

Avenging Angels:

Bad Medicine

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Teaser Chapter

Chapter One

Eviscerated

Several months ago...

I didn't know how it happened.

One second I was standing just inside my apartment door and Gabe—my hot guy acquaintance/friend who had recently turned into my bodyguard—was moving through my space to make sure it was secure, no bad guys lurking in the closet, no ex-boyfriends planning on doing something (else) that was immensely stupid.

The next second, he called out all was safe, I stepped in further and shut the door behind me.

The second after that, he appeared in the mouth of the hall.

And then, for some reason, I was staring at him. (Okay, I knew the reason, he was breathtakingly handsome in a scary, uber masculine way.)

He was also staring at me.

How we made it across the room to each other, that was the part I didn't know.

How we collided in the middle of my drab living room, again, no clue.

Though, I didn't miss how his mouth crashed down on mine. How his arms crushed me to his tall, hard body. How my fingers skated over his thick, close-cropped, coal-black hair. How his neatly trimmed beard deliciously abraded my skin. How I opened my mouth to him practically before our lips touched. How he didn't hesitate to thrust his tongue inside like my mouth was his to claim.

Like it had always been his to claim.

Before we met.

Before we were born.

Before the universe even came into being.

Uh...*no*, I didn't miss how good his kiss was.

And I didn't miss how good he felt, strong and warm.

Further, I didn't miss how good *I* felt: wanting him, him wanting me...

Belonging to him.

Already.

I belonged to him.

With...just...one...kiss.

One kiss that wasn't even done yet!

And I didn't miss how safe...

How safe...

Safe.

Safe.

With all the mental and physical strength it took—and mind you, it took *a lot* (straight up, all I had)—I yanked from his arms and retreated two very wide steps, only stopping because I ran into my secondhand (but not all that bad) armchair.

Gabe was staring at me, his broad, proud chest visibly rising and falling with his breaths.

He wasn't the only one breathing heavy.

“Willow—” he started.

I shook my head, lifting a hand, palm aimed his way like I was holding him off, but I knew.

Man, did I know.

Those gestures were for me.

I was holding myself back from making another really stupid, really damaging, really messed-up decision.

“That wasn't smart,” I said, my words shaky.

He nodded, and that movement, his agreement, should've set my mind at ease.

But it felt like a million needles piercing my skin.

Then he said, “You're right. While I'm assigned to protect you, we shouldn't go there.”

“Gabe—”

“But after this shit is done, babe—”

“No,” I stated firmly, surprised I had that in me, glad I did, but at the same time devastated.

His excruciatingly perfect, arched black eyebrows winged up. “What?”

“No,” I repeated.

“No...what?” he asked, appearing confused, which was kinda adorable.

Gabriel Stark had been in my sphere now for a good while. He was buds with my buds' boyfriends. We were firmly entrenched in the same posse.

He was also built like a brick shithouse—bulky, sturdy, no lean muscle there. Though he was all muscle and it was all in-your-face *power*.

He was further, all spread-legs-while-seated, arms flung over the backs of chairs and booths, taking up manly space like it was his due. His chuckle, which was hard to come by, was deep and rumbling, and each time he emitted it, it was clear he was bestowing a gift you should feel lucky you received.

And whenever I heard it, I felt lucky.

Whenever I caused it, I felt like the queen of the world.

He was intense.

He was edgy.

He was so sexy, it was almost scary.

So not once, not even close, had he ever looked remotely *adorable*.

And seriously, in this exact moment, I really did not need to know he could.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

You've learned, my logical brain told me. The hard way. Like, a gazillion times. Starting at, oh, I don't know...birth!

But this is Gabe, my starry-eyed, dreamer brain told me. He's a member of the Hottie Squad. They've managed the impossible. They've succeeded in morphing the hot, sexy alpha bits with the thoughtful, sensitive enlightened bits of a human being with a dick.

Raye says Cap struggles with his inner caveman all the time, my logical brain reminded my dreamer.

He bests it, my dreamer reminded my logic.

Barely, Logic pointed out.

“Willow?” Gabe called.

I focused on him.

“No, not after either,” I pushed out because I had to.

For a second, it seemed my words didn’t penetrate.

I knew when they did because his brows knitted ominously.

“Were you in a fugue state when I kissed you and you missed what just went down?” he asked.

That was kinda funny, which was surprising because Gabe was not a funny guy. He didn’t joke. He didn’t quip. He was not light-hearted and fun-loving.

I wished I could laugh. Laugh and shrug off the words I’d just said. Tell him I wasn’t thinking straight. Tell him Kevin had muddled my head. Tell him, yeah, he was right, while all this crap was going down with Kev and Kev’s very dead friend Trev, we shouldn’t go there, but after...

After...

We could see what that kiss was all about.

We could see what the sizzling tension that had been blistering between us the last few days was about. Tension that led to that kiss.

Who was I kidding?

That tension had been building between us since we met, it was just that there were things in the way.

Now those things (yeah, freaking *Kevin*) were not in the way anymore.

But I couldn’t say any of that.

And I wouldn’t.

Damn it, I was going to have to find some more strength.

Not my strong suit.

I dug deep and scratched at the dregs.

“I didn’t miss it,” I replied. “But I think you’re missing where I might be at right now, considering my choices and where it’s landed, oh, I don’t know, everybody I care about.”

“Don’t take his shit on,” Gabe ordered.

“Oh, okay. Sure,” I stated blithely, then gave myself an overdramatic physical shake. “There! All those women who were scammed by my ex and his bestie, Harlow’s apartment being tossed,

everyone spending all their time trying to solve a freaking *murder*”—I lifted both hands in front of me, fingers curled in, and I flashed them open—“*poof*. All gone. All good now.”

“None of that is on you,” he rumbled, and I could see he was getting pissed.

It was a little frightening and a little exciting, which pretty much defined Gabriel Stark.

(Okay, no, the “little frightening” part was spot on, but it was more like “a lot exciting” if I was honest, something I was not going to be for the sake of my own sanity, not to mention my heart.)

“No, you’re right. It’s on Kevin.”

“So let him face whatever consequences he’s set up for himself.”

“I will.”

“Then what was that shit about not going there with me?”

“Because, dude...you have a dick,” I pointed out like he wasn’t the brightest bulb in the box. Mistake.

Huge mistake.

His head ticked back almost violently.

And I would *so* get why when he said carefully and oh-so sinisterly, “I am not him.”

“You’re all some version of him,” I retorted.

Another mistake.

Huge.

Colossal.

“That’s some seriously fucked-up shit to say,” he bit off.

“Uh, *hello*,” I shot back. “When we got home, *you had to walk through my apartment to make sure it was safe*.”

“Right, so you’re gonna transfer all his damage to every guy you meet?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said breezily. “His and Trev’s.”

And your dad’s. And high school boyfriend number one, along with high school boyfriend number two. Oh yeah, and your former bestest bestie Jen’s winner of a man, Logic added.

Oh, shut up, Dreamer snapped. *You ruin everything*.

“We are all not that guy,” Gabe said dangerously.

“Guess what, Gabe. After all this crap with Kev and Trev, I’ve learned, and my pick is henceforth gonna be the bear every damned time,” I returned.

With alarming slowness, he turned, looking down the hall where he, not ten minutes ago, just put himself out there to any protentional...*something*...that might be lurking, in order to make certain my space was safe.

He then turned to stare at the front door, an eloquent reminder that, for the last several days, he hadn’t been doing his normal job as he should be doing it—this, to be sure I was safe.

After that, he looked at the ceiling, indicating, I was sure, Cap and Raye’s apartment, which could more aptly be described as a love nest. Because Cap was one of the very few good ones (even Logic could see that).

Changing his aim at the ceiling slightly, and that indicated one of Eric and Jessie’s places (they hit whoever’s space struck their fancy—his house, or her apartment—so they had two love nests). Because, you guessed it, Eric was also one of the very few good ones (and, again, Logic couldn’t argue).

Only then did he come back to me.

But now, I was getting mad.

“You cannot pretend you don’t get why I’m not all fired up to jump into another situation, considering the situation all of us are in right now...because of me.”

“Not a fan of repeating myself, woman, but I will right now to say it is *not* because of you,” Gabe replied.

I opened my mouth to say something but didn’t get it out.

Gabe kept going.

“And life is too goddamned short to waste it on other people’s shit. Their shit hits you, or they force it on you, when you clean it off, you take from it what you gotta take. You learn from it what you gotta learn. You shake it off. And you keep moving forward.”

“Thank you, oh Sage One,” I returned.

And yeah, I was being a bitch, with a purpose.

His eyes narrowed.

I figured Gabe didn’t miss much, and he certainly wasn’t missing I was being a bitch.

And maybe because I was being such a bitch, he laid it out and laid me out doing it.

“So some clown plays you, and just to say, you weren’t the only one who fell for his shit. You and your women have been investigating him and his bro for months, so you know that even better than me. He cons you...and by the fucking way, the ‘con’ part of that stands for ‘confidence,’ and if you let his bullshit change you, you’re letting him win that game too...you allow yourself to become bitter and paint all men with his brush, that”—he lifted a very attractive, strong, veined hand with a long, square-ended finger jabbing my way (a hand I had more than once, even before his guarding-my-body gig started, fantasized doing many lovely (and naughty) things to me)—“*that is on you*. It isn’t on him, babe. It is one hundred percent *on you*.”

And um...

Yeah.

I was definitely getting ticked.

“Right, Gabe,” I snapped. “How about you put yourself in my shoes and tell me how you’d play this.” I leaned back, threw my arms out and went on snidely, “Oh, I forgot, you’re *a man*. Stiff upper lip, fuck her for being a bitch and *onward*. Right? I’m just being a girl by giving a shit how this affects me and everyone I love. Right?”

“You think I haven’t been played?”

I blinked, shocked at this knowledge.

Hurt at this knowledge.

Hurt...for him.

And I’d missed something else.

I’d taken it too far.

Way too far.

I knew that by the stiff way he was prowling to the door, like he was holding himself in check, like if he let loose...

What?

He’d tear into me?

He’d share with me?

He’d expose his emotions to me?

God, I wanted to know what he was holding back like I wanted to unlock the secret to keeping a cake fresh and moist for more than a few days.

But I wasn't going to get that.

Because I'd squandered it.

He yanked open the door, but turned to me, and landed the hammer.

"Go ahead, Willow. Bury yourself in his shit. That's weak and cowardly and stupid as all fuck. But it's safe. Maybe one day you'll open yourself up enough to find a man who does not come close to doing it for you. But he won't challenge you, he'll bore the absolute piss out of you. And you'll be so mired in your spinelessness, you'll convince yourself it's all good when it's shit. And you'll know, deep down, where you'll never have the courage to go, you fucked up. You lost your shot. You blew it. And you'll blame Kevin and all those other guys, but it's all you, babe. It's all fuckin' you."

With that, he slammed the door.

And he was gone.

But I stood in my living room with my cheap furniture mixed with the thrifted stuff, staring at the door, my guts on the floor, my heart shredded.

Eviscerated.

And Gabe may have said the words.

But I'd handed him the scalpel and invited him to cut me open.

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