



**JEYA
JENSON**

**ROMANTIC TIMES
REVIEWERS CHOICE
NOMINEE ~ 2005**

**BEFORE
NIGHT FALLS**

**KITH & KYNN:
BOOK 1**

Before Night Falls
by Jeya Jenson

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First published in www.extasybooks.com, 2006

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Before Night Falls—Kith and Kynn Book 1

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ISBN: 1-55410-608-7

Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books, a division of Zumaya Publications, 2005

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Dedication

Once again to my friendly editor, Stefani Kelsey, who made me fix the ending, and to Martine Jardin for the kinky cover art. Thanks for your belief and support!

Chapter One

Ginny turned the sign from OPEN to CLOSED. "I can't believe this is the last time we'll be doing this," the saleswoman said.

Rachel Marks glanced up from the day's receipts. "We tried, Ginny. But there's just not enough business to stay open." She frowned. "There was enough business for a bookstore to make a profit. Just not a bookstore located on a Main Street that's slowly succumbing to the new additions being built on the other side of town."

Just not a bookstore that isn't located in the new Warren Mall, she fumed. Because of that, she was out on her ass, unable to compete with the huge new Hastings that had opened up in that same mall two years ago.

Rachel would have loved to move her business into a more desirable location, but she simply could not afford the outrageous rent charged for the spaces. Trouble was, no matter how many specials she ran, no matter how much she slashed prices, the new bookstore was always one step ahead of her.

Moreover, they had a coffee and snack bar, something she just couldn't compete with. Why come to her small shop when a cornucopia was waiting across town? Why venture to a downtown where more than half the businesses had gone belly-up when one could head uptown, where the city was beginning to grow and thrive again after years of an economic bust? No, she simply couldn't keep up with the big boys.

Because of that, she'd had to admit defeat, and close her doors.

Ginny wiped away her tears. "I did so like working here," she said, casting a final look over the barren shelves. "It's such a cozy little store."

"*Was* such a cozy little store," Rachel grumbled, writing down the day's numbers on the sheet of paper by her register. This last month of 'Going out of Business' had secured barely enough to cover the rent on the building and Ginny's salary. There was zilch left over for her. That was depressing. Unless she got a job quickly, soon she wouldn't be able to meet the rent on her own apartment. She quickly counted out a week's pay.

"Here you go," she said, looking into Ginny's sad hazel eyes. "I'm sorry it's not more."

Ginny shook her head. "I don't want to take the money."

Rachel had to smile at that. Ginny Smithers never wanted to take her money. A sixty-year-old widow with no family living in the state, Ginny had loved spending her days at the bookstore, browsing the books and chatting with customers. She'd begun by coming in daily, always immaculately groomed, bringing home-baked goodies to share with the public. In no time at all, she'd become a regular fixture at The Book Nook—prompting Rachel to hire her full-time.

Ginny really needed the work, too. She lived on a limited income from social security, barely making enough to get by. Though Ginny would protest that she didn't really need the money, Rachel would have to insist that the old woman take it. Ginny had been the only one she was able to keep on

these last couple of months. The rest of the staff had slowly been let go as business decreased from a flow to barely a trickle.

"Please, Ginny, not today," she said, sighing tiredly. "You've worked hard this week and you need to take your money. Now go on home and relax. It's been a long day." A long day of doing nothing, her mind filled in nastily.

"Do you need some help closing up?"

Rachel shook her head. "No. I just need to get those last few boxes of unsold books out, and I'm done."

"If you're sure..."

"I'm sure." Rachel came around the counter. "Just give me a hug and promise me you'll take care of yourself." She gave the tiny woman a gentle squeeze.

Ginny reached up and patted her cheek. "You'll come by and see me sometime?"

Rachel smiled, even though she wasn't feeling very cheery inside. "Of course I will, and I expect to have one of your delicious chocolate muffins just waiting for me."

An easy smile crossed Ginny's face, lighting her eyes. "I'll bake up a big batch."

"You do that."

Rachel walked the old woman to the door. "Now you get on home before it gets too dark outside." She cast her eyes toward the sky. A storm was brewing. Already the sky was leaden with clouds; heavy, pregnant, threatening a violent storm. The wind was picking up, coming from the North, bringing in a chill. Hanging on with cold hands, winter was refusing to go easily.

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In like a lion, out like a lamb, they always say. March is coming in like a lion. So much for sunny, summery California. I should move to the part of the country that has weather more like Seattle.

Truth be told, though, she liked the weather. Rainy days made one think of a warm fire, a mug of hot chocolate and a good book to read, of a day lost in a world not one's own.

She stood for a moment, watching Ginny shuffle up the sidewalk. It was five o'clock, and the rest of the businesses on Main Street were also closing. This part of town usually rolled up the sidewalks by sundown. The city of Warren was growing and going west. What had once been just barren stretches of land on the face of the California landscape was now a thriving business district.

Sighing, she shut the door and locked it behind her. Turning, she cast her gaze around the store that had once been filled to the top with books. New Releases. Fiction. Non-Fiction. Biography. Travel. Self-Help. Children's. She'd tried to stock a little bit of everything, keep customers happy by always ordering the latest best sellers, or searching down that hard-to-find title. She simply could not win the war with the online booksellers like Amazon or Barnes and Noble.

She wasn't alone. A lot of the little Main Street businesses couldn't compete either. She wasn't the only one who'd been forced out of business because of lack of customers. It didn't make her feel any better, though, just like a failure. She'd had to sell most of her stock at rock-bottom prices just to get people to come in and take it off her hands. What went unsold would be returned to the booksellers for future credit.

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Not that she needed credit now. She was out of business. For good.

No use in standing around thinking about it, she decided. She hurried to the back of the store and propped open the rear exit, then opened the trunk of her car. The wind was picking up, bringing in an icy-cold blast that went straight up her skirt. Catching her hem before she gave the world a fine view of her panties, she hurried back inside and picked up a box of books. Hefting it, she carried it out to the car and packed it away. Two more trips followed, and that was all.

She slammed down the trunk lid. Twelve years down the drain. For over a decade, since graduating from a community college with an Associate of Science degree in Business Administration, she'd been right here on the corner of 212 Main, the corner that intersected with Price Street. In its heyday, Price had been one of the busiest, as it went straight through Warren, heading onto the interstate. Now, people were driving straight past Main and heading down to the larger shopping area.

"To the mall." *That goddamned mall.*

With the closing of the store, she'd lost not only an income but every last cent she had in the world. To open the store, she'd cashed out all the CDs her late father had left her. It wasn't much—not that she'd expected anything from a man who'd walked out of her life over twenty years ago. Still, his death had brought a welcome windfall, even if it did come too little, too late. Fifty-eight thousand dollars. Enough to pay off her college loans, buy a used car and launch the bookstore.

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She'd heavily financed the rest ... paid it off, started to make a small profit—then lost her shirt.

The last of her inventory packed away along with the cash register, coffee pot and cups, Rachel scribbled a quick note to the owner of the building, left both sets of keys on the counter, and walked out the back door. Out of habit, she twisted the doorknob to make sure it was firmly locked. Not that there was anything to steal. As she did this for the final time, pangs of loss spiked through her heart.

Getting into her car, she twisted the key in the ignition. Fat droplets of water began to pound the hood, the rain beginning to come in a flood as the skies above punished the Earth below. Flicking on her lights, Rachel put her car into gear, maneuvering out of the alley and onto the street.

The bookstore had long been a dream of hers. As a child, she'd spent hours with her nose in a book, living vicariously through the lives of the characters she encountered on the printed page. Starting with Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, she'd learned early that she could make the pain in her life recede a little if she lost herself in an imaginary world.

As the years had passed and she grew older, she'd worked her way through countless bodice-ripping romances, dark gothic and fantasy novels; so many that she could not even recall who had written them, much less what their plots were. When she was reading a book, for a few hours the boring and mundane could be put aside, temporarily forgotten when she was in someone else's world.

In a way, reading was an escape from the misery of her childhood, from the parents who drank and fought as violently

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as they fucked. They were a true mixture of oil and water: couldn't mix, and never would. The only thing they had in common was booze, mean tempers and one little girl.

Her mother was a drunk. Her daddy was a drunk. Years ago, her father had gotten fed up with dragging around a family he didn't want in the first place and just walked out. That left Rachel, at seven, with a mother who still drank, a mother who ran around with lots of men—men who thought Rachel surely was a cute little thing. Come 'ere, darlin' and sit on Uncle's knee. Let Uncle show you something special, something right here in his lap, somethin' nice for you to hold, to suck on...

She blinked, fighting against the tears that were beginning to sting. The state had taken her away from her undisciplined, uncaring mother after her last arrest for drunk driving, putting Rachel into foster care when she was barely eight years old. She'd never gotten to go home because her mother had never straightened up. A few months later, Anita, drunk and high, managed to wrap her car around a telephone pole, killing herself instantly. Rachel didn't remember crying or feeling any loss—only relief. Eight years old, and she was thankful that those people would not be coming back.

The years passed as they always did, seeing her shuffled to home after home, fighting for a stable life amid the unstable situation of people who'd welcome her into their homes for a few months, only to send her away when she became an inconvenience. Through her misery, she read, giving her heart and soul to the books that offered a sense of

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security. As long as she could read, she could go all over the world without ever leaving her chair.

Reading well also helped her keep her grades up. She was a good student, never straight A's because of all the moves to new schools, but decent B's and C's. She'd managed to graduate high school and go on to college, working two part-time jobs while juggling a full schedule of classes. She'd graduated one hundred and sixth out of a class of three hundred fifty. She was in debt, but by God, she had that piece of paper. Success, she felt, was waiting around the corner.

When she was twenty-two, the social security administration contacted her to let her know that her father had passed away, and that she had a bit of an inheritance coming. It was the best thing the man had ever done for her. Come to think of it, aside from donating some sperm toward her conception, it was the only useful thing he'd ever contributed to his family. The money had helped assuage an ache that had long ceased to bother her. Perhaps it was cold-hearted, but it was the only way she could think of her father, a man she barely cared to remember anyway. That money had given her a leg up in life, a fresh start. Degree in hand, she felt she could climb the ladder toward success and security.

Pulling into the driveway at home, she killed the engine and sat in the car, listening to the rain patter against the windshield.

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I blew it, she thought, bitter bile churning in her stomach, filling her throat. I failed to make a go of it. Damn it, but I'm too old to start over at almost thirty-three years of age.

She sank down into the seat until she couldn't even see above the steering wheel. For a moment, she wished she could just evaporate, cease to exist. Life hadn't really been that damned lovely or interesting anyway. Certainly no one would miss her. She had a few distant aunts and uncles, some cousins, but these were people she barely knew and had seen nothing of through the years. If she vanished tomorrow, would anyone aside from Ginny come looking for her? She doubted it. Alone. That's how she'd basically gone through life. She did for herself, looked out for herself. *All for one and one for me.*

She sighed. Realizing that she couldn't spend the night moping in her car, Rachel drew her sweater closer around her body. Grabbing her purse, she got out and made a quick dash up the stairs to her apartment, pausing only to grab the mail out of the box. She had the left-side apartment of a three-unit dwelling; a two-bedroom, one bath cracker box that just barely justified its outrageous price of seven hundred dollars per month—save for the fact it had a large natural stone hearth and a second-floor balcony barely the size of a postage stamp off the bedroom. She'd lived there for almost ten years, couldn't ever imagine moving anywhere else. The neighborhood wasn't the nicest in town, but it wasn't the worst, either. It was where people who were on their way up lived. A yuppie neighborhood. Too bad she no longer counted as a young upwardly mobile professional.

She crinkled her nose, wiping droplets off her face. What did they call young busted business owners who didn't have a pot to piss in? Yubbies?

Her mind kicked in too quickly. *Failures.*

"Failure, indeed," she sniffed. "I might be out of business, but I still have a degree. People will be dying to snap me up. I can make a living anywhere."

She closed the door and locked it, determined to shut out the world and its problems. It was Friday night. She had the weekend to relax. Monday morning, she would go job hunting. The Sunday paper would have the most help-wanted listings in the classifieds.

Inside, her residence was decorated with dark, broody colors, navy blues and browns. She just wasn't the kind of woman who went for colorful, flowery prints, acres of wide-open windows and sunshine. She preferred to keep the blinds closed, her way of keeping the outside world at bay. Her home was her sanctuary, that little piece of the world she had absolute control over. Her decoration was an eclectic mix, heavy oak furniture amid the most modern appliances.

As a hobby she did needlepoint, mostly fantasy-themed. Hanging on the walls, carefully matted and framed, were faeries, unicorns, beautiful sorceresses and handsome wizards that came to life in colorful thread under her skilled needle. Most she designed herself, working from sketches she made onto the material. Such a simple diversion was part of the escape that made a boring, mundane life livable.

Not raised by any foster parent long enough to be taught to follow any organized religion, aside from a few oblique

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references to a 'God in Heaven above' and 'Jesus loves you', she'd always been fascinated by the occult and gravitated toward Wicca, as she liked the idea of nature and its forces rather than the idea that God created man in his own image. If that was true, then God had picked a piss-poor image to recreate.

Not that she had a whole hell of a lot of respect or affection for this planet, mankind in particular. So far, those most important in her life had let her down. Truth be told, she wasn't a serious believer in any religion as a source of comfort. When it came to the bottom line, her mind was too analytical, too unwilling to bend the concept of faith around the abrasive realities of living on planet Earth in the twenty-first century. It was okay to interject fantasy into daydreams, but she didn't really believe in spells or charms, altars and rituals, any more than she believed in prayer and unproven miracles and that there was a supreme being.

Flipping on a light, she threw her keys into the wooden bowl by the door, then hung up her sweater. She flicked through the stack of mail, wincing over each bill. Rent, utilities, phone, car insurance. Visa to the max. MasterCard—ditto. Almost a thousand dollars in bills, not including the extra three months she still owed on the bookstore's rented building. She'd stupidly signed a lease that required her to finish any given semi-annual calendar period, whether open or closed. She owed on the damned building until June, nine hundred more dollars right there.

She shook her head. What was she thinking, trying to float her company with her credit cards when it started losing

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money? She'd known over two years ago that things were going downhill. Why hadn't she gotten out before she put herself so deeply in debt? When the mall came in, she'd known it would suck customers away from shopping on Main. She supposed she'd had hope, thinking that in hanging on and trying to struggle along that her business would have to get better once the new wore off. But things hadn't gotten better.

She sighed and put the bills aside. Digging in her purse, she quickly flipped open her checkbook, checking the balance. She had nineteen hundred in checking, another eight hundred in savings. She could get by for about a month and a half.

"Well, at least I'm not entirely out on my ass yet," she muttered, giving the bills one final glance. She'd take care of them tomorrow. A blinking light on the answering machine caught her eye. She stabbed the play button. A man's voice filled the air, grating on her ears.

"Hi, Rachel, it's Dan. Listen, if you want to get together later tonight, just give me a call. I've been missing—"

She pushed the delete button. "No, Dan, I don't want to get together with you. Not now. Not ever." The second message was also from Dan, and she erased it, too.

Dan Parker was just not on her mind right now. They'd been dating off and on through the past two years, but there were no sparks flying. Not that there was anything wrong with him. There wasn't. He worked steadily, treated her well, and squired her on his arm as if she were his queen. Trouble was, there was absolutely no chemistry between them. When they'd made love, she'd often found herself faking pleasure,

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trying to please him. Was it wrong not to want to be with a man who didn't ring your chimes?

She felt guilty. For the past few weeks, she'd been avoiding him, citing the closing of her bookshop as an excuse not to get together with him. She'd hoped he'd get the message that she just wasn't interested and move on, but thus far, he hadn't. She supposed she'd eventually have to get a backbone and face him down, tell him it was over. To make matters more difficult, he'd even offered a loan to bail out the bookshop, but she knew that any infusion of cash would be wasted, only helping the horse limp along for a few more months before it would have to be shot anyway. It was generous of him to want to invest his savings in her venture, but she'd had to refuse. She had to do it on her own.

"I'm a heel," she muttered. But rule number one in her world was that she had to do for herself, not let anyone else pick up the slack. It was a tiring life. Though she often wished there was a man out there who would sweep her off her feet and take care of all her problems, she also knew realistically that it wasn't going to happen. Settle for Dan? There was a problem with that word. Settle. It implied that a person could do no better, that there was no one else out there in the world worth seeking out.

Love. That was what was missing. That absolute mad, passionate got-to-have-you-baby type desire was something she had yet to experience. Did that even exist, or was it a product of imagination? She didn't know. She wasn't even sure she'd ever find that kind of love. She did know that it was wrong to put down roots with a man she did not love.

"I'll cut him loose. Let him find someone better."

That decided, she went into the kitchen, made a peanut-butter sandwich and poured a glass of skim milk. As a single woman, she wasn't much for cooking for one. She never used her stove, instead preferring to use the microwave if she wanted to heat something up. The contents of her fridge were pathetic anyway. Wine coolers, skim milk, cottage cheese, some lunchmeat, a loaf of bread.

A thump against the window brought her head up. Outside, a little black cat scratched against the glass, meowing frantically.

"Sleek!" Rachel dropped her butter knife and hurried to open the kitchen window. A skinny little tomcat bounded in, soaked with rain. Grabbing a dishtowel, she knelt down and rubbed him dry, all the while listening to his chorus of meows and purrs. Sleek was four years old, a nutless wonder who still insisted on disappearing for days, worrying her to no end. Every time she saw a smashed dark cat in the road she nearly had a heart attack, frantically searching to see if the cat wore a bright pink collar.

"Where have you been, cat of mine?" She reached into the cabinet and made a selection from the many cans of cat food lining the shelves. Her own food supply might be limited, but Sleek had the best of everything, the best litter and toys. She might not see the doctor or dentist on a regular basis, but Sleek was at the vet's the moment he sneezed.

Giving Sleek a final petting and leaving him to chow down, Rachel took her plate and milk into the living room. Settling down on the couch, she picked up the paperback left on the

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coffee table from the night before, her favorite kind of fantasy romance; swords, sorcery and scorching sex. Biting into her skimpy dinner, she began to read, putting aside all nagging problems and losing herself for a few hours in the adventures on the pages.

Chapter Two

The interview process was humiliating. First, there was the resume-slash-application process. Then the wait for the call. The interview. Explaining that her own business had gone belly-up, that she needed a job. Education? No problem. Whip out the old degree and dust it off. Uh-oh. Tongue in their cheek. That word coming out of their mouths. Overqualified.

Don't want someone working under you, who has more education than you do, God forbid, she thought.

Work history? Well, she had only worked for herself for the last ten years. She was her sole reference. Uh-huh. Ex-owner of a busted bookstore. What a glowing reference she had there.

Drug test. Pee in the cup. How embarrassing. The only drug she came remotely close to taking was Tylenol for her cramps. Results cloudy. Oh, shit, do poppy seed muffins really test positive for opiates? She was sunk if that was really true.

Sure, honey, we'll call you.

Doors slamming in her face.

By the middle of March, Rachel was at the end of her rope. Not a single position she'd interviewed for thus far had called her back and made a firm offer of employment. Did she look too eager, too stupid, too desperate? It could take months for her resume to work its way around.

She'd applied for every management, secretarial and clerking position that paid a decent wage, even swallowing

her pride and putting in for assistant manager at the bookstore at the mall. But with the economy on the downslide and the unemployment rate skyrocketing daily, she wasn't the only person pounding the pavement for a job. So were a couple hundred other people at any given time. Employers could pick and choose whom they wanted to work for them. Except she didn't have months to wait for the job she wanted to open up.

With no quick employment prospects in sight, she was getting desperate. Never a secure person who was absolutely confident in her abilities to deal with the public, deep down inside she worried that homelessness would be her next step. What was really upsetting, though, was if that happened she had nowhere to go, no one to lean on. That scared her. A lot. More than she wanted to admit. It was probably why she'd hung onto the bookstore until the last possible moment. She was afraid of losing everything.

Sitting with the paper open to the classifieds, Rachel sipped her afternoon treat, a double mocha latte with whipped cream. She might be nearing broke and not have food in the fridge, but she damn sure wasn't about to give up her single joy in life. She'd forego eating for the happiness of knocking back a too-small overpriced coffee drink in a fancy cup.

Pen in hand, she'd circled several possible jobs to go out and apply for. Trouble was most of them were minimum wage, a lot of rungs lower than what she was accustomed to working for. But she needed to find legitimate employment soon. She'd take anything to keep ahead of the bill collectors

until something better came along. Well, almost anything. No matter how low she hit, some things were off limits. Fast food was a definite no. As was washing cars, janitorial and nursing home aide. She hadn't fallen that far. Yet.

She crinkled her nose, leaving the clerking section and skimming over to food services. Just when she was about to give up, her gaze fell on an ad.

HOSTESS WANTED, it read. Mystique Nightclub. Also hiring waitresses and kitchen staff. Experienced only need apply.

She read no further, beating the pen against her chin, holding off on circling the ad.

Mystique was the hotspot to party at. A Goth-themed nightclub that had opened about a year ago, it attracted an interesting mélange of people—from the normal ones looking for a drink and dance, to the psychos who seemed to have a problem with reality. Like the underground gay community, Warren also harbored a huge pagan community. By day, they worked jobs like everyone else. By night, they ghosted around in indigo robes, fancying themselves to be supernatural beings. For the most part, the police left them alone, and the normal people gave it a wide berth. She'd never been there herself, but had heard stories from some acquaintances.

Do I really want to work in a place like that?

She tapped the ad with her pen, marking it with tiny red dots. Something about the ad beckoned her. Go to work in a nightclub? She wasn't the kind who fancied bodies packed like sardines in a can. Mystique was loud, wild and attracted the type of crowd she just didn't run with. However, from

miscellaneous conversations that she'd overheard at the unemployment center, the girls who worked the floor there made good money. A waitress could rack up a few hundred dollars in tips a night. That certainly wouldn't hurt her feelings.

Using the figures bandied around in the women's conversation, she did some quick addition at the edge of the paper under the doodles she'd already drawn there. That kind of cash would help bail her out of debt faster. She flicked the end of the pen against her chin again. She supposed she could put up with the crowds if it meant making decent money. She'd waited tables in college. It wouldn't be hard to deliver drinks from point A to point B.

Trouble was Mystique always hired certain types of women. You had to be a real knockout to get past the management's discerning eye there. The girls were all beautiful, with huge tits, firm asses, miles of permed waves and perfectly capped white teeth—all actresses on their way to Hollywood. The sad reality was that most of them had no true talent. Some actually made Pam Anderson seem halfway intelligent. Most of them usually ended up working as hookers.

Okay. So she didn't have a shitload of bleached blonde hair. So she didn't have double D tits. She did have a B-cup rack on her chest and long killer legs, part of the glory that came from being a giraffe, standing five-feet, ten inches tall. Since she wasn't looking to be the next Meryl Streep, perhaps working at Mystique would help make ends meet until she could land a more stable position.

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The hostess position wouldn't be half-bad. Those girls just drifted around, shaking hands with the customers, making sure everyone was happy, well taken care of, seeing that no one swiped tips off the tables, arranging seating for groups. That shouldn't take a lot of brainpower or be a hard thing to manage. Making several small circles around the ad, Rachel quickly finished her coffee, tossing the cup and napkin into the trash.

Why not? There wasn't much more in the paper to apply for today. And, more importantly, she had bills to pay.

Chapter Three

The Mystique nightclub stood on the outskirts of Warren, one of the last sights people saw when leaving the city. Built from the ground up, the two-story club had been designed to resemble a medieval castle, complete with turrets and a drawbridge. Instead of going over water, though, the bridge connected with the concrete parking lot. Surrounded by an acre of trees, manicured hedges and evergreen grass, it was one of the best sights in town—and one of the nicest. The owner had spared no expense, bringing in the best materials.

Even in broad daylight, the club was impressive. At ten in the morning, the parking lot was nearly empty. The place didn't open its doors to the public before noon. However, there were enough cars parked around to let her know that some employees had already arrived to start their workday.

Checking her makeup and smoothing her tresses into place, Rachel got out of her car, not bothering to lock it. There was nothing to steal but a newspaper and a lot of empty coffee cups. Hitching her purse strap higher up on her shoulder, she walked to the front entrance. Taking a deep breath and readying herself to paste on her 'public' face, she reached out and pulled on one of the twin doors that would take her inside.

Her stomach was full of butterflies. She was used to being on the other side of the desk doing the interviewing, not being interviewed. That still stung her pride, and she doubted she would ever get over the profound sense of loss she felt.

Truth be told, she didn't like the idea of punching someone else's time clock. She'd enjoyed being a business owner, being her own boss, had liked working in the quiet, slow pace of her bookstore.

Walking inside, she was immediately struck by the immensity of the nightclub. The panorama that greeted her took her breath away. The sheer size of the place was overwhelming, a massive space with several levels. It had not one, or even two, but three dance floors. It was also dark, decorated in a neo-gothic style reminiscent of a medieval age gone hard punk. The walls were covered with huge, custom-made tapestries that revealed scenes of hellish brutality when lit by the overhanging black lights.

In the Mystique world, evil triumphed over good, night overcame day and death ruled over life. As if echoing Torquemada's dungeons, faux instruments of torture decorated shadowy corners. Cages the girls danced in hung from the ceiling. There was a balcony with a huge disco booth so the DJ could see the dance floors. The balcony ran all the way around the nightclub, allowing a view from every angle. Overhead, a wall of mirrors spanned one complete side and an elaborate lighting system flashed multi-colored strobes in sync with the music. It was the perfect place to party.

Quiet and motionless, the bar was eerie without people packing it, music thudding. One could imagine they were walking through one of the seven levels of hell itself, deeper into the bowels of a purgatory from which none returned.

That, of course, was a silly thought, but Rachel had a big imagination. In reality, the bar was well-lit at the present

time. People worked throughout—behind the bars, restocking the booze, putting down chairs, getting ready for the night ahead. She reasoned that the waitresses would probably not be straggling in until around eleven.

"Can I help you, Miss?"

A voice behind her caught her ear. Rachel pivoted on her heel. Standing behind the backup bar was a young man dressed casually in a Mystique T-shirt and blue jeans. The design was of a vampiric sorceress sucking the life out of a half-naked man. She smiled. Girl power, indeed.

"I'd like to see the manager, please."

"Are you here to apply for a job?"

She nodded, flashing her best toothy grin.

"I'll need you to fill out an application, please." Reaching under the counter, the young man came around the bar and handed her the application. He put down a chair and motioned for her to take a seat. "Fill it out here, and when you're done, let me know."

Rachel didn't fail to notice his striking gray eyes and the way his cowlick fell casually over his forehead. A good-looking fellow. But young, oh, too young for her. She was in her early thirties, and he looked to be a puppy of twenty-one or twenty-two. Digging in her purse for a pen, she set to filling out the application with the appropriate information. She wrote slowly but precisely, careful not to make any mistakes that would cause her to have to strike through what she'd written. In her opinion, that made an application look messy and carelessly done. That was the first thing she'd looked at as an employer. She had tossed out many sloppy applications

herself. It took her about fifteen minutes to get it just right. Done, she stood up, pushing the chair into place.

"You finished?" The hunk motioned for her to follow. She trotted across the dance floor behind him, heels clicking on the polished wood. He led her toward the rear of the building, through a door and into a rabbit warren of intersecting hallways. People passed them without looking twice, not caring that an outsider was trying to penetrate their clique. They had jobs there. She didn't. She was no threat.

A nearby door read Manager. The young man knocked on it, opening it and sticking his head in. "Rosalie," he called. "Someone needs to see you."

"Who?" a woman's voice called.

"Dunno. Some lady looking for a job. She's filled out an application."

"Send her in."

The young man stepped aside, allowing Rachel into the office. Windowless, it was well lit. Her eyes flicked over the desk, filing cabinets, a couple of chairs, some innocuous framed prints on the wall. All in all, quite normal décor. The nameplate on the desk read Rosalie Dayton. A woman sat behind the desk, tapping at her keyboard, squinting from behind her glasses at the monitor. Giving her head a little shake at whatever she was working on, she took off her glasses and stood up, offering her hand. "I'm Rosalie Dayton," she said. "And you're..."

Rachel offered her own hand, covertly looking her over. Rosalie Dayton was an imposing-looking woman. Fat as a tick on a hound, she had the face of a brindle bulldog and tiny

hard eyes that seemed to bash through everything she set them on. It was clear that beauty was not hers, past or present. With her wrinkled skin and shock of white hair, it was hard to tell if she was fifty or seventy.

A tough old bird, Rachel thought. Not easily impressed or bowled over by charm. Best to be straight and talk tough back.

"Rachel Marks. I'm here to apply for the hostess position advertised in the paper." She handed over her application, not failing to notice that Rosalie's desk was literally papered with more of the same. Many of the applications looked like they had been scrawled on by half-wits and idiots. Hopefully, her neat, letter-perfect penmanship would win her a few brownie points.

Rosalie flashed her that small, grim smile that Rachel knew so well. "Mister Carnavorn has already filled that position," she replied briskly.

"Well, then," she countered brightly, refusing to be deterred, "what else have you got open?"

"Waitress is all he has open. He needs two more girls by this evening."

"I'm interested."

"Really?" The older woman's gaze raked her body. "You don't look the type."

Spine stiffening, shoulders going back, Rachel drew herself up to her full height. Even in flats, she was taller than average. Time to use that height to her advantage. "And what type is that?" she countered coolly. "As in, I don't look like a whore?"

To her surprise, the old battleaxe smiled and nodded.
"Exactly."

"So what do I look like?"

"Like a nice girl who doesn't work in a place like this."

"Then you're not going to hire me?"

"I didn't say that. That decision is entirely up to Mister Carnavorn." The way she slanted her tone made it sound as if the young lady standing before her desk was wasting her time.

"Will I be allowed to meet him, or are you going to hustle me out the door for not coming in dressed like a tramp?" Rachel asked in a crisp voice, hinting that she would not have her time wasted either.

A small smile touched the old woman's lips.

"Very well." She sighed heavily, fiddling with her glasses that hung on the chain around her neck. "If you insist."

"I insist."

"Then follow me."

* * * *

The owner's private offices were on the second floor of the nightclub. To say they were huge was an understatement. They were absolutely massive, a complete suite that allowed him to look down upon the first level through the two-way mirrors that made up nearly an entire wall; opaque from the inside, it allowed for clear viewing.

It was also not your typical office in that it had no filing cabinets, or any other business accoutrements at all, for that matter. There was an enormous desk, fashioned of rich, dark

exotic wood with ivory inserts at the corners. A huge, comfortable-looking chair sat behind the desk, along with two more visitor's chairs sitting in front. Huge oriental-style carpets were spread across the expanse of the polished wood floor, lovely shades of gold, blue and red.

Carnavorn in the flesh held the prime position behind the desk, chair tilted back, feet propped up on the desk. Putting aside the paperwork he was reading, he waited for the two women to make the trek toward the Holy Grail his presence implied.

"Devon," Rosalie said. "This young lady wishes to speak with you about a job." She pushed Rachel's application across the wide desk.

Rising gracefully, Devon Carnavorn reached out and claimed it. His eyes flicked to the paper and then up to Rachel. "Miss Marks," he said in a voice lightly tinged with an English accent. "Thank you for coming today."

Rachel nodded, feeling slightly uncomfortable. He did not offer his hand, and only the barest trace of a smile. His eyes, however, were all over her. She could feel his gaze raking over her body, from the top of her head to the tip of her toes, practically peeling away her clothing. But more than that, she felt he was also searching beneath the layers, as if he were examining her for a particular purpose.

What's he looking for? she wondered. Aren't I pretty enough for him? She thought she looked nice, having dressed herself simply in a white blouse, a navy skirt, taupe hose and low navy heels. All in all, she believed that she looked pretty damned good.

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Determined not to be overwhelmed by his intense stare, she returned the assessment. The first thing she noticed was that he was tall, well over six feet. She was always attracted to men who made her look smaller, more feminine. He definitely managed to do that.

Pretending to brush a piece of lint off her skirt, she sidled a few more looks his way, concentrating on his face. His forehead, straight nose, strong square jaw, sensual mouth. Neatly styled brown hair covered his head, matching exactly eyes the color of her morning coffee cut lightly with cream. His body appeared sleek and solid under his obviously tailored Italian suit. She had no doubt that he could span her waist with both hands and still have a few inches left over. He was handsome, strikingly so.

He appeared to be in his early thirties. No older than thirty-five, she was sure. She covertly studied his face, trying to keep her perusal less obvious than his. He certainly had nice lips, kissable lips. She'd like to taste those lips. Just once. She felt her cheeks growing warm. He was a hunk, eye candy for the ladies. Married? Her gaze darted quickly to his left hand. Nope. No ring. A good sign.

My God, but he's gorgeous!

She knew in less than the space of one breath that she was attracted to him. Hell, she liked everything she saw—and everything she couldn't see. She felt an immediate hot tug deep within her body. Contrary to her will, her nipples came to instant attention, the hard little nubs raking uncomfortably against the soft silk of her bra. A brief fantasy wish of the purely wanton type passed through her mind. She imagined

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him picking her up, setting her on his desk and screwing her until she screamed in sheer pleasure.

Urbane, well dressed and well spoken, he did not seem the type of man who'd enjoy hanging out in a Goth nightclub. Still, something in his manner set him apart from the average Joe. There was a sense of darkness about him, as if he didn't quite belong on this Earth, walking with the rest of the common mortals. Oddly, there was something strangely familiar about him, although she knew she'd never met him before. By the way he was looking at her, perhaps he was thinking the same thing. Though he had really done nothing out of line, his blatant visual aggressiveness excited her.

Maybe we were lovers in a past life, she thought. It was a stupid idea, but she liked thinking it. Reluctantly pulling her mind out of her crotch, she managed to choke out an answer.

"Thank you for allowing me to see you, Mister Carnavorn," she returned, trying to ignore his intense examination. "I'm told you have a few waitress positions open, and I would like to apply for one of them."

His hand went out and he indicated a chair. "Please have a seat while I look over your application," he replied firmly, finally breaking his eye lock on her.

Rachel quickly sat down, smoothing her skirt under her legs, glad to have a reason to duck her head. Fighting the need to fidget, she laced her hands together and waited for him to make the first move. At this point, she would make the man use dynamite to get her out of his office. No reason to let him rattle her, either. She had more important matters to

think about than Devon Carnavorn stripping her naked with his eyes.

Taking his seat, Devon began to skim Rachel's application. After a few silent minutes, he lowered it. "It says here that you have owned your own business. Tell me about it."

She pasted on a diplomatic smile. "Yes. The Book Nook. On Main Street." The name seemed to have no effect on him. Apparently he did not often frequent tiny bookstores clear on the other side of town.

"I have noticed that a lot of businesses are closing on that end," he commented, tone going flat as if the bust in the economy was somehow her personal fault.

Rachel stiffened, smile vanishing. "Mine included," she countered. "The mall sank me."

Carnavorn offered no words of sympathy. "I see you have some experience in food services..." He let his words trail off.

"That's right." She frowned and shifted a little uncomfortably in her chair. "In college. A long time ago, I admit, but I think I can handle the work."

He scowled critically at her. "Waiting tables in a nightclub today is different from waiting tables in a diner a decade ago." He looked again at Rachel's application. "I see that you hold an Associates degree in Business Administration. I would think you would be overqualified for this type of work."

She had to resist the urge to glare darkly back at him. What did he think she was? An idiot? Of course she knew what bar work would entail. She hadn't been hiding under a rock these last few years. She knew Mystique was the hottest nightclub in town—and the busiest.

"Although this isn't my chosen career path," she said carefully, measuring each word, "at this time I am looking at other options that will allow me to support myself. In that capacity, I am not overqualified. I am just trying to seek out work so I can pay my bills."

His left eyebrow rose into an arch. "I can certainly understand that sentiment," he replied in an understated tone. "I really do need at least two girls today. But let me set you straight. If you were to take this job on, I would warn you that you've got an uncontrolled crowd of people wired on alcohol and whatever else they've put in their bodies. People push and shove, with no mind that a waitress has got a tray full of drinks. The men—and some women—grobe any part of a girl's body they can get their hands on. Some girls don't last an hour and most don't last more than six months. I need reliable people who will show up." He raked strong fingers through his stylishly clipped mane. It fell immediately back into place.

"I'll show up," Rachel said, looking him squarely in the eye. She wasn't going to argue his words, rock the boat. Just show him that she was determined to work, no matter what he said to discourage her.

He viewed her speculatively. "Until a cushy nine-to-five desk job comes along? You're not fooling me, Miss Marks. You're better dressed and better qualified than the usual women who parade through my office. Frankly, I just don't see you as one who would be a long-term employee."

Worried that she was about to see another chance to work slip through her fingers, Rachel leaned forward, putting her

hands on his desk, as if she were holding it down to keep it from flying away from her.

"Look, Mister Carnavorn, I'll be honest and say this isn't the most desirable type of work. But right now, the economy's bad and people are pounding the pavements in droves. You know that for every mall that opens up, ten little businesses like mine curl up and die. We've even seen the big corporations fold up and leave here. K-Mart, Client-Logic, MCI—all pulled up stakes and left hundreds of people scrabbling for work. A few hundred jobs for a few thousand people doesn't make one able to pick and choose what type of work they want. All I am asking for is a chance to make an honest living." The words erupted from her lips before she had time to think about what she was saying.

For the first time since their introduction, Devon Carnavorn smiled. "Well, if nothing else, you seem to have determination." He turned slightly in his chair and gestured to Rosalie Dayton, who stood nearby. It was clear that she was there to run interference if an interview got out of hand. "Please get Miss Marks a uniform. Have Gina put her on the schedule to start tomorrow, six sharp."

Like a silent sentinel, the older woman nodded. "Follow me, Miss Marks. We'll take care of your employee file and I will give you your uniform."

Rachel smiled, standing up and offering her hand. "Thank you so much for giving me a chance," she murmured gratefully.

Carnavorn's eyes slid over her again in that intimate way of his, following the curve of her arm, her shoulders, her

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neck, finally settling on her face, his gaze almost as personal as a physical caress. He stood, slowly reaching out and taking her hand. Instead of shaking it, though, he did quite an odd thing and turned her hand up, bending over it in a slight bow.

Although self-conscious under such an unabashed stare, Rachel felt a pleasant shiver go up her spine at his touch, reveling in the warmth flooding her body.

What would it be like to make love to him? she wondered, then blushed, a revealing flush creeping into her cheeks. Goodness, but she hardly ever thought of men in such a graphic way. It was embarrassing to think that while she was outwardly trying to land a job, inwardly all she could think about was shagging the boss! *Good thing we can keep our thoughts to ourselves.*

Wishing his touch would never end, her gaze swept over him for a final time, her eyes settling on his hand. On this third finger of his right hand, he wore a large gold signet ring. Its design seemed vaguely familiar, but she couldn't exactly place where she'd seen it before.

"It has been my pleasure, Miss Marks," he said, a low accented purr behind his words. "More than you can know."

Chapter Four

At home that evening, Rachel examined the black dress that Rosalie Dayton had given her, standing before the full-length mirror hung on her closet door.

Picking up the confection that was supposed to serve as a uniform, she pressed it against her shoulders. "There's barely anything to it," she muttered under her breath, holding it up to the light.

The dress was short, the sort of costume that would attract Elvira, whom she supposed it was supposed to be modeled on. Examining it more closely, she saw that it wasn't wholly a dress but more like a cheerleader's outfit, as it had a solid joined crotch that snapped together between the legs. That was good. She'd worried about bending over in the thing. The frilly skirt around the shorts was so limited that if a girl bent over, she'd give everyone a prime view of her pussy. The silky material was embroidered with the Mystique logo over the left breast in crimson, the M and the T of the word elongated to resemble a set of vampire fangs. Clever, but hardly original. The tag sewn into it said medium, but she was sure it must be a small instead. She had also been given an apron, much-needed pockets for a waitress, and a nametag. If she stayed for more than a month, Rosalie explained that she would be given additional uniforms.

For now, though, she'd have to make do with one. The rest of the uniform she had to provide; her hose and shoes. Pumps, the higher the heel the better. That made no sense.

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How the hell did they expect a woman to spend all those hours on her feet, running across a bar in high heels? Fortunately, Rosalie had told her to choose comfort over looks and wear a low half-heeled flat. Because she had long legs, Rachel felt that she didn't need the extra sexy height four inches would add.

Deciding to try it on, she tossed the cocktail dress on her bed and began to strip down to bra and pantyhose. She wriggled into the outfit, tugging it into place over her body, smoothing out the wrinkles with the flat of her palms. The damn thing was tight, fitting her like a second skin. It allowed not an ounce of spare fat, showing every curve of her body. The neckline plunged deep between her breasts. Making a face, she cupped them. She was a perfect B cup, not too big, but not too small. Because her frame was a long one, she had been blessed with a small waist, flat stomach and slender thighs. The dress didn't look terrible on her at all.

Not bad for a thirty-something woman, she thought. Pleased, she pivoted right and left in front of the mirror, liking the way it looked on her. Until she caught sight of the mark on her left thigh. The costume was slit up each side of the skirt, giving a perfect view of the ugly blotch.

"Shit," she muttered. "I hate that damn thing." That damn thing was a birthmark about the size of a fifty-cent piece. The color of burgundy wine against her pale skin, it vaguely seemed to resemble a broken pentagram. She called it her mark of Cain, the thing that set her apart from other people. When she was younger she'd considered having it tattooed over, but had never gotten around to having it done. Really, it

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wasn't a problem, as she rarely wore skirts or shorts that let it show. Only lovers knew it was there, and most had said nothing, being interested in other parts of her body.

She tried to tug the skirt down over it. Of course, the second she moved, the skirt flicked open to reveal it. Maybe she could cover it with a flesh-colored foundation. Getting out a cover stick in a light shade that matched her skin tone, she quickly pulled down her pantyhose and daubed some of the makeup on the mark. That somewhat concealed the mark, but the experiment was doomed to failure. The material of her hose quickly rubbed the makeup off her skin when she walked around. Okay. So much for that.

I guess if I want the job, I live with the damn thing. Hell, it's a dark bar. No one will notice it. People aren't going to be gawking at my legs. They're going to be dancing and drinking, not thinking about a blotch on my thigh.

Feeling somewhat better about the birthmark, she took off the uniform and laid it aside. Tomorrow she would begin work. Since she didn't have to go into until six in the evening, she could stay up late and celebrate. She decided to have a quick shower, then she'd settle down with a glass of wine and a good book.

Stripping off the rest of her clothes, she shook her head, unbraiding her bun and running her fingers through her hair. Though she'd considered a shorter style, she couldn't bring herself to touch her waist-length mane. The stress of watching her business go down the drain had set her nerves on edge and she was getting tired of struggling to fix it. But when she mentioned it to Dan, he'd immediately had a fit

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over the idea of her cutting it. She'd thought about chopping it off to spite him, and they'd had a huge fight over the inane subject. That was the last night she'd seen him.

Since that time, she'd been dodging meeting him in person. He'd called several times since the day she'd closed her store, but she always found a reason not to call him back, nor open his cards and letters that came in the mail. She definitely wasn't up to a face-to-face meeting. She was hoping he would just give up and go away; though in the depths of her heart she knew they were soon due for a showdown. Dan had proposed before their argument. She had never given him a reply. Their dispute had precluded that. Now that she'd decided that the answer must be a firm no, she didn't want to see him to tell him as much. As nice as he was, she just didn't love him.

Turning on the taps, she adjusted the water to a comfortable temperature and stepped under the warm water pulsing from the showerhead. Lathering up, she gave herself a good long splash from head to toe, washing her hair, then sitting in the bottom of the tub to shave. Only when the water had gone cold did she reluctantly get out of the shower. Somehow, having a good wash seemed to clean away the grime of the nasty world around her.

Sometimes she wished she were the sole person on Earth, for she'd never really felt that she belonged with others of the human race. Perhaps it was her childhood that set her apart from them. If she had an emergency or a terrible accident, she had no one close to call. In a way, she'd closed herself

off, not allowing herself to really get close to another human being.

Somewhere, there must be a place I belong.

Her stomach growled then, reminding her that she had not eaten in quite a while. This morning's wheat toast and tea was just a memory.

Getting out of the shower, she pulled on a robe and wandered into the kitchen. She made herself a cup of hot tea and a sandwich from the cold cuts she'd picked up on her way home. Turkey and Swiss on rye, no mayonnaise. If she wanted to look good in her uniform, she'd have to watch her weight with an iron fist.

Taking her meal to the sofa, Rachel sat down and began to munch on her sandwich. She made herself eat slowly, savoring the buttery-smooth flavor of the turkey mixing in her mouth with the cheese.

Finishing her meal, she set her plate aside. Tense. She was tense right now.

She got up and stretched her back, rolling her head along her shoulders. That seemed more visually interesting than it actually was. She wiggled her legs, then her toes. Cracked her knuckles. Scratched her nose. Wiggled her feet. She got up and checked the window for Sleek. No cat. Where the hell was he?

What about the remote? Here it is, under the cushion. She turned on the television. Reruns. Cheers, again. Sam and Diane. Not Sam and Rebecca. Had Frasier come on the scene yet? Ah, nope. The really early episodes. Isn't that Carla a bitch? Had she seen this one? Yep. Thirty minutes sneaked by

anyway. She laughed at the stupid, familiar jokes. Sheesh. Forty-five dollars a month for cable and this is all she got? What's up next? Dallas on TBS? Hadn't it been almost twenty years since that first ran?

Four hours crawled by, lost in the mindless haze of the boob tube. She surfed through the channels, searching for something besides infomercials. Tone your butt cheeks, breathe fresher air, cook faster without muss or fuss. Sale, sale, sale! Success was yours if only you learned the secrets to buying and selling real estate without a single dollar down. Buy the whole package for only thirty-nine ninety-five, billed in four monthly installments on your credit card.

She flipped the channels. There was nothing good on, not even on Cartoon Network. She glanced at the clock. Was it only twenty after twelve? Still a lot of long hours ahead in the night. About now, she was wishing she had caved in and called Dan. Right now she could be wrapped in his arms, fucking his brains out, scratching the itch that Devon Carnavorn had set to life inside her.

Devon Carnavorn. Before applying at Mystique, she'd only heard of the man through the social and business columns of the newspaper. He was reputedly a millionaire several times over, having set up several successful nightclubs throughout the United States and Europe. The Mystique chain was bigger than the Hard Rock Café or Planet Hollywood, successful because it catered to a young, hip crowd, feeding them plenty of alcohol, loud music and a place to dance.

Looking at him, she didn't think he'd ever known a day of deprivation. He'd probably never struggled to pay bills or buy

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groceries. He'd probably been raised in the lap of the English aristocracy and inherited his money. His biggest worry was probably how many net thousands he could add to his bank balance.

His reputation as an employer was sterling, though. He paid the best wages in town for that type of work. No reports of sexual harassment, either. With all those pretty young things parading through his offices, he must get tempted to taste some of that alluring female flesh. He was very much a ladies' man, according to the papers. Being so damned good-looking he must have his choice of women. He probably barely blinked when one woman left and another slipped onto his arm.

What I wouldn't give to have him turn his eye toward me.

Turning off the television, she headed to bed. Another lonely night down the proverbial toilet. What a tiny life. But at least then she'd be working again tomorrow, making her own way in the world again. She was part of the ranks of the employed and it felt good.

That's how it's always been, she thought. Probably how it will always be.

Chapter Five

Thirty minutes before she was due to start work, Rachel parked her car in the employee section of the parking lot, got out, then made her way around to the back staff entrance. She wore a long sweater over her uniform, a bit embarrassed to be seen in it in public.

Inside, she was greeted by Rosalie Dayton, who gave her a quick tour behind the scenes, showing her the employee break room, explaining the scheduling and introducing her to the bartenders, bus boys and other waitresses. She got a quick lesson in how she would carry her money. Given a working till of a hundred dollars, she would pay for the drinks at the bar when she picked them up, then collect the money at the table from the customers. Through her shift from six to two in the morning, she would get a thirty-minute break to eat, and two fifteen-minute breaks for bathroom or a smoke. Her meal would be on the house, from the grill. She could have her choice of anything but the steaks or seafood, unlimited coffee or soft drinks.

Six p.m. Showtime. No sign of Devon Carnavorn.

Rachel hit the floor behind her trainer, Lucille, the one who would keep an eye on her and help her out if needed. The nightclub was divided into sections among the girls, giving each a bank of tables. So that each would have a chance to make equal money, the sections were rotated between them. The tables closest to the dance floor were the most undesirable, as they were often forced to jostle drinks while

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dodging dancers. The ones in the back were the dead zones, where people parked for hours just to drink and talk, not really interested in the dancing. These were usually the lousiest tables, as the people there tended to nurse the drinks and tip poorly. The prime moneymaker was along the bar between the dance floors, but not too far back. People here drank and danced, and were more apt to be generous.

Because she was new and inexperienced, Rachel was given a back selection of twelve tables that she'd wait on using the second bar, thus not having to run to the front to pick up drinks. Since it was a Tuesday, the night was going to be a slow one. The weekend would be the prime time to make the bigger money.

Though the night was just getting started and wouldn't really start to wind up until about nine, the nightclub was already pretty full for a weeknight. There was a strange odor in the air, a mixture of sweat, perfumes, alcohol, incense and cigarette smoke. It overpowered her. The music was pumping, wall shaking, with multi-colored lights flashing in sync with the music, a strange, oddly appealing Goth-techno remix of a familiar classical number. Not bad at all, if you liked that sort of thing.

"Here's where you'll work." Shouting above the music and chatter, Lucille gestured toward a shadowy row of booths.

Her eyes skimmed over the girl. A pretty redhead who couldn't be more than barely legal, she had green eyes and the palest of skin.

"That's your bar," Lucille continued. "Alan's your bartender."

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Rachel nodded again. What was there to say? She was petrified about plunging into a new job, working among strange people in a strange environment. She was used to a quiet, closed-in workspace. Here she was now, trying to make her way through a place where bodies were packed together like sardines. Lucille noticed her discomfort and smiled, giving a knowing wink.

"You'll get used to it." She gave Rachel a reassuring pat on the arm.

At a loss for words, she said lamely, "It's so loud. I can barely think." As if that wasn't abundantly obvious already.

"You tune it out after awhile," Lucille said. "Just keep your head up, smile, and get the drinks to the table. That's all you have to do."

With those words, she sent Rachel into the fray.

* * * *

Four hours later, Rachel limped into the break room, smiling weakly at the other people in the room, but too tired to do anything more than nod and murmur a few words. It was ten, and she was ready for a chance to sit down and rest a little.

Putting down her iced tea, she flopped down into a metal folding chair; she lifted a foot and slipped off her shoe, rubbing her aching toes. Oh, God, but her feet were killing her! How did these girls do it, day in and day out? She'd worn flats with the barest hint of a heel, and both her feet felt like painful lead weights. Tomorrow she was going to go the drugstore and buy some gel pad inserts for her shoes. Those

who dared to totter around in heels higher than an inch must have feet of steel, else they would be crippled by time they were thirty.

It hadn't escaped her that she was one of the older girls on staff. She felt positively ancient compared to these young chicks, most barely old enough to be serving liquor. So far, though, no one had pinched her ass or fondled her as she bent over to put the drinks on the table. She had no doubt that it would soon happen. It was just a matter of time.

A couple of other girls, nametags reading 'Tammy' and 'Debbie' respectively, wandered in and sat down. Both were blonde, chesty and gave new meaning to the word sexy in those little outfits. She'd already noticed that some of the girls had a certain way they bent over the customers, giving men a prime view of their breasts or asses. Those girls invariably walked away with the big tips, later pocketing the twenties or fifties that the men would slide down their cleavage.

Lighting a cigarette, Tammy offered her one. "Smoke?" Debbie took the one she refused, using Tammy's cheap plastic lighter.

Rachel put her shoe back on, shaking her head. "Thanks, but I don't smoke."

Tammy's gaze raked over her. "So you're one of the new girls?"

"Yes."

Tammy exhaled through brightly painted crimson lips. "Like it?"

"It's different. Going to take some getting used to."

Debbie piped up, "I'm starving. I had better get something to eat before my break is over." She got up and headed out.

"You having anything?" Tammy asked.

Rachel shook her head. "Too nervous to take a bite." She took a sip of her tea.

Tammy stubbed out her cigarette. "I vomited for hours my first night. You're lucky. I started on a Friday. At least you're getting an easy break."

A disbelieving laugh escaped her throat. "This is an easy night?" she asked incredulously.

"Oh, yeah. This weekend, be ready to be crushed, pushed, fondled and halfway fucked by that crowd. They're animals."

Rachel slumped down in her chair, covering her face. "Oh, great," she moaned.

"It gets easier," Tammy offered. "You learn to ignore the people and take the money."

She sighed. "That's why I'm here." The money. That thing that made the free trade system a viable thing. It would keep a roof over her head and food in her mouth. Though she hadn't yet had time to count her tips, there was already a goodly wad of bills in her apron, along with lots of change, mostly quarters. No one counted their tips where the others could see. What you made was to be kept to yourself. If she was lucky, perhaps she would go home with a hundred or more.

When the break was over, she got up and headed back. Spurred on by need, she pasted her best smile onto her face, determined to stroll away with a few big tips herself.

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When Rachel walked out onto the floor again, she saw her new employer heading straight for her. She watched him glide through the crowd, seeming to float more than walk. People reached out to shake his hand. If he offered his own, you were in favor. If not, you were shit out of luck. A life like his was to be envied. He had money, power, beauty. Everything.

For a few tense minutes she was afraid that she'd done something wrong, but the easy smile on his face belied any anger. He paused only to shake hands with favored customers, gradually making his way to where she stood. Fortunately, there was a lull in back and most of her tables were empty. To look busy, she grabbed a tray from a passing busboy and began to clear one of her tables. She was more than a little pleased to see two twenty-dollar bills that had been left as a tip among the debris of empty glasses and overflowing ashtrays. That party had been a large one, ten people in all, and they had kept her running for almost two hours.

Just as she was pocketing her money, she felt a light hand on her shoulder. An electric current seemed to shoot through her entire body, causing the fine hairs on the back of her neck to rise. Empty glasses in hand, she whirled, clutching them tightly, her heart hammering wildly in her chest as she looked up into Devon's handsome face. Not for the first time, she became aware of just how tall he was in comparison to her own statuesque figure. He stood a full four inches over the six-foot mark.

"Rachel," he greeted over the pounding music, bending close so she could hear his words, "just wanted to see how you're doing this evening."

She struggled to gather her wits about her, fumbling for words. "Fine, thanks," she finally managed to spit out, trying not to shout out too terribly loud.

"Good." His gaze flicked over her body, intimate, more than a little curious. Finally his eyes settled on the glasses in her hands, and a slight smile lifted one corner of his mouth. "Let the busboys clean the tables. That's what they are paid for. Your job is to keep the drinks coming." He snapped his fingers, catching the eye of one of the hostesses drifting among the customers. "Get someone over here to clean these tables. Now."

The hostess nodded, hurrying off to make his words a command.

Gulping, she set the dirty glasses down. All she could see were his wonderful brown eyes and that incredibly white smile. Immediately, she forgot every ache in her bones. It was as though someone had delivered a numbing shot to her body.

"I was just trying to keep busy," she stammered, unsure of what else to say.

"You'll have plenty of chances to be busy, Rachel. Enjoy the slow moments. Sometimes they are few and far between in this place."

She nodded, letting out a little puff of air between her lips. She resisted the urge to fan herself with her hand. My, but she was suddenly so hot. Just standing near him seemed to

ignite a sexual need deep within her body. Though she had not a dirty thought in her mind, she could feel herself growing moist. Another few minutes and her pussy would be practically dripping. She shifted her frame and leaned back against a chair, trying to quell the sensual itch between her legs. Oh, God, how she would love to take his hand and guide it between her thighs, feel those long fingers of his stroking her clit. Just the thought of it almost made her climax right then and there.

"I'll remember that," she stammered.

He glanced around, then brought his unsettlingly direct gaze back down to rest on her face. "So now that you have done it a few hours, how do you think you'll like working here?"

"I really like it, Mister Carnavorn."

He tipped his head to one side, reaching out and giving her left cheek a quick soft stroke. "Good. I'd like to keep you around for a long time. I wouldn't want anyone else to take you away from me."

With those words, he flashed her yet another devastating smile, then turned and sauntered off, leaving Rachel to gawk in his incredible wake. Had she heard him correctly? She thought so. The way he'd touched her wasn't the way a boss would touch an employee. It was more like the way a man would touch a woman he desired.

Chapter Six

From his offices high above, Devon Carnavorn stood, hands locked behind his back, looking down upon the crowd below. Though the place was by no means filled to capacity, there was a decent crowd present. From his vantage point behind the wall of two-way mirrors he could see every corner of the club, just the way he liked it. Nothing escaped his notice. Nothing.

Especially Rachel Marks.

Gaze fixed on her, he watched her work. In action, she was mature, intelligent and more than a little bit crafty in the way she handled the customers, especially the more aggressive ones. He stepped closer to the glass, eyes narrowing as a man ran his hand up her thigh as she bent over to deliver a drink. Rachel only smiled and winked, nevertheless giving his hand a swat, indicating that she was strictly a hands-off girl. How easily she handled the mashers. No one was offended, and her laughing reaction would most probably earn her a hefty tip. Because she had not pulled away in anger and delivered a resounding slap to the offending customer, he wagered that Rachel was a woman who favored being touched and stroked by a man's hands. A sudden image of her long legs wound around his waist as he plunged his cock deep into her cunt sent a spur of heat straight into his groin.

She does not belong down there, mauled by the common people, he thought, frowning. She belongs up here, with me.

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The very idea stunned and startled him. It had been a very long time since he'd thought about a woman that way.

Since she'd come into his office yesterday, he could think of nothing but her. Even now as he watched her work her section of assigned tables, he could clearly remember how she'd looked when she'd first walked into his office to ask for a job. She was a rare beauty, far different from the over-painted women who usually applied to work at his nightclub. Face lightly freckled, she wore only enough makeup to highlight her wide silver-flecked blue eyes, inarguably her best feature. Instead of lipstick, she'd chosen a berry-pink gloss to highlight the naturally rosy color of her lips. Her long hair was put up in a neat bun. A few wispy strands framed her heart-shaped face, sprayed lightly to keep its shape.

Downplaying her sexiness, she'd dressed simply. The skirt was cut demurely below the knee, slit a few inches up one leg, but hardly provocative at all. The clothes molded to her slender body, yet didn't seem slinky or cheap. Because the morning was warm, she'd worn no jacket. All in all, the colors had complimented her skin, creamy, like fresh milk. There did not seem to be a flaw on her. She was perfect.

She's the one, he thought. Rachel will be a perfect addition to the Kynn.

Turning away from the glass wall, he returned to his desk, throwing off his jacket and sitting down in his chair. He felt restless. In the company of others, he'd always felt alone. Maybe it was because he was alone. *It has been a long time since I've thought about bringing a human over to join us. So few have been worthy to receive our gifts.*

Rachel, he believed, was worthy.

Why her? came the question. And why now, after so long? I thought I had grown used to being alone that I could accept living without a blood-mate.

Almost a century had passed since he'd lost Ariel to those ignorant fools—the Amhais, or shadow-stalkers—ones who believed vampires such as himself were evil and must be destroyed. Indeed, those fanatical humans who believed that no other kind should be allowed to taint this Earth had nearly succeeded in eradicating a species they did not understand and would never accept into near extinction. Members of the clan were few and far between these days.

He often felt Ariel's murder with a heartbreaking bitterness, bearing it with a sense of oppressive sadness, but never really accepting that she was forever beyond his reach. Though hardly a man to weep and gnash his teeth in grief, he was given to days of deep depression, often seeing only futility in the long existence he now considered to be a curse. Immortality meant nothing when the time was spent alone, making Ariel's loss no easier to bear. He thought he had moved on since that time. In reality, he had not. He closed his eyes. Just thinking of how she had died made his head throb, his hands tremble.

Thrusting her memory out of his mind, Devon sank lower in his chair, brow wrinkling in thought. Should anyone really care to go digging into his past, they would find themselves stonewalled, for he'd rearranged the facts to suit the changing of the times, easy to do since he'd been the last of

his human bloodline when Ariel had become his lover, brought him across.

In England, Hammerston Manor had been the family seat since fifteen eighty-six. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, when wool was so important to England, the Carnavorns were among a small handful of families to make a large fortune simply by being in the position of owning sheep. In fifteen ten, under Tudor rule, they acquired the estate of Hammerston in Northhamptonshire, where the family built a handsome manor that was, in this year two thousand and three, an architectural wonder, recalling a bygone era.

The earldom of Hammerston had been conferred by King George the third in seventeen sixty-six to a distant ancestor. This was a special mark of pride to the family, as it predated both the industrial age and the Victorian era—when the elevation to nobility was much more common, and the wealth of a simple shepherd could purchase a title and make his plain red blood blue.

Then, in his mortality, Devon was nothing more than a rake, often dragging himself in at the crack of dawn, drunk and disheveled, pockets empty or rouge on his collar. He was a hedonist in the fullest sense. The good father at the local rectory preached abstinence, chastity and poverty, things that were certainly not in Devon's nature to observe. He simply could not restrain himself from seeking out sin. It was more than in his nature, it was his nature. Life was meant to be enjoyed, the temptations of this Earth too many.

Man was a hearty animal. Lead a clean life; steer clear of temptations and what happened? In the end a man died,

became a shriveled corpse in a coffin. And what did heaven offer? Everlasting life, sitting on a cloud, plunking a harp, singing hosannas to the Lord? The idea was enough to send shivers up his spine.

Hell. It was full of debauchery, self-indulgence, denying nothing and promising everything. It was said in the Bible that God had rained fire down on Sodom and Gomorrah. Was it because He despised the sins—or envied what he could not have in heaven? Hell was envy, pride, lust, greed, vanity, sloth, and gluttony. The seven sins were those he most revered, the ones he lived by, that of self and the gratification that came of extravagant excess, be it physical, mental or spiritual. The idea of fire and brimstone simply did not enter into the equation.

Certainly, he could not seek respite on Earth. Heaven? So, where to look when Earth had become tiresome and tedious, and heaven did not meet expectations?

The answer had come to him in the form of a woman.
Ariel.

Ah, the most sensual woman who'd ever lived. How clearly he could recall the night they'd become lovers. Ariel was a lady of the night ... but she was no common whore working the streets.

He had been entranced the moment he had laid eyes on her. Ariel didn't walk, she glided. Gowned in the latest fashion and groomed immaculately, she'd looked ever so elegant in her off-the-shoulder confection. The soft pink dress she'd worn was covered in delicate ribbons, designed to enhance her slender body. Yards of net and chiffon hand-sewn with

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thousands of spangles and jet beads draped over the satin foundation. Worn over a corset, the bodice was heavily boned. The sleeves were full at the shoulder, draping becomingly on her arms. Although the virginal neckline did not dip excessively low, the bodice was most cleverly cut to give a cloying peek at her more than ample bosom. He knew more than most men about women's clothing, mostly because he wanted to know how to get it off them quickly.

Instantly, she'd held him in her thrall. Her long eyelashes had fluttered, brushing her cheeks with their soft down, the kiss of a butterfly on a flower. Her lips were moist, slightly parted, begging for sweet kisses. He remembered how he had hungrily searched her body, starting at her fascinating amber-shaded irises, downward toward her shapely neck, then to her full, firm breasts, clearly outlined against the silk fabric, to her small waist, downward still to her shapely hips sawing gently against the bustle of her gown. He could imagine sliding her dress up, parting her slender legs, dipping down his head to take in her scent before giving her a good lashing with his tongue. When she was wet, begging for release, he would take her, slide his cock deep inside her warm, welcoming depths.

Closing his eyes, Devon pressed his hands to his eyes. The tips of his fingers were ice cold. His breath caught in his throat, a lump that brought the incredible ache. They were not together long, but the mark she'd left on him was forever unforgettable, her memory indelibly etched on his brain like acid on glass.

Don't think about the loss, he warned himself. Remember her as she was—alive, vital, pulsing with sensuality.

Ariel...

Taking him to the opium dens on the lower east end of London, she'd opened his eyes to a whole new realm, an invisible world ... one he'd always suspected existed, but could never see with a mortal's eyes. Instead of being frightened by the experience, he had been intrigued, a willing convert to the clan. He'd been seeking the answer to the world-weariness of life's tedious, often meaningless rituals. Without provocation, without any prayer to a greater deity, it had arrived in the form of that very beautiful woman. It was almost, well, providence.

Lowering his hands, Devon undid the top button of his shirt, pulling away the constricting collar and pressing the tips of his fingers to his throat. There was a small scar a few inches under his left ear, a little slash across his jugular vein. Hardly a deadly cut, just enough to mark him. There were more scars under his clothing, more signs of her feeding. Having her draw his blood into her body even as he'd been inside her was an incredibly spiritual experience. And later, when she'd brought him across, he'd accepted it willingly, even eagerly. No longer did he feel the lost soul. He had come home, joined his own.

The history of such creatures was an unclear one, shrouded in layers of superstition, fear and ignorance. If the legends were true, one could trace the Kynn to the beginning of creation, when the Earth was new and man still lived in the Garden of Eden.

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The story found its origins in the dare that the Angel Lucifer had thrown out to God, a challenge that he, Lucifer, could tempt more souls into Hell than God himself could into Heaven. God had accepted that challenge, casting Lucifer and his brethren of fallen angels out of Heaven. But not all the angels completed the transition to demons. Some had hesitated, unsure which side to choose, becoming lost between the two realms, belonging neither to Heaven nor to Hell. So powerful was this vision of cosmic struggle that humans had used it time and time again through the centuries as an excuse to persecute and destroy the soulless undead 'pagans' and 'heretics' they believed vampires to be.

Though he hardly believed that ancient legend, he did not have any other viable explanations as to how his kind came to be. But he understood why mortals were so afraid of something that defied all rational explanations. In their mind, a creature that preyed on human blood must be destroyed. The unique beings that had given birth to the Kynn were long dead, only echoes in the vastness of time and history. Through the ages, his race had evolved, as did all species, inhabitants that lurked on the edges of the human world, part of the unseen fourth dimension that was the realm of the supernatural.

Here, Devon had to smile.

The Kynn only took blood to make a deeper connection with their chosen victim, a ritual of sharing and taking in their essences, not to feed a disease-like hunger. In return, they gave intense sexual pleasure, drawing even more strength from those focused energies than they did from the intake of

blood. The fallacy that they could drain a human dry in a single feeding was plainly absurd. The adult human body had eight pints of blood. No vampire could drink that much. Plus, the idea of subsisting solely on blood was, frankly, repulsive, not to mention downright ridiculous. Nor did they sleep in coffins filled with the soil of their graves, nor fear holy relics, for were they not created by the same God who created man? Out too, were the fangs that Hollywood moviemakers and authors of fictional works loved to put in their mouths. That alone was bizarre, a bit of nonsense that gained popularity with that dreadful Stoker book in 1897—along with the notion that vampires had no reflection and were just animated corpses. They were alive, existing on a level far superior than the puny life force granted to mortal man. Their hearts beat in their chests, blood flowing through their veins.

But the opposite of strength was weakness. The Kynn were not invulnerable or wholly eternal. Pure silver was a deadly enemy, as was the sun. During the daylight hours, his energies and paranormal abilities waned. The sun continued to rise around the clock on other parts of the planet, something that could not be escaped. But as long as he stayed well shielded he could move around with a fair amount of freedom, dashing from car to building fairly unscathed should he have to venture out in the day.

Rising, Devon returned to his wall of mirrors, looking down onto the people below. It amused him to no end to see the pale-faced, white-skinned hardcore Goth types who often frequented the nightclub decked out in inky clothes, mouths sprouting dentist-made fangs and white contact lenses. Those

are the true freaks, the types who fancy themselves to be vampires.

In their dreams.

Yet it was from this fascination with the darker side that he'd managed to build an empire. You had to learn to grow, change with the times, or you would not long survive in this world. So, the pastimes he'd once indulged in himself, he presently provided to others.

They had it all wrong, though. The poor misguided assholes had obviously viewed one too many bad vampire movies. He loved to watch their posturing, snickering over their too self-conscious attempt to come off as cool. Those pathetic play-actors actually believed that all vampires did, aside from flit around and suck blood, were lurk in the shadows striking iconic poses.

Still, he could not entirely fault them. After all, people following the medieval-slash-gothic subculture paid his bills and had made him a wealthy man many times over. Also, the proliferation of vampire books and flicks served their purpose, by casting the light of truth far away from the actual being.

The Kynn were not about death, but life. There was no future in the grave. Though they did have to extinguish a mortal's breath to bring them over, to cease the aging and degenerative processes—what they replaced it with was far more valuable than a mere human soul. It was the collective, the gestalt of the Kynn as a race, a relationship of elements so unified as a whole that its properties could not be derived from the simple summation of its parts. All of them had been birthed through a single bloodline. There was no taint, no

genetic weaknesses. To partake of the blood was to take in the very essence of a creation that harkened back to God, the creator.

But here, deviant forces were at work. Satan had once said it was better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven. The Kynn served neither Heaven nor Hell ... they reigned on Earth, preserving the balance. Humans were very necessary to their survival. Should humans cease to exist, so would his race.

There were other names for the Kynn; the male called the incubus, the female the succubus. Because they could not reproduce, they had to recruit from among the mortal population. At a hundred and forty-three years old, Devon was still quite young. His physical age was only thirty-four. When Ariel had brought him over, he had ceased to age, become invulnerable to those things that harried mortals into their graves. The oldest known Kynn had lived to be well over a thousand years old. Vampires of myth were simply too fantastical to even exist. Therefore, it only made sense to the rational mind that they did not. But Shakespeare had gotten it right when he had written there were more things in heaven than were dreamt of in men's philosophies. Ah, indeed. Man gave credit and belief to a supreme being who could raise living flesh from dust. Science gave credit to evolution, survival of the strongest, fastest, and smartest. Perhaps it was a bit of both. He was not sure himself sometimes. He only knew what he was.

Lonely.

He needed a mate.

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Soon.

Rachel was a woman who gave off the vibes of an intense sexuality. Hers was a vital life force, powerful, just waiting to be tapped by the right man.

Devon wanted to be that man.

Chapter Seven

At two-forty in the morning, Rachel pulled into her driveway and killed the lights. Getting out, she hurried into her apartment, feeling more than a little strange being out this late at night. Inside, she locked the door. Damn, why did she have the feeling that someone was following her? There wasn't a soul or car in sight.

Safe inside her own little domain, she kicked off her pumps, sure that her feet were nothing but nubbins and her shoes were full of blood. They weren't, but it still felt like it. After a night on her feet, her calves ached unmercifully, and her legs felt as huge as tree trunks. Even now she could feel the pulsing of blood through her lower regions, that strange throb that came with overworked muscles.

Atrophied muscles, apparently, she thought, grimacing. God, but I feel every minute of my days here on earth. So much for sitting behind a counter on my ass for years. I've been too lazy too long. This is what it feels like to really work for a living.

Speaking of working for a living ... how much had she made in tips tonight? She hadn't counted the loot yet.

Grabbing a wine cooler out of the fridge, she walked into the living room, practically collapsing onto the sofa. Drinking this late was out of character for her, but she needed to relax, and it would help. Twisting off the cap, she took a long sip of the blackberry-flavored drink. The fizzy wine was refreshing, bringing a bit of wakefulness to her exhausted body. She took

another swallow, set it aside and began to dig the bills and miscellaneous change out of her apron. In a very few moments, she had quite a stash lying in her lap.

"Holy cow," she whispered, giving a half whistle. "Shit. I think this is more than I made in a whole week." Hands half-shaking from excitement, she began to count the money, smoothing it out, sorting out the dollar amounts into their own little piles. As she counted, her tongue snaked out of her mouth, tracing her upper lip.

Two hundred and seventy dollars. On a slow night, she had made almost three hundred dollars in tips.

She gave a low whistle. "This could be good." She didn't care that she was talking to herself. She was too damned thrilled to have cleared so much easy money in one night. Well, okay, not so easy. She hurt like hell, but figured she would be able to bear the ache if this was the type of money she could make. Shit, work one night and she'd almost managed to cover the whole week. When she was paying herself a salary out of the bookstore, she'd often never bought home more than fifteen thousand dollars a year. In California, that was practically a poverty-level wage. She knew every trick about scrimping, eating cheap, driving an older car, going without any health insurance or other benefits so she could keep her business afloat.

Looking at the cash in her hands, she did a bit of mental figuring. If she worked at Mystique a year or two, she could make enough money to get out of debt and maybe even have a savings account. The prospect was an exciting one. Here, at

last, was a way out of her hole. Maybe that light at the end of the tunnel wasn't an oncoming train after all.

The only problem was did she have enough stamina to keep up with that kind of pace night after night? Tonight, she had been excited, eager to please, smiling, flirting. She wasn't always going to feel that way, wasn't always going to feel like laughing off being groped like a piece of meat. In that respect, she felt like a whore, giving a flash of tit and thigh as she delivered drinks. By watching the other waitresses, she'd already learned to bend extra deep, giving the customers what they wanted.

Still, the lure of money beckoned. She wouldn't have to do it forever, just long enough to get out of debt. When she was firmly on her feet, she'd quit and find a nice cushy office job, go back to pushing that pencil.

Eyes growing itchy with fatigue, Rachel put away her money. Heading back to the kitchen, she poured the rest of the wine cooler down the drain. A scratching sound at the window caused her to turn. She hurried to the window, peering through the glass into the dark street outside.

"Sleek?"

No cat. Seeing nothing, she quickly unlatched the window and slid it up. Since this was usually the cat's main entrance into the apartment, there was no screen. The night was cool, a little misty from the rain clouds that had settled upon the face of the Earth like layers of soft cotton. The wind was brisk and clean, caressing her skin.

Hands braced on the windowpane, Rachel leaned out.

"Sleek?" she called again. "Here, kitty. Get your ass in here."

A presence. A pressure. What glided past her was as silent as the breeze, as subtle as a lover's touch. It briefly caressed the back of her neck, going down her back, circling her breasts, then lower, over her flat belly, between her thighs, down her legs. Closing her eyes, she gave herself to the wonderful phenomenon, wrapping around her like a warm, loving embrace.

Lulled almost into sleep by the lovely feeling, an abrupt thump on the windowsill caused her eyelids to fly open, her heart almost dropping to her feet.

"Holy shit, Sleek! You scared ten years off my life." Pleasant sensations forgotten, she picked up the scrawny tomcat and set him on the floor. Filling his food and water dishes, she flipped off the kitchen light and went upstairs, unsnapping the tight crotch of her uniform as she walked.

In the bathroom, she peeled off her clothes. Hose and panties went into the hamper. She hung her uniform on the shower bar, where the steam from the hot water would chase away the wrinkles and odors of the smoke-filled bar. Sitting on the edge of the tub, she turned on the taps, adjusting the water until it was as hot as her skin could stand. As it filled, she slowly began to ease her aching feet into its depths. Oh, God, that felt so good.

Tub filled, she began to lower her body inch by inch into the nearly scalding water, her skin soon growing red as a lobster in a pot. She lay in the water until it grew cold and her skin wrinkled like a prune. Regretfully getting out, she

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toweled herself dry, then brushed her teeth and took out her contact lenses, glad to have the damn things out. After an evening in a smoke-filled bar, they felt welded to her eyeballs.

Exhausted from the pressures of her new job, she padded, naked, into the bedroom. The bed was a blur before her eyes, an inviting oasis for sleep.

Lying down, she closed her eyes, and let darkness overtake her. She'd only been there few minutes when she felt that strange presence again, the one she'd experienced when she let the cat in. Clearly, she felt an almost feather-light pressure settle against her hips. A delicious warmth, like being dipped in warm honey, spread over her body. She had the odd feeling that someone was straddled atop her, holding her waist.

Rachel gave herself to the moment. She could almost imagine that she was in the arms of a man. The vibrations were so intense; she had the feeling that if she opened her eyes, she would find a hard male body pressed against hers.

The pressure began to move over her skin, sliding up her sides, under her arms, over her breasts. The touch was light, sensual. An unbidden rush of sexual warmth filled her. Her nipples hardened. The strange sensation continued, feeling as if slow circles were being drawn around the pink aureoles. After a moment, the invisible hands sank lower, tracing over her belly, lower still to the soft flesh between her legs.

A distinct moan floated from her parted lips. Her clit was beginning to pulse, growing moist with the juices of her arousal. The light touch settled between her legs, instigating

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an excruciating tease. Invisible fingertips tickled the soft petals of her vagina. Her breasts began to throb, aching with the desire to be kissed, suckled. She drew in a deep, ragged breath. Whatever was happening to her was—wonderful.

Arching her back, she spread her legs wider. Raising her arms over her head, she grasped the headboard. The pressure against her clit intensified, stroking harder, sending her over the edge of pleasure and into a body-shuddering climax. Her cry of pleasure caught her throat, emerging as a low throaty moan.

Opening her eyes, she slowly let the air out of her lungs. Wow, she thought, gathering her senses about her. That was so damned intense. She would have sworn that she was just made love to. A weak laugh escaped her lips.

That was impossible, though. She was alone.

Rubbing her hands over her face, she rolled over onto her side, hugging a pillow between her legs. She glanced at the clock. It was nearing four a.m. For a moment she thought about picking up the phone and calling Dan, but it was way too early to wake him up. What had just happened had awakened an incredible sexual hunger inside her body. She longed to be in the arms of a man, being under his weight as he pumped his cock deep inside her. But, no, if she opened that door and let Dan back in, she'd be obliged to consider keeping him in her life. That was something she didn't want. She wasn't that desperate for a pity fuck. Yet.

Find a brand new lover, then?

Her mind drifted back toward her new boss. Devon Carnavorn. Even his name sounded regal. She remembered

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the way he'd looked at her at her interview, as if undressing her with his eyes, how his hand had felt, holding hers, the electric shock that had gone through her body at his touch. She'd never experienced anything like it before in her life. What she wouldn't give to make love to him one time. She had no doubt that he knew how to please a woman.

She sighed, drawing a deep breath over dry lips. Devon Carnavorn was out of her league, a rich man with a booming business. She was a busted bookstore owner, about to be out on her ass if she didn't start bringing in an income. Carnavorn must have his pick of women. After all, they paraded practically half-naked through his nightclub. He probably fucked a lot of them often. She probably wasn't even his type. Still, she could have her little secret fantasies about him. Why not? Might make working there a little more fun.

Closing her eyes, she drifted off into a deep sleep.

Chapter Eight

Devon drew a deep breath, shrugging off his velvety bathing robe, letting it drop to the floor around his feet. Droplets of water still beaded his skin, giving his flesh a clean, fresh sheen. Thoughts of Rachel caused that familiar warm rush of blood toward his groin. As if having a will of its own, his member began to twitch. His smirk grew wider.

Ah, Rachel, a lovely lithe creature to behold. Hers was a body well arranged; round, full breasts, tiny waist and lovely curving ass cheeks. As delicate as a porcelain doll, hers was a body made to entice, tease and please.

A shadow moved behind him and he turned, catching sight of his reflection in the full-length mirror. Light brown hair covered his arms and chest and the penis nestling snugly in a thatch of tight pubic curls. His body was sleek, solid, deliciously muscled, the envy of other men, the desire of many women.

The Kynn were highly sexual creatures, needed sex, craved sex as surely as other men craved air in their lungs. When he wasn't having intercourse with some willing female, he was thinking about having sex.

And what he was thinking about now was how to get Rachel to spread her legs.

Reaching down, he wrapped his fingers around his growing erection. His cock pulsed in his hand, warm and velvety to his touch. Even when flaccid it was an impressive sight, well filling the cut of his trousers and giving the ladies something

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to whisper about behind their hands. Erect, it was a magnificent length, thick and round. Closing his eyes, he began to stroke himself, up and down, bringing it to full hardness. His breathing grew ragged. A tiny drop of semen leaked from its head, glistening in the candlelight.

Though he had taken many lovely ladies through his time on this earth, it was the woman he had marked to be his next mate that he fantasized about.

Rachel was that woman. Ah, she'd played her coy game with him, but behind her fresh manner and cool gaze simmered a passion yet to be tapped. He could sense it, knew it, in the way her eyes trailed over his body, lingering at his crotch. She had that certain sparkle that spoke of curiosity, wonder and desire. Oh, she was most definitely curious. Why would she not be? She was the moth to his flame, the light to his shadows.

"I'll soon have you, Rachel," he whispered. Earlier in the night he'd visited her, gaining entrance to her home through the use of her cat. Not only could the Kynn morph into animals, but they could manipulate them, just as they could move on the wind, unseen and unheard.

Using the perfect pressure, he stroked his cock in a steady motion. Rachel's image filled his mind. His fantasy had her on her knees, looking up at him, eyes alight with anticipation. She was eager to take him, her pink tongue flicking out of her mouth to lick the pre-cum away from the tip of his cock. The salty taste excited her and she moaned softly, taking him inch by inch into her mouth, sucking ever so slowly to build his

tension. He could imagine the way he would guide her head as he fucked her warm mouth.

Devon's breathing grew harsh, labored. He rubbed his slick penis harder, giving himself no respite. He wanted Rachel, wanted her so badly he could almost see her lying naked before him, white thighs spread wide. How he longed to swirl his tongue over her pulsing clit, lapping her nectar as he flicked and sucked those delicate pink petals.

The friction on his erection grew heated, harder.

He would tease her, using first one finger and then two to prepare her. She would be excited by the sight of his engorged manhood, that angry beast of sexual conquest, and would whimper. But he would reassure her with soft whispers and softer kisses. She would taste her female spice on his lips, her supple tongue tangling with his. When he entered her in a single thrust, she would cry out, thrash her head, buck her body. Her nails would rake his flesh and she would scream his name. Then he would bring her over, perform the sexual death ritual that would free her from human constraints and make her an immortal.

A quake of pleasure thundered through his entire body with his release. His moans filled the air, his body trembling from the force of his orgasm as hot semen spilled from the tip of his penis. Teeth gritted, he milked every last pearly drop from the tip. He gasped, catching his breath, struggling to bring his breathing back to a normal level. Body slick with sweat, the scent of his seed filled the air. He had been none too gentle and his penis was sensitive from the lashing he'd

given it. There was some discomfort, but it was muffled, as though it were someone else's skin.

A knock on the door brought his attention back to the present. In a few hours the night would fade away, and he would need to seek rest.

"Sir?" Simpson's voice was a tad impatient. "Do you require help in dressing?"

His mouth dry, Devon swept his tongue over his lips. "I'm fine," he called, putting a hint of steel in his own tone "Certainly I am well able to dress myself."

"If you're quite sure, sir," Simpson replied. "The night's guests are beginning to arrive."

His many tensions somewhat eased by making a successful first contact with his chosen one, he smiled and began to dress, pulling his shirt across his broad shoulders.

Downstairs was a smorgasbord of willing women, just waiting for him to make his selections for the evening. The women were carefully chosen, women no one would miss if they were to unexpectedly ... pass away. He never preyed on the women who worked for him, preferring to keep business and pleasure separate. Besides, how would it look if his waitresses were to suddenly begin to waste away, growing thinner, paler, as he sapped away their sexual energies? Sometimes he forgot himself, taking a woman into a realm of such intense orgasm that she literally died from the pleasure.

He frowned, more than a little disturbed by how weak human beings could be. He had to take care, draw no attention to himself. Tonight, he would take several of the women. But he would only be having sex with them, not

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making love. That sentiment he was firmly determined to hold in reserve for the woman he'd chosen as his own.

Ah, sweet Rachel, he thought. I cannot wait for the time when your lips shall be firmly wrapped around my cock.

Chapter Nine

A soft, almost hesitant knock jerked Devon out of his thoughts. He glanced at the clock on his desk. Ten after two in the morning. He'd told Rosalie to send Rachel up to his office after her shift ended.

"Enter," he called.

The door swung inward on silent hinges. Looking like a child about to be punished, she came into his office. She carried her pumps in her hand, walking on bare feet.

Rachel offered a wavering half-smile. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Devon nodded, beckoning her closer with his hand. "I do, Rachel."

When she had come to a standstill before his desk, his gaze began at her face and then moved downward, toward her shapely neck. Lower to her full, firm breasts, clearly outlined against the silken fabric of her uniform, to her small waist, downward still to her shapely hips. His lips curled at one corner. He could imagine sliding her skirt up, parting her slender legs, dipping down his head to take in her scent before giving her a good lashing with his tongue. When she was wet, begging for release, he would take her, slide his cock up inside her warm, welcoming depths. Her energy would fill him, sating the hunger deep inside his very soul...

"Have I done something wrong?" she inquired, obviously trying not to show she was nervous ... and failing.

He moved to reassure her. "Not at all. In fact, I wanted to commend you on the fine job you've done these last two weeks. You're fitting right in." His eyes narrowed. There was a slight shadow of uncertainty across her face. She was biting her lower lip. Was she being shy, or was it because she was nervous? Damn it! Rachel Marks was the classic female, hard to read and even harder to pin down. She kept her mystery firmly to herself. So far, she'd rebuffed every attempt the customers had made to pick her up, gently letting the men down without insulting their masculinity. She knew how to handle herself, being friendly without becoming friends with anyone she worked with. When her shift was over, she went straight home. Alone.

Obvious relief crossed her face. "Thank you," she said, offering a smile. "I've been trying."

"I've noticed," he replied. "Which is why I want to ask you a few questions. I know you're tired, so I will be brief."

"Of course," she said. She gestured to one of the chairs. "May I?"

"How rude of me," he said. "Please take a seat."

Rachel sat down, tugging the hem of her uniform down, slipping into her shoes. As she did, he noticed the odd mark on her left thigh. He drew a sharp breath, instantly regretting his action. Her gaze followed his, and she shifted her body uncomfortably to hide the mark.

"Birthmark," she said, giving him an odd sideways look, as if she wondered why his eyes should be on her thighs. "Ugly, isn't it?"

He tried to swallow over the sudden hitch in the back of his throat. There was a bit of ancient lore among the Kynn, one that spoke of a mark much like his own. A story that predicted the rise of a king and queen among the kith—the two who would lead the Kynn into a new age of prosperity. Was it to be believed? He'd doubted it when Ariel told him the story all those years ago. Remembering Ariel's reverent insistence that the story was true struck a deep chord in him. He was now more determined than ever to have Rachel.

"Not at all," he said, feigning disinterest. "I thought it a quite interesting tattoo. A lot of the girls have them."

She relaxed again. "I've actually thought about having it covered. I've never found it attractive."

"Don't," he said, perhaps a bit too quickly. "It's unusual. Sets you apart from the others."

"I never thought of it that way. Thanks." She paused, and then asked, "So what did you want to ask me?"

Devon leaned forward, setting his elbows on his desk and lacing his fingers, his best imitation of business-like posture. "It's quite simple. Gina, whom you know manages the waitressing staff, just handed me her resignation without two week's notice. I need an immediate replacement. I believe you have the necessary qualifications, so I would like to offer you the job."

Rachel's eyes grew wide, as if disbelieving his words. The tip of her pink tongue shot out, tracing the curve of her upper lip. It was an utterly sensual move, igniting within him a whole new desire for her. He longed to taste her sweet lips,

cup her full breasts, and stroke those pebble-hard nipples that poked through the material of her dress.

"Really?" A little laugh escaped her.

He had to smile. The raised color in her cheeks and the way her eyes brightened as she pushed herself forward in her chair told him that she was pleased with the offer.

"Yes. I believe you could handle the management duties it entails. You will work with Rosalie on scheduling and help her with the payroll, as well as supervise the girls out on the floor. Since you have owned your own business, I assume you will be able to pick up our system fairly quickly. You'll start at a salary of sixty thousand, with raises and bonuses based on performance. In other words, the longer you stay with me, the more you'll make. I hope you'll find it worthwhile to stay a long time with Mystique."

She gulped, her slender throat contracting as she swallowed. Her expression conveyed what words could not; a profound sense of gratefulness. She was apparently very satisfied by the job offer and its salary.

"Thank you," she stammered. "I really appreciate that you thought of me for the position."

"I've been watching you, Rachel," he said, trying to focus on his words and not her enticing lips. "I can tell you're different from the other girls. You're more mature."

She demurred. "Well, I am not as young as they are, Mister Carnavorn. I'm going to be thirty-three soon."

"Devon," he put in. "Since we'll be working closely together, please call me Devon."

"Thanks," she said, eyes sparkling, bright and appealing.
"I'll do that."

"I know it's late, Rachel, so I should let you go home."

"What time should I come in tomorrow?" she asked
eagerly, seeming not to want the conversation to end.

"No one comes in on Sundays," he gently chided. A smile
crept outward along his lips.

She blushed again, giggling. "Oh, right. I forgot. Monday it
is, then."

Devon stood. Rachel clambered to her feet as well. "Quite
a view you've got there," she commented of the wall of glass.

"Take a look," he said. "You'll be seeing the view a lot."

She crossed to the security mirrors that allowed people
inside the office to view the scene below without being seen
themselves.

"This is incredible," she enthused. "There isn't a corner I
can't see."

He walked up behind her, "A security measure. We need to
be able to see everything that's going on at any given time. If
there's any trouble, we want to be able to handle it
immediately."

"I understand." She yawned, lids dropping, rubbing her
eyes. "Sorry. Guess I am a little tired."

Devon lifted his hands and set them lightly on her
shoulders. He began to massage her neck, gently working
over the soft flesh beneath his fingers. Being so close, he
could smell the scent of her skin. The light pear-scented body
mist she wore tantalized his nostrils. Even after a night of
working in a packed nightclub, she seemed as clean and fresh

as a newborn babe. To her credit, she did not jump under his touch or pull away with indignant words. Instead, she sighed and leaned back toward him, as if she wanted him to put his arms around her.

"Feel good?" he murmured in her ear. He continued to knead her skin over her shoulders, running both thumbs up the nape of her neck, making slow circles. He felt a small tremor go through her body.

"Mmmm, yes. I could use a good massage right about now."

Unable to resist the presence of her body so close to his, he circled her waist with his arms. Her held her, not so tightly that she could not pull away if she was uncomfortable. The sensation that passed between them was silent, a strange electricity seeming to crackle in the air around them. Rachel was a tall woman and her body fitted against his perfectly, as if she had been created only for him. His head dipped and he dropped a light kiss on the back of her neck, just where her upswept style ended at the nape. His glance settled on the curve between her neck and shoulder. He ached to brush his lips there.

Before he knew what he was doing, Devon spun her around, pulled her into his arms and kissed her, long and hard. He didn't care that at any moment she might let out a protesting scream, pull back and slap him across the face for his bold move. But she did neither, and since she wasn't giving him a negative response, he could not stop kissing her, teasing her sweet lips with the tip of his tongue. The thrill of finally finding a woman he desperately desired sent a rush of

heat straight to his loins. His breath caught in his throat, and he felt a tightening in his stomach. By God, it was not the hunt, but the chase that sent a man's blood boiling in his veins. If he did not stop his thoughts now, his cock would soon be as hard as an ancient, fire-wrought stone. Just the feel of his penis rubbing against his trousers was driving him wild, and the way her hips brushed his sent his pulse into triple digits.

As if having a will of their own, his hands moved to cup her breasts. How he longed to pinch and suckle those delicious pink tips. Boldly, he touched her, circling her nipples with his thumbs until they were solid and peaked.

Rachel shuddered, sighing lightly into his mouth. She was breathing hard, cheeks flushed, lips bruised and swollen from his kisses. Abruptly, she shook her head, murmuring more to herself than to him.

"What am I thinking?" There was regret in her eyes when she lifted her hands to his chest and gently pushed him away, taking a step back. The loss of her in his arms left a cold spot in the wake of her body's absence.

"Don't think," he breathed, reaching for her again. "Just do."

She eluded him, her gaze softly appealing, as if she hoped he would understand without demanding a further explanation.

"We have to stop." Despite her words, it was clear she was fighting her own needs for him, that she, too, felt the connection between them. She should, dammit! He'd only been visiting her in her sleep the last two weeks. It was hard

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to keep from materializing out of the astral plane and make love to her until she cried out his name. Damn her, she was like a poison under his flesh, burning its way through his veins and eating into his heart.

"Devon, did you offer me this job so you could sleep with me?" There was no anger in her voice.

He could tell she was intrigued, but also trying to be cautious, probably a wise move on her part. If their positions had been reversed, he would have thought the same thing. Truth was, he had offered Rachel the job precisely because he wanted to keep her close to him. He also wanted to move his hands over her hips, touch her where the fabric hung so enticingly across her flat belly and Venus mound. He could imagine how her pussy would feel, delightfully slick with her own creamy juices.

"Forgive me," he blurted out, not the least bit sorry that he'd taken such an intimate liberty with her. "I don't know why I did that."

"Believe me," he continued, shoving both hands into his trouser pockets and beating a hasty retreat. Even now, his cock still ached for her. "I did not intend to use my position as your boss to force my attentions on you." He shook his head, knowing how insincere he must sound to her. "I am terribly sorry. It will not happen again, I assure you."

Rachel drew a long slow breath and looked up at him from under silky dark lashes. "I like to keep my business separate from my pleasure," she said.

"I understand completely."

"It's better that way. Less complicated."

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"You're right."

"So, do I still have a job?" she asked.

He had to smile. "Of course. I hope you'll still want to work with an old wolf like me."

"You're hardly old, Devon," she said lightly. "Anyway, it's getting late and I should be going home."

"Shall I escort you out?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm a big girl. I think I can get myself home."

Chapter Ten

When Devon's office door had shut firmly behind her, Rachel leaned against the wall, letting her head drop back with a soft thud against the polished paneling. It took her a solid ten minutes to regulate her breathing, to stop trembling. Wow! How he had touched her. Just thinking of it sent shivers clear into her core. She traced her lips. She could still feel the tingles his kiss had aroused inside her. Between her legs, her clit pulsed wildly.

"Don't let what I said stop you," she whispered. "If you want me, come on."

Though she knew she could be caught at any moment, her hand sneaked down between her legs. She began to rub herself through the silky material of her costume, stroking slowly the way she wished he'd touch her. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensations, feeling her cunt grow moist, her panties and hose drenched with her juices. She pressed harder against her clit, wishing she could finger her pussy, but the hose made that impossible. She increased the pressure of her fingers, her body quivering as a long slow stream of heat began to course through her. She closed her eyes, enjoying the climax.

Hearing the sound of heavy footsteps, Rachel opened her eyes. She quickly gathered her wits about her, smoothing her uniform and tugging her short skirt back into place. She took a deep breath just as Rosalie Dayton rounded the corner.

"There you are," she said. "I just got the news from Devon a few minutes ago. He's told me you've accepted the job. Congratulations.

"Well, thank you. I hope we'll work well together."

Rosalie rolled her eyes. "I'm thrilled to have an intelligent woman to work with and not one of Devon's damned floozies. Trust me when I say I get so damned tired of these fluff-haired wanna-be models and actresses he parades through here so he can sleep with them."

Rachel felt her heart literally fall to her feet with a heavy thud. "So he sleeps with a lot of women?" she asked, her mouth suddenly very dry.

"Sleeping isn't what they're doing, honey. He's no more got one in the sack than he's out looking for the next." Rosalie reached out and patted her arm. "But you look like a sensible girl. You've got some age on you. You don't look like the kind he can jerk around."

"Thanks, I think," Rachel said slowly, trying to keep her face neutral. She was damned glad Rosalie had no idea that not twenty minutes before, Devon had been pawing her like a prime piece of meat. Moreover, she'd been willing to let him. Thank God she'd come to her senses. If he'd said he wanted to fuck her, she wouldn't have been able to get her clothes off fast enough.

Bidding Rosalie good night, she hurried down to her car. Sliding behind the wheel, she locked the doors around her.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she admonished herself, banging her forehead on the steering wheel with each word. "Sleeping with the boss is not the thing to do right now. Stay away from

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that damned man. He'll be nothing but trouble."

Chapter Eleven

Slamming down the phone, Rachel wiped away the tears streaking down her face. That was that. She'd just put the final nail in the coffin of her relationship with Dan. They were through. Finito.

Heart beating against her ribs, her stomach was tied into a thousand knots. The last time she and Dan had seen each other had really been the last time. Instead of feeling relieved, though, she felt awful, like a damn jerk. She had created the rules between them, always made sure that she never allowed him to get too close, controlled their relationship. Since Dan was such an easygoing guy, he'd let her have her way. He didn't seem to think it strange that she never let him spend a whole night at her place—nor would she spend a whole night at his. When the evening was over and she'd been sated sexually, she always showered and dressed, slipping out as dawn crept in to go home. She simply could not bring herself to spend a complete night with him.

It wasn't that way with only Dan. It was a pattern that had repeated itself through all the relationships she'd had in the past. For some reason, she simply could not commit to a single lover. Something about them was always wrong—unsatisfactory. Cutting Dan loose was simply following the pattern, something she could not ever see herself deviating from.

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Why, then, was she crying as though her heart was broken? It wasn't because she felt she'd made a mistake in letting Dan go.

She was crying because she basically felt that she didn't belong. It was much like that feeling that you got when standing amid a strange crowd of people, knowing no one. All you could do is wander around aimlessly, lost and alone, looking for your own kind and finding none. Except in her case, she felt that way about the whole world, a square peg trying desperately to fit into in a round hole. It just couldn't be done. Even with modifications, it would never quite fit right. Oh, she supposed she was doing what she should do in life; work a job, pay bills, vote every four years. But something still seemed to be missing, her shell of a body missing its soul. She'd had her lovers, that was a given. But she'd never had a true mate. Why did she have to be so different?

Lost in her own misery, she was hardly aware of the dying light outside. The skyline of the city faded quietly as the sky shifted from blue to gray and then into a deeper somber dark soot. Lights popped on across the city's landscape. In the hours before night fell, she was, once again, alone.

Rachel felt as if she too, were fading, entering a darkness from which she'd never find a way out. There was no joy in her heart, only resignation that tomorrow would bring yet another day.

She felt tears sting her eyes again. I'll be a spinster woman, she thought miserably. Me and my cats, living here all alone, sharing our cat food. The idea depressed her. Was

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there anything more waiting for her, or was she doomed to forever feel like a fish out of water?

A knock on the door made her cringe.

Who the hell could that be, she silently cursed. Dan? Had he decided to come over and face her down in person?

"Not now, asshole," she muttered under her breath. Since she was sitting in the dark, maybe he would assume she'd gone out and go away. She sat still, silent, holding her breath. The doorbell rang. And again.

"Shit," she muttered. Of course he'd know she was home. Her car was parked in the driveway. Fucking genius you are, Rachel.

Flipping on a lamp beside the couch, she headed to the front door, steeling herself to tell Dan to go away. Twisting the doorknob, she flung open the door.

"I told you to leave me alone!" Her anger slipped away. She immediately fell into silence, mortified by the man standing outside, staring numbly at him. Oh, great. This was just what she didn't need right now.

"Well, Rachel," Devon Carnavorn said. "If you insist, I suppose I have no choice." He was dressed casually; slacks, shirt, sport jacket, neat and immaculate.

Rachel inwardly groaned. She couldn't believe she'd just yelled at her boss less than one day after receiving a promotion.

"W—w—what are you doing here?" she stammered, trying to regain her composure and failing. It flashed through her mind that she must look an absolute fright. Eyes red from crying, face puffy, dressed in a pair of old sweats and house

shoes. Certainly not the kind of sexy beauty that would capture Carnavorn's eye at all.

"I hope you don't mind that I dropped by without calling," Devon said, "but your phone was busy."

"I ... well ... now isn't a good time," she confessed.

"So I see." Looking her over, he quirked a brow at her. "Aren't you going to invite me in?" Without waiting for a reply, he stepped under the threshold. As though he had been there a thousand times before, he crossed into the living room.

"Nice place you have here, Rachel. Closed within itself. Like you." He nodded approvingly. "I like it."

Though she wished he would have chosen another time, Rachel was pleased Devon had come to visit. Another time would have been better, especially had she been prepared for his arrival, however...

I can make do, she thought.

Trailing in his wake, Rachel digested his comments, her mind whirling with options. She could not very well force Devon out of her apartment, and she sure as hell couldn't call the police on her boss. Running her fingers through her uncombed shag to smooth it, she shrugged.

"Thanks. I'm glad you like it. Can I, ah, get you something to drink?"

"Wine would be lovely, if you have it," he said.

"As a matter of fact, I do." Right now she could use a drink as well. It was bad to drink alone. Might as well have some company.

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In the kitchen, she quickly splashed cool water on her face. After patting her skin dry with a cup towel, she took a bottle of white wine out of the fridge. It had cost her about six bucks. Not the best damn stuff, probably nothing like the expensive vintages he was accustomed to drinking. Still, it was all she had. Twisting off the cap, she filled two wine glasses. Taking them back into the living room, she offered him one.

He took the glass, his gaze roaming her features, settling on her eyes. "You've been crying, Rachel," he said gently. "Has something upset you?"

At his words, all the anger, frustration and confusion of the weeks before filled her up and began to overflow. She wanted to yell, scream and shout, stomp in fury, but all she could do was watch the room turn blurry as tears pricked her eyes. Shaking her head, she dropped to the couch.

"It's nothing," she sniffed, wiping her eyes. "I just broke up with my boyfriend."

"And you wish you hadn't?" he asked gently.

She drew in a breath. "Oh, shit, no. Just the opposite. I was ready for it to be over." Saying the words gave her no comfort. She still felt that pinching sensation deep in her chest. That ache of loneliness.

"Then why the tears?"

"Because I'm afraid I'll be alone now."

Silence. She felt him watching her, studying her. He walked slowly toward her, a large predatory cat on the prowl. Her body tensed in the readiness to respond when he put down his glass and sat down beside her. She had the vision

that he was going to wrap her in his arms and kiss her feverishly—and for a moment she wished he would grab her, throw her to the floor and fuck her until she melted into a puddle.

"You are too beautiful to be alone long, Rachel," he said.

She sniffed, reaching for a tissue. "Yeah, and flattery will get you everywhere."

Devon's hand caught hers, linking his fingers in hers. She said nothing, only raised an eyebrow in question, looking from his hand to his face.

"That is why I have come tonight. What would you say to seeing me after hours, when we're both off work?"

A bit stunned, Rachel struggled to keep all thoughts of his proposal to herself. She knew he was not a man accustomed to begging for a woman's attentions. He probably took from them what he desired. She was tempted by his proposal. Instead, she restrained herself, nearly trembling from the pressure of keeping her hands off his body. If he was trying to catch her at a weak moment and seduce her, well, he had certainly chosen the right time. She was vulnerable—and willing to be inveigled. Echoes of the conversation she'd had with Rosalie Dayton inevitably made their way back into her mind.

He's no more got one in the sack than he's out looking for the next, the older woman had told her. Was he only looking for his next easy conquest? Do I want to be just another notch on his bedpost?

"I told you," she started to say, "I don't—"

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He must have sensed that she was about to object to his proposal, for he cut her off. "Mix business with pleasure. Yes, I know. And I want you to know, that I don't sleep with my female employees either. It's a rule I try to follow religiously."

Her throat tightened. "Then why are you here?"

"To change your mind, and break a rule," he replied, his voice growing husky. He gave her a long look, the wheels in his brain seeming to turn at a furious pace. He was tense, perhaps ready to have his hopes dashed to the ground.

Rachel felt her heart leap in her chest. "And how do you intend to do that?" she asked.

"Like this." Leaning over, he kissed her, his mouth lingering over hers. His hands were moving up her body, cupping her breasts, sending pleasurable chills up her spine.

"Devon," she whispered into his mouth. "It would be wrong." Her lips were saying no, but her body had ideas of its own. Even now blood thrummed through her veins, beating against her temples at a furious pace, a roar in her ears like the surf driven by wild winds. If it pushed much harder, she was sure it would come pouring out her ears.

"I disagree," he murmured, reaching out to stroke her face. "Since the day I saw you, I have felt your body crying out to mine. I only want to please you, Rachel." A slow sexy smile turned up the corners of his full lips. "Even now, I can read your very thoughts."

"C—can you?"

He nodded. "You're thinking of my touch. Of my palms resting on your hips, sliding up to cup your breasts, testing their weight in my hands." He leaned forward, whispering in

her ear. "Feel that familiar tingle between your legs, the spread of warmth through your loins? You're a woman whose desires long to be freed. I can do that for you; help bring your deepest sexual fantasies into the open."

"Oh, my," she whispered, her mouth cotton dry. She squeezed her thighs tightly together. Having Devon seducing her with his words was definitely a turn on. She could feel her pussy dripping, wetting the crotch of her panties. Her heart almost stopped. The expression in his eyes was impossible to resist. She tried to force herself to stand up, tell him he was being silly, but she simply could not find the words or the courage to say them. Neither could she refuse him. His words had set her mind afire.

"I want you, too," she said. This wasn't the shy Rachel Marks talking. This was a brazen hussy, knowing what she desired and going after it. So it might very well cost her job. She could find work somewhere else. She was sure of one thing; she couldn't find another man like this to sleep with. To have sex with him was becoming an increasing hunger in her soul. The more she thought about him, the more she wanted him.

"Good." He cupped her face, leaning forward.

She willingly accepted the pressure of his mouth, gentle, as she had expected he would be. Their kiss deepened, his tongue breaking the barrier of her lips to explore the depths of her mouth. He was a master. It was absolutely the best kiss she'd ever experienced. He pressed her back onto the soft cushions, one hand sneaking under her sweatshirt to caress the soft curves of her breast. When she did not

protest, he grew bolder, rolling her erect nipple between thumb and forefinger.

She arched herself against his rock-hard body, loving the feel of him. He was so solid, so masculine. His scent was a cloying mixture of musk and male sweat, not at all unpleasant, more than a little enticing to her female senses. His hand left her breast, palm brushing over her flat belly to cup her Venus mound through her sweatpants. Using his middle finger, he began to stroke her clit through the material, introducing all kinds of new and wonderful sensations.

"Oh, goodness," she moaned. "You don't know how fantastic that feels."

"Oh, but I do."

He gave her a devilish grin, changing his position and pulling her into his lap so that she straddled him. She gave a soft sigh of pleasure when he pulled her forward so that he could trail his lips down her throat. He pulled back only long enough to tug her sweatshirt over her head. She arched her back and pressed her body to his when he leaned forward and took her left nipple into his mouth, teasing the hardened pebble with his teeth and tongue. The exotic sensation summoned a familiar heat.

She could feel his erection pressing against her crotch, surging under the tight material of his trousers. As his hands moved with an expert ease over her bare back to cup her ass through her sweat pants, his lips trailed across that valley between her breasts, finding the other nipple. His tongue swirled around the erect tip, driving her wild with need.

She moaned, running her fingers through his thick hair, rubbing against his trapped erection. "To hell with not mixing business and pleasure," she whispered, kicking off her house shoes. "I think it's time we move this to a more appropriate venue."

"I was hoping you would say that."

Rising, Devon swept her into his arms, carrying her up the stairs to her bedroom as though she weighed no more than a sleepy child did. He knocked open the door with his foot, crossing the room with eager strides to lay her on the bed. Bending over, he expertly peeled her sweatpants over her hips, leaving her dressed in only a thin pair of cotton panties. A smile turned up one corner of his fine lips as his unabashed stare raked over her body, lingering over her breasts, and then her pussy.

"Rachel," he breathed. "You are exquisite."

She smiled up at him, knowing she looked far from that, but glad he was saying the words anyway. Even though she looked like the wreck of the Titanic, the way he looked at her made her feel sexy, desirable, female.

"I bet you say that to all your girls."

He shook his head. "At this moment, no other woman exists in this world."

To her surprise, he did not immediately undress and attack her. He shrugged out of his coat, but did not remove any more of his clothing. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed, running his hand across her flat abdomen.

"Turn over," he whispered, giving her a light kiss.

"Why?" She was curious.

"You'll see."

Rachel rolled onto her stomach, crossing her arms under her chin, wondering what he had in store for her. She felt him shift his position, move to the end of the bed. He picked up her left foot and began to stroke the curve of her arch. Working slowly and with purpose, he proceeded to massage her foot. Slipping his fingers between her toes, he stretched, kneaded each one in turn. Toes done, he moved to the ball of her foot, kneading the soft, vulnerable flesh with his thumbs before moving up to her ankle and then her calf. The insinuating warmth of his touch spread through her body, setting her blood to boiling. Letting out a tiny whimper of enjoyment, she curled her toes. She felt as shimmery and soft as satin caressed by a night wind.

"Feel good?" Voice rich as pure cream, the pressure of his fingers was strong and sure.

"God, yes!" she sighed, closing her eyes, relishing the feel of his hands. Her blood felt thick, like dark, warm chocolate. She shivered when he began to work over her other foot, repeating the movements, then brushing the pit behind her knee with the tips of his fingers.

Pleased by her reactions, he purposely moved his hands up the back of her thighs. His palms brushed the insides of her legs, coming close to, but not quite touching her at the point where her legs met. The light brush of his fingers against the crotch of her panties felt like an electric shock, stunning her into awareness. Even now, her clit was pulsing, dying to be stroked, sucked. She tried to close her legs around his hand,

but he pulled away, holding off, torturing her by making her wait.

If you threw my panties against the wall, came her naughty thought, they would stick.

Devon's hands moved higher, lightly cupping and rubbing her ass cheeks before settling at the base of her spine. He let his hands roam, kneading along her spine, her ribs, her shoulders, his massive hands feeling her as a blind man would. She felt his fingers brush the back of her bare neck, followed by his lips. He nibbled lightly, kissing and licking the soft skin.

"Turn over," he whispered in her ear.

Her anticipation building, Rachel rolled over onto her back. He continued the massage, taking her by the shoulders and working along her collarbone until her tense muscles began to grow relaxed. From there, his hands moved lower, over her breasts. His fingers brushed her creamy mounds, but he deliberately did not touch the pebbled pink tips. Very gently, he stroked her firm, flat belly. His feather-light touch sent a slight tremor through her body. He ended the sensual massage by working his way down her legs, back to the tips of her toes, ending where he had started.

Finished, he stretched out beside her, supporting his weight on one elbow. His eyes dwelt for a moment on the small, excited pulse that leapt at the base of her throat. There was a strangely tense expression on his face, one that seemed to be of exhilaration and wariness at the same time. It was as though she had drawn him to her against his will.

"What?" she asked, smiling.

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"I was just thinking how beautiful you look," he said in a hoarse whisper.

She swallowed, overwhelmed by the compliment. It touched her heart in a way he couldn't know. Instead, her hands rose to the nape of his neck. She caught the splendid scent of his musky aftershave as he bent toward her, his mouth claiming hers. Her lips parted willingly for the searing invasion of his tongue. He kissed her thoroughly, his lips mastering hers, his tongue promising an invasion of another kind. She tensed when his hand cupped a naked breast.

Breaking their kiss, Devon slid downward to take her nipple in his mouth in a long suckling draw. Rachel cried out, arching up to draw him closer. God, how she wanted him inside, their bodies joined in the ultimate bliss. As his tongue twirled around the sensitive nubbin, his free hand moved across her belly, grasping her through the thin material of her panties, urging without words for her to spread her legs for him. He began to caress her, tracing his fingers along the swollen lips around her clit. The sensation of her own juices, the material and the pressure almost drove her into losing complete control. A primitive throaty gasp escaped her as she hovered on the edge of climax, fighting not to fall completely over the edge alone.

"Please," she whispered, thrusting her hips upward.

"Slow down," he cautioned. "We have the night." He increased the motion of his hand, sliding aside the crotch of her panties. With a single shove into her dripping depths, he invaded her pussy, all the while suckling her nipple.

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Rachel sobbed his name, digging her feet into the mattress so that she could lift her body. Devon was working her into a frenzy, plunging one, and then two fingers deep inside her. Thumb flicking her clit, he thrust into her. Rachel felt the violent jolt as the orgasm exploded through her, her body jerking as though a mad puppeteer was pulling the strings. When it was over, she lay panting, trying to catch her breath, her body tingling all over with the lovely aftershocks. But it wasn't enough. She wanted his cock.

All of a sudden, he pulled away, leaving the space beside her empty as he repositioned himself between her spread legs. On his knees, he looked down at her, eyes sweeping her almost naked form. Hands moving to her hips, he slid his fingers into the waistband of her panties. With a slow, deliberate move, he pulled them down over her hips and legs, exposing her sex. She stretched her arms above her head, catching the headboard in preparation for her surrender to a good fucking even though he still had not removed a stitch of his own clothing.

"I want you inside me," she said, using pleading, shameless words. The wanton ache that had tormented her grew worse, threatening to overcome her senses.

Devon gave a low sexy laugh, lowering himself down over her. "Slowly now, my love. I want to wait until just the right time for us to come together. It will not be tonight ... but soon," he whispered, tongue tracing the circumference of one rosy nipple, sending shafts of delicious torment through her. He teased each aching pink pebble equally, then began to work his way down, his hands moving possessively over her

hips. He kissed the warm surface of her ribcage, her belly, the patch of skin above her aching mound, then the insides of her thighs. The sensation of his face brushing against her flesh was so sensual that Rachel could only close her eyes and sigh in sheer pleasure. She did not know whether she wanted him to stop or go on. She only knew she was in sheer heaven.

Devon's lips again seared the flat plane of her belly like fire across dry prairie grass. Brushing his fingers through the downy hair covering her sex, he parted her labia to reveal the soft, silky rosebud of her clit. He charted a fiery course, flicking his tongue several times over her pulsing flesh before tracing the silken folds from side to side. His reward was a desperate ragged sigh, followed by the cry of, "Oh, heavens, yesssss..."

Searing spears of desire shot through every inch of Rachel's body. He delivered a most delicious tongue-lashing, proving that he was well versed in the arts of cunnilingus. Hot crimson spikes shot before her eyes, her blood throbbing furiously, almost threatening to burst from her veins. She trembled as her own reckless hungers warred within her, wanting to please him as much as he was pleasing her.

Devon, however, had total control and was showing no signs of relinquishing it. His hands pressed her thighs further apart to make her more vulnerable to his ministrations, giving him free reign to lick and nibble on her throbbing clit. As the friction increased, her responses grew more and more heated. Soon she was twisting and writhing, her hands clutching at the bedspread, head tossing from side to side in ecstasy.

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Selfishly, she lost herself in the sweet glories of her building orgasm. He gave her no respite, using his fingers and tongue to drive her into a wild frenzy. The cries of pleasure that broke from her throat were shameless, fierce. The animal needs within her, driven by his hard furious manipulations, sent her tumbling headlong into a final searing climatic release. As her pleasure peaked, her body tensed reflexively and an intensely incredible explosion released itself inside her.

Chapter Twelve

It was well after two o'clock in the afternoon when Rachel opened her eyes. Yawning and stretching, she rolled over onto her back, feeling the curtains of sleep continue to gnaw at her mind. She closed her eyes again, tugging the covers over her head, savoring the snug little world she'd created. Warm. Safe. Who wanted to get out of bed?

Especially after last night.

Memories flooded her brain, languid, sexy images played across her mind's screen. A slow, sleepy smile tugged up one corner of her mouth. She began to touch herself, fingertips gently brushing naked skin. Finding the tips of her nipples, she began to trace the pink aureoles. The little nubs grew hard, peaked. Her tongue snaked out, outlining her lips as her fingers teased her nipples. She gently jerked the taut little pebbles, wishing it was Devon's mouth there.

Oh, last night ... Mmm, the way he touched me was wonderful...

Without thinking about it, she parted her thighs, still sticky from the heat of her passion. Her hands moved over her stomach, brushing over her mound. Her pussy was still moist, slick. She touched herself, tracing the puffy lips, then parting them to rub her clit, arousing herself all over again.

Damn, I'm so horny.

Dipping a finger inside her depths, she began to masturbate, enjoying the sensual feelings washing through her. In her mind, she was imagining Devon hovering above

her, parting her legs with his, teasing her slit with the head of his engorged cock.

Wanting to touch him, needing him desperately, she rolled over on her side, reaching for his side of the bed. It was empty.

He's gone.

She looked at the empty pillow, showing not even an imprint of his head. That didn't surprise her. Devon Carnavorn hadn't even taken off more than his coat last night. Nor had he fucked her in the traditional sense. He'd held off having sex with her, giving her orgasm after orgasm but taking no pleasure to satisfy his own needs. She could clearly remember every detail—how he had felt, and how she'd felt in his arms. What would it be like to wake up next to him, feel his strong physique pressed next to hers? She imagined how she would waken him, touching his penis, feeling him grow firm in her hand. She would caress him softly, then slide down under the covers to wake him right.

But she was alone.

Typical man. Couldn't even hang around to give me a kiss goodbye.

Eager to get up, Rachel threw aside the covers. More than anything, she yearned to see her new lover, persuade him to get out of those damned clothes and into bed with her. What he had done last night was wonderful, but it wasn't enough.

She wanted more.

To hell with being just another discarded bimbo. She was an adult, single, and able to make her own choices as to whom she wanted to sleep with. So Devon would probably

love her and leave her. Would that be so bad? Who said that a woman had to involve her heart in her lovemaking? Why shouldn't she seek pleasure where she wanted? It was more than a little flattering that a man like him wanted her in the first place.

Enjoy it, she told herself. It might not last, but you'll have the memories a long time.

After a quick shower, she threw on her robe, and made her way downstairs. In the kitchen, she made herself a few slices of toast and a cup of skim milk, then let Sleek outside to potty. Thankfully, the cat was house-trained, but refused to use a litter box. There was still a streak of wild in him despite the fact that she'd had him for five years, a rescue kitten whose poor momma had been crushed under the wheels of a car while trying to bring home a mouse for her hungry brood. Of the six, only one kitten had survived before being found. Since Sleek was barely two weeks old, she'd had to bottle-feed the kitten, carrying him around in a pocket so he would stay warm. He was spoiled rotten, had no nuts, yet still he insisted on tomcatting around to protect his turf.

Rachel was just stuffing the last bite into her mouth when the doorbell rang. Who the hell could that be? She brushed the crumbs off her fingers.

Opening the door, she found herself facing the absolutely biggest bunch of peach roses that she'd ever seen. The floral arrangement was breathtaking.

"Miss Marks?" the delivery boy asked.

Dumbfounded, she nodded.

"These are for you." He handed over the flowers. "Sign here, please."

Setting the huge vase down, she quickly scribbled her name. "Thanks." She fished some change and a few dollar bills out of the catchall bowl on the table. "For you."

The boy grinned, tipped his hat and pocketed his tip. "Good day, ma'am."

Rachel shut the door as he departed. He called me ma'am, she thought. God that makes me feel so old.

She looked at the flowers. Who had sent them? Dan?

There was a card. She opened the tiny envelope and drew it out.

Thinking about last night and wanting more ... it read. It was not signed.

"Devon," she whispered. She bent over the roses to take in their delicate scent, a smile parting her lips. Yes, last night was incredible. She definitely wanted more, too.

* * * *

An hour later, Rachel pulled up outside Mystique, parking in the employee's section of the parking lot. Checking her make-up one more time in the rear view mirror, she picked up her purse, got out and strode across the parking lot toward the employees' entrance. A few busboys and waitresses loitering around out back taking a cigarette break silenced their conversations as she approached.

"Good day, Miss Marks," one of the busboys said, reaching out to open the door for her.

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by Jeya Jenson

From behind dark glasses, her eyes searched for his nametag. For some reason she was a little bit light sensitive today. The bright day was bothering her, giving her more than a slight headache, a side effect of the coming flu, she supposed.

"Hi, Rusty," she returned casually.

"You look nice today," he complimented her.

She smiled. She looked more than nice and she knew it. No longer locked down in the waitress uniform, she'd dressed to kill. Taking her cue from Gina, whom she'd thought dressed a little bit too flamboyantly for the job, she'd chosen a suit the shade of charcoal gray, its skirt hovering a dangerous two inches above her knee, slit slightly up the side, enough to be provocative, but not crude. The skirt molded to her slender body, but didn't look slinky or cheap. Daringly, she'd left a couple of buttons on her blouse undone, showing a peek of cleavage and a bit of lace from her bra. Flesh-toned hose and sensible heels completed her ensemble.

Stopping only to grab a cup of coffee, she passed through the maze of service halls, giving brief nods and a few words to the employees she encountered, making her way to Rosalie Dayton's office. The older woman was buried under her usual barrage of paperwork. She looked up from her reading.

"Good to see you're here," she said in her unbending and abrasive style, punching her adding machine. "Gina left the schedule in a mess and the waitresses' payroll undone."

"Where did she go?" Rachel sipped her coffee, heavy with cream and sugar.

Rosalie shrugged. "I don't know anything. Phone's disconnected, so no way to call. I really don't care where the hell she's gone. I still have my work to do."

Rachel set aside her cup. "Fill me in on what I do and I'll get to work."

Rosalie gave her a grateful glance. "Good. We need to get the payroll first. People get pissed when there aren't any paychecks waiting." She handed the schedule from the last two weeks across her desk. "Total the time and then I'll figure their pay."

Rachel glanced at the schedule. Pretty easy to figure. "I can do the pay, too, if you want."

"If you can, do. It won't hurt my feelings." Rosalie motioned toward the smaller desk across from hers. "That's where you'll be working. You managers all share that space. We're getting a bigger office. That's in the works now. Until then, we have to deal with the close quarters."

Rachel nodded, taking her coffee cup and sitting down behind her new command post. "Didn't seem like Gina ever did very much." She didn't mean the remark to sound catty. It was just a statement of fact.

"She didn't," Rosalie answered wryly. "Just drifted around in her own little haze. Drugs, I think. Why Devon let her get away with it so long, I don't know. The man's got a soft heart. Willing to give everyone a chance."

A smile tugged up Rachel's mouth, putting a dimple on her cheek. "Maybe because he was sleeping with her?"

Rosalie pursed her lips, half in disgust, half in envy. "He says he doesn't sleep with the help. If the rule's not been broken, it's sure as hell been bent a few times."

"So tell me," Rachel began to ask. "If you had the chance, would you sleep with him?"

Caught by surprise by the question, Rosalie coughed into her hand. "Sleep with Devon Carnavorn? Hmm. That is a hard question. Knowing that he sleeps with anything in a skirt and would fuck a snake if you held its head, would I want to be the next woman in line?" The question seemed to tantalize her, summoning memories too sweet to savor.

"Well?"

"If I were forty years younger, I think I would."

"Even if you knew he'd probably throw you aside?"

Rosalie cocked a jauntily eyebrow. "You only live once, honey," she said sensibly. "When your youth is gone, it's gone forever. You're going to spend more than half your life being middle-aged, and then old. Once you're up the hill, it all goes down. You can't recapture your past, relive your lost youth. Hang on to it while you've got it. It won't ever come back."

Her mind working a thousand miles a minute, Rachel nodded. Rosalie was right. She was seven years away from forty. Black balloons. After forty came forty-five, and then fifty. Sixty. Seventy.

I want to enjoy now, she thought. I want to have a grand affair with a man I desire, something to remember when I'm old. At least I'd have some fine memories and not always

think of the path not taken. Devon's made the first move. He wants me, I know.

She was willing to take the chance, even if it meant getting her heart shattered in the process.

Rosalie rolled her eyes. "It's pretty easy to see you're smitten. You two have had some kind of silent flirtation going on since day one."

Rachel sighed, propping her elbows on the desk and balancing her chin on her hand.

"Do I look like a lovesick cow?"

"Worse."

"Shit."

"If you're going to sleep with Devon," Rosalie advised, "try and be discreet."

"Good advice."

Rosalie went back to tapping at her computer, prompting Rachel to get to work herself. She still needed to make a living. Using a calculator found in a drawer, she began to work on the waitresses' payroll. She knew the correct state and federal taxes to withhold, so it was simple to arrive at the ending figures. As she added and subtracted, she paused a few minutes, tapping her pencil against the pad.

Be discreet, she thought. What about being hard to get instead? Why let that man breeze into my life and roll all over me? I don't want to be one of the many, another one to be found, fucked and forgotten.

She was going to make him work to conquer her. They say men loved the thrill of the hunt, the chase, the seeking of the unobtainable.

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by Jeya Jenson

Well, if Devon wants me, he's going to have to chase. He's got the money to spend. Let's see him throw it around to woo me. If he doesn't ... well, he wasn't that interested, and I still have a job.

Chapter Thirteen

Devon stood behind his wall of mirrors, his gaze searching through the throngs of people for Rachel. She was there below, but he couldn't find her in the crowd. He saw only a mash of far away bodies, flashing lights, the movements of dancing and drinking, having a good time. He wished she were here to share the view with him, not down there, working the floor as she always was, five nights a week.

Rachel Marks had proven to be an excellent manager. She had the maturity and common sense to keep the girls in line without being overbearing or unduly bossy. She was stern, strict but willing to listen to the girls and their complaints. She'd demonstrated that she could be flexible with the scheduling, giving a girl a break when she needed a night off, yet tolerating no slackers who tried to take advantage of her good nature. She handled her paperwork like a pro, quickly learning the programs Rosalie used, often working late into the night to help the older woman catch up. She did so without objection.

Teeth clenching, his jaw hardened. Trouble was that Rachel took her new responsibilities so seriously, he hadn't been able to get near her for almost a month. Oh, they had exchanged looks from afar. But every time he tried to get her alone to steal a kiss or cop a feel of her luscious body, she'd wriggle away, laughing gaily, heading back into the gaggle of waitresses she oversaw.

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It was driving him crazy, insane with need. He was trying to take it slowly with her, not scare her as he introduced her to his world. But she wasn't accepting his invitation. She always had an excuse as to why she couldn't see him on her days off. She would barricade herself in, turn off the phone and become incommunicado.

Had he scared her that night they'd been together? Perhaps put her off because he tried to too hard to push her into a sexual relationship. He'd attempted to be gentle with her, not appear to be a predator who'd move in on a vulnerable, wounded woman. When he had her naked under his touch, it had taken an incredible amount of willpower to keep from making love to her. But he didn't want to drain her too fast, make her too weak. So, he'd held off, satisfying his hungers with other women who meant nothing to him.

The wait, however, had to come to an end. He craved her as deeply as a starving man hungered for sustenance.

I've got to get her alone, he thought, determined. Tonight.

He checked his watch. Twenty after one. The bartenders had just given last call. One more round of drinks, and this night was over. They'd had a good crowd, people drawn out by the warm spring night. The month of May had come in like a lamb, presaging a sultry California summer.

Perfect night for a drive, he decided.

He only needed a companion.

* * * *

Rachel was in the downstairs offices, helping Rosalie put together the night deposits. The two women, along with Fred

Hawks, were banding together the cash and stashing it in the heavy canvas bank bags.

Playing it casual, hands in pockets, Devon leaned against the door, giving everything the quick glance he usually did.

"Everything all right?" he asked, knowing good and well that it was. Rachel lifted her head and gave him a little smile of acknowledgement, then went back to counting the money. It was casual and dismissive at the same time.

It took every bit of his self-control to keep from walking across that room, turning her around in her chair and capturing those cherry-red lips of hers. Of course, he couldn't do it now. Vaguely, he considered throwing all propriety and convention out the window, letting his employees see him break his air of stern reserve and publicly claim the woman he desired.

He couldn't do that, though. It wasn't that his voracious hunger for female flesh wasn't known to those who worked for him. He was a single man and a healthy male with appetites that needed to be sated. It was not enough to do damage. He tried to be discreet, picking and choosing carefully, keeping his private pursuits away from the daily tasks of running the nightclubs. The fact that he wasn't always around helped preserve the mystery he built around himself. He still had a little time here, maybe eight or nine more good years before he would have to sell it all, pull up stakes and reinvent another identity. Stay around too long and people would begin to wonder why he never aged.

When he had to go again, he wanted to take Rachel with him.

Fred Banks looked up, clearly unhappy. "We're a little short tonight, Devon. Looks like we've got a bartender skimming cash."

He narrowed his eyes. "Who?"

"One of the back-up bars. The money's not matching the drinks sent out."

"Who was working that station?"

"Gerald."

"Take him off that shift for a few days, then put him back on. Have the girls mark down how many drinks they sell. If we come up short again, fire him." He knew it couldn't be one of the girls. They paid for the drinks with their till money before they left the bar. To recover it, they had to collect money from the customers. Pocket that and their till would come up short. Drink skimming, the practice of sending out the drinks and pinching the money, was fairly common. A lot of bartenders had learned to do it well enough to make a comfortable living. It was greed that usually blew their embezzlement. A bottle only made so many drinks, each measured fairly precisely, with some loss written off as spillage and mixing.

"Will do," Banks said. He motioned for Rachel to hand him the deposit bag. She handed it over without a word. "Guess I need to get on to the bank. Glad tomorrow's Sunday. I am ready for a day off."

Devon stopped him. "Have you trained Rachel to make the deposits yet?"

Rosalie jerked her head up, giving him a sharp look. "No, we haven't sent her out to make the deposits. You know Fred usually does it, or I do."

"It's time she learned."

Fred shrugged. "Okay, she can come with me."

"Give them to me. I'll make the deposits tonight so you can go on home," Devon said.

Everyone looked at him as though he'd grown a second head. Doing the menial chores was not the sort of thing he usually bothered with.

"Rachel can ride with me if she likes," he continued casually. As Fred handed over the two heavy bags, he turned his gaze on her. "Don't mind riding along with me, do you, Rachel?"

Rachel tensed just a little, shoulders drawing back, her chin leveling out. She rewarded him with a speculative view. There was more than a hint of wariness in her eyes—and interest. From under long, silky lashes she gazed primly up at him, the barest hint of a smile lifting her lips. "Of course I don't mind," she answered.

Devon smiled inwardly, very careful to keep it from repeating on his lips. If he had accurately read her body language, she was clearly pleased that he was maneuvering to get her alone. There was that telltale layer of nervousness, the way her skin seemed to tremble like a cat that's suddenly been awakened from a nap. She looked a little tired, but that was to be expected after a long week of work.

"Good. Come on, then."

Outside the club, he laid a light hand on Rachel's elbow and steered her toward his car. She didn't protest at his touch, but he didn't press it either. She walked so close to him that he could feel the heat of her body beside his. In heels she towered well over six feet herself.

"This one," he said. He made her brush by him to reach the passenger door. She pushed gracefully past him, only to have him slam the door on her before she was completely settled in. Her eyes tracked him as he rounded the front of the car, her expression impossible to make out in the shadows that half covered her face.

Getting behind the wheel, he handed her the two bags.

Rachel caressed the leather seat, obviously impressed by the car, a brand new Porsche 911 GT2. It was equipped with a standard 3.6-liter, H6, 456-horsepower turbo engine that achieved fifteen mpg in the city and twenty-two mpg on the highway. A six-speed manual transmission with overdrive was the best part of the package. His latest toy, it was lithe, lean and made for speed. "Wow. Nice. This runs circles around my old car." There was no hint of envy in her voice, just appreciation.

He knew that she was pressed for money by the closing of her bookstore. She earned a reasonable salary now. In her mind, a couple of year's work and she would be debt free. He wasn't the sort of man who would blackmail a woman, threaten her job if she didn't give into his desires. He'd learned long ago not to sleep with a woman on his payroll. Rachel was the sole exception—he intended to get her out of the office and into his bed as soon as was decently possible.

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With him, she'd never have to worry about such trivial things as lack of money.

He turned the key in the ignition and gunned the engine. It roared to life, purring smoothly as it idled. "Glad you like it." He shifted into reverse, backing out and weaving around the various cars still inhabiting the parking lot.

"I do," was all she said. She turned her head away from him, looking out the window as they made the trek to the bank, watching the trendy section of the city pass by.

When he pulled up to the night deposit box at the bank, she didn't wait for him. She jumped out and used the key to open the slot and shove the bags in. Locking it, she hopped back into the car.

"That was easy enough." She was panting, lips slightly parted, a sexy sheen of gloss still clinging to her mouth. Her breasts rose and fell under her white blouse. He could see the hard tips of her nipples poking through the clingy material. He wanted to reach over, rip the blouse right off her body, cup her breasts and suck on those little pink nubs.

"That's about all there is," he said, trying to keep the hoarseness of desire out of his voice. "If you make any deposits in the future, it will always be with another person. That way you have a witness if you are robbed or help if you are otherwise accosted."

She flushed and looked at him, a slight knowing smile parting her lips. "Otherwise accosted?" she asked in a teasing tone.

The space in the small car seemed to grow even less as he became more aware of Rachel Marks. Her hands were folded

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primly in her lap, small and delicate, nails manicured and polished. Though she dressed professionally, he knew the body beneath her clothes to be perfect in every way. He eagerly remembered how he'd explored her body. Under his touch, she was soft, pliant, willing, even eager. How would she react if he touched her now? He drew in a deep breath. The scent of her subtle perfume still clung to her pale skin; light, peachy, fresh. He imagined being stretched out beside her, pressing his naked flesh to hers.

"Otherwise accosted, as in someone trying to make love to you," he said.

She pretended innocence, widening her eyes as if scandalized. "Why, who would want to do that with little old me?" she teased in a hint of a baby's whisper.

Shifting in his seat, mindful of the gearshift that separated them, he reached out and stroked her face.

"I do," he admitted, brushing the tips of his fingers down her soft cheek, over her jaw line, then down her neck, letting his touch linger. He could feel the soft pulse of blood through her veins. If he ever brought her over, he would cut into that delicate skin with a sharp blade, drawing forth a crimson fountain of life, drinking of her, absorbing the essences of the energies that gave a human's body animation. Taking her life, he would again restore it.

As if mesmerized by his touch, she closed her eyes and sank slowly back into her seat.

"I know," she murmured. "I've felt you watching me, wanting me—"

"But you don't want me?" It hurt to ask the question, say the words.

She sighed and his heart dropped. She swallowed, a delicate ridge forming at the base of her throat. How he wanted to press his lips against her throat, taste her.

"I do," she admitted. "I just don't want to be left in the cold when you're finished fucking me."

"You think I would do that? Walk off and leave you?"

She opened her eyes. "I know how you are with women, Devon. Rosalie made it very clear when she said you'd screw a snake if someone would hold its head."

He wound his fingers around the nape of her neck and leaned forward, closing the distance between them. "It will be different this time, Rachel," he whispered in her ear. "I want you as I have wanted no other woman." He was startled by the instant pleasure the words brought to his heart. He liked the way it felt to say them.

She stubbornly dug in her heels. "Men will say anything to get in a woman's panties."

He had to laugh. He knew every line there was that would accomplish just that. "What if I don't say anything?" he asked. "What if I just do this?"

He closed the distance between them, capturing her mouth with his. Her taste and scent filled his consciousness as he gently thrust his tongue between her soft, pliant lips. He reveled in the sensations that washed through him. To touch her was to complete another part of his soul.

When she did not pull away, Devon deepened their kiss. Rachel moaned softly in the back of her throat, meeting him

with her own rising passion. His tongue traced her lips, licked them, then slipped back inside her warm, wet mouth. He nibbled gently on her lower lip, sucking until her mouth was wet and swollen with his kisses. He tugged on her blouse, needing to touch her bare skin.

Rachel pulled back. "Here?" she asked. "In a bank parking lot, necking like teenagers?"

He hesitated, heart quickening. Nervous, he cleared his throat. "Do you want me to take you home?" Meaning—home alone.

"No," she murmured dreamily. She reached for his hand, linking her fingers through his. "Let's go somewhere more private."

He looked into her eyes, caught in the heat that blazed there. His heart beat so fast she had to notice. Blood pounded in his ears, almost deafening him as he started the car, fighting to ignore the painful sensations of his cock trapped in the confines of his slacks.

"Where?"

"Just drive," she purred. "We'll find a place."

"Anywhere?" he choked out, twisting the key.

Rachel nodded her assent. "Anywhere you like." She reached out, touching his thigh, sliding her hand perilously close to his throbbing cock.

Devon jumped at her unexpected touch, almost losing all control of the car. Making a quick U-turn, he came close to scraping a concrete pole as he guided the vehicle back onto the street. Steady now, or he would wreck the freaking thing.

"Careful," she warned, grinning. "Wouldn't want to ruin your nice paint job."

I could give a damn about the paint. Driving through the city, he pointed the car toward the freeway, heading toward the valley. Within thirty minutes, they had arrived at their destination. The city of Warren maintained one of the finest parks to be found for miles around. Immaculately groomed groves of trees encircled rolling green hills that guarded a crystal-clear lake. Along the driving paths that led through the park were little rest areas. Covered picnic tables and small-embedded BBQ grills offered a place for families to enjoy the amenities the park offered.

He passed them by, guiding the car deeper into the trees, into the more private areas densely surrounded by the trees. At night, it was the perfect place to park ... and make out. The night was clear, warm, the sky barren of the fog that haunted the larger cities. The stars twinkling in the sky were so huge that it felt as though one could reach out and touch them. Pulling onto the grass, he killed the engine and lights.

She leaned her head back against the seat. "Mmmm. Very nice." She closed her eyes and yawned. "I could almost go to sleep here."

"Don't go to sleep on me now."

Getting out, Devon rounded the car. Opening the passenger door, he reached in and pulled her out, drawing her into his arms.

"Sex now," he said, kissing her hard. "Sleep later." Out here in the middle of nowhere, he wanted to take her with no one to interrupt them but the creatures of the night. He

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wanted to touch every tantalizing inch of her, fuck her until she was too exhausted to move. He kissed her again and again, his hands circling her slender waist to grasp her ass cheeks, kneading the firm flesh as he pressed her body to his. His penis was practically pounding, fighting to get free of his trousers. Balls heavy, he ached with need.

He fumbled with the pearly buttons on her blouse. He wasn't usually this clumsy or eager, but something about her was spurring him to hurry so he could touch her naked skin. When he could not work them fast enough, he grabbed the front and ripped the material apart. A gasp broke from her lips.

He stepped back, watching the mesmerizing rise and fall of her breasts. Encased in a lacy bra, those creamy twin mounds beckoned to be fondled. Breathing heavily, her tongue flicked out, tracing the little dip of her top lip, an utterly sexy and alluring move. His hands caught her shoulders, pulling her forward for a kiss. She accepted it willingly, not fighting when his mouth left hers, trailing over her chin, lower down her throat. Softly, gently, he nipped at her jugular, licked the vulnerable pulse, tasting her with his tongue. If he wanted to, he could easily overpower her, make the cut into her flesh, partake of her sweet blood, make her his own.

With great restraint, he held himself back. He wanted her to come to him willingly, make the decision to join his vampire clan. When the time was right, he would tell her the truth about the mark on her thigh ... the sigil, that magical sign that proved that she must belong to him alone. His hands moved around to the small of her back, tugging her

torn blouse out of her skirt so that he could slide his hands under the material and caress her skin.

Rachel moaned, pressing her body closer to his. Her hand had moved down past his beltline, grasping his rigid penis through his trousers. She stroked him up and down with the expertise of a woman who knew how to touch a man.

"Touch me," she whispered.

He smiled. "I am touching you."

"All of me," she hinted.

Pressing her back against the car, he unsnapped her bra and slid it off her body with her blouse, leaving her completely naked from the waist up. Dipping his head, he closed his lips around one nipple. He felt Rachel tense, her hands going to his shoulders as if she were going to push him away. Instead, she captured his head in her hands, guiding him as his tongue swished around her nipple. After a moment, he switched sides, giving the other breast equal attention. She made a soft sound; a half gasp, half laugh. Her pleasure was all that mattered to him right now.

"Devon, oh..." she moaned, flushing hotly. "That feels so good."

"I want to please you." Anticipation ran riot through his veins, his blood pounding a strange rhythm in his temples and cock. He felt a flame of desire shoot down to his balls, making them tingle, tighten. His hands found and teased her nipples, looking so much like cherries dotting creamy mounds of vanilla pudding, good enough to eat. When she looked up at him, her eyes were full of desire. A shudder of longing crossed her face.

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He smiled. He'd conquered her as easily as a cat lapped up cream. Speaking of cream, there was a particularly sweet cream that he wished to lap from between her legs. His cock was pulsing furiously in anticipation of her full lips. He knew that she felt the unmistakable urgency of sex that radiated from his body.

"I want to belong to you, Devon," she breathed. "Only to you."

"I will not hurt you, Rachel," he murmured, stroking those tender tips, circling the aureoles with his fingers. "I won't do anything if you tell me to stop." It was hell to spit the words out, but part of the seduction.

"Don't stop," she gasped. "Please."

Smiling, he caught her around the waist and laid her over the hood of the car. His mouth again found a hard tip. He kissed her nipples, one after the other, rolling them with his tongue. He swirled his tongue, gently biting, then rasping away the pouty ache with his lips. He gave each breast equal attention, suckling deeply. Rachel squeezed her eyes tighter, her breathing ragged from the sensual motion of his mouth on her breasts. He began to draw languid circles around her mounds with his tongue and fingers, never quite touching the sensitive tips. The vulnerable expression in her eyes was quickly replaced with a look of wanton desire.

He rubbed one breast with his palm until she released a soft gasp. It was clear that she could feel the physical evidence of his need. His cock was a thing alive. He ached to open her legs and let his hand find the spot that throbbed so desperately for his touch.

Her eyes lowered to the hard bulge in his trousers. Following her gaze, he took her hand, guiding it back down to his erection.

"Stroke me," he breathed, his voice rough in need. "Rub your hand up and down." He could imagine her slender hands exploring his body, memorizing each contour, enjoying every sensation her touch elicited.

Rachel nodded and complied, watching him. The flutter in his stomach was not nerves or bad wine, but anticipation.

With unsteady fingers he unzipped his trousers, freeing his erection; tight, sensitive and definitely strained. He left the top button closed. No reason to lose his pants down around his ankles. Very undignified. He did not stop to think of Rachel's potential embarrassment. Again he guided her hand to his penis. She wrapped her fingers around his shaft with just the right pressure.

"You're, um, very rigid," she teased. "That must be painful." She moved her hand along his length.

He gritted his teeth. Did she know the hell she was putting him through?

"Harder," he breathed, his hand covering hers. "The more, the better." He began to ease her to her knees. Her back stiffened only momentarily, and then she went down, lower, her face level with his crotch. She was face to face with the dreaded one-eyed trouser snake, and she showed little fear.

"A woman certainly wouldn't be disappointed with what's down here," she teased.

Close to losing all control, he spat out, "Take me in your mouth, Rachel. Suck my cock." He gave her no time to think twice about her decision.

Placing his hands on her head, just as he'd earlier fantasized, Devon guided her mouth to the engorged head of his penis. She had closed her mouth, and easing himself between her lips was like easing himself into a virgin's cunt. She playfully resisted. He pushed harder. Finally, she relented, allowed him to slide the tip into her mouth. Sucking came naturally to her, and as soon as she figured that there was no vile taste to offend her taste buds, she tongued him as eagerly as a calf taking first milk. Her teeth scraped his private flesh, adding to the delight, a bit of pain to feed his deep-seated carnal desires.

Dipping his head back, Devon moved his hips gently forward, fucking her mouth. He no longer needed to guide her head, for she knew how to suck a cock like an experienced whore, flicking her tongue over the tip, then taking him deeply until he could feel the back of her throat. She pulled away, then plunged down again. She wrapped one hand firmly around the shaft, using her saliva to create a slippery path. Her free hand cupped his sac, squeezing, tweaking, fingering his tender balls.

He'd almost reached his limit of self-control. If he were not careful, in a very few moments ecstasy would claim him and he would release a stream of hot, creamy semen into her waiting mouth. He felt as if his penis were melting, a wonderful lassitude creeping up on him, dulling his brain, but

sharpening his other senses. All he could think of was Rachel's willing body crushed beneath his own.

Gritting his teeth, he eased himself away from her hungry lips and pulled her to her feet. A fine sheen of perspiration had begun to shine on his skin. His mouth felt incredibly arid, his lips tender from the hot breath rolling over them. He longed to be kissing her, holding her, needing to be inside that tight, velvety cunt, feeling her smooth belly against his as she writhed under his body. Soon he would hear her breath in his ears, matching every hard thrust of his cock.

"I need you, Rachel," he gasped, his voice harsh.

Her full lips begged for kisses. His mouth sought hers in a long, hungry duel of tongues as he filled his hands with the weight of her breasts.

Grabbing her hips, he lifted her onto the hood of the car, trying to spread her thighs. He began to push her skirt up around her waist, cursing the damned pantyhose she wore. He ran his hands over her hips, giving her flat belly a quick kiss. He wanted to lick, suck and taste every inch of her as she hovered in a state of peak sexual arousal. The air around her was sticky, scented from the sizzling heat of raw desire.

Finding the elastic around her waist, he pulled the hose down her legs, having to stop long enough to pull off her shoes, sending them flying in the process. When she was naked, he ran his palms up her inner thighs. His hand found the slit between her legs, that luscious treasure every woman possessed. Delving past the coarse curls of her Venus mound, he slid his fingers along her clit, stroking. Her pussy seemed to arch toward his fingertips.

He dipped one finger inside her, swirling it. She was already dripping with hot juice. He ran his fingers along the lips of her labia, searching for her clit. Finding the tender nubbin, he moved his index finger in a stroking motion, beginning a sensual tease. When he entered her, sucking muscles spasmed around his fingers. Her cunt was so slick, so warm and so ready.

Rachel lay on her back, hands covering her face, moaning like a bitch in heat. He was none too gentle, doing as he pleased with his fingers. She met the thrusts with increasing fervor, her wild needs increasing the pulling motions deep within her vagina. He could feel her clit throbbing against his skin, her juices soaking his hand. He bent and began to lap his tongue along those tender pink petals, awakening a fierce passion in her. His cock was surging, straining with a heat of its own. He stroked his penis with his free hand, pleasing himself even as he finger fucked Rachel with a body-jarring intensity, stretching her cunt wider when two fingers became three.

Trembling with pent-up desire, she pressed her legs together, capturing his hand snugly. She moaned loudly, coarse language spilling over her lips. Her expression was cloudy with passion, alight with the delights his touch unleashed in her.

"You're so lovely," he murmured. "So wet ... and slick." His fingers delved deeper.

"I can't wait anymore," she warned. Wanton fierceness made her voice tremble. The expression in her eyes was naked. She shivered with tension, ached with desire. "I can't

help myself. I don't know what's come over me. It's as if I've been mesmerized by you. Don't make me wait any longer to be yours." Her words became little more than lustful moans. Her hands scrabbled at the hood, trying to clench the cool metal. She quivered violently, then peaked, her vagina pulsing greedily around his fingers. Her body arched back when her first orgasm ripped through her, her exposed breasts heaving as she gasped for air.

Devon's own need was wild, the tempo increasing as blood pounded through his veins, deafening him. His arousal was simmering at a heat that threatened to boil over like a volcano disgorging molten lava. He had to take her, taste her, make the connection before he could claim her, experience his own climax. Already he'd gone further than he'd intended to, but he had not been able to resist. Slipping his hand into his pocket, he withdrew a small stiletto knife, one whose blade rose and fell from within like the tongue of a lizard. Fitting in the palm of the hand, it was small, silent and deadly sharp. Depressing the button released the blade.

Sliding his free hand over her breastbone, he caught her at the base of her neck. Her eyes widened in fear when she saw the knife flash in his hand.

"Devon, what—!" she started to say, but he tightened his grip on her throat, cutting off her air. She started to struggle, but he was stronger. Her fear was palpable. Her could feel her blood pounding under her skin, hear wild heartbeat driving her fear, see the breath fluttering in her throat.

"Do not resist me, Rachel," he soothed in a soft voice.

"Please," she gasped, "Don't hurt me!"

"I will not hurt you," he said, and loosened his grip on her neck. "Trust me so that I may bring our bodies together."

Eyes wide, lips parted, she slowly nodded. Her breasts rising and falling, he could see she was excited by the danger.

"I need to taste you, take of you to feed my hunger," he whispered.

When she did not protest, he brought the blade up, quickly making a small slice in her jugular. Crimson seeped from the wound, trickling down her pale skin. A small whimper escaped her throat, but she did not resist when he slid his hands under the small of her back and lifted her into a sitting position. He traced his tongue along her flesh, licking away the blood. Pressing his lips to the soft pulse, he drank of her, drawing her life into his body. The liquid filling his mouth was sweet and warm.

The minutes passed slowly, only the sounds of the night's creatures breaking through the wind's gentle whispering. He reluctantly pulled away, careful not to get lost in the intense joy of the feed. He could still feel the warmth of her blood on his lips. He looked down at her face, marveling at her beauty. Half in shadow, half in light, he could see the flush on her high cheekbones. And her mouth. Every time he looked at it, he wanted to capture it and crush it with his over and over. He could imagine that mouth pressed against his flesh, drawing his blood over her probing tongue, taking his life into her body.

When that happens, he thought, we shall be one and she will truly belong to me.

"I want you to taste yourself," he whispered. Drawing her to him, he kissed her, slowly, deeply. When their kiss had broken, he pressed two fingers against the small cut in her neck, murmuring a few words of healing. When he drew them away, the cut had healed, leaving only a small white scar.

"That was so intense," she purred.

"Mmm, did you enjoy it?" His hunger was only half sated. There was more he needed from her.

She dragged a deep, ragged breath into her lungs. "Yes. Very much."

"There is more," he whispered. "Much more I want to share with you."

She laughed low in her throat, hands going down between their bodies. She wrapped her fingers around his shaft, stroking up and down his length. "What are you waiting for?"

Positioned between her legs, his hands slid down her body. He grabbed her by the hips and impaled her with a single hard thrust of his cock. Clenching his teeth, holding himself back as long as he could, he began to move his hips, each time pumping deeper into her soft depths. Too hard, too fast. He had to slow down, enjoy the moment, not rush it. Her legs wound around his waist, locking at the ankle. Her hands slid around to his back, pulling at his shirt to find hard flesh underneath. She drew her long fingernails against his vulnerable skin, not scratching, but firm enough to let him know she was being well pleased.

As a new climax began to ripple through her body, Rachel's head dipped back. Breasts exposed, Devon lowered her head and began to lave one nipple, sucking hard on the

pebbled tip. Her cry of pleasure fueled his own desire until he couldn't tell where his body ended and hers began. Unable to breathe, unable to think, he only felt the sizzling contractions of her hungry cunt doing wonderful things all around his cock.

Just as he believed he would be the one who'd faint from pleasure, he gave one final thrust, feeling his balls draw up as if squeezed. His climax was so violent that he felt the pull of his loins releasing his seed inside her waiting womb from the very tips of his toes.

Bodies locked together at the hip, neither moved for a long moment, as if to pull apart would break the magical spell of the incredible experience that they'd just shared. He could not remember ever experiencing sex this glorious, even with Ariel, the woman who'd brought him across.

Finally, excruciatingly, he pulled away from her, arranging his clothes back into place. The night around them was dark, quiet, peaceful.

"Rachel?" he said softly.

"Hmm?" Stretching languidly, she sat up and snuggled closer to his chest, laying her head on his shoulder like a sleepy child.

"Are you awake?"

"Mmm, no..." she murmured. "I just want to stay like this, forever in your arms."

He wrapped his arms tight around her body, cradling her closer. "Good," he whispered. "That's exactly what I want, too."

Chapter Fourteen

Rachel was hardly prepared for the sensations overwhelming her when she sat up in bed. Her head began to spin, vision dimming, stomach rolling. She felt weak, spent, as though some creature had latched its teeth into her flesh and was sucking the very strength right out of her. Pressing her hands to her forehead, she sank back onto the mattress. Her skin was flushed, warm, feverish. Panting through her mouth, she felt her stomach lurch, bowels twisting. If she moved, she would vomit all over herself.

Oh, shit, not now, she thought. I hope I'm not coming down with the flu or something.

Head rolling on her pillow, she looked around her dim bedroom. Mercifully, the blinds were drawn, shutting out the sunlight. The light peeking around the edges hurt her eyes. Even that tiny bit of light seemed unnaturally bright.

Pressing her hands over her face, she closed her eyes. The sensations of nausea were slowly beginning to fade, her insides settling down to something resembling near normal. She had a headache, a sensation much like someone had knocked her on the side of the head with a metal bar, sending all memory flying out. With a trembling hand she reached up and rubbed her left temple. No bruise, no lump, but God, her skull felt like it was about to split in half. Her heart thumped hollowly in her chest, blood thudding through her veins like a herd of wild buffalo. Her mind was a haze, memories of the prior night mired in a murky haze.

What the hell did I do last night?

She knew she'd gone to work. That was a given. Her clothes lay discarded on the floor in a messy pile, her typical way of undressing after a hard night's work. Afterward, though, there was ... nothing. She couldn't remember undressing and getting into bed, much less how she'd gotten home. She wrinkled her brow in frustration, trying to recall the night. A few vague scenes came floating up from the dark pools. Devon. Yes, now she remembered. He'd shown her where to make the night deposits. Good. On track. Things coming back, clearer. After dropping off the money, they'd taken a drive. Trees. Grass. A clear night's sky. Devon kissing her; hard, urgently, pulling open her blouse and his hands roaming her body. The thought of their embrace sent ripples of warmth over her flesh.

Rachel shifted her body. Under the covers, she was as naked as a jaybird. Sleeping nude was not something she typically did. When she was alone, she always put on a nightgown and panties. When she was entertaining a man she slept au natural, loving the feel of her partner's flesh pressed against hers.

Did we make love last night? She searched every nook and cranny of her brain, but there was simply nothing there past a lot of heavy petting. As far as she knew, they had not gone all the way.

Well, that's too damned bad. Maybe they hadn't progressed any further because she'd become ill. Devon must have driven her home and put her into bed. At the thought of him undressing her, seeing her butt naked, a hot flush began

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to creep up her face, reddening her cheeks. Oh, wonderful, here she'd been naked with a handsome man and too sick to do anything with him. *Gee, my luck. What a time for the flu to hit me.*

Her stomach lurched again, this time filling her with a fresh sensation. Hunger. Perhaps a few pieces of wheat toast and hot tea would help to settle her stomach down a bit. Feeling a familiar pressure in her bladder, she slid her legs over the edge of the bed and got up. Her legs were shaky, but held her weight. She could waste all day lying in bed getting sick, or she could get on with life. Time to get up, get going. There was nothing she could do about the flu except load up on medicines. At least it was Sunday. No work today.

Eating seemed to settle her stomach. By time she'd bitten into the second piece, she felt better. Her strength was returning, her body losing those odd 'shakies' that usually preceded illness. A second piece quickly gave way to a third and then a fourth slice of toast, heavily buttered and slathered with apricot jam, along with a glass of milk and two cups of coffee, heavy with hazelnut-flavored creamer and sugar.

So much for being sick, she thought, washing the breakfast dishes and putting them away. Taking her coffee, she went back upstairs for a shower. Just as she was stripping off her bathrobe, the doorbell rang.

"Now who the hell could that be?" she cursed under her breath, putting her robe back on and trekking back downstairs. Maybe it was Devon, come to check on her. If

that was the case, she'd be ready to assure him that she was perfectly fine, and invite him to join her in the shower.

Much to her disappointment it wasn't Devon. To her relief, it wasn't Dan, either. It was Ginny. The old woman lifted a plate of home-baked cinnamon rolls.

"Since you haven't come to see me, I thought I'd come to see you," she chirruped cheerily, offering a broad smile.

"Hello, Ginny." Sighing inwardly, Rachel ran her fingers through her disheveled hair. Ginny was probably the last person she wanted to see right this minute, but it would be absolutely rude to send her packing. Offering a smile that could only be called a wan parting of the lips, she stepped aside to let her come in.

Ginny reached up, holding her plate in one hand, wrapping her arm around Rachel's neck in a hug. Rachel accepted it almost grudgingly, pulling quickly away. A shiver went down her spine. God, sometimes she just absolutely did not like being touched at all. It was as if she could feel the vibes emanating off other people's bodies, going all over her skin like dirt. Perhaps her illness was making her too sensitive.

"How have you been?" Rachel asked, taking the cinnamon rolls into the kitchen.

Ginny followed her, frowning a little, as if she'd noticed Rachel's standoffishness. "I've been fine, dear," she said. "Since the bookstore closed, I've gone to work at the Shop-N-Sack down the street from my house."

"Isn't that a little hard on you, standing behind a counter all day?" She poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Ginny.

Ginny cradled her cup. "It is, but you know I like meeting new people." What she left unsaid spoke volumes. "I wish the bookstore could have stayed open."

Rachel picked up a fresh cup for herself. Might as well have another. She couldn't get through the day without her caffeine boosts. By the way Ginny was acting; she didn't want to leave anytime soon. What would it hurt to give an old lady a few more minutes?

She sat down at the kitchen table, indicating a free chair. "I do, too, but it just didn't happen that way."

Ginny sat down. "Aren't you going to try one of my rolls?" she asked, reaching for the creamer and spooning some into her coffee.

Sipping her coffee, Rachel shook her head. "I would, but I'm not hungry. I'll save them for later. Would you like one?"

"Oh, no, dear, they're for you to enjoy."

"Thanks for bringing them over. I'm sure I'll love them—and so will my hips."

The old woman's gaze flitted over her. "You look a little thin, dear. Have you been eating enough? You're so pale."

Rachel toyed with her spoon, eyes on her coffee, watching the steam rise from the hot liquid in her cup. "I've just got a touch of the flu, that's all. And I don't seem to see the sun anymore now that I'm working all night."

"All night?"

"At Mystique."

"The nightclub?"

"Yes. I'm supervisor over the waitresses and hostesses now. Been there about two months, I believe. The time's

really gotten away from me, but you know how that is when you're working. The pay's really good. I'm going to try to be out from under the debts of the bookstore in a couple of years. Think I can do it if I put every penny over to the bills."

Ginny frowned. "I've heard that's a pretty racy place, Rachel."

She shrugged. "It has its moments, but I like it."

There was a stretch of uncomfortable silence between the two women. It occurred to Rachel that because they no longer worked together, they had nothing in common to share. Their lives had taken new directions. Her mind was no longer on the struggle to keep her store going, wondering where the money was going to come from to pay the bills. She had a fairly secure job, was making a good wage. Despite her business setbacks, she felt she was entering the zenith of her life. She was young and had a good future ahead if she worked hard.

Ginny, on the other hand, was struggling to make ends meet, a woman in her sixties who had no close family to turn to or depend on. She felt sorry for Ginny. Pity, even. It was a position she never wanted to find herself in, old, alone and searching for companionship.

Ginny's voice broke into her thoughts. "Still seeing Dan?"

Rachel shook her head. "We broke up while ago." Her words spilled out almost involuntarily.

The old lady pursed her lips, eyes sad. "He was a nice fellow. That's just a shame."

"He was a good man," she agreed. "But he just wasn't the man for me. There was no spark, you know, no ringing of chimes."

"Chimes fade, Rachel," Ginny offered sagely. "There's a lot to be said for a comfortable man who's reliable and dependable. He treated you well and he loved you a lot."

Love. As soon as that four-letter word escaped Ginny's mouth, it chilled her. Suddenly she felt resentful, trapped; even enraged at what she perceived to be Ginny's meddling.

She cast a narrow glance at her friend. Ruthlessly, she clamped down on her memories of him, her emotions churning, trying to push those confusing thoughts away. Okay, so she'd acted like a perfect twit by refusing Dan's proposal. Why does a woman have to feel so guilty when she turns a man down? she asked herself, wishing the conversation hadn't turned the corner and gone down this path. She knew that Ginny liked Dan. Liked him a lot. Perhaps that was because the old woman had introduced them. Yes, he was a nice man. Yes, he had treated her with respect. Should she have been grateful? *Why isn't it right to walk away when you're not happy with what you've got, even if it's good?*

Because she wanted something—someone—else. What Dan had to offer, marriage, a home ... it wasn't enough. It was blasé, boring, routine. She didn't want to be trapped in the ordinary. Hell, she'd created her own ordinary, done a damn fine job of it, too. Anybody could do ordinary. She was searching for the extraordinary, searching the way the heroines in the many novels she read searched for the loves

they wanted. Sometimes it happened on purpose. Sometimes it happened by accident. She just wanted something to happen for her, too. She just didn't know what.

Perhaps one day she'd identify the true reason for that aching hole in her soul that made her feel so incomplete, the reason that went past a poor childhood and lousy parents. There had to be something more than growing up, getting old and dying. Did she push aside every opportunity for love and happiness because she believed in the back of her mind that her marriage would be exactly like her parent's relationship?

Because daddy walked away from momma first? Because they all walked away from momma when they got fed up with her drinking? Was that what she was afraid of? That if she let herself love a man, he'd also walk away?

Rachel took a sip of her coffee, annoyed by the sudden sting of tears at the corners of her eyes. No time to give in to the creeping miseries of disappointment and dissatisfaction. That's what had felled her mother; alcohol holding hands with its best friend, despair. The woman was just a suicide waiting to happen. Sure enough, she'd managed to do just that, in a roundabout way. Instead of a gun, she'd used a bottle and a car. Perhaps she hadn't intended to, but the end result was the same: six feet under, pushing up grass in an obscure cemetery.

She took a deep breath, trying to get a handle on her racing thoughts, fleetingly wishing that she had the words to adequately describe what she felt inside. What the hell was she doing going into an in-depth self-analysis? It was like looking for your ass and not being able to find it, even with

both hands and a flashlight. Shit, no wonder she pulled away from people and had a problem with commitment.

"Yes, he treated me good, maybe even loved me. I wasn't in love with him, though," she finally managed to say, a little resentful that she should have to explain and try to justify her decisions. Why couldn't people just leave her alone and let her sulk in her own dark little corner? Her hands gripped her coffee cup so hard that her knuckles began to turn white.

"And I just am not willing to settle on a man because he's all who's hanging around. I think I would rather be alone than be with someone I don't love."

Ginny patted her arm. "Love can grow between two people, given time and mutual respect."

Rachel looked up at her sharply, skepticism clearly evident. "It just wasn't there with Dan," she said firmly. "Not at all. Besides, to love someone doesn't guarantee that they will love you in return. That's just the fickle human heart at play. One partner is always going to love more than the other does. It's why so many women are treated like doormats. They let men walk all over them because of some vague emotion they perceive to be love."

Ginny looked at her for a long moment and then slowly shook her head. "I just don't want to see you end up alone." Her lower lip began to tremble. There was a slight hesitation before she finished. "Alone, like I am now."

Seeing that abject look of abandonment on the old woman's face, Rachel's her inner anger began to drain away. How could she be angry with someone who was so obviously so lonely that she'd seek out a former employer?

She and Ginny had never been close friends. Hell, she'd never even been to the old lady's home. What she knew of her, she knew from conversations to pass the time on slow days at work. Rubbing her hands over her numb face, she realized that she was so busy being absorbed with her own problems that she'd totally ignored those of a fellow human being. How shallow could she get? She could see the reality of an old woman's loneliness sinking in slowly, by increments, a prophetic, almost frightening glimpse into her own future.

Her mind started working again, but nothing made much sense. The ache in her chest grew stronger with each passing second. How she wished she could wave her hands and make the world's problems magically disappear. Desperately lonely people, frail emotions, tiny lives. Like hamsters running in a wheel, they were all going round and round, running down the path to nowhere. Where the hell was God? He couldn't be in his Heaven, for all was not right in the world.

"You're not alone, Ginny. You know I'll always be there for you," she heard herself saying. "I promise, just as soon—"

The doorbell cut into her words, the second time in one day.

On a Sunday, no less, she thought. When did I suddenly become Miss Popular?

It was not flowers this time. Another delivery person, this time handing over a small square package, neatly wrapped, complete with a bow on top.

From Devon.

Forgetting Ginny's presence, she tore the elaborate paper off. A jewelry box. Her heart nearly stopped. Hands shaking,

barely able to breathe, she opened its lid. Inside was a necklace. She lifted it out. From a delicate gold chain hung a pendant. She recognized the strange design as being the same on the face of the signet ring Devon wore. She quickly opened the little card that had come with it.

My other half, it read mysteriously, we are soon to be one...

"Whoa," she whispered. "This is intense."

"How pretty," Ginny said from behind. "Is that from the new man in your life?"

Rachel smiled. "Yes."

"Who is he?"

"Devon Carnavorn," she replied airily, admiring her new treasure.

"Isn't he the owner of Mystique?"

"Yes."

Ginny's mouth drew down.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Rachel frowned herself. "Tell me."

"Well, it's only gossip, mind you, but I've heard that he's quite a ladies' man, if you know what I mean?"

"Meaning he sleeps with a lot of women?"

"That, and I've heard a lot more. They say he has orgies at that place of his, the one on the outskirts of town—rituals of some kind, too, practicing black magic."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Oh, surely you can't believe that."

The doorbell sounded a third time, interrupting further conversation.

Four packages—large, rectangular, also beautifully wrapped.

Like a kid at Christmas, Rachel gleefully tore into them. Taking off the lid off the largest, she parted the folds of white tissue paper. A dress. Not just any dress, but one of the latest designer fashions. It came from the most expensive clothing store in town, a place she couldn't even afford to walk by, much less go inside.

Taking it out, she held it against her body. The dress was stunning, a daringly cut design that showed bosom and thigh to best advantage. It was red, almost scarlet, and made of pure silk.

She picked up the envelope that came with the dress, a larger one, more direct: *A car will pick you up at eight. Be ready.*

The second package was a pair of matching shoes. Just her size. The third held matching lingerie; push-up bra, daring thong panties, garter, thigh-high hose.

Wear these tonight, the note inside said.

The fourth package was the most stunning. Inside was a mink evening cape. Pure charcoal, fashioned of the finest pelts, it must have cost a small fortune.

Although Rachel was not a fan of wearing clothing made of wild animals, she was flattered that he had taken the time to choose the very best items for her. Flowers, necklace, dress, cape ... It was all so overwhelming. She had to wonder if this was how he treated all his women. A bit of intuition told her that he didn't. Devon had made it clear that he was taking his

time with her, that he was willing to give pleasure, but hold off from it himself until the time was right.

Would tonight be that time?

Ginny glanced over all the gifts, a sour expression crossing her face. "Looks like your young man is serious about you."

"I certainly hope so," Rachel said, trying to make light of the many intimate gifts scattered in her living room.

"I don't think you should accept them," the old woman warned.

"Why?"

"It's like he's trying to own you," Ginny pointed out. "Dress you the way he wants you to look."

"That's silly," she scoffed, carefully rewrapping the expensive mink and laying it in its box. "He's just being generous."

"He's buying you, Rachel. Trying to make you into something you're not."

"Maybe it's something I want to be!" she flared, forgetting her temper. The moment the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. The look on Ginny's face said that her words might as well as been a physical slap. Ginny began to gather her things, putting on her jacket and pulling her purse onto her shoulder.

"Thank you for the coffee, dear," she said, opening the front door.

"I'm sorry, Ginny. You don't have to go."

The old woman gave her a soft, almost sad smile. "But I do," she said.

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"I'll come by," Rachel called out. But it was too late. Ginny had slipped outside, closing the door behind her. Hurrying to the window, she opened it in time to see Ginny disappear around the corner. Then, she was gone.

Sighing, Rachel closed the door, leaning against it. She tiredly glanced up at the clock. Was it already going on five? She'd better hurry if she wanted to be ready by time the car arrived to pick her up. With a little thrill that went clear down her spine, she wondered what else Devon had planned for their evening.

* * * *

At eight o'clock sharp, the car pulled up. Not just any car, but a Rolls Royce. Magnificent, silver-gray and looking as if it had just rolled off the show room floor, the car seated six passengers behind the driver, separated by a smoky pane of privacy glass. The interior was leather, creamy and supple as a baby's bottom. It was outfitted with everything a busy executive would need to keep in touch with the outside world and be entertained within; cell phone, color television, compact disc player, and a small wet bar stocked with miniature bottles of most popular wines and whiskies.

The driver opened the passenger door and helped her into the cocooning depth that completely cut her off from the eyes of the outside world. On the seat was a last present, another dozen roses. Light pink.

Selecting a rose, Rachel lifted the flower to her nose. God, but she felt like a princess on her way to see her prince. What luxury.

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I could get used to being pampered like this, she thought, then frowned. But how long would it last? How long would it be before Devon laid his eyes on a prettier, younger woman and went after a new prize? A few weeks? A month? Six? Would she be fortunate enough to get a year out of him? She didn't know. One thing was certain, however. She was going to enjoy the ride, go wherever it might take her. A chance like this only came along once in a lifetime.

Carpe diem. Seize the day!

Chapter Fifteen

Rachel's heart beat with excitement inside her chest when the Rolls came to a stop before a matched set of massive iron gates held into place by a six-foot-high stone fence. Up front, the driver rolled down the window and pressed a button on the communications link. A moment later a buzzer sounded. The gates parted like the Red Sea, rolling aside to let the car and its sole passenger through.

As the car followed the drive toward the main house, she leaned forward, eager to catch a glimpse of the manor where he lived. Two years ago, Carnavorn had built the place from the ground up; allowing no cameras inside the massive stonewalls guarding his private residence.

The place was rumored to have cost over nine million to build and was called Hammerston, after the estates he was reputed to own in England, for Devon Carnavorn was a titled man, the seventh Earl Hammerston. Whether it was a family title or one bought with his fortune, she didn't know. She had expected to be taken to a fancy restaurant, or the nightclub itself. She had not expected to be taken to his private residence. Outsiders were simply not allowed there. If you didn't come by invitation, you didn't come at all.

The gardens were a perfect backdrop to a night lit by the silver-blue glow of a full moon. Her eyes swept the elaborately manicured gardens; lush with trees, shrubs and early blooming spring plants. It was a night for whispers, for kisses, for love to blossom. Not far away stood a gazebo. Cool

shadows cloaked it, silent sentinels that would not whisper of the secrets lovers might share.

The house, if you could call such an imposing edifice a house, was settled amid the vast green lawn. The sand-colored stone looked Medieval, as numerous vaulted turrets were spread across the roof, lending a ferocious appearance to the otherwise composed three-story structure. One almost expected a knight in armor to come charging up on his valiant steed.

The Rolls slowed to a stop in front of the main entrance. The driver hopped out and hurried around to open the passenger door. He offered one gloved hand, helping Rachel out of the car.

With the driver's hand firmly at her arm, Rachel walked up the wide stone steps leading to the front door. By the pressure with which he held her, it almost felt as though he were somehow trying to restrain her, keep her from running away. His silent intensity gave her an uneasy feeling. It was bad enough that the butterflies in her stomach were doing loop-the-loops. Though outwardly composed, inside she was a nervous wreck. As she crossed the last step, she could see that the elaborate iron tracery of the door displayed the coat of arms the Carnavorn family had claimed.

No knock was needed to get inside. As if of its own volition, the door swung open on silent hinges. It was not magic that guided it, however, but the formally outfitted butler. Seeing Rachel, he offered a ceremonial bow. Without stepping inside himself, the unnamed driver practically propelled her under the threshold.

"Welcome, Miss Marks," the butler said, voice tinged with an English accent. "Lord Carnavorn has been awaiting your arrival."

Rachel offered a slight smile, nodding.

"Thank you," she said, trying to quell the nervousness in her own voice. "I am delighted to be here." She felt as though she were the fly who'd just blundered into the spider's web.

The butler did not even crack a smile. "Please follow me," he said.

Rachel pressed her hand to her stomach to quell her nerves. "With pleasure."

She trailed the butler through the main foyer, a wood-paneled and flag-stoned affair designed to intimidate. Passing through its voluminous depth, her gaze briefly flicked over the paintings hanging on the walls. A passionate collector, Carnavorn had filled the manor with an impressive array of artwork, some family portraits, but also old masters like Poussin, Bourdon, Vouet populated the walls. She had no doubt that its furnishings were the finest to be had, a testament to his leading position in the social and financial arenas of the jet set world. Her high stiletto heels clicked sharply as she walked, trying not to be too eager to hurry and join Devon. She pushed her fingers through her untamed hair that she'd streaked with a few bold strokes of gold highlighting.

Coming to a set of closed twin doors, the butler grandly pushed them open. Stepping aside, he allowed Rachel to proceed ahead alone. Drawing back her shoulders, she swept into the great chamber that was the formal sitting room.

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Immediately, her gaze ranged around the chamber. It was spacious, comfortable, with many windows overlooking the countryside. Carpets of great beauty were thrown across the floor, providing succor to the solid tapestry-covered oak furniture. Each piece of furniture had been carefully placed. Each bit of decoration all depicted the same thing: people making love in various positions, a virtual kama-sutra of statues, paintings and other sexually oriented objects d'art.

Outside, a soft summer breeze stirred the leaves of the trees and the flowers in the gardens. During the summer, the Carnavorn estate boasted one of the finest rose gardens in the county, unmatched for miles around. Because the evening was cool, a fire had already been stoked. Psychedelic lights wafted against the walls, floor and ceiling, lending the room an unearthly atmosphere, like floating in space in an alien vessel. The sweet smell of incense was everywhere.

To her surprise, though, the room was full of people. Not people standing around having drinks and conversation, but people lounging around in various states of undress, touching each other, some making love as others sat nearby watching. How many bodies there were, she couldn't count. She drew in a breath, trying not to be utterly shocked, but she could not stop herself from staring. Men on women, women on women and men on men ... Devon Carnavorn had not invited her on an intimate date. He'd invited her to an orgy!

When she entered, the guests automatically stopped what they were doing, turning their eyes toward her, lowering their voices to a whisper. The impulse to leave immediately almost overwhelmed her. She started to open her mouth to protest,

but something deep inside silenced her. Instead of being repulsed, the scene before her eyes simply fascinated her. She could feel the sexual energy in the room, taste it, smell it, soak in the whole decadent atmosphere.

It was almost as if she could reach out and lay a hand on it. Indeed, it seemed to be touching her. Her skin felt warm, tight, her sensitive nipples rasping against the silken bra she wore. Her stomach did a funny little dance in appreciation of all the beautiful bodies stretched out around the chamber. Male and female alike, all were fine-looking people, exquisite. The males and females evenly matched, as though everyone was to have a partner no matter their preference.

Her gaze moved to the center of the room. Like a raja holding court among his concubines, Devon lazed on a couch. Two half-naked women lounged at his feet, wine glasses in hand, stroking each other, sharing deep kisses. He was dressed, albeit more casually, in slacks and shirt. Seeing her, he lifted his dark brows. A lazy smile curled up one corner of his full mouth. He snapped his fingers and the women at his feet moved apart, allowing him to stand. He waded through the sea of bodies to where she stood.

"You look superb, just as I knew you would." His eyes held an appreciative sparkle as he looked her over, pleased that she'd dressed as he'd wanted. Reaching out, he slid his hand quickly behind her neck, bringing her body forward to meet his. He kissed her deeply, hungrily.

If she'd had thoughts of leaving, Rachel quickly forgot them. She couldn't imagine wanting to leave this place. Ever. Through the next seconds, only scattered thought registered

in her mind. The chamber was temporarily deserted except for them. She lifted her arms to encircle his neck, going easily into his embrace with no reservations.

Devon eased her closer, until their bodies were pressed together against one another. She opened her lips to allow his tongue to invade her mouth. He let his hand follow the lines of her body, slipping beneath the fur wrap to caress the small of her back before squeezing her ass cheeks through the silken material of her dress. Giving a final squeeze, his left hand moved up between their bodies, cupping her breast. Unable to help herself, she briefly tensed, then began to wriggle with pleasure, small sounds of delight escaping from deep within her throat. Who the hell cared that strange people were watching him paw her? Instead of being repulsed, she was oddly turned on by the idea. Devon was showing them that she was the woman he desired. As their kiss deepened, she felt him grow rigid. Pulling away, he looked down into her eyes and saw that she felt his need. She didn't back off.

"I've been waiting to see you again," he breathed. He continued to hold her, supporting her weight until her legs steadied and her breathing evened out.

She nodded, tracing her tongue over dry lips to wet them. God, how he took her breath away. He was pure beauty to look upon. He made her feel all female. Even now she could see his need in his eyes, his desire, and she wanted more than anything to give him the pleasure he seemed to hunger for. It was clear she had aroused his need.

She lifted her chin, staring up at him from beneath a veil of soft lashes. "Me, too."

"Come, sit down," he said, sweeping the mink off her shoulders and throwing it to the butler. "Join the party."

The doors closed behind her. There was no turning back.

Rachel let Devon lead her through the writhing bodies, stopping to make brief introductions. The people stopped making love only long enough to smile up at her, murmuring words of welcome before going back to their activities. She couldn't remember the names, didn't really care. More than once, strange hands reached out to stroke her, a hand caressing her leg, thigh, ass.

One of the women who'd been sitting at Devon's feet rose from her partner, pouring a glass of wine and pressing it into her hand as he pulled her down beside him on the couch, a king overlooking his subjects.

"Thank you, Jade," he said.

"Always to please, my Lord," Jade said with a smile.

The second woman poured him a glass. "For your thirst, Lord," she said.

He accepted it. "Many blessings, my Gia." He ran his hand over Rachel's crossed legs, sensing her unease.

"Relax," he whispered in her ear.

"I wasn't quite expecting this," she whispered back.

He sipped his wine. "No one does, at first. But few see this side of my world."

"I'm flattered," she stammered, unsure of what else to say. Eyes wide, she tried not to look at the naked people, but couldn't help herself. It was almost as if their bodies were

magnets that attracted her probing stare. She watched a man make delicate oral love to a woman's pussy as another woman straddled her face, playing with her breasts as she in turn was given oral sex. It was a mesmerizing sight. Her own body grew warm with desire, that familiar moist heat of intense arousal.

Devon slid his arm around her. His hand draped over her shoulder, slipping under the spaghetti strap of her dress to invade the barrier of her bra and caress her breast. The two women resumed their lovemaking at their feet, stretched out on a faux-fur rug.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she couldn't help tensing as he caught her nipple and began to roll the erect nubbin between thumb and forefinger. For the first time she noticed the strange, erotic music that was playing in the background, almost too low to be heard. It was an odd melody, not one that could be hummed or sang to, but throbbing with tones that seemed to match the pulsing of blood through her veins. Along with the haze of the incense that floated gently on the air, the atmosphere was heavy with the scent of wine and the sweat of uninhibited animalistic intercourse. It was a heady mixture.

Though she hardly willed it, she found that she was turned on by watching the people fuck. She felt no repulsion. Just total relaxation. She had been nervous about the evening, now she was calm ... tranquil. She felt warm and comfortable being in this place, watching the strange rainbow of light drift over the naked bodies like the gentle waves of the ocean.

With a strange clarity, she realized that she belonged here, with Devon.

She uncrossed her legs and sipped her wine, leaning against his shoulder to give him free access to her body. What else did she have to do? Nothing. Before she knew it, her glass was being refilled. Once. Twice. Three times. She kept drinking, becoming mesmerized by the unending sex, unaware that the minutes were passing at a slow, languid pace. She heard voices, but couldn't understand the words. They seemed so far away. Conversation faded into a comfortable silence. It could hardly be as interesting as what was going on before her eyes, anyway.

More than sex, there seemed to be some sort of strange ritual going on. More than one of the people had knives. They would make small cuts into their partner's flesh, then lick away the blood they drew. Instead of being repulsed, she was fascinated by how it appeared to heighten the sexual enjoyment of the 'victim'. None protested. Indeed, they seemed to welcome it, more than one helping to guide the blade. The licking, the sucking, the sight of crimson smeared against pale white skin was definitely arousing.

"You are a special one," Devon whispered in her ear. He began to ease the strap of her dress off her shoulder. He pushed the cup of her bra down to expose her breast.

Far from feeling embarrassed, Rachel felt that curious sensation that proceeded orgasm spread through her body, going straight to her groin. Her head lolled on his shoulder. He put down his glass. His hand left her breast and he shifted his body so that he was facing her.

"I want you to be a part of my life," he said, leaning forward to nuzzle her lips with his.

Head spinning from the wine, she heard herself say, "I want to be a part of it."

He smiled. "Good." His mouth crushed hers. When their kiss broke, he moved his lips to her cheek, her chin, the soft pulse at the base of her neck. He was touching her in what seemed to be slow, sensuous motion.

She leaned back on the cushions, hands cupping around his face, guiding his mouth to her taut nipple. Over his head she saw a couple dancing, naked, engrossed only in each other's bodies. It was so sweet. So loving. So ... natural. "Then join us tonight."

Rachel nodded, unsure of what he was talking about until she felt one of the women lying at their feet reach out and caress her leg. Though her first impulse was to pull away from the strange touch, she didn't.

Devon nodded and settled back. The woman he'd called Jade moved forward, nuzzling at Rachel's ankle with her lips. Sliding off the stiletto heels, Jade began to kiss her way up Rachel's leg, trailing her tongue over the flesh-colored hose. Jade worked her way higher, expertly parting Rachel's legs and kissing her inner thighs.

Rachel gasped, the room spun. She felt frantic, but the woman was touching her in such a magical way that she didn't want her to stop. She'd never made love to another woman, had never had the desire to. Yet something about a beautiful woman serving her every sexual need appealed to her.

"You haven't existed before this night," Devon whispered in her ear. "Tonight you'll be reborn into my world."

She gazed at him, shivering at the touch of Jade's hands and lips on her skin.

"Is this what you want?" she asked, trying to find the words through the misty haze starting to envelop her mind.

For an answer, he unhooked her bra, letting it drop to the floor. "Just give yourself to the sensations." He laughed, light, throaty, sexy. His eyes were afire with a passion she could not yet fathom.

"Devon ... oh," she started to say, but could not finish her sentence. The second woman, vaguely remembered as Gia, was suddenly standing before her, taking her hands and pulling her to her feet. Gia's hands expertly slid Rachel's dress over her hips, letting it drop around her ankles. Rachel stood naked but for the thin thong panties hugging her hips, garters and hose.

Jade pulled her down, and the three women tumbled to the floor, landing on the soft fur rug. The women stretched alongside her, caressing her body, rigid with sexual tension.

Rachel felt soft lips cover hers. Opening her mouth, she closed her eyes and relished the flavor of a long, potent, berry-flavored kiss. Jade's hands caressed her arms, her shoulders, her breasts ... and she welcomed every sensation.

When Gia broke their kiss, Rachel drew in a breath. The woman smiled down at her.

"Do you like?" she asked.

"I don't know ... I've never been with a woman," she gulped.

"Then you're in for a treat," Devon Carnavorn said from above.

"But—" she started to say.

Gia pressed a finger across her lips. "Just lay back and enjoy." And then she was brushing her lips against the sensitive hollow of Rachel's throat, her warm mouth lowering, claiming an erect nipple, sucking it with slow tender strokes of her tongue.

Crying out, Rachel writhed with delight and agony. She was vaguely aware of Jade unsnapping her garters, rolling down her hose and then her panties down her legs and discarding them. Like a cat on the prowl, Jade moved between her legs, stroking the insides of her thighs, hands and mouth moving upward toward her throbbing pussy. Jade's fingertips moved in slow, gentle circles, pressing up against the moist depths of her womanhood. Her head dipping, Jade flicked her tongue against Rachel's clit. As she sucked the small nubbin, she caressed her fingers along the pouting swollen lips. She manipulated that sensitive little button between Rachel's legs with just the right pressure, causing a ripple of heat to roll through her.

It was Gia who made the first cut into her skin, a small slash above her right breast. She pressed her lips to the soft mound, her tongue soothing the tender cut as she drank Rachel's blood.

Lost in the lovely sensations washing over her body like a tide pool, Rachel began to respond with an instinctive rhythm to the two women's soft touches and caresses. Her lashes fluttered, lips pouting, drawing inward as if sucking, then

parting as yet another moan escaped from deep within her throat. She was absolutely lost in the touch of their hands, their mouths, unable to comprehend all at once the myriad feelings rushing through her body. The kisses ... the way the women were caressing her ... the places they were touching...

All was part of a dance that she'd waited to join all her life, this unknown world she'd been waiting for to open up before her eyes. She'd only been lacking the people to show her the way. Her mind was spinning, her whole body throbbing with the passions expert hands induced, working slowly and with purpose. She had been sure she would feel embarrassed, vulnerable, even a little terrified letting strange women touch her. But none of that even entered her mind now. This was ecstasy!

Gia suckled at her breasts, pausing now and again to give her long, slow kisses. Between her legs, Jade delivered a devastating cunnilingus, tongue flicking at her clit over and over. Before she knew what was happening, two beautiful men came over and lifted her off the floor. They carried her to the center of the room, placing her on a chaise lounge between them.

They knelt down as if in silent homage, each stroking a breast, kissing, then sucking the tender tips of her nipples. She held their heads, smiling, welcoming their attention. Everyone loved one another in tranquil acceptance. As the women had earlier done, they silently began to explore her naked flesh, making more tiny cuts, drinking her blood as a kitten lapped milk. Mouths, hands, fingers were touching

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every inch of her, sliding wetly up and down her body. It was like an incredibly physical, spiritual and instinctive dance. Beautiful people were having incredible sex, and she was right in the middle of it all, the goddess being sensually worshipped. As they fed off her, she felt powerful, alive, vital, the fountain of all creation itself. Nothing she'd ever experienced in her life could compare to this moment.

One of the men thrust his throbbing cock in her mouth. She took him deep, suckling at his engorged shaft. The second man knelt between her legs, spreading her thighs wide to expose her clit. He bent, running his tongue over her tender labia, nibbling gently at the soft pink flesh. Rachel let her legs fall open a little wider. More than anything, she needed to be fucked. The tempo of the music had changed, becoming slower, more erotic, like the beating of a human heart.

She opened her eyes and cast a look over toward Devon. She wanted him to come to her, take her in front of all these people, claim her as his own. But Gia had crawled up between his legs, unzipping his pants and wrapping her hands around his erect cock. Lowering her head, Gia began to service him, licking and caressing the length of his pulsing shaft. His gaze locked with hers, unashamed to be seen taking his sexual recreation by her prying eyes. A slow, lazy smile turned up his lips.

Wanting him to witness her taking control of her desires, she sat up and pushed the man between her legs back onto the floor. He sprawled on his back at her feet willingly, giving

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himself to her manipulations. A silent communication flashed into her mind. He was hers to use, as she wanted.

Licking her lips, feeling every bit the vengeful bitch, she dropped gracefully to her knees, straddling his thighs with hers. She ran her hands up and down his hard chest, over his abdomen, lower, taking her time to thoroughly arouse him by rubbing her drenched cunt against his crotch. Claiming his hard penis in one hand, she guided him into her, taking him deep inside until he could go no further. She began to move her hips, building up to a pounding, almost painful rhythm that made her arch her back and buck her hips as her orgasm took off like lightning zipping through a dark night's sky. She felt incredibly light-headed, as if she existed beyond all space and time.

Sated, exhausted, she opened her eyes. Her gaze locked with Devon's even as another man was lifting her body, grasping her hips and entering her from behind. It was an incredible turn on to know that as each was taking their pleasure from other people, that they were enjoying the intense event together. She felt empowered, knowing she could conquer any male or female alive and suffer no consequences of a jealous lover.

As if reading her mind, Devon mouthed, Soon, my sweet. Soon nothing will keep us apart.

Chapter Sixteen

Coming out of the haze of sleep into a half-awake, groggy awareness of her surroundings, Rachel opened her eyes to a dim, unfamiliar room. Turning her head on her pillow, she fought the strange sense of disorientation.

Where am I? she questioned through the fuzz in her brain. *I don't remember coming here, don't even remember getting into bed and going to sleep.* She wasn't even sure how long she'd been there. After she had set foot in this place last night, she had lost all track of time. It was more than a little bit frightening to wake up not knowing exactly what she'd done the previous evening.

Underneath the soft comforter and sheets, her body tingled. Sitting up, she let the covers fall away to reveal her nudity. She looked around. The suite around her was an elaborate one, an attractive room, a woman's domain. The bed had a canopy of crimson with touches of gold and ivory for contrast, almost perfectly matching the heavy draperies drawn across the windows, shielding the room from almost all outside illumination. Fresh flowers overflowed the vases set on strategically positioned tables, their light fragrance filling the air.

Every item of furniture was perfectly placed and must have cost a tidy sum, for it seemed to be quite old, though very well preserved. The walls were covered in richly woven ivory fabric wallpaper, edged with a crimson-tinged wood trim. Deep pile carpeting was spread from wall to wall, a slightly

richer shade of ivory. Sneaking between a crack in the drapes, the afternoon sun cast a shadow that was as intrusive as the stain of blood on the light carpeting.

Rachel swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. As she did so, her head began to throb, hurting so badly that she was nearly blinded.

"Just how much wine did I have to drink?" she muttered, holding her head in her hands, wishing the agony would cease. It felt like someone was pounding on her head with a hammer; thud, thud, thud. Jesus, she felt totally drained, as empty as one of the many glasses of wine she'd downed last night.

Last night...

Devon ... the orgy ... making love hour after hour to strange women and men alike. Images of herself—unclothed, uninhibited, performing a sensual ballet with other twining bodies. Nothing was left to the imagination. She'd performed every kind of sexual position possible last night. The muscles between her legs ached from being spread so wide—feeling much like her body had been dough under the hands of dozens of kneading chefs.

Drawing her hands down, she looked down on her nude body, memories of the sucking, the licking filling her head. Her pale skin was riddled with tiny cuts that covered her breasts, abdomen and thighs, red and swollen. Remembering how the others had drank from her; she ran her hands over her flat belly, probing the puffy slices in her flesh with her fingertips. She wasn't really in any pain. She'd been carefully

bathed, the blood washed away and her skin rubbed with a lightly scented oil.

Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath. Her olfactory senses were still clogged with the lingering odors of incense, semen, and the musky smell of her own sexual juices.

Oh, no! She pressed suddenly clammy fingers against her aching temples, willing the pain to go away, willing this to be a terribly bad dream. She sat down on the edge of the bed, trying to muster the pieces of the night before into some sort of coherent sense.

I wouldn't have! I couldn't have! Oh, God, did I really do that?

Rachel made a great effort to keep calm, even though the thoughts of what had happened to her last night made her physically ill. How could she have let Devon lead her into such debauchery? Resentment and fury filled her. Was she that easily manipulated by a man she desired? What was he doing to her? Was he trying to hurt her? Humiliate her? She pressed her hand to her mouth, sure she was about to vomit.

He certainly managed to do both, she thought angrily. Fighting back the panic that boiled under the surface, she forced herself to stand up, search for her clothing. They lay neatly at the foot of the bed. Grabbing them up, she wriggled into her panties and bra, cursing the frilly things, wishing now she'd worn a sweat suit and not that daringly cut dress that Devon had given her.

How could I have known? She stepped into the dress, lifting its thin straps over her shoulders, struggling to zip it and failing.

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Caught in her anger, she didn't hear the door open softly behind her, nor was she aware of the soft footfalls that brought Devon to her side. She only knew that he was beside her, drawing her into his strong embrace.

"Rachel," he murmured lovingly in her ear. "I did not mean for you to awaken alone."

She pulled away. "Don't touch me! What you did to me last night—"

She continued to dress. Foregoing the sexy garter belt and hose, she stepped into her pumps, cursing the high heels. Taking a few hurried steps, she twisted her ankle. Tears stung her eyes, spilling over her lids and down her face. She closed her eyes tightly, trying to convince herself that she had the strength to walk out of this place. But she was weak, oh so weak. All she wanted to do was lie down, curl up and die.

Coming up behind her, he placed his hands on her shoulders, he whispered in her ear. "I did nothing you did not want, beloved."

She shook off his hands, repulsed. "I—I drank too much wine. I didn't know what I was doing, and you and those perverts took advantage of me." The words sounded halfway lame coming out of her mouth. She knew the minute she said them that she was lying—that she had not been an unwilling participant. She had been more than willing to join them, eager even. It had been exciting to be so sexually free, so uninhibited.

Devon's eyes were darkening to a dangerous shade, a color she'd never seen before. A perilous hue. "I took advantage of nothing," he replied defensively. His unblinking

gaze drifted down her slender body, visually exploring the soft curves. "You could have asked to leave at any time."

"But I couldn't," she countered. "I was ... lost ... in the moment." Her jaw hardened. "Raped."

He slid one hand under her chin, lifting her head so that he could look into her eyes. His touch was so forceful, so assured, that she let him without protest.

"You can't rape the willing," he chided. "And you were willing, your body crying out for sensual pleasures." A slow smile curved up the corners of his fine mouth. "I wanted to bring you into my world easily, Rachel, but there is no easy way for it to happen."

Rachel gave him a long glacial look. His touch repulsed her. "Bring me into your world?" she repeated harshly. "Into rituals of debauchery and degradation?" You're a thief, she wanted to scream, a leech that preys on people and their sexual weaknesses. "You took something from me that can never be replaced, Devon. You took my trust."

"Last night, it seemed to my eyes that you were a willing participant in your so-called seduction," he countered harshly. "Were you forced to do anything you did not wish to?"

She hesitated, momentarily lost. It wasn't the possibility that his words could be true that frightened her. It was the unadulterated look of sexual desire in his eyes that clearly said he wanted her. She steeled herself. She had to be strong. Resist. Keep her nerve. Her heart was beating against her ribs and her stomach had twisted into knots.

For an answer, she tugged down the front of her dress, revealing a small slice between her collarbone and breast.

"How can you explain this?" she demanded. "My God, they cut into my flesh, drank my blood."

When Devon's hand rose to her throat, she was sure he was going to seize her neck and strangle her. But he only traced his fingers under her jaw, along the line of her jugular.

"I too have tasted you, taken in your essences," he answered. "Remember how we made love, how I drank of you ... took you...." His voice was a mere whisper, tantalizing, summoning memories almost too intense to savor, sweeping away dense cobwebs from the darkest corners of her mind.

Myriad memories flooded her head, a torrent of longing, desire and, ultimately, consummation. Her mind drifted back to the park. She could picture it more clearly now; how they'd parked in a cul-de-sac, had sex in the cool shadows of the night.

Her trembling hand slowly rose to her neck, fingertips gently tracing her jugular. She did not have to see the small scar on her throat to know it was there, that Devon had taken her blood as he'd taken her body. Tongue snaking out to trace her lips, she easily recalled the delicious kisses he'd given her, how she had tasted her own blood on his lips after he'd drank from the fountain of her life. Then she'd been excited, had enjoyed the taste and found herself longing for more. With a chill, she realized that she had been a part of something ... ritualistic.

Devon again drew her into his arms, holding her captive against his hard, muscled body.

"I could feel how badly you ached for our bodies to join." His long fingers caressed her with a familiar tenderness,

brushing over her shoulders and down to the curve of her breasts. Finding, cupping, then finally teasing her through the thin material of her gown that revealed more than it covered.

Her head dipped back. Her nipples rose at his touch. "Oh ... God ... stop that ... don't ... stop..." she moaned, wanting to pull away, knowing she couldn't.

Closing her eyes, she heard herself sigh as he traced his warm tongue along the side of her neck, filling her with a lulling sense of languor. His mouth came down on hers with a calculated slowness, ending her weak protests. Her lips parted blindly under his, her arms lifting and curling around his neck. He kissed her until her knees felt weak and her head spun with sensations that made all rational thinking impossible.

When his hand caught the strap of her dress and slid it down her shoulder, she did not object. His teasingly sensual fingers nudged aside the lacy cup so he could roll the tip of her nipple between thumb and forefinger. His touch sent electric shocks through every inch of her body. Before she knew what he was doing, he'd eased the half-zipped dress back off her body, then unhooked her bra and let it fall. She felt the silky material pool softly around her feet.

"You can't fight your own physical nature," he whispered, his voice deliberately provocative. The look of need, of lust, was clearly etched into his features. With a surprising ease and swiftness, he lifted her off her feet and carried her to the tousled bed. Kicking off her shoes, she could feel the ripple of his muscles under her fingers as he lay her down, then stretched out beside her. His eyes traveled with slow

deliberation over her body, lingering on her breasts, then the shadowy vee of her thighs, covered only by the thin strip of silky lace. Embers of desire smoldered in the depths of his dark eyes. His head dipped. He began to suckle the sensitive peaks of her nipples.

Oh, heavens, Rachel thought dizzily. I can't believe I'm letting him do this to me again.

Still, she couldn't prevent his touch. She didn't want him to ever stop. In his arms, she felt incredibly empowered, a woman in touch with the carnal nature she'd repressed for far too long. His hand slid between her legs, parting her thighs. He was touching her where she longed to be touched, finding and stimulating nerve endings in her clit that she'd never known existed. She was growing wet, warm, aching to feel his cock deep inside her pussy.

"I want you, Devon," she heard herself gasp. So did her body, making her arch up against him. She could feel the proof of his own need pressed against her hip, his rock hard cock trapped by his tight slacks.

"In time, beloved," he murmured, kissing the small pulsing vein on the exposed softness of her throat.

"Please," she started to beg. "Make love to me." She couldn't believe the words were coming from her lips, but she couldn't stop.

He brushed his fingers against her cheek. "To take you, I must drink of you." His voice had slowed and deepened, taking on a mesmerizing quality.

Rachel opened her eyes, searching for his. Devon's gaze seemed darker, filled with strange shadows that veiled his eyes, keeping her from seeing what he was thinking.

"My blood?" she whispered, voice slightly atremble.

"Why?"

He drew in a deep breath. "I want to bring you over into my world, Rachel. Will you give yourself to me, trust me?"

Something in his tone warned her that he was not teasing, but deadly serious in his intention to have her blood again. The idea chilled her. She sat up abruptly, shaking his hands off her body.

"I'm into accepting a little kink in my sex, Devon," she started to say, brushing her bangs off her forehead. "But hasn't this pseudo-bloodsucking thing gone a little too far?"

"It is no game, Rachel. Taking blood is how we make a connection with our lovers." Taking a deep breath, his voice turning dry, he continued, "Some would call us vampires, but we call ourselves the Kynn." By the intensity behind his gaze, it was clear that he was watching her closely, waiting for her reaction.

Hearing his words, she could not fully comprehend them. She shook her head, disbelieving. Her first thought was that he must have immersed himself too deeply in the gothic lifestyle.

He's actually come to believe he's a vampire. The man's insane. Dangerous. And if I'm stupid enough to hang around any longer, I have the feeling that I'm never going to walk out of this place alive.

"Don't you mean how you make a connection with your victims?" she spat.

Afraid, she pushed her body away from his, now sickened by his touch. How could she have enjoyed the feel of his lips on hers, the touch of his hands all over her body? He was no man, but a psychopath who preyed on women using sexual desire in order to sate his unnatural hungers. Her face began to burn. How easily he'd conquered her. She'd been eager to throw herself at his feet, do anything to make him desire her. Even seduce him. But the tables had been turned. He was an expert at the games of seduction and she'd fallen into his trap, a mere novice playing against the master. She felt sick inside, sure she would faint until she willed herself to feel nothing but anger instead. Anger kept her conscious, strong, aware.

"So that's what your kind does?" she flung with nasty malice. "Weaken us, wear down our bodies and minds and then drain us dry? If this is some kind of a joke, Devon, it's a sick one, and it's gone too far!"

Her reaction had clearly caught him off guard. He visibly stiffened, as if offended. He reached for her hand, seizing it, practically crushing it in his own.

"We do no such thing!" The growl in his voice sent a shivery sensation through her that was part fear, part primeval. "The gifts I can offer are ones you choose to accept. I will not force you to cross over. You come of your own will, believing in what we are, wanting to join us."

"Wanting to join you?" she repeated, disbelieving.
"Whatever gave you that idea I wanted to be a vampire?"

"You were meant to be one of us," he answered simply
"How do you know?"

"You bear a sacred mark, one that I have searched for since my eternity began." His palm brushed her leg.

She visually followed his touch, setting on the odd birthmark on her thigh. "This? This is no holy sign. It's just a birthmark."

A small smile touched his lips. "Believe what you will. To me it is sacrosanct. You were meant for me, to become my *she-shaey*, my blood-mate. No other on this Earth wears this mark but you, Rachel. It is destiny's choice." He began to stroke her thigh.

She shivered, pulled her leg away. "You're bent." She instantly regretted her words. What was she thinking, taunting a crazy man? She sat rigidly beside him, knowing he could easily beat her senseless if he so desired. She doubted anyone would come running if she were to scream for help.

He shook his head. "I know in my heart what is true. I can feel the hungers in you, the angst you have suffered because you have never felt like you belonged in their ranks. You've always been on the outside, looking in, haven't you? Envyng what you could not fully be a part of. I can grant you that sense of place, of belonging, that you have been missing."

What I have been missing ... His voice echoed in her ears, her head.

"No." She gulped, her mouth unexpectedly dry. In a strange, unsettling way his words seemed to make sense. But that was impossible. Things such as he was claiming to be—a

vampire—simply did not exist. It went against all reason, logic and nature itself.

"It is always hard to accept the truth of our kind, that we could exist." He tugged down the collar of his shirt, to reveal the small scar on his jugular, one that mirrored the one he'd etched into her flesh. He took her hand, pressing her fingers to it.

Rachel tried to pull her hand away, but he wouldn't let her. She could feel that his flesh was warm, feel the pulse of blood under his skin. She would have expected an 'undead' to have cold, clammy skin, a rank stench clinging to his clothes. But he was vital, warm and alive.

"A long time ago, I was like you. Mortal ... caught in the weaknesses of the flesh. But you can escape that box, break free of their limitations. I can give you a glimpse of true eternity. All you have to do is believe my words are true and accept what we are."

Rachel slowly slid off the bed, out of his reach. Sanity and a sense of grim purpose returned, however belatedly.

"I don't believe, Devon." A small smile touched her lips. Tears spilled down her face. "I'm sorry. As much as I want you, I can't play this perverse game anymore."

He propped himself up on one elbow. "Rachel," he pleaded, reaching out for her. "Please know I would never hurt you."

She laughed, feeling as though her chest was about to burst from the bitter ache building in her heart. "If you don't want to hurt me," she said, "leave me alone. Just stay away from me. I can't live in your warped fantasy world."

He drew himself up sharply, angered by her words. Almost contemptuously, he threw back his head and laughed. The sound drove splinters under her skin. His brown eyes hardened, narrowed ominously.

"You belong to me, Rachel," he said, letting his words drag out mockingly. "Only to me. You can run away now, but you can't escape from me forever. One day soon, I will come for you. And when I do, you will join me willingly."

"No, Devon!" she uttered explosively, instinctively. "You're a prisoner here in your own damned little world, but not me. I won't ever join you. Ever!" She hurled the remarks, sharp as a dagger's blade, wishing bitterly that she could wound him, mar him as he'd scarred her. If she'd actually had a knife in her hand, she might have plunged it into that hard male body that so effortlessly besieged hers.

In the taut silence following her hysterical explosion, everything gave the impression of being suspended, even the beating of her heart. His studied pause seemed designed to throw her off balance. Through the deep chasm that seemed to form between them, she became aware that he could easily overpower her, overwhelm her senses and her body if he so wished.

"Do I frighten you that much?" he asked perceptively, a cold, cruel smile twisting his lips. Not really a smile at all, but a mockery. A blasphemy!

Courage, Rachel! She hardened her heart, determined to break the strange pact they had entered into, thinking of the ugly, degrading things he'd subjected her to. Cheeks reddening, her face began to burn. His mysterious,

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impenetrable eyes seemed to enjoy her inner struggle. The bite of steel in his tone might have killed her had it been a corporeal object. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest. Could he hear how terrified she was of him? If he came off that bed, she was sure she'd faint dead away. She simply wasn't sure that she could resist his touch a third time.

Fight him, she warned herself. Fight him or he will defeat you, take you and do with you what he wants. That's what he's trying to do. Control me ... own me.

"I don't want to hear any more. I just want to leave this evil place." She hardly recognized the brittle, hard voice as her own.

Snatching up her fallen dress, she clutched it to her body, knowing she must get away now or fall prey to his desires. She had to escape, cursing him for the demon who was trying to drag her in, take her will, her very soul.

Half naked, Rachel fled the room, heading blindly down a hall, descending a long curving flight of stairs. Where she thought she was going, what was going to happen to her now, she didn't know. She just had to find the passage that would lead her back to sanity, to the place she was in her life before she encountered Devon Carnavorn.

I have to get out of here, she thought, bare feet slapping on the marble stairs.

Chapter Seventeen

Devon Carnavorn hovered outside Rachel's apartment, his tall form cloaked in shadows. No car was parked nearby, for he had not needed such a primitive conveyance, instead choosing to take the form of the invisible winds. By learning to communicate with nature, the Kynn easily manipulated the elements, traveling as easily as a bird at wing, moving upon the air's currents as easily as a kite.

Since Rachel had left him, he had been in a state of agitation. Shuddering, he bought back the sinister thoughts that had troubled him since he'd opened up to her—only to have her reject him and his kind. He had believed in her acceptance so much that her anger and shock had surprised him.

I should have taken it slower, he cursed himself, given her more time, explained more clearly. Instead, I tried to rush her into the clan, and in doing so I've lost her.

Eyes burning from too little sleep, he cast another baleful glance up to her closed windows, the blinds firmly drawn shut against the outside world. Since returning home, she'd locked herself inside. And since she'd gone, he'd been trapped in some of the bleakest hours of his life since Ariel had been slain.

And now I've lost Rachel. A colorless haze closed in around his mind. There was no satisfaction or joy in his heart, no sense of being alive—a being who walked the centuries as easily as most humans walked through mere days. Without a

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true mate, the centuries were too long, hardly worth existing through. For the first time in a long while, the hundred and forty-three years he'd lived seemed too long, with an endless, loveless void stretching ahead.

The worst part was that he had lost her without ever really possessing her. He had hoped that she might be falling in love with him—but she'd certainly revealed otherwise. He had looked into her soul and believed she was destined to be his blood-mate, but apparently he was wrong. She wanted nothing to do with him.

Despair washed over him. Even now, the fact that she was so close and he could not go to her frustrated him to no end. He'd even briefly considered erasing her memories of the entire happening, easing the event out of her mind as he had the night he'd first taken her completely as his own. But he wanted her to remember, wanted her to think about what had happened between them. Perhaps in time she would come to see the event in a different light. If not, then he would have to accept that he'd let her slip through his fingers through his own clumsy machinations.

"I won't accept losing you, Rachel," he whispered. "If ever you should want me, I will be there, be it a day or a century."

Even now he felt the eternal tug of her soul on his, the hungers inside her that she'd never been able to comprehend. She was angry; frustrated with the way her life had turned out. She tried to come to terms with it, tried to pretend that what she felt was what every unhappy soul in this world felt. She was wrong. What she was searching for went past everyday struggles, past humanity itself. She had a hunger

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for more than what day-to-day living offered its humans, as he once had before his own crossing.

He drew a deep breath, but it failed to make him feel any stronger or better. He was as tempted as he had ever been to cross the street, knock on her door and beg her to give him another chance. But a little voice in his head warned him that this would be the wrong thing to do. He had already risked far more than he should have by revealing his world to her and risked even more since he'd let her walk away with her memories intact.

A lightening in the night's gloom made him turn his bleary gaze toward the sky. In the east, dawn was beginning to peer over the edge of the Earth. In another half hour the day would spread its cloak of illumination over the land—sending his kind back into the shelter of shadows in which they had to live during the daytime hours. He could not be caught out in bright sunlight for long. Prolonged exposure could be deadly. Bathed in the sun's beams the glare was so bright, so intense, that the blood in his veins would begin to smolder, ignite as the illumination invaded every pore, crawling under his skin, burning him up like old paper in hungry flames.

Shaking his head, despondent that the night must inevitably end, Devon nevertheless knew that his secret vigil must come to its completion. Tonight would not be the last time he came, though. If need be, he would come night after night, waiting, watching. But eventually, Rachel had to come to him. For now, she'd put up an emotional barrier between them. Until it came down, he would not be able to make his way into her heart.

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If it ever comes down, he silently sighed. He didn't know why he should feel this way about her. Only that he did. What he'd experienced making love to her was so completely different from the experiences he'd had with other women. Her kisses, the way she touched him, the places she'd touched him ... All seemed to be part of the dance their bodies knew perfectly. He had had lovers, but he'd never had a true mate. Even Ariel was a pale comparison.

He drew a deep breath. "I cannot make you love me, Rachel," he mumbled, his heart constricted by the pain of his loss. "But you will never forget me."

With those words, he vanished into the remnants of the diminishing darkness.

Chapter Eighteen

Through the following week, Rachel called in sick before she finally summoned up the courage to quit her job. Though she was tempted to do it over the phone, she realized that to skitter off like a scared puppy would do her self respect no good. She had to go in person. She most definitely did not want to see Devon Carnavorn, so she went at a time when he usually was not present.

Driving to the nightclub, she was a little saddened that today would be the last time she'd ever lay eyes on the place. She'd really enjoyed her job, liked the people she worked with. Too bad she'd sabotaged it by letting herself get involved with Devon. No matter what the hell the man believed himself to be, it was never a good idea to mix business with pleasure and she'd learned her lesson the hard way.

Oh, well, live and learn, she thought as she made her way to Rosalie Dayton's office. In a few minutes she would walk away from the best paying job she'd ever had. She'd thought about trying to stay at Mystique, continue as if nothing had happened between her and Devon. That would not only be uncomfortable, she decided, it would be impossible to put what had happened between them behind her.

Right now, all she wanted to do was forget the whole damned affair. Of course, he was not entirely to blame, strange as he was. She'd walked right into it, eyes wide open. He was attractive, rich and certainly a good lover. But she

doubted she could handle his peculiar lifestyle long. Sooner or later, he was going to go over the edge—and someone would be left very dead. A fetish such as his was dangerous. Who knows how many damaged women he'd left in his wake? She had the feeling she wasn't the only one. Nor would she be the last to fall prey to his bizarre practices.

For a few days, Rachel had even considered going to the police. But she'd lost her nerve. What exactly would she tell them? What charges could they press? To an extent, she'd been a willing, consenting adult. And in retrospect, she realized that, at the time, the cutting and sucking had turned her on to a great degree, enhancing her sexual experience to an almost excruciating degree. It had been so sensual, bringing such a wonderful feeling of euphoria that she hadn't thought to try and stop what was happening. Though a bit ashamed, she had to be honest and admit to herself that she'd enjoyed the experience. She'd even found the idea of joining Devon an enticing one.

But one had to be sane and sensible. And she was trying to be just that. She supposed she'd feel a lot saner if the memories and longing to be with him again didn't sting at her heart like a swarm of giant bumblebees.

"About time you got back on your feet," Rosalie said when Rachel stepped in. "Feeling better, I hope?"

She smiled wanly. "I am, thanks," she lied. "But I'm not here to work." She handed Rosalie her carefully worded letter.

A puzzled expression crossed Rosalie's face. "What's this?"

Rachel cleared her throat. "Uh, it's my resignation. I'm leaving Mystique."

"When?"

"Immediately."

Brow wrinkling, Rosalie took off her glasses, toying with them. "Care to say why?"

She shook her head, mouth drawing tight. "No." How could she calmly say that not only had she had slept with her boss, she'd also slept with his coterie of groupies, all of whom had sucked the blood right out of her body?

In the broad light of day, the idea of vampires—or Kynn, as Devon had referred to them—was damned near impossible to accept as true fact. Had she not the scars to prove it, she would have hardly believed it, either. She wasn't really sure that she did. The role-playing explanation seemed more viable, especially in a society where outlandish permissiveness was the new rule.

Still ... How to explain that she'd had no memory of having sex with Devon until he'd 'allowed' her to remember the event? What about the small scar on her neck? He'd taken her blood only the night before. She'd never had a scar there. Certainly she would have recalled it. One usually did not wound one's neck and not remember it. How had she healed so fast? The cuts she'd sustained from the others had not scabbed over nearly that fast. If she went so far as to believe his words—No, uh-uh. She just wasn't ready to bend her mind around the concept that supernatural beings walked among humans, much less that she bore some kind of sacred sign on her thigh that marked her as Devon's woman. In

fantasy novels, such creatures had their place, but this was real life. Things were damn hard enough without having people who fancied themselves to be vampires preying on you!

And if they are, heaven help us all ... Mankind hasn't got a chance...

Rosalie shrugged. The look on her face said she was not surprised, that she'd been expecting this.

"Well, it's certainly not my place to pry," Rosalie finally said. "I will say that it's a shame you're leaving after only a few months. You were one of the best supervisors I've had for the girls."

"It had nothing to do with the work. It's—ah—I'm having a personal problem. Unfortunately, I find it would affect my ability to do my job in a capable manner," Rachel hurried to say, feeling more than a little guilty that she was letting Rosalie down. Devon Carnavorn just sat up in his offices high above the crowds. It was Rosalie Dayton who did the hands-on dirty work. By walking out, she was going to leave the woman in a lurch, having to find and train yet another person for the job.

Rosalie fiddled with her glasses. "Well, Rachel, I am certainly sorry to hear that. But I am not blind, you know. Whatever happened between you and Devon is not my concern. I am only sorry that what you two engaged in so obviously ruined this job for you. If you feel you have to leave, I understand. I wasn't always an old lady, you know. I know that certain, ah, attractions can turn your life upside down and make you unhappy in the process. I can see by the

look on your face that you're miserable. No reason to try to stay on this job if you are."

"I am," Rachel admitted, relieved that Rosalie seemed to understand her position. "More than you know."

"You would be surprised what I do know," Rosalie commented dryly.

Did Devon tell her anything? Rachel wondered. Or does she already know about his other pursuits? "I don't think you should clue me in," she said slowly. "I just want to make a clean break."

"Certainly."

"If you could write me a letter of reference, that would be great." She hurried to say, "Though I wouldn't expect you to, since I am leaving without any notice."

I doubt I could expect Devon to give me a good reference, she thought. Oh, I'm quitting my job because you sucked my blood. Could I please have a letter of recommendation? The idea of asking made her want to giggle insanely, but she held her face straight, forcing the bizarre images that came to mind out of her head. How to explain that one to her next employer? Show him the scar? Yeah, right.

Rosalie nodded. "I will be glad to. Would you like it now, or shall I mail it?"

"Mail it, please," Rachel answered. "Also my final paycheck, if you don't mind. I don't expect it will be much since I've missed work."

Rosalie did some quick figuring. "It will be—adequate."

Rachel couldn't suppress her sigh. *Adequate, as in I have to go looking for a new job. Soon.*

"Thank you," she said. "I appreciate that."

"No problem," Rosalie said.

* * * *

Two days later, a large manila envelope arrived from Rosalie.

Tearing it open, Rachel pulled out the letter inside. She quickly skimmed the page. It was her reference letter, prudently worded praise, considering the short amount of time she'd worked there.

Well, it's a start. Now I no longer have to have failed bookstore owner at the top of my resume.

There was another envelope inside, much-needed money. She ripped it open. Looking at it, her hands started shaking. She could hardly believe her eyes. She blinked. Had she read the damn thing correctly? Surely it couldn't be that much? She mouthed the numbers again, counting the zeros. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars. More than twice a year's salary. The note inside was in Devon's hand. Final paycheck, it said simply, with bonuses.

Wow. Some bonus.

She sat there, holding the check. She had no doubt as to what it was. A payoff. Devon was paying her off to shut her up, keep her quiet about what had happened. Only now did it occur to her that she might have gotten herself an attorney and sued him for pain and suffering and whatever else the shyster might want to tack on. If done right, it could have been a lawsuit of million dollar proportions.

She fingered the check. This is just covering your ass, Mister Carnavorn, she mused. No matter what you think you are, if you dabble in kink, you're going to have to pay.

One hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Was it enough for her to keep her mouth shut?

She looked at it again. She could pay off her debts from the bookstore and live comfortably for a couple of years without having to worry about working if she were careful with her money.

Hmm. Yep. Enough. Okay. So she was easy as well as cheap. Everyone had their price, especially when they had the check in their hand, versus a costly lawsuit she might not win anyway. Cut your losses, she counseled herself. Take the money and run. With this bit of security in her checking account, she could take her sweet time to find the job that suited her. Maybe even go back to college. Not a bad idea. A new start. That's exactly what she needed.

Feeling as though she'd won the lottery and more than a little relieved that her financial problems were off her back, Rachel glanced at the clock. It was already after three. Too late to deposit her windfall. Well, first thing tomorrow morning she was going to cash it; putting half in savings, half in her checking account. She had no doubt as to its veracity. Carnavorn would not dare bounce a check on her.

Carefully tucking the check under the mat on the coffee table, she finished going through the day's mail. Bill, of course. Some fliers for the local pizza place. More junk mail. Then the daily paper. No need to go straight to the classifieds

today. She would actually have the luxury of beginning at the front page.

She skimmed over the headline. The city council was voting on some tax ordinance. Boring. Second story. Woman shot in robbery. Normally, she would have skimmed that, too, but a name caught her eye. The Shop-N-Sack on Fifth Street. Suddenly the words seemed to leap out at her in giant puzzle-like pieces.

Ginny Smithers, 62, shot in robbery ... Suspect still at large ... Victim in critical condition, rushed to Saint Peter's Medical Center...

That was as far as she got. She could read no further. Tears were blurring her vision, stinging her cheeks. Hands going cold, her breath caught in her throat. The paper dropped from her limp fingers, pages scattering at her feet.

"Oh, my God!" she mumbled through numb lips. "Not Ginny. Oh, Jesus, no!"

Without further thought, Rachel snatched up her purse and keys. She didn't even bother locking the door behind her when she ran outside.

Ginny has no family here. Who's with her? Her sister lives so far away, across country. Does she even know? She's near seventy and just had a stroke. Doubt she could come. When did this happen? Oh, Jesus, I knew it was too dangerous for an old lady to be working in a place like that. What was she doing working the night shift anyway?

Driving straight through several red lights, Rachel sped to the hospital, navigating through the afternoon traffic like a madwoman. It took twenty minutes to reach the hospital,

another ten circling the parking lot looking for a space in the crowded lot. When she could find no place nearby, she abandoned her car at the curb in a no parking zone. *Piss on it, she'd take the goddamned ticket.*

Heels clattering on the concrete, she ran into the front lobby. Hurrying to the visitor's desk, she pounded her hands on the counter to get the attention of the woman sitting behind the glass partition.

"Where's the ICU? Please, I need to be there now!"

Seeing her panic, the woman answered. "Take the elevator to the fourth floor, turn left."

Without waiting to hear any more, Rachel dashed to the elevator, pushing past the crowd of people to push the button. "Come on, hurry up!" she cursed under her breath, ignoring the stares of curious people. Obviously a few understood, for they let her dash in first and choose the floor she needed. "Sorry," she said, punching the fourth floor button. "I have to get there fast."

Fourth floor, left, she repeated in her mind.

There, she practically ran over the staff trying to reach the nurse's station.

"Ginny Smithers," she said to the nurses there. "Where is she?"

One of the nurses caught her arm. "Calm down, please."

Rachel shook off her hand. "I'm here to see Ginny Smithers. Please. How is she?"

A second nurse, whose nametag read 'Terry' consulted her records.

"I'm sorry. Only immediate family is allowed to see Ms. Smithers."

"I'm her niece, Rachel," she lied without thought or hesitation. She knew Ginny well enough to pass for family. Anything they needed her to answer, she could. She knew which blood pressure medicines Ginny took, what she ate to control her borderline diabetes. "Please, I have to see her. How is she?"

Satisfied by her intrusion, Terry's face softened. "I'm sorry, but she's in critical condition."

"Can I see her?"

Terry hesitated. "Maybe you shouldn't. It's not ... hopeful."

"I don't care. Please, I want to be with her. I can't let her be alone."

The first nurse nodded. "Go ahead."

Rachel followed Terry to a nearby room. The odors of the hospital burned into her nostrils. Antiseptics, soiled bedding, and, worst of all, the pervading smell of sick bodies. Of disease. Of death.

Ginny lay in room number six, behind a thick wall of glass. The privacy curtains had been pulled aside so that the nurses could monitor her every second.

Stepping up to the glass, Rachel peered inside. Ginny lay on a hospital bed, her head swathed in bandages. Dressed in a hospital gown, all sorts of monitors were attached to her body, now seeming so small and shriveled. She dimly recalled the newspaper said she'd been beaten, then shot once in the head, execution style. All for what? Fifty crummy bucks, which is all the store kept after hours. Who the hell was

sadistic enough to attack an old woman? Surely Ginny didn't put up a fight. It wasn't in her nature. Let them walk off with the cash. It was replaceable. A human life was not.

She gulped, swallowing back the bitter bile that rose to the back of her throat. "Can I go inside?"

Terry nodded. "Stay here." A moment later, she returned with a hospital gown and mask. "Put these on." She helped Rachel put them on. When she was dressed, the nurse opened the door to the room. "You can stay for twenty minutes."

"Thank you," she said.

At the bed, Rachel looked down at her friend.

"Oh, Ginny," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. I should have been here sooner." Wiping away her tears, she reached out and took Ginny's small, cold hand in her own. She lay absolutely unresponsive, her body kept alive only by the machines that kept her breathing, her heart pumping. There was no sound in the room save for the soft hissing of the machines. With all the monitors and blinking red lights hovering around the bed, it was like vultures. Waiting. Counting the seconds until Ginny's poor body gave up the ghost and her soul moved on.

Rachel didn't have to be a medical expert to know it was hopeless. A bullet lodged in one's brain did not usually come with a very hopeful prognosis. Even if she were to survive, which seemed to be unlikely at this point, she would probably be severely disabled—a brain-damaged vegetable.

She squeezed Ginny's hand.

Before Night Falls
by Jeya Jenson

I wouldn't want her to live if that's the case, she thought. I wouldn't want to live myself. I'd hope someone would have the nerve to pull the plug.

Standing beside her friend, Rachel unexpectedly found herself face to face with the specter she had not closely encountered through her short life. The Grim Reaper.

At her age, death was a thing people only fleetingly considered. After all she was young, healthy. Things like car accidents, a broken leg, disease, crime ... well, those things were supposed to happen to strangers. Not people you knew.

Struck full force in the face with the Reaper's scythe for the first time, she selfishly began to take a long hard look at her own mortality.

What is there to life?

Standing beside Ginny's unconscious form, hostility welled in her heart and the cynic in her came out full force, trumping through her mind like an angry bull. You're born into this shitty world, to parents you can't choose. Then what? Hell, you got kicked around as a child, then thrust into a nasty world when you turned eighteen. Not having oodles of money to fall back on, the need to work inevitably came next. Not just her. Millions of people. Toil, toil, boil and bubble. The facing of the public hoards, pasting a false smile on your face every day, working long hours to make ends meet. Marriage? Love? Did it even really exist? Usually it was a thing twisted by the fickle human heart. Sex? Physical attraction waned as your young, firm body dropped and drooped.

Life. It was all or nothing, a never-ending attack. Physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally, it wore you

down to a nub. And nothing was all you got in the end, slipping through the cracks like sand through your fingers. Desperate people leading tiny little lives that would only end with a hole in the ground, a too-fancy box casketing a body that would decay into worm food.

Bitter and bleak, she could see no way out of the dismal fate that would someday beckon her.

Faith. Hope. Praying that everything would turn out all right. At this moment she could summon neither into her heart, nor could she fall to her knees and pray to a God she didn't believe existed. What kind of deity would allow an old woman who'd never done anyone a day's harm to be shot down like a dog?

She reached out and gently stroked Ginny's chin, the only part of her face visible through the swath of bandages around her head. "I wish there was something I could do for you," she whispered.

It's not fair! she silently raged, it's not right. The sound of an alarm jarred her out of her inward reverie. Before she was able to comprehend what was happening, a barrage of nurses and doctors were pushing her out of the room, hustling her outside.

Through the glass partition, Rachel watched them work, hands frantically pounding against the cold window, her words incoherent to her own ears. There were hurried shouts as hands flew over Ginny's poor frail body. Though they only worked for several long minutes, the time that passed seemed to be mere seconds. And then it was over. The lines on the monitors went flat, registering zero.

As simply as that, it was over.

She knew because all activity halted, heads shaking, mouths turning down into frustrated frowns. One minute alive, the next dead. No fanfare, no bells and whistles, no announcement. Nothing but a soul departing a physical shell.

Ginny Smithers was dead. Hopefully, at peace.

"What happened?" Rachel demanded of the first doctors who exited.

One stopped to speak with her. "Cardiac arrest," he said, simply. "Her heart stopped beating. I'm sorry. There was nothing we could do." Giving her shoulder a squeeze, he hurried off. His job was done. No reason to hang around.

"Oh." Staring in his white-coated wake, her hands dropped limply to her sides.

One of the nurses hurried to her side. "Are you her family?"

Numbly, she nodded.

The nurse shoved a clipboard in her hand. "Sign here, please. Will you be taking care of final arrangements?"

Another numb nod. "Yes..." she murmured. "I—I'll t—t—take care of everything." She shakily signed the papers, not even recognizing that she held the pen, scribbled her name across the bottom the page. Holy hell, weren't they even going to allow her a few minutes to mourn before descending like circling vultures? Did they need the goddamned bed that badly that they'd hustle the body out before it was even cold? Even now, two aides rushed through with a wheeled gurney that would carry the sheet-covered body to the hospital morgue.

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by Jeya Jenson

"I'm sorry for your loss." The nurse patted her arm. "As it was, we were only sustaining her life. She was brain dead when she arrived."

"She never had a chance, did she?"

"I'm afraid not. But we did what we could to make her comfortable."

"I'm sure you did everything you could," Rachel said weakly. What the hell else could she say? Why didn't you try harder? Why weren't you watching her closer? How could you let her slip away on your watch? No reason to say the words, though. Despite its advance, medical science still had not found a way to duck the Reaper's scythe. When the last word was written on the page of one's life, the ending would be the same for everyone: they died. How and when did not matter. No one was getting out of this world alive.

Chapter Nineteen

Three hours later, Rachel walked out of the hospital. Shoulders slumped in defeat, she walked to her car. As expected, there was a pink slip under her windshield, a ticket for parking in a no-parking zone. She crumpled up the ticket, cursing under her breath. There goes one hundred and fifty dollars. Well, at least the vehicle hadn't been towed.

Sealing herself in the safety of four doors, she rested her forehead on the steering wheel. She'd just spent the last two hours talking to the supervisor of the nursing home where Ginny's sister, Regina, lived at in Florida. Regina was in no shape to take care of any of the details that would be required for Ginny's final interment. Not only did Regina not have the funds to cover the expenses of a funeral, she also did not have any way to claim Ginny's belongings. They agreed that Rachel would have to be the one to pack up Ginny's apartment, selling what she could and disposing of the rest. Dimly, Rachel remembered that Ginny had mentioned a life insurance policy. If so, that would certainly lift a burden off her only living sibling.

How sad that Ginny has no one to even come to see her laid to rest, she thought. Unless Ginny left a will with other instructions, she'd already decided on cremation, with a simple graveside service. Not because it was cheaper, but because it would be simpler. Ginny had never believed in large, elaborate funerals.

"Flowers are for the living," she'd often told Rachel. "It's stupid to cut them down to put on a grave. People should give them to you while you're alive, able to enjoy them."

She had to agree.

Sighing, Rachel lifted her head and glanced up into the sky. The day was just beginning to fade, night covering the Earth in its cloak of soft indigo. How restful the dark seemed, so peaceful.

Would that no one ever had to grow old and die. If only we could live in a peaceful world where worries never beset our bodies and minds.

Her heart grew bitter, dark and hard. Instead we live in this urban jungle, plagued by crime, ugliness and hate, by people who would execute an old woman ... How I hate living in it. If only there were an escape, I would take it in an instant.

If only, indeed.

Digging her keys out of her purse, Rachel started the car and put it in gear. As she navigated her way out of the parking lot, it was in her mind to go to Ginny's apartment, start sorting through her belongings. But just as she was about to come to the exit that would take her back into the city, she suddenly changed her mind, making a quick, illegal U-turn in traffic, heading in an entirely different direction. She knew whom she had to see. And she knew why.

* * * *

Pulling up to Mystique, Rachel drew in a deep breath Was she really crazy enough to be considering what Devon

Carnavorn had offered her? Was she that desperate that she would believe what he had offered her was real? If so, then she'd have to believe that what he had told her was indeed fact—that vampires really did exist.

'You were meant for me, to become my blood-mate,' she remembered him saying about the strange mark on her left thigh. 'It is destiny's choice.'

Destiny's choice is my innocence lost. A giggle broke from her throat.

"Why am I even thinking of this?" she demanded to herself. "It's stupid to even think it."

She thought it because she was afraid. Afraid that the Reaper would someday turn his sickle her way, afraid that she would die, alone and unloved, a wrinkled old shell wasting away in a nursing home, or worse, a victim of someone else's insane wrath.

'I can give you a glimpse of eternity,' he'd told her. 'All you have to do is accept and believe.'

Do I believe? Forehead wrinkling, she remembered how he'd seemed to lay open her soul, pinpointing her unhappiness. Was it because he'd truly know it himself, felt the outsider, always standing too far away to become a part of the crowd? The loneliness, the feeling of never truly belonging brought a lump to her throat, a deep ache that threatened to break her fragile heart into pieces.

He's right, she thought. I've never belonged here, among the rest of the people. I've constantly held myself and my feelings at arm's length because I didn't trust them, couldn't really love them.

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For the first time, she realized she did love someone. Devon. From the moment she laid eyes on him, she'd known there was something different about him, something that attracted her to him in a way no other man ever had. He was everything she believed she wanted. And, like her, he stood at the periphery of the human race, because he wasn't like them, either.

Was it too late to go to him, beg him to take her back, to bestow his gifts?

It can't be, she told herself. He said he would come for me, and I would accept. Only it's me who's going to him.

Getting out of her car, she hurried into the nightclub, pushing past the crowd to get inside. Thursday night was not the busiest night of the week, but there was still a fair amount of people. Hurrying past the main bar and cutting across the dance floor, she waved a hand when one of the waitresses hurried up to her.

"Where's Devon?" she asked, breathless.

Tammy shrugged. "Haven't seen him." Seeing Rachel's drawn face, she hurried to ask, "Is something wrong?"

She drew a sharp breath, the words almost tumbling from her lips. "Has he been here at all tonight?"

Tammy shook her head. "As I said, I haven't seen him, but you could ask Rosalie."

Rachel shook her head. "No. This is private, something I have to talk to him about."

"Have you tried his house?"

"No, but I will. Thanks."

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by Jeya Jenson

Sighing, Rachel patted the girl on the arm and turned away.

Maybe its better this way, she thought. I just let sense get away from me. How could I have really thought what he offered was a true thing?

Chapter Twenty

Exhausted, Rachel parked her car in the secluded cul-de-sac where she and Devon had first made love. Since leaving the nightclub, she'd driven around for hours, debating on whether or not she should seek him out at home. In the end, she decided not to. And though her vision was blurry and her eyes burned from the many tears she'd shed through the day, she simply was not ready to go home, nor did she wish to go to Ginny's apartment. Somehow, coming back to the park seemed right.

Killing the engine and lights, she got out. The air around her was warm, fresh. A light breeze winnowed through the trees, gently caressing her cheeks, tugging at her clothes. Crickets chirruped and the late night birds sang their mysterious song. Tilting back her head, she was amazed by the vastness of the sky, of its seemingly endless limit.

If I could fly, she wondered, how far could I go before coming to the end of the universe?

If I came to the end, would I find God in his Heaven, the core of all creation? A small smile curved her lips. *Are you there now, Ginny, looking down on us tiny humans, glad to be free of the shackles of this Earth, the worries of the flesh?*

"I wish I was free, too," she whispered.

Gentle hands settled on her shoulders, pulling her to a hard body. "I can give you that freedom," a familiar voice whispered in her ear.

"Devon?" His name broke from her lips even as her own hand rose to grasp his. She had not heard another car, had not heard footsteps approaching from behind, yet she could feel the solidity of his body. It felt so good, so familiar, that she did not want to leave his embrace. Ever.

She swallowed. "How did you find me?"

He nuzzled her neck, laughing lightly. "I told you I would come for you, beloved. I was only waiting for your call."

She stood, her body trembling, sure that she would collapse if not for his strong arms encircling her waist. "You knew I was looking for you?"

"Yes," he replied, his lightly accented voice low and sexy. "With every fiber of my being, I felt your need of me, your seeking ... You're reaching, Rachel, searching for that thing that has always eluded you. I can give you that, and so much more. All you have to do is believe."

Her eyes burned with the all-too-familiar tears flowing down her cheeks. Breaking free of his hold, she turned to him, moved by the deep emotion in his voice. She looked up into his face, shadowed, serious.

She blinked, hesitating, searching for the right words. "I—I want to believe," she choked, swallowing the lump in her throat. "I want out of this ugly, evil place."

Devon smiled down at her and brushed his fingers through the curtain of dark bangs that had fallen across her eyes. "I did not want to live without you, Rachel." He took her two hands tightly between his own. "You are my soul, the half I have been missing. If you cross, you will not regret it. We will never be apart again."

Before Night Falls
by Jeya Jenson

Without saying a word, Rachel flung her arms around his neck, squeezing hard as he lifted her off her feet and into his strong arms. He kissed her firmly on the mouth. As their kiss deepened, her heart took flight. She would not be the one to pull away.

Chapter Twenty-One

Devon's private chambers were decorated in black and white, marble and onyx, a haven lit only by firelight and swathed in shadows. It was a haunting place, its atmosphere welcoming only those who walked the night. Heavy drapes cut off the outside world, blocking all light, muffling sound. A thick haze of incense hung in the air, a mixture of sandalwood and musk, designed to relax and enhance erotic sensation.

Beside him, Rachel trembled, her gaze searching out every nook and cranny, flicking over the many candles, the fire burning in the hearth.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, "but eerie."

He drew her into his arms, chasing away her shivers.

"Does it frighten you?"

She nodded, burying her face in his chest. "Yes."

He kissed the top of her head. "You have nothing to fear."

"How do I know this is true?" she asked waveringly.

"You must have faith," he said. "Believe in me."

She broke away from him. Crossing to the window, she drew aside the curtains, peering out into the darkness.

"I'll never walk in sunlight again, will I?" Her tone was curiously distant.

"No. Though we can move in the day, direct exposure can be deadly to our kind."

She sighed, letting the curtain drop. "Guess I won't miss it too badly. I never was a sun worshipper anyway."

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by Jeya Jenson

"We have our weaknesses," he began slowly, "but we have many strengths as well. While others around you will grow old and die, you shall pass through the ages untouched, your youth intact. And no longer will you be an earthbound spirit. The elements are ours to command, the wind to carry us to the four corners of the Earth, for we are descended from those who once traveled the heavens at will."

"It sounds unbelievable," she murmured.

Devon spread his hands wide. "I cannot make you believe it," he said simply. "You must accept by faith alone."

She gave him a square look that said she questioned the idea of faith. "Did you believe?"

"I was ready to accept when Ariel came into my life."

One eyebrow shot up, suspicion coloring her features.

"Ariel?" she repeated icily.

He hurried to explain. "Ariel was the one who brought me across, a very long time ago."

Curiosity now. "How long ago?"

"I am one hundred and forty-three years old."

"That's not so very old," she commented. When her comment elicited no response, she pressed on. "Ariel—where is she now?"

A muscle in his jaw tightened. "She is dead." Before she could voice another question, he hurried on, wanting to get the story finished. "You will find there are some who know of our kind—and do not accept our right to exist on this Earth. They have made it their holy mission to destroy us. Ariel was taken from me, destroyed by those murderers like a rabid

animal. We were not together long." His words trailed off into silence.

Ariel had died so very long ago, yet the wounds etched on his heart sometimes felt as if they were inflicted only the day before. He had often felt that nothing would assuage that ache. Now he held the hope in his heart and soul that he was wrong. The woman he'd searched for blindly through so many years stood in front of him now—flesh, blood and bone. And she was willing to become his.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I shouldn't have asked." She shivered, wrapping her arms around her body. "If you hadn't found me tonight, I don't know what I would have done. I can't take it anymore. I've had enough of this life." A sob broke from her throat.

"Your old life is about to end, Rachel," Devon soothed. "A new one will begin for you."

She looked up at him. "You promise?"

He gazed into her deep blue eyes. The irises were fragmented with silver flecks, so reminiscent of an ocean lit by moonlight, drawing him into their depth. He could feel that ache inside her, knew that she silently wept for a world she could not understand because she did not truly belong in it.

"I do." To reassure her, he tipped back her head, giving her a soft, sweet kiss. She let out a faint gasp of surprise and pleasure when his lips trailed down her throat, his tongue rasping against the small scar on her jugular. He could feel the quick beating of her heart, hear the harshness of her breath. Beneath her desire, she was afraid of him, of her decision. He unbuttoned the front of her blouse, his hands

moving inside her clothing to caress her breasts. She pressed herself into his hands, offering the sacrifice of her body. Nearly melting when her eyes flashed up at him, the passion he beheld in her features summoned the familiar heat from low in his groin. He could feel the rise of his cock against the tight restraints of his trousers.

Not now, he warned himself. First she must cross, then you may take her. He needed to focus his energies on bringing Rachel across—should he lose concentration, she would be lost.

Sliding her blouse off her shoulders, he unzipped her skirt, helping her step out of it. Bra and panties followed, until she stood naked and vulnerable before him. Picking her up, he carried her to his bed, laying her gently in the center of its softness. When she was settled comfortably, he took up a soft leather cuff attached to one of the bedposts and encircled her left wrist with it, drawing the buckle tight.

"What are you doing?" she asked, tone taut with unspoken worry. She made no attempt to fight him as he shackled her right wrist. The tightness of her jaw and firm set of her mouth betrayed her worry, though her eyes still said she trusted him implicitly.

"So that you will not injure yourself when you cross," Devon explained as he lay down, propping himself up on an elbow, stroking her cheek.

She drew a painful breath. "What's going to happen?" He could tell she was frightened even saying the words, yet she had thus far managed to remain remarkably calm.

"It will be very pleasurable for you," he lied. His hand moved to the soft curve of her breast, fingers teasing a nipple until it grew erect under his touch. "First, I must bring you to the height of orgasm. When your energies are at their strongest, I will drink of you—take your essences into myself. Then, I will share mine with you. When you have taken my blood, your crossing will be completed."

She gave a wan smile. "That doesn't sound too terribly bad."

Devon remained silent, almost having to bite his tongue to keep from screaming out that he was deceiving her, that the crossing would be painful—but well worth the experiencing. What he dare not tell her was that he had to take her life, her breath away, kill her so that he could resurrect her.

"Trust me," he whispered. "Do you believe what I say is true?"

"Yes," she breathed, face half in shadows and half in light.

"Good."

Under his touch, Rachel shuddered slightly. He began to stroke her breast. When he felt her relax, he dipped his head low and took her nipple into his mouth. Teasing the erect nubbin, he slowly swirled his tongue down over her creamy mound, kissing the valley of her breasts, then back up again to her other nipple. Sucking, licking, teasing, he took the nipple between his teeth, then sucked it deeper into his mouth.

"That feels so good," she whimpered softly in the back of her throat, her voice growing hoarse with her need. He nibbled at the softness of her neck, then moved to her

earlobe. He flicked his tongue behind her ear, beginning a delicious tease. Rachel moaned and lifted her hips, parting her thighs. "Touch me, please," she gasped. The gleam of anticipation in her eyes was unmistakable.

Devon smiled. "Patience," he whispered, beginning to kiss and nibble down her ribcage, over her abdomen. He could feel the fine tremors underneath her skin. She was excited and frightened, intrigued but uncertain of what lay ahead.

She sucked in her breath in anticipation as his body moved lower. He planted soft kisses across her belly, going lower to the soft curls covering her womanhood. Very lightly, he kissed the insides of her thighs, causing her to shiver. Her breath caught in her throat when he ran his finger between her spread legs. Her cunt seemed to vibrate against the tips of his fingers.

He began to stroke her, slipping one finger between the soft petals of her womanhood. Already she was dripping. Ever so gently, his finger slid up and down, spreading her apart so he could tongue her pink clit.

Rachel's eyes shot open. "Oh, my!" She strained against the bonds holding her arms, hands flexing open and closed as pleasure washed over her body. When she could not pull herself loose, she whimpered and squirmed, trying to press her hips against his face. He sucked even harder, making the little knob swell and pulse.

"I need you inside me," she gasped out. "Please." She raised her hips off the bed, trying to meet his mouth. She'd reached her limits of self-control. Her body stiffened when her

orgasm ripped through her, her exposed breasts heaving as she gasped for air.

Devon pulled back. "Not yet," he whispered. He quickly rose to his knees, straddling her body so that he had complete control over her. His knee pressed against her cunt, giving her a pleasant pressure to rub her pussy against. Her juices drenched his trousers, the scent of her musky sex intermingling with the burning incense.

Slipping his hand under a pillow, he withdrew the small switchblade. Her eyes widened when the blade flicked out, making a soft swishing sound. Catching her by the chin, he pressed the heel of his hand against her jaw to expose her neck. In a single motion, he drew the blade across the soft flesh of her neck, making a small cut. Warm blood trickled over her pale white skin. He lowered his body, pressing his lips to the cut, drinking deeply of her essences.

When he had taken enough of her blood, he lifted his head. Her blood stained his lips. Without hesitating, his mouth captured hers, allowing her to taste the blood, her blood, fusing with her female juices. She accepted his kiss greedily, sucking at his tongue, trying to take every last drop from him.

With reluctance, Devon drew away. "Now you must cross," he murmured. Reclaiming his blade, he made a quick, deep cut in his palm. Arm trembling, he reached out and tipped his hand over her mouth, letting his blood drip past her lips. She drank his blood greedily, but he only let her have a bit. Closing his hand, he halted the flow of his blood. When he reopened his hand, no scar marked his flesh.

She had no more swallowed than her body convulsed, her head jerking sharply to one side. A mixture of fear and betrayal filled her eyes, her arms going rigid as she fought to escape the bonds holding her captive. Hands flexing open and closed, she tugged against the bonds, droplets of cold perspiration breaking out on her skin.

"What's happening to me!" she gasped out. "It's cold.... oh, God, so cold ... eating me up inside!" A scream burbled from her lips, loud and long, the agonized wail of the damned soul.

"I am sorry," he murmured, stroking her forehead, trying to calm her. He watched her closely, knowing well her agony, for he had once experienced it, too. In introducing his blood to her body, he had, in essence, put a deadly virus into her system. Like acid through her veins, his blood was eating its way through her, killing her blood cells and replacing it with an alien, inhuman mutation. Her system was beginning the metamorphoses that would take her from mortal to immortal.

The minutes passed with agonizing slowness. Devon watched closely as her flesh grew paler, whiter, the fall of her chest slowing as her heart stopped beating. This was the hardest part of the crossing; the self-induced asphyxiation of her body killing itself. Deprived of air, the chemistry of the blood temporarily changed. When the brain was robbed of oxygen, the victim experienced a high—euphoria, dizziness, and lowered inhibition before losing consciousness. She writhed only a few minutes more. Then she lay unmoving, dead to this world. Her last expression was one of confusion, as if she was puzzled by his deceit.

But not for long, he thought, relieved the process was over.

Freeing her wrists, he drew her limp body into his arms, lifting her into a sitting position. Brushing her damp bangs off her forehead, he tilted back her head and pressed his mouth to hers, sharing his breath with her, urging her to breathe again. When she did not immediately respond, he began to worry that she had not crossed over intact. He gave her cheek a light slap, trying to penetrate the darkness that had overcome her. Relief filled him when her eyelids began to flutter. Her lips began to move, a weak whisper escaping her throat.

"Devon?" she croaked, voice barely above a whisper.

He smiled, heart filling with relief. "You have crossed over, beloved. It is done." Reaching up, he unbuttoned his shirt. Baring his chest, he made a cut just above his right nipple, then guided her lips to it. He felt her tense.

"Nooooo..." she moaned. "It hurtssssss too bad." She tried to pull away, but was too weak to resist.

"It will bring no pain now," he soothed. "You need your strength." He pressed her lips to his flesh again, urging her to drink.

She hesitated, then gave in to her need, lapping at his blood, her tongue soft and warm against his skin. His fingers caressed the nape of her neck as she drank of him. He closed his eyes, feeling a supreme sense of peace. When she pulled away, her skin had assumed a normal, pink hue. Her eyes were bright, seeing the world around her with a new clarity.

Cradling her face between his hands, he asked, "How do you feel?"

Without a word, she touched her fingers to her lips. Drawing her hand away, she looked at the blood staining the tips. Then her hand returned to the cut he'd made in his skin. Already his blood was slowing, the wound healing. Her gaze drifted lower. A small gasp of surprise escaped her lips. A slow smile curved one corner of her mouth.

"You have a mark," she murmured. "Like mine."

"Yes," he said slowly. "A mark I have worn since the day of my birth, a sign that I, too was to be chosen to receive this gift when others would be passed over."

"It's the same, but different," she said, speaking as if she barely trusted her voice.

He lifted his hand, showing her the signet ring he wore. "If you join my mark and yours, they come together to form this sign. It is a symbol of balance, of completion."

She looked astonished. "W—why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't want you to feel manipulated," he said softly. "But maybe if I had told you earlier, you would have understood better. Not all Kynn wear the mark, only those chosen for a special purpose for our people."

"How?" she started to ask. "What purpose?"

He shook his head. "How can one question the stars in the sky or the rising of the sun that brings a new day? Some would call it the hand of God himself, though I cannot say for certain. I only know that once in a great while, we meet our true blood-mate."

A light blush crept into her cheeks, flushing and heating her skin. "Am I that to you?"

"Yes, beloved," he said. "And more." Hardly aware of what he was doing, he began to undress. His clothes seemed to melt away as he tossed them onto the floor beside hers. His cock was a thing alive, straining and eager to be surrounded by those luscious lips of hers.

Naked as she, Devon laid Rachel back on the bed, brushing his fingers along the curve of her breast, laying the flat of his hand on her belly. She smiled up at him, touching his face. Her eyes were shining, wide with anticipation. The nervous energy of their last encounters was gone, replaced with a comfortable sense of familiarity. Mated, they could now make love without one weakening the other. Soon, he would have to share her with others, teach her how to sustain her new life, draw into her body the energies of mortals. He had no doubt that she would be an eager student.

For the present, though, Rachel Marks was his and his alone.

Devon could not stop moving his hands over her lithe naked body; kissing those lovely lips of hers ... couldn't stop drinking in her very essences. Her nipples jutted, as pink and ripe as cherries under the summer sun. He closed his mouth over the nearest tip. She squirmed with delight, moaning.

Flicking the tender nub with his tongue, he moved his hand lower, parting her legs. She threw back her head, gasping in surprise when he began to explore her with all the knowledge nearly a century and a half had given him. He slipped his

fingers through her slick inner lips, plumbing her creamy depths until he could go no further.

"You're so lovely," he murmured, wanton fierceness making his voice tremble. "I've wanted you since the day I saw you." His fingers delved deeper. The expression in her eyes was naked. She quivered with tension, ached with desire.

"I'm yours," she murmured. "For as long as it might last."

He couldn't suppress a laugh. "Think you can stand me for another century or two?" This beautiful woman belonged to him, and he was suddenly grateful that she'd consented to love him.

Her eyes widened. "Will I really live to see centuries pass?"

"That," he whispered. "And many more."

She gazed entreatingly up at him, her eyes soft and appealing. "As long as we're together."

Devon smiled again, entering her soft depths with two fingers, stroking his thumb against her clit. Her words became little more than lustful moans. She shuddered violently and then peaked, her vagina pulsing greedily around his fingers.

Unable to hold himself back any longer, he shifted his weight, his body covering hers. Supporting his weight, he settled between her spread legs, pressing his erection against the soft nest of her belly. He captured her mouth in a long sensual kiss, tongue tangling with hers. Her hands moved up and down his back, caressing him softly, then moving lower to knead the cheeks of his ass. Her hands moved between their bodies, her searching fingers circling around his cock.

Silently urging him to move his hips by lifting her own, she guided his shaft to the downy opening of her womanhood, rubbing the tip against her softness.

Sliding his cock into her, he watched her face as myriad expressions took form. Eyes closed, she responded to his thrusts with an instinctive rhythm. Her head fell back on the pillow, her face lit with sheer joy. Eyelashes softly brushing her cheeks, her full lips drew inward, her tongue snaking out to trace their curves. Her fingers dug deeply into his shoulders, her sharp nails close to rending his flesh.

Unable to hold himself back, he captured her hands above her head. Allowing no mercy, he thrust harder, going as deep as the limitations of their bodies would allow. A tightening of his balls warned him that he would not be able to hold back much longer. He felt Rachel's body go rigid, convulsing under his weight. A cry broke from her lips, one of pure primal pleasure. Spurred by her sounds, he gave in to his own growing climax, a sensation so intense that his very being pulsed with fire. In a blinding instant they melded into a single entity, the flames of orgasm spreading through his rigid body and into Rachel's as his semen jetted into her hungry womb.

When his arms could no longer support his weight, Devon rolled onto his side. As he stretched out beside her, Rachel's breath caught in her throat. She quickly turned her head aside, trying to hide her face. A small shudder trembled through her body before a single tear rolled down her cheek.

Concerned, Devon stroked her hair away from her face, smoothing the tangles with a gentle touch. The crossing was

always hard—the adjustment in body, mind and spirit was sometimes difficult to take. Everything had changed in her life.

She rolled her head to look into his eyes. To his surprise Rachel's gaze was dreamy, distant. "I can't believe this is happening," she murmured. "It doesn't feel real ... you don't feel real. It's like I'll wake up and it'll all be gone tomorrow."

Devon slid his hand over her cheek, cupping her face. "It's not going to end, you and I. Once a Kynn takes a mate, it is forever."

A soft smile tugged at her mouth, making him want to lay claim to her luscious lips. "Forever," she mouthed the word, drawing it out. "And a day. That's how long I want it to last. Forever and a day."

He dipped his head, nuzzling the soft skin of her neck. His senses were overflowing to bursting, but so was his heart. "And it shall be so, my love."

She lowered her hand, brushing her palm across the smooth plane of her stomach. A shy smile turned up one corner of her mouth, like a child with a secret wish. "When you climaxed, I felt something happen inside, something I've never felt before."

He arched a single brow, grinning. "Orgasm, I hope."

She drew in a breath as if to fortify herself. "No, past that, I felt something else—like a new energy, a new life entered me."

"In essence, one has."

Rachel shook her head, her blue eyes serious. "No, Devon. It was something more, something else—something only a

woman would feel." Her face, already flushed, deepened a shade. "They say a woman knows when that moment happens."

Curiosity filled him. "That moment?"

She nodded. "That moment when she conceives."

Devon shook his head. "The Kynn can not reproduce." His disbelief died when he caught sight of the spark in her blue eyes. Her features positively glowed with possibility, a woman's hopes and dreams.

Rachel lifted her hand, slowly tracing the mark on his chest, before touching the mark on her own thigh. "You said it yourself ... we both bear a mark that completes the other. A child would complete us, bring a new beginning to the Kynn race." As she spoke her eyes alight with that mysterious power drawn from her female intuition. "Something happened inside me. I know it."

His gaze ranged over her, skimming her breasts, then lower to her Venus mound, a sexy, seductive trail. His body automatically tightened with fresh response. What would she look like with her belly bulging, heavy with child? Was it true that he and Rachel could somehow overcome the disease of barrenness that had cursed the Kynn for centuries uncounted?

He didn't know the answers to any of those questions. But he wanted to find out.

Devon held her close, caressing her, murmuring softly into her ear, "I hope you're right."

His hands began to explore her body, cupping a breast, heavy and soft. His heart pounded in his chest, his penis

beginning to throb afresh with a renewed and intense desire. Anticipation had given his body fresh strength.

"Something did," she whispered. Giving him a sultry pout, Rachel's hand found the crux of his thighs. She spread her fingers around his shaft. His body instantly leapt in response. "And it will again."

Their gazes locked, the moment suspended as a silent communication passed between them, their minds joining into one.

Going on instinct alone Devon shifted his body atop hers, bracketing her in his arms, anticipating the feel of her silken depths awaiting his unsheathed cock. Rachel moaned softly in surrender, welcoming him.

His breath caught as the tip of his cock found her slick opening. It was hard to leash his self-control, but he wanted to take her slowly, tease her into an erotic frenzy.

Sensing his intentions, Rachel rolled her hips in a teasing manner, a silent plea for him to rejoin his body with hers. Tangling her fingers in his long hair, she pulled him down for a long, joining her mouth to his. Her tongue swept in, sparking sensations that set his nerves to tingling as they feasted on each other lips, drawing out their hungers into a long, suckling kiss. The contact between them shimmered, feeling almost electric in its intensity. Yes, something was definitely happening...

Curling a fist into her long hair, Devon barely leashed the maddening impulse to simply impale her with one deep thrust. He gently slid his erection inside her, savoring the way her tight flesh welcomed his entry. Whimpering her need,

Before Night Falls
by Jeya Jenson

Rachel arched under him, crazed anew by the lust he incited in her body.

With an easy muscular flex, Devon pushed until her naked body was thoroughly impaled and he was engulfed in her sweet, wet heat. She was slick and snug, welcoming every inch of his cock.

Supporting his weight on his elbows, he gazed down into her eyes, watching her pleasure rise to a blazing temperature as he undulated his hips against hers. He took his time, teasing her with long endless strokes. Each thrust sent widening ripples of pleasure through his body. He could feel the hot pressure of climax building.

"Then we had better make sure," he gasped through a groan of effort, "that we're doing it right..."

About the Author

Jeya Jenson, Caitlyn McKenna and Devyn Quinn, aka the Mistress of Dark Shadows, does not exist. These identities live among smoke and mirrors, the pen wielding waifs of one person's fertile imagination, sprinkled with a few dreams and wishes along the way. Home is where this trio hangs their hats, along with a dog, a ferret and a friendly cat or two.

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