

CHAPTER ONE

❧ SERENA ❧

My eyelids slide closed as the tiny drops of water cascade from the darkened sky. The warm beads hit my face, trickling effortlessly across my cool skin.

The sensation of being alive wraps around me, as my spirit connects to the energy the weather bestows.

Strength bleeds into my body, penetrating each layer until the energy drifts throughout my veins.

I ignore the dull ache making its way into my neck, a result of tilting of my face skyward. Instead, I lift my arms, and without thought, twirl. I embrace each tiny droplet of water as the rain soaks the crenulated coastline around me in a fierce assault.

The elements heighten my supernatural powers, causing my core to hum with vitality. My lips form a small smile as I pirouette my way through the mist-shrouded, endless emerald hills.

Each rise is crisscrossed by tumbledown ancient stone walls. My laughter floats in the wind. It's the only other sound encircling me, aside from the rainfall.

I loved doing this as a child. Spinning so fast I'd become dizzy and disoriented, until the earth around my feet would simply slip away, and breathlessly I would collapse onto the blades of grass. I miss the carefree days of my youth.

There's something freeing—liberating—about standing in an open field, with your arms extended, allowing the rain to wash away your inhibitions.

Not that I have many hang-ups, but the ones I do—they wrap around my heart like chains, squeezing until the simple act of breathing becomes almost impossible.

Another childish laugh escapes me as my body tumbles and collapses onto the soaked ground. I stretch my lean limbs and sink into the sponge-like soil, becoming one with the aged earth below my undressed body.

My wet, auburn hair falls messily around my face and some of the long pieces stick to my dampened skin.

I don't care.

For the first time in days, I feel alive again.

Lying on the ground, I simply stare at the dark sky above, as the world spins around me. For a fleeting minute, the dizziness offers a brief reprieve from the musings that constantly cloud my head.

My free-spirited revel ends abruptly at the sound of a throat being cleared. I release a half-moan, half-sigh, knowing my moment of serenity has come to an end.

Rather than sitting up to face Rulf, the royal guard assigned to protect me, I pout like a child. My unhappiness overtakes the bliss I was feeling seconds ago.

It's not that I don't enjoy Rulf's company. It's just that his presence reminds me of my royal bloodline, my duties, and my obligations. Knowing the gargoyle's temperament, he's probably

standing with his arms crossed, aggravated by my lack of acknowledgment while he continues to get wet.

“Go away, Rulf.”

“You’re naked.”

The statement comes from an unfamiliar, seductive, masculine voice, filled with an inherent confidence. *Definitely. Not. Rulf.*

Unaware of who this stranger is, I remain still and strategize a plan of attack, should I need one.

Though I’m without my weapons, I’m not concerned. Years of hand-to-hand training with the best protectors have made me a skilled opponent. If that fails, I always have my supernatural powers to help me kick this guy’s ass.

I clear my throat and remain motionless. “Your ability to state the obvious is mind-blowing.”

The stranger releases a dark chuckle, unnerving me. I shiver in response, and my slight grin falls. My lips press together in annoyance at my reaction to something as simple as his enthralling laughter. It’s like silk.

Cool.

Sensual.

Designed to pull you in and entrance you.

“I guess I missed the *clothing optional* portion of the academy’s handbook,” he counters.

My stomach clenches in response as his velvety voice drifts over my exposed skin, caressing it. I swallow in an attempt to keep myself in check and my tone even.

It is an epic failure.

“Something to work on then.” My voice is shaky.

“What’s that?”

“Reading.”

“Reading?”

“A prerequisite if you’ll be attending the academy.”

A beat of silence passes between us before he speaks.

“Is nudity a habitual behavior of yours?” he questions, with an amused lilt to his tone.

At the sound of his deep voice, I roll onto my stomach, lift my gaze, and meet his curious expression.

He’s breathtaking, in a dark and unrefined manner, if you’re into that sort of thing.

By the way my breathing has become erratic and my heart rate is spiraling out of control, I guess I’m into it.

“Yes,” I reply.

A knowing smirk appears on his full lips. “Nice ass,” he compliments, while his stare runs the length of me.

I don’t shy away from his open perusal. I’m comfortable with my curves. Self-assurance comes with my title.

His eyes roam across my body, leaving imprints everywhere they go. I blush uncharacteristically at his heated intensity. My poise cracks as raw desire slithers inside me, crawling into the crevices, choking me.

Confused by the way my body is responding to him, I pinch my brows. He tilts his head to the side, watching my reaction. There's something captivating about the way he's looking at me. He's drawn to me, but can't figure out why.

I notice his self-confidence start to fade. Taking advantage of the fact that he's lost in his own thoughts, my focus shifts to his mouth, and I stare at a tiny, sexy scar on his upper lip. His breathing is smooth and soft.

Unlike me, with my unsolicited need to have him whisper dirty things to me, he seems unaffected.

Cool and calm.

Eerily controlled.

The stranger runs both of his large hands through his caramel hair, pushing the long pieces on top back in a sleek and sexy manner. The rain has soaked every perfect strand, and they keep attaching themselves to his sun-kissed face.

It's almost as if they never want to let go. I narrow my eyes at the wisps. They're eliciting a pang of jealousy within me. For some unexplainable reason, I feel an overwhelming sense of ownership over him. It's me who should be the one to touch his slightly scruffy, chiseled face—not those pieces of hair.

Wait, that isn't right. I don't even know him.

I scrutinize his thick eyebrows and attempt to compose myself. On most guys a brow piercing looks ridiculous. On him, it looks menacing and wild.

And hot.

So very, very hot.

I drop my gaze to the silver and hematite rings adorning his fingers. Like mine, every finger with the exception of his pinky is covered with them. I blink away the idea that our hands match, and instead concentrate on his broad chest, hidden under a white thermal.

The thin cotton is drenched, allowing me to take in his sculpted body. A pendant sits under his shirt, dangling from a black leather rope, which hangs from his neck.

Annoyingly, I can't make out what it is.

I sigh internally as my eyes trail over his rolled-up sleeves. They're pulled up to his elbows, showing off the leather-and-chain bracelets he's wearing on each wrist. At the sight of the familiar adornments, all my internal alarms go off, and something inside of me sinks.

I attempt to hide the awareness that has fallen across my expression, and instead fixate on his worn jeans and heavy boots, while planning my escape.

This guy reeks of danger, and trouble. The air of cockiness he emanates is one I grew up with. It matches my father's and uncles'. Meaning this hot specimen is one hundred percent off-limits, and being near him is like being near a bullet that you never saw coming. It wounds you so quickly and deeply that you bleed out without even knowing you've been hit.

I meet his powerful cognac glare and a shaky breath escapes me. I'm startled by the way he's staring at me.

Like I'm all he's longed for.

A light chill brushes through me. I'm not accustomed to someone looking at me and seeing just me, not my bloodline. I need to get a grip on my erratic emotions.

Standing, I put my entire unclothed body on display, hoping to throw him off balance. Pushing some of my damp hair behind my ear, I lift a challenging eyebrow at him, daring him not to look at me.

Unfazed, he holds my gaze with an unwavering stare.

A silent pause beats between us.

Who is this guy?

"Are you done assessing me?" he asks.

"You're a protector?" I point to the shaded Celtic tattoo on his right forearm.

The symbol binds him to the Spiritual Assembly of Protectors, allowing him to accept divine assignments. *Of course he's a protector—he's here at the academy. Why can't I think clearly around him?*

The stranger's expression falls, as if my accusation hurt him somehow. He doesn't say anything, but dips his chin in response, confirming my theory.

I take a step back, empathetic to the heavy burden protectors carry. Nervously, my fingers find and play with my own piece of protector jewelry.

The silver bracelet sits on my left wrist and is intricately designed with flowers and vines around the band, hiding my smaller, identical Assembly tattoo.

My aunt Eve gifted the bracelet to me for my eighteenth birthday. It was something her deceased mother Elizabeth, a jewelry designer, had made for her.

Aunt Eve had the emeralds, my healing stone, added so they hang off the sides in a pretty and feminine manner.

A small watch face was set on top in the hope that I would become more responsible about time management. Not one of my strong suits. Along with rules, motivation, education—anyway, you get the point.

It's crucial that all gargoyles wear something containing their healing stone. The mineral rejuvenates us, increases our powers, and heightens our restorative abilities.

It's a necessary evil in my book. I despise the leather bands my family wear. They feel more like handcuffs to me than required protector accessories.

"Tristan," he says, in a way that slices through me.

Another unwelcome shiver crosses my skin at the sound of his voice. "Serena," I reply thinly.

Tristan's pointed look drops and travels over my body in a palpable manner, as he becomes intimately acquainted once again with my every curve.

"Are you always so . . . welcoming, Serena?"

When his eyes finally meet mine, my brow arches.

"Only to those I like."

“So you like me then?” He attempts to hide his smile.

I hold him with a glare. “Don’t flatter yourself, protector.”

Tristan cocks his head and crosses his arms over his chest. My focus strays to the streams of rain dripping off his face. He steps closer to me. So close that I trap a breath he’s exhaled in my lungs, when the bare portion of his arm brushes my own. *Why am I so reactive to him?*

Slowly he bends down, piercing me with an amused expression. “And here I was, completely impressed with myself that I had a beautiful girl naked—and wet—within within five minutes of meeting her,” he seduces.

“That a record for you?” I quip.

I offer a shy grin, unable to stop myself.

“It would seem so.”

“Maybe you’re just having an off year,” I surmise.

Tristan stares at me with an obvious sadness that stretches over us. “You have no idea just how off.”

My eyes trace his lips. I start to speak, but he abruptly cuts me off when his hands lift to my face, cupping my cheeks.

I stop breathing and my gaze widens at the unexpected motion. At his touch, a warmth runs through my veins, igniting something foreign within me.

His thumb lightly brushes a drop of rain off my bottom lip, and I watch with a rapidly beating heart as he brings the thumb to his mouth and sucks the bead of water off, watching me the entire time.

“It’s been . . . interesting meeting you, Serena.”

My name feels like a test on his lips.

He releases my face and takes a step back, roughly sliding his hands into the front pockets of his soaked jeans.

I swallow, regarding him for a moment longer.

“You too, Tristan.”

“See you around, raindrop.”

✧ TRISTAN ✧

I slowly back away, wearing a stupid grin, while holding her wide-eyed stare. The energy dancing between us is almost unbearable, and I have to force myself to look away from eyes that are bluer than any ocean I've ever seen.

Normally, unmated female gargoyles have gray eyes, highlighted with small flecks of color that match the clan they're born into. Of course the royal heir would defy the rules and have deep sapphire irises.

I look away from her and an unwelcome heaviness descends. Trying to appear unfazed, I turn my back and full-on walk away, before I do something stupid like storm back, pull her into my arms, and make promises I can't keep.

Then it hits me—I've left her unguarded. *Shit!*

Regardless of my assignment, I'm aware that Serena St. Michael can defend herself. Yet, the idea of leaving her out here, unprotected, causes my chest to tighten. *Why is that?*

I press forward, reminding myself that her primary guard is close by. My nostrils flare at the thought.

Christ, she was dancing naked in the rain, with another male protector watching her. It's obvious she has no inhibitions, and that's both infuriating and sexy.

So. Fucking. Sexy.

A vision of her unclothed body hits me. The reminder causes me to growl like a fucking animal. The photos in her file didn't do her justice. *Goddamn, she's beautiful.*

I approach my Harley Davidson, digging my fingers into my front pocket to pull out the key. I'm drenched. Groaning, I straddle my Street 500 and bring her to life.

The only thing sexier than my blacked-out, custom bike is the protector with the piercing blue eyes.

In the split second that I laid my eyes on her, everything inside of me decided I wanted to be the reason she breathed.

When a slight grin turned her mouth up at the corners, it was all I could do not to lean over and claim her lips.

Taste her.

Mark her.

Make her mine.

Something about the way she studied me, quietly considering me—in that instant, it became my mission to obliterate any space between us. Without thinking, I placed myself as close to her as I could.

A bad idea, because within seconds, my hands lifted of their own accord, cupping her cheeks. I became fascinated with the little bead of water that sat on her bottom lip, beckoning me to suck it off. I couldn't, though. Instead, I allowed my thumb to do what my mouth wanted to.

At the recollection, my heart thuds against my chest, and for a brief moment, I regret touching her altogether.

All it took is that one time, damning me to hell.

The moment I held her delicate face between my hands, my heart vowed to follow her to the end of all time.

Protect her.

Be her champion.

It didn't go unnoticed by me that at my touch, goosebumps immediately formed across her bare body, and her skin took on a slight pink hue. Maybe I'm not alone in the inexplicable pull department.

I lick my lips and refuse to allow my mind to go there.

To the place where I steal her away and permanently etch myself on her. The simple fact is that no matter what I want, at the end of this appointment, I'm the one who has to break her. Educate her in the ways of her reality.

Angrily, I take off, out of the parking lot without a look back. It doesn't matter how hypnotic Serena St. Michael is.

She's hands-off.

An assignment.

Nothing more.

I'm not allowed to want her because it's not about me.

It is about blood, oaths, and protection.

Loyalties and obligations that we're both tethered to.

If our pasts collide, our bloodlines would divide us.

Acting on an attraction would trigger a shitstorm of darkness to fall over both our futures.

I'll protect both of us from that fate, with my last breath if I have to.

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