

# MIDNIGHT INK: GABRIEL

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The Awakening Series  
Midnight Ink: Gabriel  
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# Chapter One

*April 1960*

Gabriel Lara spared a glance at the ominous sky. Black clouds gathered over his family's cornfield, dark and roiling. A perfect match for his mood. He pitched his cigarette to the ground, smashing the last of the lit end under his boot. He figured the rain would soon keep it from smoldering. The oncoming storm brought his attention to his bladder. Shaking his head slightly, he huffed a dry laugh as he stalked over to the trees at the edge of the field and undid his fly. His brain and mouth both felt like dirty cotton. *Man, that was some party last night.* He was still draining off the effects.

A small movement snagged his peripheral vision and he stiffened, sharply scanning the area. His hearing might be shot all to hell, but he could still see just fine. He quickly zipped and swiveled on his heel to face whoever was there.

Nothing but empty fields.

He stood still for a moment then casually reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out the special shades he'd made, and slid them over his face. Now he could see behind him as well as 180 degrees around the front. He hitched at his jeans and strode back into the open field just as the sky opened and the scent of something foul reached his nose.

It smelled like a combination of wet dog and rotted meat.

From the corner of his glasses, he caught a dark blur coming towards him, fast. It was the last thing he saw before the lightning hit.



*Present Day*

CAROLINE Chadwick—a.k.a. Carolyn Wheeler—checked over the design once more, scarcely believing what she was about to do. Seven years had passed. Seven years of constantly looking over her shoulder. Now, maybe, just maybe, she could finally start to breathe easier. Testing the concept, she took a deep breath, steadied her hands, and admired the phoenix sketch she held. It felt so good to create art again, even if only a simple tattoo design.

But it was a design that held deep meaning for her. A decoration of her soul. She laughed a little. She needed to decorate *something*. The décor of her current living quarters could at best be called Early Dumpster.

A far cry from the mansion in Maine.

She shook her head slightly. It didn't matter; all she needed was a place to sleep and no possessions to hold her back. She never knew when she might need to pull a runner.

Sighing, she contemplated the sketch, and decided to have only the outline of the phoenix done tonight. The rest would be filled in when Lemuel Stanning was dead.



Jabbing the keyboard, Gabe pulled up a file of the past month's receipts. He frowned at the screen, but he'd been frowning a lot lately. He didn't want to believe it was because everyone in their compound—except him—seemed to be hooking up.

Romance had been in the air for their merry band of Mutts, from the teens to the adults, over the past few months. A wry smile twisted his lips. He was happy for them, truly. But why did watching them sometimes make his chest feel like something was trying to claw its way out?

Shaking off the funk, he returned his attention to the computer until a discrete strobe of light alerted him that the door of Midnight Ink had just been opened. He shifted his gaze to the side of his special glasses and noted the woman walking hesitantly towards him. A quick glance at the clock showed almost 1AM. He turned to his customer, slightly surprised.

*Little Miss Muffet*. That was his first thought. Five foot nothing, curly blonde hair, pink sundress, and upon closer inspection, older than she appeared.

He smirked. Another desperate housewife, eager to get her Ho Patch on.

He raised his brows at her in lieu of customer service. The past several months of rescuing kids and friends had taken a toll on him, and he had no patience for the clueless these days.

"Are you Mr. Lara?" she asked.

He nodded curtly. If she already knew his name, this was going to be a piece of cake.

He knew her type; he'd disliked them before he died, and he really hated them now. But they were useful. Damn useful when he needed to feed, and that raw scratching of his throat said it was supper time.

She straightened her small shoulders and became as businesslike as her china doll appearance would allow. Which is to say, not very.

"I've heard your establishment is the best around, and I have a design I want on my shoulder." She opened her small bag and pulled out a piece of paper.

He didn't look down. "Shoulder? Are you sure?"

She frowned. "Yes."

"Not your lower back?"

"No." A flash of anger lit her eyes and tightened her lips.

*Well, well. Miss Muffet just got a stick up her tuffet.* He repressed a smile.

"Are you still open for business or not? I thought you didn't close until three."

"Which is only a few hours away. Let me see what you've got, and I'll let you know if I can get to it before I close." He held out his hand and she gave him the paper. The design was simple, elegant. A phoenix captured in a few Zen strokes.

He frowned slightly. "Where did you get this? I don't accept work from other shops, and I don't do pirated designs from the Internet."

The light of battle re-ignited in her eyes. "It's my own design."

"Can you prove it?"

She did a short imitation of a gaping fish, then jerked a pen from her purse before snatching the paper from his hand. In a few short flashes, she produced an outline of his face on the back of the paper, then thrust it across the counter at him. "It's my own design," she repeated acidly.

Impressed despite himself, his mouth quirked. "My apologies."

She stared at him for several seconds, unknowingly earning more of his begrudging respect the longer she met his gaze. Most of her kind only maintained eye contact with him to signal their lust, and Miss Muffet definitely wasn't sending that vibe.

Which he was surprised to find disappointed him slightly.

Amused and intrigued, he pointed to a chair. "I believe we have time."

She stared for a minute more as if deciding whether she wanted to go through with it.

He smiled, careful to hide canine tips. "If you still want to."

She tossed her head slightly. "I do."

Grinning, he gave her the standard paperwork and a pen, then gestured again at the chair where she could fill it out. Admiring the tightness of her ass under the pink dress as she walked away, he figured her to be in her early to mid-thirties. She definitely kept herself in shape.

Probably tennis lessons at a country club provided by a North Shore hubby—hers, or someone else's.

No doubt, she was slumming it tonight. Her stick-straight posture and perfect bone structure proclaimed her to be well-bred trophy material. The type who, at her age, only came in his shop with their pool boys or drunken girlfriends, desperately trying to recapture a youthful rebellion that had never existed in the first place.

He couldn't help noticing how fragile she looked under the flash on the walls and wondered why she was in the city alone after midnight. An unfamiliar wave of protectiveness surged through him and he scowled. *Not my problem.*

The door strobe snagged his attention again. A clearly inebriated young man wearing khaki cargo shorts and a camo t-shirt wobbled into the store.

Gabe placed himself between the newcomer and the woman. "What is it?" he demanded.

The younger man squinted up at him, weaving like a stalk of wheat in the wind. Alcohol came off him in waves and assaulted Gabe's nose.

"I know what you are. Your time is coming. Our time is coming," the unwanted visitor slurred.

Gabe clamped down on the tiny frisson of alarm that had hit him as he looked at the kid. "Oh, yeah? What time is that?"

"Time for the creatures of the night to rule the world! Are you with us, vampire?"

*Us? Vampire?* Eyes narrowed, he scanned the street beyond the kid, but detected no one. He looked down again with a small slash of pity for what was coming. The kid was probably just some drunken frat brat who'd seen *The Lost Boys* one too many times.

"Sorry, Not-So-Bella Legosi, but your 'time' is to get out of here, now. I don't work with drunks." He frog-marched the dickhead to the door, then let him fall on his drunk ass as he pushed him out onto the sidewalk and flipped the lock behind him.

The wannabe stumbled over to a streetlamp, dazedly pulled a cellphone from his shorts, then started weaving his way down the street. Gabe waited until the kid was out of sight before turning back to his other customer.

Her already large blue eyes were even rounder.

“Sorry about that.” He shrugged. “You get all kinds at night.”

Her eyes went to the locked door, and he gestured towards it. “Just a precaution. If we’re going to do your work tonight, it’s better to keep out the riff raff while I’m working. But if it makes you uncomfortable, I can either unlock it, or you can come back in the daytime and work with my assistant, Alejandro.”

Even as he made the offer, he found that he hoped she’d stay.

She sat silently for a few moments then nodded. “I’d like to do this tonight.”

He let her get back to the paperwork and went behind the counter to send a quick text to Laurent about their unwelcome, inebriated visitor. When the woman was ready, he took the papers and glanced at the name. *Carolyn Wheeler*.

After leading her to his workspace, he said, “Okay, Carolyn, show me where you want your lovely design.”

She indicated the visible area of shoulder near the right strap of her dress. He was glad he’d already put on the face mask—a precaution he insisted his artists use, though his kind didn’t need it—because his fangs elongated at the silky expanse of her skin.

*Down, boys.*

With some effort, he shut off the response wracking his body, reminding himself that he’d fed earlier tonight—college students buying parental disapproval with daddy’s own money—and it helped ease the hunger her soft pulse had aroused.

Didn’t do jack shit for the arousal in his pants, though.

He shifted slightly on the stool and mentally gave that other lengthening body part a stern ‘*Down, Boy*’ also.

“So, how does your husband feel about you getting inked?”

She turned, giving him a glance that could frost windows. “I don’t have one.”

Well, now, didn’t that just make his one-eyed soldier snap back to attention? He moved hard against his seat, trying to punish the thing into submission, but at the rate it was growing, he’d have to give it a goddamned court martial.

“Divorced then? Raising three kids in the suburbs with a hefty alimony check?”

She reared back before the needle touched her shoulder, and he had to jerk his hand to keep from hitting her with it.

“How dare you? You know *nothing* about me!”

“My mistake,” he said coolly. The fire in her eyes increased the heat in his loins exponentially, proving to himself, at least, that his nonchalance was a lie.

Carolyn jerked her dress strap into place and stood in a huff. "Never mind. I'll take my business elsewhere."

He laid a hand on her arm, surprising himself, and she stiffened. With his other hand, he pulled the mask from his face. "I apologize," he said, uncomfortably aware that he meant it. "I was out of line."

She pulled away slightly, but he held her back. "Look, I'll do this one for free, just to make it up to you."

*What the fuck?* As soon as the offer left his mouth, he inwardly cursed and dropped his hand from her arm. What the hell was wrong with him? He didn't pander to her kind. And he sure as hell didn't work for free. But he'd already said it, so he couldn't renege.

A hitch of breath caught in her throat, and her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

He put on his most innocent mug, the one he sometimes used to lure in his meals. He realized he didn't want her to leave. That's why he'd made that stupid offer. What was wrong with him? He hadn't responded to a woman like this in years, decades even—hell, who was he kidding? He didn't think he'd ever responded like this. He closed his eyes briefly and drew in a deep draught of her scent.

God, she smelled good. That had to be it.

When he looked down again, he saw that she continued to examine him, a tiny line between her brows. Her gaze lingered on his glasses.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

He pulled back, surprised and disappointed by the question. So disturbed, in fact, that his usual smart-ass comebacks failed him. "What do you mean?"

"Were you born in the U.S.?"

"Yes." He spat out the word, and felt his eyes harden with a coldness that could outstrip the AC.

Man, he had to get a grip. He didn't know if she'd asked because he was Latino, or if it was because—

He gave himself a mental shake. It didn't matter. He couldn't freak out every time he had speech difficulties, or whenever some low-life thought having ancestors from south of the U.S. border made you less than human. He almost laughed out loud at that thought. *If only they knew.*

But that hadn't bothered him in years, though for some reason, thinking that little Miss Muffet might be racist upset him more than it should. He searched her frank gaze and, with relief he mentally kicked himself for feeling, he ticked one item off his list. She just didn't seem the cross-burning type, in spite of her "All American White Bread" looks. There was no disgust in her eyes. Only an assessing intelligence that clipped his gut.

There was only one other reason she might have asked, and he wanted to derail that train of thought before it went through her head. Most people didn't put two and two together, but he wasn't taking chances. He forced his expression into a sheepish sort of friendliness, attempting to exude a warmth he didn't feel.

"I guess you're just picking up on my old Southern twang. Most of the time it doesn't show." He exaggerated the accent and gave a short chuckle.

Her expression didn't waver as she continued her silent appraisal, and he wondered if maybe he'd laid it on a bit thick. She was more astute than he'd given her credit for. Not a quality he appreciated in his customers.

Or his midnight snacks.

After another beat, she blinked slowly, seeming to reach an internal conclusion. His breath caught when she tilted her head and gave him a small smile, her expression wistful in a way he couldn't fathom.

Before he could begin to ponder what it meant, she turned and walked back towards the chair. She stopped once to look over her shoulder.

"This one's on you."

He went to her side, pulled on gloves, returned the mask to his face, and set the needle gun humming. He lifted his hand then paused, cringing at the thought of hurting her, even though she'd come for the ink.

His brows drew down. *Can the Sir Galahad routine and get to work.*

"You'll need to try to stay still because this will hurt a bit. Kind of like a cat scratching a sunburn," he warned.

Her formerly wistful expression turned mocking. "I'm sure I'll manage," she said dryly.

His brows rose. Miss Muffet was full of surprises. She'd responded to the question like someone who was used to pain. But what would a princess like her know about pain, unless ...

"You got any children?" he asked.

She frowned back at him. "No, and what's that got to do with getting a tattoo?"

"Not a thing." No, not a damn thing.

He motioned for her to lie forward again and reminded himself that he was there to do a job, not have a freakin' tea party with his customers. What did it matter what Carolyn Wheeler did in her spare time? Again, *not his problem.*

But damn, she smelled delicious.

He breathed in her scent once more and had to steady his hand before moving the tip of the ink gun to pierce that beautiful skin.

One touch. That's all it took. Just one drop of blood.

His fangs punched down so hard his lower lip got two bloody new piercings. Lust the likes of which he'd never experienced grabbed hold of his gut and balls,

shaking him to the core. He jerked upright, his vision overlaid in a haze of red, and an unfamiliar buzzing in his ears overwhelmed almost every other sound.

Sound.

He heard sounds he hadn't heard since he'd lost most of his hearing over fifty years ago. He threw down the tat gun and Carolyn's eyes widened in fear as he tore off his mask and loomed over her.

The door's strobe light went off and snared his attention for a fraction of a second. That moment of inattention was all it took to find himself pinned to the wall by his business partner and maker, Laurent. Gabe fought frantically against his hold, but Laurent was powerful and held him back.

"I'll take care of this," Laurent mouthed, then moved to Carolyn's side in a streak of light.

Gabe growled and launched at them, knocking Laurent away from her.

"Mine," he snarled.

Laurent came back quickly, pinning him against the far wall in another flash of movement and strength. Looking over Laurent's shoulder, Gabe saw Caroline running to the front exit, and she was the only thing in focus. He fought like the wild animal he was to follow her, but Laurent was just too strong, slamming him back as she ran out the door.

Gabe bared teeth and went for Laurent's face, but was slammed into the concrete wall so hard that dust spilled from the ceiling. The older vamp tightened his grip around Gabe's throat and commanded, "Stop. Now."

He was hit by an invisible wave of calm that left him dazed and disoriented. He shook his head to clear it. "What the *fuck* just happened?"

Laurent didn't move; just held Gabe against the wall. "You back in control now, brother?"

"Yeah, and I ain't your fucking brother. And get the fuck off me, *now*." Gabe snarled.

Laurent moved back slightly and laid an elegant hand over his black silk vest. "You wound me, *mon ami*, you really do."

"I'll fucking do more than wound you the next time you body slam my ass like that. What the fuck was that about?" *Fuck* really seemed to be his word of choice at the moment.

Laurent moved back and considered him, a slight frown marring his blond brow. "Why don't you tell me? What was happening just before I walked in? You were out of control—no, don't deny it," he said as Gabe moved to interrupt. "I saw your face. You would have drained the woman dry right there where anyone could have walked in."

Gabriel blew out a long breath and rubbed a hand over his military-standard hair. "I honestly don't know what came over me."

“Had you fed tonight?”

His mouth twisted to the side. “Yeah, a couple of co-ed cuties came by earlier.”

“Yet that woman still threw you into bloodlust?” Laurent’s brows pulled together.

The scent of her still tickled the back of Gabe’s senses. He felt his eyes go hot and his fangs go down.

Laurent shook him slightly. “Gabriel! Stay with me.”

“You’d better put a couple boot lengths between us right now,” Gabe snarled. He was in no mood for round two with the older vamp, no matter how tight they’d been.

Laurent took a step back, his face hard. “Tell me *exactly* what happened.”

Gabe tried to think back through the haze that covered those few moments before Laurent opened the shop door. He pieced it together as best he could, the words coming in a slow drizzle. “I had just touched the needle to her when I heard the door chime—”

“You heard chimes?” The astonishment on Laurent’s face matched what Gabriel himself was feeling when he realized what he’d just said.

“Yeah, there was this loud noise. Ringing, clanging, I don’t know. And a loud buzzing. But the smell of her blood covered everything. I’d never smelled anything so incredible.” His mouth watered just thinking about it.

Laurent’s pale skin managed to go a shade lighter. “*Mon Dieu,*” he breathed. “She is your *Sacresange*.”

“My soccer *what?*” The word seemed familiar, but he couldn’t place it.

His maker gave a humorless laugh. “*Sacresange* ... your sacred blood.”

“You’d better start explaining, stat, cause I’m about to run outta here and track her down in two seconds.”

“Forgive me, my friend. I have not been as complete with your education as perhaps I should have. A *Sacresange* is the being whose blood we cannot resist—male or female, human or vamp. There have even been legends that some of them have been Chupacabra.” Laurent shuddered slightly, then continued, “A mere whiff of their scent and the bloodlust nearly destroys all reasoning. All we can think about is having them, which is why you were about to drain her even though the lights were on and the windows unshaded.”

Gabriel clenched his hands against the tremor working through them. Man, after several decades of the whole Awakened, vampire/chupacabra shit, you’d think there wouldn’t be anything new. His thoughts must have transmitted to Laurent because he laughed.

“Decades are nothing. After more millennia than I care to recall, I find I still have things to learn.”

Gabe snarled. "Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

When Laurent had found him in that lightning-struck field, half dead and soundless, he'd taken him under his protection and guided him through the transition into his new life. He'd explained how Laurent's own blood had worked as an antidote to the Chupacabra's that killed him. Laurent had revived him and had turned him into a vampire-chupacabra hybrid, but not a monster. Yet not once had he mentioned something like this.

Laurent shrugged. "*Sacresangre's* are rare. Fortunately. For us and for them. I didn't expect it to come up. After all, it's not like you're—"

Gabe shifted impatiently and snatched up his jacket. The black leather rasped as he jerked it over his broad frame. "So, what do I do about it, besides track her down tonight?"

"You do *not* track her down. Tonight, or any night."

Gabriel leaned back against the counter, crossing one booted ankle over the other. "Oh, and why is that? You gonna stop me?"

"If I have to."

Laurent's tone suggested it would be no problem, but Gabe was ready to show him just how much of a problem it could be. He might not have Laurent's strength, but he was determined and crafty.

He was also very, very fast. Hell, you could enter him in the Indy 500 without wheels and he'd still leave the rest eating dust. Add that to his Marine Corp training, and Gabriel felt confident he'd find a way to get what he wanted.

"Don't even think about it, my friend. It's better for her if you stay away."

Since when did Laurent become Mr. Noble? He searched the other's face and noticed how carefully composed it was. Too carefully.

"Do you have one?" Gabriel asked. His eyes narrowed as Laurent's face closed up and shut down for business.

"I thought I did, once."

"Allie's mom?"

"That's not a subject for discussion, at present."

"It damn well better be, because if you don't come up with one good reason why I shouldn't go after her, I'm gone."

He only knew the barest sketch of Laurent's history with Allie's mother—the woman whom Laurent had only recently discovered had left him a biological daughter many millennia ago. If the uptight, upright Laurent had been willing to impregnate his own twin brother's wife, Gabe figured the attraction must have been overwhelming.

Leaving Laurent to mull over his ultimatum, Gabriel stalked to the door and secured it for the second time that night. Laurent had nearly broken the lock coming after him when Gabe had lost control with the woman.

*Carolyn.* Every urge in his body screamed to go after her. He flipped on the 'Closed' sign and turned back to Laurent.

"Talk or I'm out of here."

"That wouldn't be wise." Laurent's gold eyes narrowed in warning.

"Which part? You talking or me leaving?"

"Neither would serve any purpose other than to be unpleasant for us both."

Unpleasant?

Gabe remembered the way Carolyn's smell wrapped his senses in a warm cloak of seduction: soft, floral, with a sensual undertone of spiced vanilla that still caused his mouth to water and his cock to press hard against his jeans.

Hell no, it wouldn't be *unpleasant* if he left the shop. He wanted nothing more than to track her down and let his tongue have a *very* pleasant way with her.