

Devil's Claw & Moonstone

by Emily Michel

Chapter 1

Rhys Carter snapped out of his deep, dreamless sleep when the kitchen door banged open but relaxed in the next second as he recognized his brother, Owen, grumbling to himself downstairs. The scent of oranges surrounded him, and a smile formed on his lips. For once in his life, he was content. While the sex had been amazing, he was actually looking forward to waking up next to someone he gave a damn about.

Annie, the incredible Gifted witch who had invaded his life two months ago, had somehow managed to get under his skin. What had started out as mere attraction grew to respect as she pulled his ass out of the fire more than once. Her dedication to her mission and her courage only added to her allure, and when he finally discovered that her feelings mirrored his own, Rhys counted himself one lucky son of a bitch. But now she was going to leave him for a chance to complete her mission: destroying the demon who had killed her mother and her husband. She'd been up front about it before their encounter, her tenacity making any other choice impossible. He wished it wasn't so.

The clock on his nightstand read noon. Rhys turned over to caress Annie's soft skin and bury his face in her red-gold hair, ready to tease her about being discovered. His hand met cool sheets instead. Frantic, he rose from the bed and pulled on his worn out jeans. He barreled down the stairs, hoping he could still catch her before she left. He wanted, needed, one last goodbye.

"Did you see Annie?" he nearly shouted at his brother.

"No, and her truck's gone," Owen replied. "Why? What's happened?"

Annie had left while he slept. All Rhys wanted was to rewind the clock, just a little bit, so

he could ask her to stay. Before the betrayal could sink in, Rhys ran back up the stairs. He grabbed the first shirt he could find, pulling the ratty t-shirt over his head. It clung to his muscular chest like a second skin, the only reason he kept the damn thing. His boots were next, standard Doc Martens, good for ass-kicking, monster-hunting, and motorcycle-riding. He threw his wallet into his small go-bag, a backpack containing a change of underwear, socks, and a toothbrush. After thundering down the stairs, he snatched his motorcycle jacket from the coat rack by the front door before racing out of the kitchen door, straight for the garage. He sent Annie a text.

"Where r u?"

Owen followed him. "Wait, what's happened, man? Where's Annie?"

"She's gone, Owen," Rhys answered over his shoulder. "She got a call, and she had to go. Some witchy thing."

"Shit, Rhys, I'm sorry. She thought this would take at least a few days."

"You *knew*?" He stopped in the middle of opening the door to the garage and looked up at his brother. Rhys was tall, just over six feet, but Owen had a few inches on him. He clenched his empty hand at his side. "You knew, and you didn't tell me?"

Owen paled. "She wanted to tell you herself," he said, quietly. "Dude, it was less than a day!"

The hurt in Owen's amber-flecked brown eyes quelled his anger. It wasn't his brother's fault. She'd said things had happened fast, but it didn't matter. What did matter was catching up to her and telling her to stay. In a place in his mind he would never admit to, he had thought that maybe, just maybe, what they'd shared would change her mind. *Stubborn witch!* So he was left with tracking her down and telling her how he actually felt. Which meant he had no more than two hours to figure that shit out.

"Doesn't matter. I gotta find her," he said.

"Did she say where she was going?" Owen asked.

"Near Dallas."

"How long has she been gone?"

"I dunno, maybe an hour."

A tiny spark of hope burned in the deep recesses of his mind. Tyler was a two-hour drive from Dallas, but on his motorcycle, he could cut off at least twenty minutes. He might be able to catch her.

But she left you. The cold, rational part of his mind, the part that always needed to be in control, tried to douse the spark with bitter reality. *And what, you're going to drive around Dallas looking for one truck?*

"Are you really going to drive around Dallas looking for her, Rhys?" His brother echoed his own thoughts.

"Yeah, I am. You gonna try to stop me?"

"No, man. But you gotta know it's nearly impossible, right? There's over six million people in the Dallas area."

"Never tell me the odds," Rhys said with a smile as he donned his helmet over his dark-brown, unruly hair and started up the Kawasaki he'd bought two years ago as a treat for his birthday. "She left a note for you in her room."

He steered around the more robust Harley that belonged to Owen and opened the throttle down the driveway. Rhys looked back once, at the turn in the drive that would put the house out of sight. Owen stood next to the garage, his hand raised in farewell.

As he sped toward Dallas, Rhys maneuvered on auto-pilot. He lost himself in his thoughts of Annie. Annie running through the woods, looking like a victim on their first meeting.

Now that he knew her, victim would be the last word he would use to describe her. Strong, funny, and sexy suited her much better. He would miss the feel of her on the sparring mat. Or watching her sneak up on his brother during their training and laughing when she pelted him with a barrage of paint balls. And he would miss the quiet moments. The intense set of her face as she made her way through a book on magic, how peaceful she looked when she fell asleep on the couch, the animation in her face and sparkle in her gray eyes when she talked with her family. Despite himself, his thoughts drifted to Annie in the last minutes they spent together. She was glorious naked, better than his imagination, calling his name and moaning in pleasure. He forced his attention back to the road.

He still couldn't find the words for how he felt about her. If he found her — *when* he found her — he was going to tell her what, exactly? *Don't go. I really liked fucking you?* What could he say that would change her mind? And if he said it, did he mean it?

Just over an hour later, and no closer to an answer, he drove through downtown Dallas. He pulled off the interstate and cruised the main streets, stopping occasionally to text her. After an hour of this, he pulled over for gas and to rethink his situation. He had known this would be difficult but had given in to the hope of a miracle. While fueling up, he reviewed their last real conversation. *What exactly had Annie said?* The other side of Dallas.

Fuck. He needed to be looking in Fort Worth.

Rhys got back on his motorcycle and rocketed the thirty-plus miles between the two cities. Looking for her truck in the glut of trucks in a large Texas city really was looking for a needle in a needle stack. Nevertheless, he continued to patrol up and down the streets of Fort Worth.