long years of partnership had proven Niall's worth. If the demon said he would do something, it was always done or someone died in the trying.

Aedan could feel the sun's approach, its burning rays warming the night-cooled land to the east. He knew that even separated from its harmful light by a foot or more of soil he would feel its burning presence. He resigned himself to a sleepless day in the earth, but would not suffer another day. "Retro-fit the master bedroom while I sleep."

"And the woman?"

He considered his companion in silence. He would need the woman kept alive if he wanted keep a low profile. Her fear and pain could easily feed him for a month or more. Not that he expected to be here that long.

He rose. "She's yours until the moon rises. My only request is that she's kept alive and coherent."

Niall smiled, his eyes resuming their unnatural glow. "Thank you, sir."

Aedan laid a hand on the man's thick shoulder as he passed him. "I'll see you in a few hours."

Buried beneath the rich, Midwestern soil, Aedan could track the sun's movement through the sky. He slept little. He had become too accustomed to silk sheets and soft pillows. Once he might have been able to ignore the tickling sensation of ants and other insects against his skin, but no longer. The dirt which filled his every crevice, plugging his nose and ears, had claimed his flesh just as it claimed its mortal victims.

Slowly the sun sank into the west. As the first of the night shadows stretched between the trees, Aedan pushed through the shallow grave. He hadn't finished shaking away the dirt when he walked into the house fifteen minutes later.

No one greeted him. The woman's fear did not linger in the air, tempting him to her side. A preternatural stillness had enveloped his newly claimed lair. The place might have been abandoned, but Aedan knew better.

He beckoned the creature within him, demanding its power and cunning.

"You should have told me." The voice, so deep, so beautiful, sent a shiver down Aedan's spine. Dread settled in the pit of his stomach.

"Told you what, my lord?" Aedan resisted the urge to glance around him. The Beast would be seen only if it wanted to be seen.

"Do you play games with me?"

Aedan shook his head. He knew better than to challenge his master's wrath. He had learned the folly of such foolishness long ago. "No."

"Then know I am here for the same reason you are."

Trying to keep the surprise from his voice, Aedan chose his next words very carefully. "You refer to the book then." A pregnant pause forced him to fill the silence. "I didn't realize such a trivial matter would interest you."

A shape coalesced in the shadows the front room. Shape and definition solidified as the Beast walked into the room. He had taken on his most favored human form, that of a tall, inhumanly beautiful man with black wavy hair and crystalline blue eyes. A man that even other men took note of when he passed.

"Oh, it interests me a great deal." The handsome Beast said, seating himself rather regally at the simple table. "It gives my legions dangerous ideas."

"Surely none of your hordes believe true love can save them," Aedan said. He tried and failed to keep the incredulity from his voice. He barely managed to restrain a mocking laugh.

The Beast regarded him with merciless eyes. "It does seem to be the stuff of fairy tales, doesn't it? Yet, some are foolish enough to risk their lives for it. Already I've had to punish a dozen or more of the lesser demons for rebelling."

Aedan did not have to fake his surprise. "They rebelled because of a book?"

"No, they rebelled because of Abrianna," the Beast snarled, his benign façade slipping. Fangs of all lengths and sizes appeared in a maw too big for the face it sat in. Then the skin shifted, darkened into the molten cast of hell, and the blue eyes turned to flame. The black hair lengthened, becoming a mane down the man-beast's back.

The Beast tossed the chair aside as it stood on its massive legs, its cloven feet burning into the linoleum. Despite its monstrous appearance an ageless wisdom shone from its hellish eyes as it towered over Aedan's slender form. "She will not escape me again."

Aedan had vowed the same thing when he had first read Gabe Anderson's novel. He had sworn to find the succubus who had escaped him and make her beg for forgiveness. He had envisioned the means he would use to bring her crawling back to him on her hands and knees.

He had not considered how her disappearance all those centuries ago might have burned the one creature who could claim true dominance over all of demon-kind. He had not thought of how her disappearance might undermine the Beast's earthly dominion.

"I want her brought to me," the Beast said, his sulfurous breath burning away Aedan's eyebrows and raising blisters along his forehead. "She will twist in agony for a thousand years before I cast her into the lake of fire."

The thought of Abrianna's glorious body being undone by the lake's greedy flames infuriated Aedan, but he could not let the Beast see his anger. Schooling his features into a mask of indifference, Aedan forced himself to kneel before the Beast. "If I find her, she is yours, my lord."

The ram-like legs shifted into human form, their shapeliness hidden by a pair of dark trousers. Aedan could see black dress shoes peeking out from beneath the pant legs. The hand that land on his shoulder felt human as well. His show of obedience, no matter how grudgingly given, had apparently calmed the Beast and recalled it to its human form.

“Don’t fail me, Aedan.”

Aedan did not miss the warning in those simple words. He bowed his head. “My Lord.”

Without warning the Beast disappeared, leaving only the scent of brimstone in the air. Aedan climbed to his feet, trembling with rage. The sweet revenge he had planned did not matter in the face of his master’s will. He would do as the Beast asked. He would deliver his wayward Chosen to the King of Hell and smile while doing it. He had no choice.

He walked into the living room in time to see his servants rousing from the trance-like state the Beast had cast over them. The succubi uncurled themselves from their sleeping partners like lioness from long nap. Niall straightened, blinking and stretching, and the lesser demons pulled themselves out of the heap they had fallen into.

“Leave us,” Aedan instructed the three women, his voice sharp.

As they slid past him he could sense their hatred. He reached out and grasped the last one - a beautiful creature with violet eyes and sable hair - by the throat. His talons dug into her flesh. “You will attend me tonight.”

She held his gaze, her expression submissive.

He could beat her right now and she wouldn't raise a hand to stop him. Not unless he instructed her to fight back. Yet, he could feel her fear. Her hatred and self-loathing fed the darkness within him. Later he would be sure to add a good measure of pain to the mixture.

He released her. As she brushed by him, her body betraying the serene expression on her face, Aedan focused his attention on more immediate concerns. "What were you able to find out?"

Niall led him to a desk that had not been there the first time Aedan had walked through the room. A competent computer set-up awaited them, the two monitors glowing with information.

"Here's everything I've got," Niall said, sitting down and grabbing the mouse.