



SUMMARY

Valhalla is for warriors that die in battle. What of those who don't have a hero's death? Where do they go?

The inter-world is in chaos and has become the heart of the battleground in the war between Paladins and Gatekeepers. Harley doesn't know it yet, but she's at ground zero. A night of drinking, to forget a cheating girlfriend, is about to change her life forever. A birthmark—or a birthright—sets her on a direct path to a woman who claims to have known her for centuries. Not ready to accept her Paladin mantle, she needs proof—and that proof is out to destroy her.

A protector by birth, Dawn was bred to preserve the delicate cycle of life and death. Protecting a Paladin is to be mated for eternity, usually without the sex, but Harley's allure is universally compelling. Harley's rise in status to *The Chosen* complicates things further as Dawn finds herself fighting for her own heart, as well as battling her biggest nemesis and brother, Lucius.

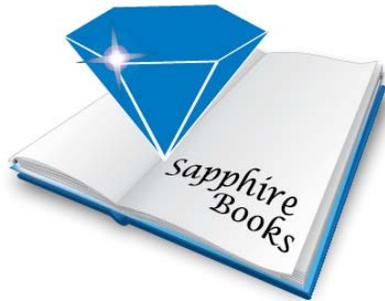
Lucius, lord of the Gatekeepers, is out to kill souls moving to their next life. He wants Harley in his corner and he isn't about to let a little sibling rivalry stand in the way, no matter what it takes.

Harley find herself caught up in Lucius's tempting promise of power, but cannot shake the soul-tugging love she feels with Dawn. Will Dawn convince Harley in time to embrace her Paladin destiny and save the souls looking for their gate, or will Lucius be able to sway Harley to throw in with the Gatekeepers?

THE GATE

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ISABELLA



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The Gate

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Dedication

For my mom.

May she be in Valhalla raising hell.

Schileen

I am for ever your paladin.

Acknowledgments

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Prologue

Jerking off her leather armor chest guard, Dawn let it fall to the floor in a fit of rage. She kicked the leather across the floor, pissed that she had to train in secret. Her new duties for her charge wouldn't begin until the afternoon, when Aphrodite finally woke for the day. She ran her fingers over the birthmark on her chest, a constant reminder that she had larger duties ahead of her.

"Mother!" Dawn screamed. "How could you do this to me? Of all the goddesses, you had to pick Aphrodite?"

"Daughter."

Dawn cringed. She hadn't really expected a response.

"She will teach you the most valuable lesson of all," said her mother. Omniscient that she was, her mother granted very few the pleasure of her presence. Why was Dawn surprised she wasn't one of them? "You will learn patience being Aphrodite's handmaiden, my daughter. You'll need it for your Paladin. She has yet to perfect that virtue and will need the guidance of someone like you."

"But, but...Allie got to serve the goddess of war. Why couldn't I learn from the huntress, or somebody equally spectacular?"

"Your sister is learning to fight her own battles. She has yet to prove that she can handle a Paladin. You, my dear, will be the protector of The Chosen One, and she will stress you to your limit. Trust me, you'll thank me for this little exercise. Now go back to Aphrodite and fulfill your job. Besides, your time is almost done here."

"I can't believe this."

Dawn's mother's voice, tinny in her ear, reminded her of the great challenge that was to come. Powerful forces wanted Earth to spin off its axis, causing it to go dark. Lately, the Paladins were failing in their struggle to bring lost souls to their next gate, so it was imperative that the Protectors be ready for a higher battle.

"Dawn! Where are you, sweetie?" Aphrodite's singsong voice rang through the great halls.

"Shit." Dawn tucked her wings and pulled her gown on, tying the belt loosely. "Coming."

"There you are." Aphrodite hugged Dawn and laced her fingers through Dawn's. "I need a bath and require someone to scrub my back." Pulling Dawn along, Aphrodite turned and smiled. "Would you be a dear and bring something to eat...oh, and some wine, too. I'm famished."

Dawn closed her eyes, her jaw bunched as she cursed under her breath. "Of course."

Chapter One

Harley's head hurt. Her mind felt like it was on fucking overload. All she'd done was think all day. That's all she could do now. The hike had been a chance to reevaluate her life, assess where she wanted to be and where she was going. Instead, it had become more than self-reflection; it had undone her. No phone, no computer, no TV—completely off the grid. Technology had replaced everyone's ability to really communicate, so she'd left it all behind—tossed her cell phone out of the car's window as she'd sped down the highway and watched in her driver's side mirror as it busted into tiny little pieces, never to be reclaimed, not even if she wanted to. She didn't.

Being alone off the grid let her think, made her think of what had happened.

No TV, no diversions. People vegetated for years in a state of misery because of TV, didn't they? TV allowed them to focus on something other than their own miserable lives, their pain, and their inadequacies. Hell, watch it long enough, and if you weren't depressed and miserable, you soon were.

Looking down, she ran her hand over her stomach, feeling her pelvic bones. Dinnertime. She'd lost her appetite long ago. *Maybe I'll get nutritional dementia.* When had she last had something solid in her stomach? The pain had replaced hunger a long time ago. *Thank God.* Staring at the protein bar she was holding, she couldn't imagine downing another tasteless piece of cardboard. She tossed it into the fire. She didn't want wild animals digging through her campsite while she was there asleep.

Arrooooo. A coyote howled off in the distance, signaling the impending darkness.

Mentally clicking off another day, she sat staring at the two bullets in her other hand. Picking up the fine-point Sharpie she'd been writing in her journal with, she scribbled *I'm done* on one and *Fuck this* on the other. She was too much of a coward for suicide, but she had considered it lately, a lot. Sitting at night in her tent, she could feel the cold steel bump of the 9mm she tucked under her pillow for protection. Now it lay cradled in her lap, the clip pulled out and the bullets scattered around her. She'd even formulated a half-assed plan one night while lying in her sleeping bag.

She could wrap herself in her plastic liner and not make a mess someone else would have to clean up. She'd seal it with duct tape and get inside her sleeping bag, which was in her tent that she would collapse around her for more protection. Then she'd take out her cook pot, place it over her head, and put the gun in her mouth. But which way should she aim the gun? Straight back at her spinal cord or at an angle into her brain? By putting the cook pot over her head, she was certain the bullet wouldn't travel and hurt anyone. She didn't want to be careless with someone else's life.

It wouldn't happen. She was a coward, or maybe just not desperate enough, yet. She could down a fifth of whiskey, which might help facilitate things, but what if she didn't do it? The hangover would be killer.

If she could just reach in and pull the most painful part of her out, she'd be fine. But she suspected her heart wouldn't cooperate with the exorcism. Leaning back against her chair, she twisted her neck and felt the pop. Stress and pain were doing the buddy system in her head. In fact, they were her best friends lately. The beauty of the dusk surrounded her, yet it couldn't find purchase in her soul. Gazing at the night sky, she spotted her first falling star and flung a wish at it. She had given up counting sheep to try to fall asleep. She'd lost so many nights that she dreaded seeing another one fall, but fall they must. Her eyelids drooped and her head finally bobbed backward.



"Hey, you know the way to the gate?"

The sound of plastic snapping in the breeze caught her attention. The yellow caution tape flapped against the side of a fence. Picking up the end she studied it. CRIME SCENE was printed in big black letters that blocked her path.

"Hey, you know the way to the gate?"

Peering over her left shoulder she saw a young guy, in his mid to late twenties, holding his hand over his chest.

"What gate?"

"*The* gate," he said, staring at her.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said, looking around the campsite. Something had happened, but she didn't know what. She also didn't know who this guy was, but she intended to find out.

"What the fuck is going on here?" She stood and looked at him again, noticing his bloody hand covering his chest. "Holy shit, you're bleeding."

"Jesus, you're tall. What are you, about six feet?"

"No. What the hell happened to you?" She stepped back from the guy, who was definitely in bad shape.

"What?" He pulled his hand away and looked at it. "Oh, this? It happened days ago."

"You need a doctor. Do you have a cell phone? I'd loan you mine, but...but..."

Shit, she hadn't thought about emergencies. What if something had happened to her, what would she do? Who would come to *her* rescue? No one, that's who. No one cared, no one worried about her. She'd go to work, and the same students would be sitting in the same chairs. Their homework wouldn't be done. Her office mate would be bitching about her useless husband, and her boss would ask where her self-evaluation was. No one cared. Especially her cheating girlfriend, Renee. She was the reason she was up here. Fucking bitch.

“Just point me in the direction of the gate, and I’ll be out of your hair, lady,” he said, looking past her.

Turning, she tried to see what he was looking at, but nothing was behind her.

“Wait. At least let me get my first-aid kit,” she said, scrambling to her tent.

He grabbed her arm and stopped her before she got anywhere. “I don’t need a doctor. I don’t need first aid.”

“But—”

“I did this to myself. I don’t need help.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, stepping back from him. “How did you do that?” She pointed to his bloody hand.

“I had too much to drink, and pow. Look, I got a shitty life, a shitty job, and I do, correction, did way too many drugs. So, last night I got drunk, said fuck it, and…” He made the shape of a gun with his finger and thumb, then pointed it to his chest. “Pow.”

“Oh, my God, you shot yourself. Is the bullet still in there?” She walked toward him and reached for him, but he grabbed her hands before she could touch the wound.

“I get it. You’re like that lady in the movie who sees dead people and doesn’t even know it.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I committed suicide, lady.” He dropped her hands and looked at her funny. “What’d you do?”

“Do? I… I didn’t do anything.” She looked around again. She was in her campsite, her stuff still in the same place she’d left it. But the remnants of crime-scene tape flapping in the breeze caught her attention, again. Looking down at her own hands, she realized she was holding something tight in the palm of one of them. Opening it, she saw an empty shell casing fall to the ground, heard the tinkle of bouncing copper echoing in the wind. *Fuck this* was written on the side of the shell.

“What happened?”

“What?” she whispered, staring at the brass beacon of her demise. Opening her hand, she could make out the indentation of the casing on her palm, but where was the blood? The guy standing in front of her had blood on his hand, his chest. Hell, he looked like he’d taken a bath in it, but where was hers? She patted her body for a wound but didn’t find anything.

“On the side of your head?” he said, reaching up to touch her.

She flinched back out of reach and felt her temple. “Oh God,” she whispered. “Oh God, this is just a dream. Oh God, this is just a dream.” She kept repeating the words as she walked in circles, waving her hands.

“I don’t think so.”

“It has to be. I was just sitting there watching the sunset. I wished on the first star and everything.”

“You don’t remember shooting yourself? Holy shit.”

“No, I don’t remember anything.”

“Seriously? I mean, damn. I remember putting the gun up to my chest, counting to three, and pow. I sat there for a minute, and then boom, I was—”

“Stop, don’t say another word. Just stop. I didn’t kill myself.” She was still wringing her hands, but at least now she was standing still. “I mean I thought about it, had a plan and everything.”

“Well, if you ask me, you had more than a plan.” He reached down and picked up the bullet casing. “You even wrote *Fuck this* on the bullet you used.”

“I did not kill myself. I didn’t. I didn’t have the gun in my hand. I put it right there under my pillow.” She stopped at the opening of her tent and peered inside. Blood soaked her pillow. The cook pot sat next to it with a small dent she could barely make out. “I didn’t, I didn’t, and I couldn’t. I mean, I just...”

He peeked inside the tent, too. “Nope. I’d say you did the deed.” He pushed the flap closed and pulled down the zipper. “Look, my sponsor said I’d have a guide to help me get through this. Show me where the gate is and all.”

This wasn’t happening. She wasn’t dead and she didn’t commit suicide. She would never let Renee win like that, never. Stepping back, she looked down and noticed the trash left from bandages, IV bags, and medical tubing. A set of tracks led past the crime-scene tape. A new set of tire tracks, probably an ambulance, had driven out and down the road. Lots of footsteps littered the ground. How come she hadn’t seen them before?

She looked around for her Willys Jeep, but it was gone too. “What the fuck am I going to do now?”

“Well, if you focus, really focus, you can pop back into your body.” He put his hands on her arm and then spoke softly. “I wouldn’t do that. I did and was right in the middle of being embalmed. Gross.” He shivered, making a face.

“How am I going to get home? My car’s gone. I live miles from here, and...I need to go home.” She unzipped the tent, fell to her knees, and started to cry. When she picked up her pillow, an empty whiskey bottle rolled away from it. She stared at the bottle and then her blood-soaked pillow. Christ, what had she done?

“What are you doing?”

“Look, I don’t know who you are or why you’re here—”

“Jack,” he said, sticking out his bloody hand.

“I’m not shaking that. It looks like it’s still wet.” Her stomach lurched as she caught a whiff of the smell.

“Hey. You’re one of the few people I’ve found out here, so we must have met for a reason.” Jack tried to wipe his hand on his white T-shirt, but the blood wasn’t coming off, only smearing across his shirt.

She stuffed her sleeping bag into her pack, then tossed out her pillow, the tin pot, and everything else into the tent. After breaking it down, she put it into her backpack too. Everything felt real. If she was on a different plane, why could she still pack all this?

"I'm getting the fuck out of here." She slipped her knife into her jeans pocket. "I have a teaching job to get back to, the semester starts next week and a cheating girlfriend that I need to break up with. So, whatever you got going on here..." She swirled her fingers around. "Doesn't involve me. All this shit, it's just a dream. Why I'd dream this is beyond me. Maybe it's one of those Christmas-ghost kinda things. You know, where they show you what your life would be like if you did something stupid."

Jack shook his head. "What? I know this is all new to you, but you had that shell casing in your hand. The one that said *Fuck this*. You got a hole in your head. Turn around." He put his hands on her shoulders and hesitantly moved her around. "Interesting." He pushed strands of brown hair to the side, looking for something, but she had no clue what he was hunting.

"What?"

"No exit wound."

"What?" She hadn't thought about that. Reaching up, she touched the back of her head. Nothing. No blood, no hole, nothing. "See. Maybe this is just a big dream and you're part of my delusional mind. I don't have time for this crap." She grabbed her gun, loaded it, and shoved it inside her waistband. "I can't believe someone stole my truck. Fuck me."

Pulling bandages from her first-aid kit, she covered the hole in her head. "Can you hold this while I tape it?" She motioned to Jack.

"Sure, but it won't make a difference. I'm telling you dead is dead."

"Just hold this." She removed her hand and pulled strips off the medical tape.

"To be honest, now that I look at it, I'm kinda surprised it isn't bigger. I mean, I saw a guy who shot his head, and the back was blown almost off. Kinda gross."

"Hush." Harley couldn't take any more dead talk. She wasn't dead, period.

After finishing the patch job, she pulled her baseball cap out of her backpack and put it on to hide the bandage well enough that she wouldn't be stared at when she went home.

"Thanks," she told Jack.

After putting all her supplies back into her kit and shoving it into her pack, she hoisted it onto her shoulders. It was going to be a long walk home. Probably take her days, if she didn't get a ride. Pushing past Jack, she stopped with a jerk as a five-point buck stood in her path, piercing her with his gaze. They stared at each other for a long moment, neither moving. She was scared as shit. She could barely breathe, frozen where she stood.

"Jesus," Jack said. "I haven't seen one of these big bastards in years, and now here's one in a face-off with you. Damn." Jack raised his hands, trying to scare the buck off. "Arrgggg," he said, moving toward the massive beast.

Undeterred, the buck stepped toward Harley, sniffing her. She reached out and stroked the enormous rack of horns, and when he dropped his head, she rubbed her fingers across the strong plane of his face. She should be freaked out by the size of the buck, but she felt the need to touch him, to feel his energy. What the fuck was wrong with her, feel his energy? They both calmed at the touch as something passed through her.

She didn't have time to analyze what the hell was going on. She just wanted to get home, pull the covers over her head, and wake the hell up. As if reading her thoughts, the buck jerked his head sideways and roofed the ground, then galloped toward the forest. He stopped, then turned and looked at her one more time before he retreated deeper into the dark, lush green. Christ, could this day get any weirder?

Jack followed Harley as she slung her pack on and started walking. "That was amazing. What do you think was up with all that?"

"Look, don't you need to go find your watcher, or something?"

Her corrected her. "Guardian or guide."

"Whatever, but that isn't me. So if you'll excuse me, I'm going home. I want to wake up from this bullshit."

"Okay, but I'm telling you, you're not going to be able to do anything but come with me and get to the gate."

"I'm not like you. I ain't dead." She shifted her backpack and kept going down the dirt road. "See, I can pick up my stuff. I touched that deer back there, and I'm kicking up dust."

Jack stopped and stood there, a puzzled look on his face. He walked behind her, no dust.

"See," she said, pointing to his feet, which weren't leaving any tracks. "We aren't the same."

"Yeah, but you can see me. I touched you." Jack seemed more than a little puzzled.

She pressed her lips together and shrugged. "Don't know what to tell ya. I'd love to sit here and chat, but I need to be going. Good luck finding that watcher."

"Guardian or guide."

Stopping, she turned back toward him. "You mean like a guardian angel or something?"

"Sorta. My spiritual guide said it would meet me when I crossed over."

"Okay, now I'm really confused. You had a spiritual guide," she asked, making air quotes. "He told you to kill yourself? I thought that was like a sin or something."

"Oh no. He would never have approved of me killing myself." Jack's face colored. "I'd just found out I have cancer, or had cancer, and the prognosis wasn't very good. So I got drunk and bang." He shot his chest again.

"So you were going to die anyway." She shook her head. Christ, and she thought she had it bad.

"No. No, actually I was going to lose my testicles, and with chemo the survivability rate is pretty good."

"What the fuck?"

"Hey, don't mix drinking and losing your manhood all in the same night. I didn't say I was dealing with a full deck at that moment. My buddies tried to stop me, but I was just horsing around and here I am, with you."

"Okay, let's get this straight. We aren't together. You need to go find your gate, and I need to get home and wake up from this damn nightmare. So go."

She shoed him away and started walking down the road again.

Chapter Two

Judging from the sun's location overhead, she figured it had to be close to noon. She'd walked for hours and still didn't see the main road yet. She froze when she looked at her watch. July 23, three days later. Backtracking in her mind, she'd hit the campground late on July 19, pitched her tent, had a drink—okay, a few drinks—and sat wallowing in her hate and denial until she went to sleep.

During a lousy night of tossing and turning, she'd dreamt of her lover and watching her over and over again kissing that bitch she'd spied her with.

She got up, took a piss, and walked the campgrounds. It was too hot for campers, except a few die-hard guys who stayed at the opposite end of the place. From the looks of their camp, they were there to hunt and party, if the empty whiskey bottles and beer cans lying around were any indication. Stepping backward, she retreated the way she'd come and put as much distance between her and them as she could. No use inviting trouble, even if it did seem to have a way of finding her.

How the hell had she lost three days? She reached up and touched the small wound on the side of her head. Something didn't seem right. A 9mm would have created a giant exit wound on the back of her head and the pot. The pot had a dent on the outside instead of the inside. Shit, it didn't make sense.

As she pushed farther down the dirt road, she was determined to at least hit the paved road before dark, hitch a ride, and get the hell home. The beating sun was wearing her out though. Getting off the road, she found some shade and pulled her pack, reaching for a bottle of water. She sipped it. If she were dead, how could she drink water? As soon as the liquid hit her stomach, it growled.

Food.

How many days had she been without food? Didn't people die of dehydration after only a few days? She'd lost three. No food, no water until now, nothing. No matter how she tried to wrap her mind around things, she just couldn't accept the possibility that she'd committed suicide. God, not over Renee.

"Hey, there you are." Jack strolled up and plopped down beside her. "How far do you think you've walked? By the way, you never told me your name."

She refused to look at him. It freaked her out seeing the big hole in his chest and all that blood. Maybe if she ignored him, he'd go away. Please leave me alone, she thought, taking another sip of water.

"I'm not going away. You can drink water?" Jack's laser-like focus on her made her twitch.

“Yep. Proves I’m not dead.” She stood and packed her bottle into the side pocket of her backpack and shrugged it on.

“Okay, if you say so, but I’m just sayin’—”

“Stop.” She threw up her hands. “Don’t you have a gate or something to find?”

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts. I’m not your finder—”

“Guide.”

“Whatever, I’m not that person.”

“You know what?” Jack crossed his arms and stared right through her. “You’re the first person I’ve found that is like, well, like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You drink, but I don’t feel the need to drink. You’re hungry. I can touch you. I can’t touch other people I’ve seen. We just, whoosh,” he said, pushing his hands past each other. “It’s like those ghost movies you’ve seen on TV. Spirits can’t touch, except the bad ones.”

“Bad ones? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I call ’em Dark Souls. You know, those people who can go through the gate.” Jack looked around and then lowered his head and whispered into her ear. “They wanna kill us.”

“Okay, now you’re freaking me out.” She put her hands up and pushed him back to clear her path. “I don’t know anything about gates, Dark Souls, or spirits. Hell, I don’t even believe in God.”

“You don’t have to believe in God to see this shit. Tell me this. Why are you and I having a conversation?” He raised his eyebrows in question.

“I’m dreaming and you’re part of my damn nightmare. No offense, but I’m sure when I wake up, I’ll need to see a counselor or something to sort this shit out.” She pushed through some bushes. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to pee.”

“I’ll just wait right here for you,” Jack said, sitting down. “Besides, I’m not feeling well.” He twisted his head and then rubbed his stomach.

Harley watched him through the bushes, drawing in the dirt. He could touch the dirt, but nothing moved. She’d seen him lean against a tree, but he didn’t go through it.

“How come you can sit on the ground or you could lean against that tree over there when we were talking?”

“I can walk through it if you want me to.”

“Nope. Just thinking out loud.”

“I don’t know. I just can.”

“Hmm.”

Nothing made sense in this dream, nothing. Zipping up her pants, she walked out of the bushes and headed away from Jack.

“Well, until I wake up, I’m going in the direction of home.”

“Wait. Who’s going to help me find the gate?”

“Don’t know.”

“Wait,” he said, pulling on her arm.

“Don’t touch me.” Harley shook him off.

“Sorry.” Jack took a step back. “There are people out there who can hurt us, I mean you, so you should be careful.”

Harley patted her waistband, her 9mm lodged securely there. Pulling it, she dropped the clip and checked it. “Hmm, nine shots, so I don’t think so.”

Jack rubbed the back of his neck and made a face. “Yeah. I’m not sure that’s gonna work.”

“Let me ask you something completely off the subject.”

“Okay.” Jack looked down at the dirt, twisting his toe into it. Suddenly he looked embarrassed. Why?

“Where did you kill yourself?”

“Oh, um.” He threw his hand over his shoulder, pointing his thumb behind him. “Over off Lexington in Gilroy. My apartment is 1438 North—”

Harley held up her hands, stopping him. “I don’t need to know the address. How did you get here?” She pointed to the ground. “That’s what, two hours away, driving?”

“Yeah.”

“So you mean to tell me you walked, what, a day, day and a half, to get all the way out here?”

“Not exactly.”

She eyed him suspiciously. He wasn’t telling her something. He didn’t walk here. He said he’d committed suicide in his apartment with his buddies sitting around him. Yet he was here.

“How did you get here?”

“Well, I just was...” He stopped and looked around again.

What or whoever he was looking for was making her nervous. “Was what?”

“I just thought, where would the gate be? Then I figured it was some place in nature, probably hidden away in some forest. You know, like in those movies where the secret door is in some rocks or something like that. So I imagined the forest, and bam. Here I am.”

“So you just imagine some place, like when you wanted to find your body, and you’re there?”

“Something like that.” Jack blushed.

Harley closed her eyes tight and imagined her house. Nothing.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m thinking about home. I want to go home.”

“But you’re still here.”

“No shit, Captain Obvious.”

Harley started walking again. She definitely wasn’t dead. However, that didn’t explain how she could talk to Jack, assuming he was the only one. She was definitely dreaming.

Chapter Three

“Hey, wait up,” Jack screamed at her.

“Jack, go find your gate. I’m not your keeper. Leave me alone.”

Harley had enough problems. Being someone’s keeper wasn’t on her list of job duties, and she wasn’t picking up any strays. She pushed farther ahead until a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

“Hey, girl, listen to me.”

Harley flinched. “I’m not a girl. I’m a grown-ass woman.”

“Well, you still haven’t told me your name, so until then it’s whatever I call you.”

“Really?”

Jack had suddenly grown some balls. Or had they been there the whole time and he was just being polite earlier because he thought she was his finder? Guardian, or whatever.

“Harley, my name is Harley.”

“Like the motorcycle?” Jack said, making throttle signals with his hands and sputtering his lips.

“My dad loves motorcycles, and I happened to be stuck with the name. I was supposed to be a boy,” she said, her voice flat.

“Ah, gotcha.”

She turned and continued down the road. The sounds of traffic off in the distance spurred her to walk faster. Running wasn’t an option. Her head was suddenly killing her. What she wouldn’t do for some aspirin.

“Hey, wait, Harley.”

“Jack,” she screamed. “Go find your keeper and leave me the fuck alone.”

“Guide, Harley. Guide.”

“Whatever.”

“Stop.”

“Fuck,” she said under her breath. He was never going to leave her alone, was he?

“It’s not safe out there.”

“What are you talking about? This...” She twirled her fingers, pointing toward the sky. “This is all a dream. So get out of my head and leave me alone.”

“Harley, I’ve seen some stuff on this side, and you aren’t safe.”

“Oh, my God, are you kidding me right now?” Looking around, she yelled, “Okay, you’ve punked me. I get that I’m on camera. The head wound, this guy, it’s all been fun, but you can come out now. It isn’t funny.” She looked around, waiting for someone to appear out of nowhere and tell her it was all a big joke at her expense.

Silence.

“Are you done?” Jack stepped closer. “What’s the date today?”

“What?”

“What’s the date today?”

She knew what the date was, but she looked at her watch for confirmation. “July 23.”

“I’ve been dead for over six months.”

“I thought…” Harley looked at Jack’s gaping chest wound and then back to his face. “I don’t understand. I thought you said you just did this?”

He shook his head. “I’ve been looking for the gate for six months. I’ve seen things here…” He stopped and scrunched his face, his bottom lip starting to quiver.

She couldn’t stand to see a grown man cry, so she did the only thing she knew to do. Run.

She put as much distance between her and Jack as she could. Something wasn’t right here, and she wasn’t sticking around to find out what.

“Harley, wait.”

Suddenly Jack was standing in front of her, stopping her.

“What the fuck. How did you do that?”

“Listen to me.” He put his hands on her shoulders and held her firm. “I’ve tried to tell you that something’s going on, but you’re not listening. There are people out here who want us dead.”

“Dark Souls,” she stated for confirmation.

“Gatekeepers.”

Harley threw up her hands and covered her ears. “Blah, blah, blah. I’m not listening. I’m not being sucked into someone else’s dream.”

Jack jerked her hands down. “Stop acting like a child and listen to me. I don’t care what you think, but you’re here now. I don’t know what you are or how you got here, but you’re going to have to accept this as your new reality. Do you understand?”

“I’m telling you that I’m going to wake up and it’s all going to be a nightmare. You’ll be gone—this bullshit will be gone. I’ll go back to my crappy life teaching college and to a cheating girlfriend—who I’ll promptly break up with and then get on with my life.”

“Shh.” He clasped his hand over her mouth.

She could feel him willing her to shut up.

The Gatekeeper coming 2018

If only life were easy for Harley. In the next book in the Gate series, Harley finds out what Mother has planned for her, but there's only one problem, Lucius. He wants Harley – either dead or working for him. It's not negotiable.

Allie's back and she wants all of Harley, for purely selfish reason and perhaps so Dawn can't have her. She weaves her magic around Harley to distract her from her mission, unknowingly giving Lucius the way in he needs. Can she right things before he's able to put his plan in action?

Dawn's finally found her paladin and she's not about to let anyone take Harley from her. Working with Mother they are about to bring the middle world to its knees to re-center it on its axis. As Lucius pushes Harley and Dawn to their limits, they try and navigate the pending storm.

With the world upending itself, can they save themselves and still help lost souls find their equivalent Valhalla?

About the author

Award winning, international best selling author, Isabella, lives in California with her wife and three sons. Isabella's first novel, *Always Faithful*, won a GCLS award in the Traditional Contemporary Romance category in 2010. She was also a finalist in the International Book Awards, and an Honorable Mention in the 2010 and 2012 Rainbow Awards.

She is a member of the Rainbow Romance Writers, Romance Writers of America and the Gold Crown Literary Society. She has written several short stories and working on her next novel, *Cigar Barons - A family dynasty where blood isn't thicker than water, it's war!*

You can follow Isabella on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

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Instagram - [Isabella_Author](https://www.instagram.com/Isabella_Author)

Other books by Isabella

Award winning novel - Always Faithful

ISBN - 978-0-9828608-0-9

Major Nichol “Nic” Caldwell is the only survivor of her helicopter crash in Iraq. She is left alone to wonder why she and she alone. Survivor’s guilt has nothing on the young Major as she is forced to deal with the scars, both physical and mental, left from her ordeal overseas. Before the accident, she couldn’t think of doing anything else in her life.

Claire Monroe is your average military wife, with a loving husband and a little girl. She is used to the time apart from her husband. In fact, it was one of the reasons she married him. Then, one day, her life is turned upside down when she gets a visit from the Marine Corps.

Can these two women come to terms with the past and finally find happiness, or will their shared sense of honor keep them apart?

Forever Faithful

ISBN - 978-1-939062-75-8

Life is what happens when you make other plans, and Nic and Claire have just found out that life and the Marine Corps have other plans for their lives.

Nic Caldwell has served her country, met the woman of her dreams, and has reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. She’s studying at one of the nation’s most prestigious military universities, setting her sights on a research position after graduation. Things couldn’t be better and then it happens; a sudden assignment to Afghanistan derails any thoughts of marriage and wedded bliss. Another combat zone, another tragedy, and Nic suddenly finds herself fighting for her life.

Claire Monroe loves her new life in Monterey. She’s finally where she wants to be, getting ready to start her master’s program at the local university, watching her daughter, Grace, growing up, and getting ready to marry the love of her life. What could possibly derail a perfect life? The Marine Corps.

Will Nic survive Afghanistan? Can Claire step up and be the strength in their relationship? Or will this overseas assignment and a catastrophic accident divide their once happy home?

Broken Shield

ISBN - 978-0-9828608-2-3

Tyler Jackson, former paramedic now firefighter, has seen her share of death up close. The death of her wife caused Tyler to rethink her career choices, but the death of her mother two weeks later cemented her return to the ranks of firefighter. Her path of self-destruction and womanizing is just a front to hide the heartbreak and devastation she lives with every day. Tyler's given up on finding love and having the family she's always wanted. When tragedy strikes her life for a second time she finds something she thought she lost.

Ashley Henderson loves her job. Ignoring her mother's advice, she opts for a career in law enforcement. But, Ashley hides a secret that soon turns her life upside down. Shame, guilt and fear keep Ashley from venturing forward and finding the love she so desperately craves. Her life comes crashing down around her in one swift moment forcing her to come clean about her secrets and her life.

Can two women thrust together by one traumatic event survive and find love together, or will their past force them apart?

American Yakuza

ISBN - 978-0-9828608-3-0

Luce Potter straddles three cultures as she strives to live with the ideals of family, honor, and duty. When her grandfather passes the family business to her, Luce finds out that power, responsibility and justice come with a price. Is it a price she's willing to die for?

Brooke Erickson lives the fast-paced life of an investigative journalist living on the edge until it all comes crashing down around her one night in Europe. Stateside, Brooke learns to deal with a new reality when she goes to work at a financial magazine and finds out things aren't always as they seem.

Can two women find enough common ground for love or will their two different worlds and cultures keep them apart?

Executive Disclosure

ISBN - 978-0-9828608-3-0

When a life is threatened, it takes a special breed of person to step in front of a bullet. Chad Morgan's job has put her life on the line more times that she can count. Getting close to the client is expected; getting too close could be deadly for Chad. Reagan Reynolds wants the top job at Reynolds Holdings and knows how to play the game like "the boys". She's not

above using her beauty and body as currency to get what she wants. Shocked to find out someone wants her dead, Reagan isn't thrilled at the prospect of needing protection as she tries to convince the board she's the right woman for a man's job. How far will a killer go to get what they want? Secrets and deception twist the rules of the game as a killer closes in. How far will Chad go to protect her beautiful, but challenging client?

American Yakuza II - The Lies that Bind

ISBN - 978-10939062-20-8

Luce Potter runs her life and her business with an iron fist and complete control until lies and deception unravel her world. The shadow of betrayal consumes Luce, threatening to destroy the most precious thing in her life, Brooke Erickson.

Brooke Erickson finds herself on the outside of Luce's life looking in. As events spiral out of control Brooke can only watch as the woman she loves pushes her further away. Suddenly, devastated and alone, Brooke refuses to let go without an explanation.

Colby Water, a federal agent investigating the ever-elusive Luce Potter, discovers someone from her past is front and center in her investigation of the Yakuza crime leader. Before she can put the crime boss in prison, she must confront the ultimate deception in her professional life.

When worlds collide, betrayal, dishonor and death are inevitable. Can Luce and Brooke survive the explosion?

Razor's Edge

ISBN: 978-1-943353-81-1

Luce Potter lives by a code of honor. Push her and she shoves back, harder. There's only one problem: Luce has just found out that revenge is a knife that cuts both ways. Now that her lover Brooke has survived the attack on her life, Luce has only one thing on her mind, and his name is Frank. Unfortunately, someone walks into her life that she didn't see coming.

Brooke Erickson has survived an attack so brutal it's left a permanent scar on her soul. All she wants to do now is go home and finish recuperating with her lover, Luce Potter, by her side. An unexpected event puts Brooke at the head of the Yakuza family. Can she command the respect necessary to lead it through the crisis?

Luce and Brooke's worlds are upending. Can each do what's necessary to survive and return to a new normal?

Surviving Reagan

ISBN - 978-1-939062-38-3

Chad Morgan has finally worked through the betrayal of her former client and lover, Reagan Reynolds. Putting the pieces of her life back in order, she finds herself on a collision course with that past when she takes on a new client, the future first lady. Unfortunately, Chad's newest job puts her in the cross-hairs of a domestic terrorist determined to release a virus that could kill thousands of women.

Reagan Reynolds has paid for her sins and is ready to start a new life. Attending a business conference in Abu Dhabi gives her the opportunity to prove to her father and herself that she's worthy of a fresh start. Her past will intersect with her future at the conference when she accidentally comes face-to-face with Chad Morgan.

Time is running out. Will Reagan confront Chad? Can she convince Chad she's changed, or will death part them forever?

Writing as Jett Abbott

Scarlet Masquerade

ISBN - 978-0-982860-81-6

What do you say to the woman you thought died over a century ago? Will time heal all wounds or does it just allow them to fester and grow? A.J. Locke has lived over two centuries and works like a demon, both figuratively and literally. As the owner of a successful pharmaceutical company that specializes in blood research, she has changed the way she can live her life. Wanting for nothing, she has smartly compartmentalized her life so that when she needs to, she can pick up and start all over again, which happens every twenty years or so. Love is not an emotion A.J. spends much time on. Since losing the love of her life to the plague one hundred fifty years ago, she vowed to never travel down that road again. That isn't to say she doesn't have women when she wants them, she just wants them on her terms and that doesn't involve a long term commitment.

A.J.'s cool veneer is peeled back when she sees the love of her life in a lesbian bar, in the same town, in the same day and time in which she lives. Is her mind playing tricks on her?

If not, how did Clarissa survive the plague when she had made A.J. promise never to change her?

Clarissa Graham is a university professor who has lived an obscure life teaching English literature. She has made it a point to stay off the radar and never become involved with anything that resembles her past life. Every once in a while Clarissa has an itch that needs to be scratched, so she finds an out of the way location to scratch it. She keeps her personal life separate from her professional one, and in doing so she is able to keep her secrets to herself. Suddenly, her life is turned upside down when someone tries to kill her. She finds herself in the middle of an assassination plot with no idea who wants her dead

Scarlet Assassin

ISBN 978-1-939062-36-9

Selene Hightower is a killer for hire. A vampire who walks in both the light and the darkness, but lately darkness has a stronger pull. Her unfinished business could cost her the ability to live in the light, throwing her permanently back into the black ink of evil.

Doctor Francesca Swartz led a boring life filled with test tubes, blood trials, and work. One exploratory night, in a world of leather and torture, she is intrigued by a dark and solitary soul. She surrenders to temptation and the desire to experience something new, only to discover that it might alter her life forever.

Will Selene allow the light to win over the darkness threatening the edges of her life? Two women wonder if they can co-exist despite vast differences, as worlds collide and threaten to destroy any hope of happiness. Who will win?