

Flesh and the Devil



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Flesh and the Devil

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DEDICATION:

This book is dedicated to two people:
Tracey West, my friend, who read the book first
and advised me on its content.

And Robin Taylor, my editor, who made sure that
all the words were where they needed to be. Thanks
to these two ladies for their valuable help and input
during the creation of this novella.

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CHAPTER ONE

Brenden Wallace sighed and lowered his binoculars. Today was going to be one of those days when absolutely nothing useful was going to be accomplished. He could feel it in his gut. Sighing again, he shifted his body in the uncomfortable seat, feeling the cramp in his legs and ass from hours of continual sitting. It was torture for a six-foot-tall man to sit for so long in a tiny space. His hand scrabbled toward the breast pocket of his shirt, finding his cigarettes. Extracting one, he lit it, drawing a deep breath as he sucked on the filter. Tarry smoke filled his lungs. He'd already spent way too many hours here, and so far, he hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary.

"My first week back on the job," he muttered, exhaling smoke, "and they've got me staking out a goddamned whorehouse."

He rubbed his tired eyes and reached for the cup balanced between his splayed legs. He took a gulp of its contents; black unsweetened coffee. Hours ago it had gone cold. The churning acid rose to the back of his throat as the bitter brew mixed in his stomach to

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burn away another millimeter of tissue on the ulcer he felt forming. Pain immediately sliced through his gut, feeling as though a razor was wending its way through his bowels. He grimaced and tossed the empty cup into the floor on the passenger side. It joined a pile of trash that included other coffee cups, discarded sandwich wrappers and dozens of crumpled cigarette packs, a testament to the many hours that had passed by as he sat in his cramped shell of fiberglass and metal.

Cigarette clenched between his teeth, he raised the binoculars again.

Six months ago, a business license had been granted and an escort service had opened its doors for business. The reason he was here today was a simple one. The owner, a woman by the exotic name of Ládán Niamh, was suspected of running more than a simple after-hours gentlemen's club-she was under suspicion of prostitution. Complaints from angry wives and girlfriends had tipped the police off that there was more pressing of the flesh going on than was legally allowed.

Catching his cigarette between thumb and forefinger, Brenden flicked the gray ashes out the window. He tossed aside the binoculars, catching a brief glimpse of half his face in the rear view mirror; a thatch of messy brown hair and bloodshot blue-gray eyes. Lines of worry puckered his forehead. Shadows lingered behind his gaze, the ghosts of disappointment and disillusionment. One of his irises had a thin streak of amber through the lower half, as though someone had taken an eraser and began to

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rub out one color and replace it with another. People, especially guilty ones, were frequently unsettled by that odd eye, something he used to good effect when employing his best mean cop stare.

It was almost hilarious that he should be getting paid to stake out a passel of pretty young ladies, when there was currently a restraining order sworn out against him. That was courtesy of his fourth ex-wife, a stripper named Danicia. She presently worked at Midnight Traffick, the topless bar downtown. He now had to stay one hundred and fifty yards away from her at all times or face being arrested for stalking and harassment. It was also because of that tits-and-ass bar that he had been suspended without pay. About six weeks ago, he'd gotten picked up on his third DUI, leading Chief of Police Ray Eddington to issue a warning: sober up and get straight or get fired.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that drinking and driving was a criminal offense. More so for a police officer. It would also be a crime of moral turpitude if he were to be convicted. That would mean immediate removal from his job.

He was presently on probation. He was also supposed to be on the wagon, had sworn on his mother's grave and lied like a dog that he would go to the AA meetings at the local Baptist church on Sundays and Thursdays. So far he hadn't attended a single meeting. Chief Eddington had recently laid down the letter of the law to him in no uncertain terms, though. Right now he was walking a very thin line, literally between the rock and the fucking hard place.

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"Women," he muttered, stubbing out his cigarette. "Can't live with them, can't bury them in the back yard."

He gave a deep shudder, mouth twisting painfully. One more screw up and he would be packing his bags and leaving town—that was if he wasn't serving time in jail.

Opening the car door, he got out. The cool air of the early evening was like a balm on his flushed skin. The city car didn't have a good air conditioner, and recent rains had made the moist air even balmier than normal. A layer of sweat and grime clung to his flesh, something it seemed no amount of cold showers and soap could ever wash away. He could feel wet patches under his arms, trickles of sweat making its way down his spine to his underwear. Sweat fogged his vision as he pushed sticky bangs off his forehead.

He pulled in a deep breath, taking in the scents of the city; a mixture of carbon monoxide and damp concrete tinged with the smell of pure human waste from a sewer system that threatened to overflow under the continual torrent of rain. Ah, such was the familiar smell of home. Stretching his arms wide, he backed his shoulders, trying to relieve the ache at the base of his neck.

Leaning against the car, an unmarked nondescript blue seventeen-year-old Chevy that immediately identified him as a cop to anyone who cared to look close enough, he drummed restless fingers on the roof. A few people drove by, recognized him, waved.

He waved back. It was hard to be anonymous in a town of less than three thousand people. He glanced

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briefly toward the darkening horizon, a mixture of pinks and deepening navy hues. In another few minutes the sun would disappear into the west and night would spread its velvet cloak over the sleepy sky. He should be going off-duty, packing it in and calling it a day.

Still, something urged him to linger, as if tugging at him with invisible fingers.

From his vantage point on an incline slightly above the house, he could clearly see everything that happened at the residence. Of course, this also meant that those being watched could probably see him, too.

The manor that currently housed the business was a grand antebellum showplace that had been built by one of the town's founding fathers. It had been built about a century ago and became a bar in early nineteenth century after its original owner died. Except during Prohibition, it had pretty much remained one until the late nineteen seventies, when it closed due to bankruptcy. Unpaid taxes had put it under the city's control, and it had sat empty through the eighties, as no one knew what to do with the old behemoth that seemed to have no useful purpose and couldn't compete with the newer, sleeker buildings being erected throughout Dordogne. Miss Niamh had not only purchased the house, she'd refurbished it in and out, then hung out her shingle.

At first the city council had been glad to get the useless old place off their hands. Now, they weren't so sure. So that's where he came in. It was up to him to determine if the lady in question was practicing the world's oldest profession.

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A little laugh escaped his lips; half a chuckle of amusement, half disgust.

God knew it was perfectly all right for women to shake their bare tits and asses in the nudie bars uptown, but God forbid if someone actually sold a piece of that tail that so enticed men. You could look in this county, but you certainly couldn't touch. Hell, Dordogne still had sodomy laws on the books, whether between men and women, men and men or men and animals.

Because he'd been a vice cop in Dallas before his relocation eight years ago to what he thought would be a simpler life in Louisiana, Brenden was the one who always drew any kind of case that required a modicum of investigation. He was one of two sergeants on the force, and one of the few on staff who had any real investigative experience. People became filled with angst when it rained twenty-nine out of thirty days a month. The population had its fair share of domestics and burglaries, a suicide once in a while, even a murder. For the most part, though, those things were few and far between and he could pretty much bank on the fact that he would be going home at night in one piece.

Dordogne was also definitely bayou country, a unique blend of the old and new, of southern hospitality and French-Cajun superstition. Spanish moss abounded and sleepy cypress trees nodded in the swamps, mixing with the ancient live oaks that stood guard around the perimeters of the town. Most of the homes were large and aged, concealed by walls and nearly impenetrable clinging vines and oleander.

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Many of the streets were a God-awful maze, and he'd gotten lost more than once on his way to answer a call.

Aside from a four-screen movie theater and a bowling alley, there was almost nothing for anyone under eighteen to do for entertainment. Drugs were a problem among the teens, and he'd shut down more than one meth lab operating in the forbidding and hostile marshes on the outskirts of town. It was the kind of place people usually passed through on their way to the larger, more scenic cities, serving as little more than a pit stop for travelers. Baton Rouge was an hour's drive, but it might as well have been a world away for all the differences.

Dipping into his cigarettes again, he lit another. His eyes were fixed on the front entrance of the house. Through the last two days, he'd watched the people come and go, jotting down license plate numbers, familiarizing himself with its operations from the outside. To break up the boredom, he'd had the dispatcher run a few of the plates. Most of them were from out of town.

Not catering to the locals, I see. Wise, ladies...very wise.

He'd already nailed down in his memory all five of the girls living there, not an ugly one in the group. The ladies came and went at irregular intervals, keeping their activities clandestine. Not a one of the girls appeared to be over the age of twenty-five and more than once he'd trained his binoculars on a shapely ass or pair of breasts. Hell, he might be four times divorced, but he wasn't dead. It was almost a relief to feel a twitch in his cock, the familiar heat of

desire in his loins. He wouldn't have minded giving any of the girls a good fuck, though that probably was not exactly how the city planned to crack down on prostitution and illegitimate activity.

Operating from about seven in the evening until late into the morning hours, the escort service worked by appointment only. A popular place, there was never a lack of traffic.

Since there was only the merest impression that the ladies were actually trading sex for money, police couldn't just kick down the doors and go in guns-a-blazing. It was not illegal to run an escort service in the great state of Louisiana. It was illegal to solicit a person with the intention of promoting prostitution. As a right-minded thinking person, he really didn't think that sex for money should be a crime. It was only a misdemeanor for man to buy himself a piece of ass. The whore usually got a slap on the wrist, too, fined a few hundred dollars, and turned loose to trick again. As a cop, though, it was his job to enforce the laws.

Right now he needed a bit of evidence to back up the hearsay. The best way to do that was to book an appointment and see if the entertainment services offered included any sort of sexual interplay. If his escort made him an offer, he could book her and take her in. She could pay the fines and be back in business within a day. The intention was not to run the ladies out of town tarred and feathered. He'd just give them a little roust, let them know that the police knew what was going on. That way the Christian moralists would be satisfied, and the city council could justify

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the salaries of its eight-man police force.

The sun sank a little lower, and the sky took on the color of a bruise. A few more men came and went. All drove nice cars, all were well-dressed.

Reaching through the open window, Brenden snagged up his binoculars, bumping his head in the process. Elbow propped on the hood of the car, he trained his spy eyes on the front door. He was rewarded with an opening door, only this time a beautifully dressed woman stepped out onto the verandah.

Líadán Niamh, he thought and smiled. His cock stirred in his slacks at the sight of her. Truly a lady of the night, she never came out before sundown. The tight green silk oriental-style dress she wore clung to every curve of her tall, lithe body. Her long raven's black hair was done up in a chic chignon, and only served to enhance the paleness of her milk white skin. The contrast between the two left him breathless. Of all the ladies, she was the one he'd kept a closer eye on. Not because she was the owner, but also because she was the most beautiful.

He tensed, adjusting the lenses so he could see her better. A muscle twitched in his jaw. His tongue snaked out, tracing the line of his lips, gaze following her every move with interest.

I'm going to fuck her. That was his first thought on seeing her and now he couldn't get it out of his head.

"Sweet Jesus," he whistled under his breath. *She is perfect in every way.*

Haloed by the soft light emanating from the open door behind her, Líadán was laughing, smiling,

clearly pleased. She held out her hand and a man came out to join her. His hand slid around her slender waist, palm sliding with an unsettling familiarity over the curves of her ass before finished its transit. He then pulled her close and kissed her.

Brenden's eyes narrowed as he directed a glacial look toward the man. His suit looked expensive, custom-made. He didn't know this man, but it was clear that he was on intimate terms with Ms. Niamh.

God, how I'd love to be running my hands over her ass, he thought.

Heart pounding, he closed his eyes. His stomach performed a back flip as jealousy hit him full force, stunning him with the instant emotion. He hadn't realized until this moment how attracted he was to this mysterious woman. Why couldn't he wrest his eyes from her? Was it because she silently beckoned him? Or was there something more from her that he longed to possess, something that went beyond the physical?

Since he'd first set eyes on her, he'd been casting her in his sexual fantasies, playing them across his mind's screen, all the lascivious things he'd thought about doing to her perfect body. He could imagine her naked, long hair down around her shoulders, firm white thighs spread in anticipation of receiving his cock. Even now he could fantasize that they were making love, the soft sensation of her mouth open to the invasion of his tongue, her body pinned under his as he sheathed his erection deep inside her. He doubted she'd stay passive, though. He pictured her as determined to be on top, wrestling him for control.

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Mouth suddenly desert-dry, he swallowed, reminding himself to breathe. Still, the invisible fingers refused to lessen their tight grip around his heart. Trying to clear his mind, he felt both sick and shaky, like someone suffering a nerve-shattering shock. His head felt as though it had been squeezed in a vice. All he wanted to think about was Ládán, naked. The word obsession was not too far from his mind. On top of his list, though, was lonely. God, how he hated to live alone. Why, why couldn't he learn to be with a woman, keep her happy?

Don't be a ridiculous fool! he silently reprimanded himself. *I'm not supposed to be thinking about fucking the woman I might soon be arresting.* No matter how diligent and fair the ladies might be to customers, if they were too friendly, he'd have to run them in.

"A woman like that is out of my league," he muttered, watching the smiling couple get into a sleek sports car and drive off. "The only things I get are strippers and waitresses."

CHAPTER TWO

Hands shoved deep in his pockets, Brenden finally got to stand on the hallowed ground. The foyer was huge, open and inviting, ceramic tile under his feet. Though the shades were drawn against the fading day outside, the reception area was intimately lit, revealing a living room of comfortable overstuffed couches. Getting a 'booking' had taken quite a bit of begging and wheedling on his part. It cost one hundred and fifty dollars just to make an appointment, charged to the credit card of your choice, and another one-fifty at the conclusion of the client's evening.

Steep, he thought, but not wholly outrageous.

He cast his gaze around, noting little details here and there. There was a bar, and a large comfortable waiting area where the men mingled with the girls. A long set of stairs led to the second floor. When he arrived at six forty-five for his seven o'clock appointment, one of the girls verified his identification. He hadn't bothered trying to hide his identity. Instead of presenting a badge, he'd just presented a driver's license. The badge and gun, he'd left at home. The drill was going to be a simple one.

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He couldn't make any sexual moves or lewd suggestions to the ladies. That would be entrapment. They had to proposition him, offer him more than their pretty smiles and bright conversation.

"Líadán will be down shortly." She smiled knowingly and winked. Bright, blonde and pretty in that California 'pert' sort of way, he knew her name without asking. Gia Donovan.

Breaking his eye-lock from the nice set of breasts under that silky white blouse of hers, Brenden wandered over to the bar and ordered a drink, in this case Perrier with a twist of lime. Sipping his water, he watched the men claim their dates and drift in other directions. A couple went upstairs; another headed out the front door, off to dinner by the bits of conversation he picked up.

At seven on the dot, Líadán Niamh glided down the stairs, a sleek panther on the prowl for fresh red male meat. She was dressed in a short black dress that her body filled out very nicely. Heels and a simple string of pearls around her neck completed her ensemble. Naturally pale and porcelain-skinned, she had highlighted her face with discreet shades of toffee and peach that gave her skin a faux sun-kissed glow. Her eyes were beautifully made-up with a shade of shadow that only served to enhance their natural color, a deep blue flecked with silver. The color reminded him of an ocean under moonlight. A pale shade of gloss was slicked across her generous lips. Her long hair was pinned up. A few alluring strands curled around her face and the nape of her neck.

She really has the most wonderful mouth, he thought.

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Just made for kissing, for sucking... A man couldn't warm his hand on a chilly woman, and there was definitely nothing cold about Ládán. As if lit from inside, she seemed to radiate a heat that was all wanton female.

He swallowed hard, glad that he hadn't said the words aloud. He wanted to whisper more compliments in her delicate ears, taste those lips, touch her body. He could barely contain himself from pulling her into his arms. She stopped and offered her hand.

"Mister—?" She let the single word hang, inviting him to fill it in. Her cool gaze flicked over him, taking in every inch of his body in a casual assessment. He probably wasn't her type, but he wished he was anyway.

Brenden recovered in time to take her hand, shake it briefly, let it drop. At five foot, ten inches, she wasn't small and she carried her height gracefully, presenting herself as confident. Timid women certainly didn't attract him.

"Wallace," he finished. "Brenden Wallace."

"I am Ládán." She smiled, revealing perfect white teeth. Though the central incisors in her mouth were of a normal shape, the cuspids on either side were very slightly elongated and came to neat points, enhancing yet more that feline quality that hovered about her. It wasn't freakish, just...unusual.

"I believe you requested my company for the evening," she continued. Her voice was smooth, cultured. "Please tell me what our plans are." Her firm voice was lightly tinged with an accent he didn't

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quite recognize. Something European, he was sure.

Caught off guard by her question, Brenden silently cursed his stupidity. He hadn't made any plans.

"I'm just looking to waste a few hours," he stammered. He shrugged helplessly. "You know, maybe, uh, talk a little..."

"I think we can do that," she said. "Is there any place you would like to go, or shall we stay in tonight?"

"Uh, staying here is fine with me," he said.

"Well then, why don't we go somewhere where we can have our privacy?"

He nodded, trying to force himself to relax and failing. "Sounds fine to me."

When she turned around and bade him to follow, his eyes followed every movement of the luscious ass under her dress, which reminded him of two kittens playing under a sheet. The sway of her hips was mesmerizing. Oh, God, how he wouldn't love to pet that pussy between her legs.

He took a moment to snap back to the present as Ládán Niamh led him up the stairs to a suite that was decorated in a crimson and black gypsy motif. The shades were drawn, blocking out the outside world and the pink and blue-hued lights were turned low. Scented candles had been lit, their sweet fragrances wafting through the air. Soothing classical music played low on a stereo in the background. The lilting notes were evocative, sensual. A couple of closed doors led off in various directions.

Bedroom, maybe a bathroom, he reasoned.

Brenden looked around. It definitely seemed more

a *romantic* atmosphere than a *professional* one. His cop instincts kicked into gear.

"Uh, is this the way it's supposed to be?" he asked, playing the nervous john.

"Our objective is to create a blissful experience," she said. "To engage your senses and have you rest, rejuvenate your mind and spirit." She reached for a light switch. "But if you are uncomfortable, I will be glad to accommodate your needs in any way I can."

"Sorry," he said. "I've never done this before."

Again, that smile, the flash of subtly sharp teeth. He literally had the feeling that Ládán could be a formidable woman if provoked. She didn't *look* dangerous, but she *felt* dangerous, and that made him more wary than he cared to admit. He was bigger than she was, relatively sure he could overpower her with few problems. Still...he suddenly felt insignificant.

Leaving him behind, she crossed to a small mini-bar. "Perhaps some wine would calm your nerves." She filled two glasses, handed him one and sat down on the sofa. Kicking off her shoes, she curled her legs under her body and patted the seat beside her. "Sit down, please."

Nervously fingering the glass, Brenden sat down. Sitting so close to her, he could smell the perfume that clung to her skin, mingling with her unmistakable womanly scents. It infused in him a strong erotic awareness. She clearly wasn't wearing a bra, and the tips of her nipples protruded beneath the thin material. God, he was just dying to run his hands over her skin, pinch those nipples, suck them...

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Her eyes skimmed over him. A small smile quirked up one corner of her mouth.

Does she like what she sees? he wondered. He didn't think he was a bad-looking fellow. A lot of people compared his looks to the young Gary Cooper. *Well, okay. Maybe the about-to-hit-forty Gary Cooper.*

"Tell me what you would like to talk about," she opened, taking another sip from her glass. A droplet of wine clung to her lips as she lowered the glass. When her little pink tongue darted out to swipe it away, he damned near came in his pants.

"I really didn't come to talk," he admitted. "I'm just tired of being alone, going home to an empty house." He started to say something further, then changed his mind. In a rapid glance, he scanned her, the muscles in his cock contracting. Damn, to have her so close and not be able to touch her was excruciating.

She lifted one smooth arched brow. It gave her face a saturnine look. "You're not married?"

He shook his head. "Divorced. Four time loser."

She caught his gaze with hers as if beseeching him in some way he could not yet comprehend. "Maybe you haven't met the right woman," she offered.

He tried to make his shrug look careless. He wasn't a sensitive guy who liked to talk about his feelings. Why was she probing?

"Yeah, maybe." He sighed raggedly. "Sometimes I don't think there is a right woman for me, though."

"Then you don't believe in soul mates, that there is a woman for you alone?"

"For me alone?" he snorted. The narrow-eyed

glance he flicked at her was impatient. "No... There's been a lot of women, some I married, most I just fucked and forgot." Unmindful that he was supposed to be foregoing alcohol, he gulped down his wine. It was almost embarrassing how easy it was to say the words, words that were-in his case absolutely true. He didn't have to act the lonely man, because he *was* the lonely man.

Jesus, Brenden, he told himself, you're coming off like a goddamned lonely loser. Well, what could he say? He was a loser. He was lonely. He muttered a profanity under his breath. He wondered if the city would still reimburse his expenses if he slept with Ládán and then busted her.

She finished her wine and refilled both their glasses. He drank his down, then accepted a third and fourth glass, warming to the exquisite heat it created in his belly. Watching her take another delicate sip of her wine, he was immediately reminded of the fantasies that he'd had of her, highly erotic ones that portrayed her as an intense, passionate and fulfilling partner. He had imagined her as being both gentle and passionate, demanding and patient.

"What about your dreams?" she asked.

"We all have dreams," he said, not offering what he'd been dreaming about lately. She might be offended. And he didn't want to talk about the ones that might be doomed.

I just don't feel like being rejected, he told himself.

She was silent for a moment.

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked.

"Love?" he repeated, almost defensively. A harsh

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laugh escaped his throat, almost a growl. "I don't believe that love exists. You know what they say. Men give love to get sex. Women give sex to get love. Men and women are just fooling each other, manipulating each other. Why can't people just come out and say they want sex? Why does there even have to be a commitment at all nowadays?"

"You have a cynical heart." She touched his arm. "I like that. I, too, sometimes wonder about love."

"I would think a lady of your, ah, profession, would know all about the art of love."

Accustomed to feeling graceless around women, he'd let subtlety fly out the window. Damn it, he felt two inches tall. He'd put his foot in his mouth and really had no graceful way to back out. Well, when in doubt, the pot should always call the kettle black. He knew she was a whore. She knew she was a whore. Why beat around the bush? If he got the chance, he was sure he was going to fuck her, no question about it.

Líadán's face took on a shadow of sadness. He could feel her thinking in the moment of silence that followed. The wheels were turning in her head; he could almost hear the rattle.

"I know about the arts of physical pleasure," she finally admitted, sounding cautious. She paused long enough to make sure that he got the point—allowing no innuendoes "But the heart is a funny creature. You would think love would be gentle, giving. Instead it is cruel, wrenching. The acts committed in the name of love are more often worse than those committed in hate."

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He cleared his throat, letting out a huff of air.

"You sound as if you have known both." Being so close to her, wanting her so badly was a hell he almost couldn't force himself to endure any longer. He was heart-wrenchingly conscious of that lush body beneath her dress, so very aware of the aura of her female sexuality. He was also attuned to his own arousal, barely able to contain himself from leaning over and capturing her mouth with his.

"I have." She lifted a hand, drawing it along her pale neck. "But I also believe that we were not meant for one lover alone, but many. They come into our lives, enhance it, sometimes take away from it... Then they move on and another person comes. One by one they shape us into the people we are to be in life. And when we are complete, the sum of our perfection and of our failures, we are able to rest."

"Yeah," he grunted, his tone edgy. "Life's a bitch, then you marry four of them and then you die." Tense, he put down his glass and flexed his fingers. His head started to pound as the tension in his muscles locked his veins. The temperature in the room suddenly seemed to be scorching. He lifted his hand, pressing his fingers to his forehead. He hadn't slept much, and the exertions of the last week were beginning to catch up with him. He was vaguely aware of Ládán putting her glass down, getting up, circling the loveseat.

Gentle hands brushed his away. She pressed the pads of her fingers to his skin, making slow circles against his temples. Her hands moved lower, the tips of her fingers caressing his cheeks, his jaw line, down

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his neck. Her hands settled on his shoulders and began to work the tense muscles at the base of his neck. There was nothing subtle in her touch. It was strong, firm, more than a little painful when her fingers dug into his skin. But it was a good kind of pain, a pain he welcomed and savored.

At her touch on his bare skin, he received a faintly shocking charge of erotic awareness. A wave of heat suffused him and every nerve ending in his body burst into painful life. His body coiled in anticipation. He subconsciously knew what sensual pleasures would be waiting for him if only he dared to succumb to the lure of this lovely woman. It shocked him a little that he should feel this heady, almost wanton pleasure inside his soul. His body burned with heat and the restless surging male urgency that she seemed to be deliberately trying to incite. He was fighting to hold on to his self-control, and losing.

"You have much in your mind," she whispered, obviously feeling the tension and resistance shimmering through him. "You should let go of what troubles you."

"I just wish I could," he said, closing his eyes, content to let her massage him.

She suddenly stopped. Walking around in front of him, she reached out for his hand. A muscle jumped in her cheek as she turned up her lips into an alluring smile.

"Come," Ládán said, pulling him to his feet without much effort. She batted her eyes, smiling slow and mysteriously.

"I know what you need...something you've been

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dreaming about for a long time.” Holding his hand, she led him toward one of the closed doors.

He didn’t protest. Whatever she had in mind for him, he was eager to experience.

CHAPTER THREE

The room Ládán led him into was not a bedroom at all. Lit by black lights, the walls and ceiling were painted to resemble a starry night sky, and the floor was covered in some sort of deep pile dark carpet. Walking in was like drifting into deep space, more than a little disorienting, and he began to wonder if he hadn't overindulged in the wine. She led him to a chair placed in the center of the room, an expensive black leather massage chair, wide and comfortable.

Ládán drew his coat off his shoulders.

"Sit," she murmured. "And I will ease your many pains."

Guided by her, Brenden settled back, resting his arms on the curved armrests. The seat back could recline from a hundred and twenty to a hundred and seventy degrees. The chair seemed to embrace him, welcome him.

"Comfortable?" she asked.

Past a sudden lump in his throat, he said, "Very."

Going into restless motion, she slipped around behind him, disappearing from view. He heard the

faint rustle of material. Before he knew what was happening, she slid a black silk scarf over his eyes, knotting it at the back of his head.

"Hey! What are you doing?" he asked, reaching up to pull off the scarf. His brow furrowed and he craned his head around to look up at her, wondering what she was up to. Disquiet stirred the hair at the nape of his neck. He thought about getting up and walking out, but his attraction to her made him too weak to do that. His need for sex was blunting his wary intelligence. He wanted to take this night as far as it would go.

She ignored his comments and stood in back of him, frustratingly hidden from view.

"Don't you trust me?" Her voice seemed to echo through the expanse of the room.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Should I?"

"If you don't trust me," she explained. "I can do nothing for you." She reached out and guided his head around before pressing the tips of her fingers to his temples, again starting those soothing slow circles. "But if you will trust me, I will promise you pleasure such as you have never experienced before."

Addled by the wine he'd consumed and too far gone on his attraction to pull back and protest, he nodded, ignoring the little spurt of panic.

"I'll trust you," he said, voice a bit hoarse from the need he felt for her. He tried to sound blithe, unconcerned. His cock was pressing against his trousers and images of what the next few hours might hold for him were playing across his mind's screen, all of it triple X-rated. Looking at her moist, parted

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lips didn't help cool his need. His just wished she would lean down and kiss him, tease his tongue with hers.

"Good." She replaced the blindfold, settling it across his eyes so that the little bit of light there was in the chamber was completely blocked out.

Brenden couldn't see her, but he could hear her as she moved around the room again. More scarves were produced, and he felt her wrap them around his arms, binding him tightly to the chair. His breath caught in the back of his throat. His heart hammered as he fought against the impulse to protest. He was giving over all control of his body to this woman and the idea thrilled him more than he would care to admit. Whatever she chose to mete out to him, he would have to suffer it. Somehow he had the idea that it would be most...exciting. He had never been into bondage before, but he was certainly more than willing to let her have her way with him.

He heard Ládán move again. His unease increased. She parted his legs and knelt down between his spread knees. He felt her unbutton his shirt, bringing a cool breath of air to his burning hot skin. Running her palms over his sweaty chest, she circled his dusky nipples, teasing the little nubs with light gentle tugs. She played with his body as if she were a connoisseur of skin, flicking her tongue here, tracing her fingertips there. His muscles jerked under her hands.

"Does that feel good, my sweet?" she whispered. Her strong hands found every knotted muscle, untying the tension, making him groan with pleasure.

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He wiggled slightly, shifting his body into a more comfortable position. He was weak and helpless and didn't care what else happened as long as she didn't stop. Every breath he took was reinforcing his emotional and physical awareness of her.

"Oh, yes," he gasped, almost swallowing his words. The urge to rub his cock was an overwhelming one, but the way she had him tied he could only suffer the torture of feeling his tool trapped under the tight material of his underwear and slacks. Damn, but he was starting to ache, pulse with need.

She methodically worked her way lower. Her hands moved down over his abdomen, expertly working to undo his belt and the top button of his slacks. He heard the crunch of the zipper as she lowered it. She freed him from his clothes, fingers wrapping around his swelling erection. He felt the tension in her fingers as she gripped him.

"I regard oral sex as the highest form of expression of love that can be exchanged between two people," she whispered, beginning her caresses.

Oh, Jesus, he thought wildly. That's every man's fucking dream, a woman who likes sucking dick. I've died and gone to heaven...I'll spend every penny of my goddamned paycheck here...

With his erect penis pointing toward the ceiling, she cupped his balls in one hand and gently, using only her tongue, licked softly along the entire underside of his erect organ. He felt her fingers massage his sac, playing with him, tugging. She placed his stiff cock inside her mouth but didn't

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tighten her lips around the shaft. Her head began a circling motion. His cock slid to different places in her mouth as she moved in both clockwise and counterclockwise motions in a slow purposeful manner.

Brenden damned near came right then and there. As she touched him, his body trembled, vibrating almost to the sensitivity of her touch. He loved the sensation of her soft warm mouth against his hardness, her tongue tasting the hot salty tang of his pre-come. Gritting his teeth, it was sheer hell to hold back from climax as her talented mouth worked over his penis. Yes, she was damn definitely a whore-a very talented whore. And now damned sure wasn't the time to announce he was a cop.

She hasn't asked for any money, he tried to justify in his mind. *Maybe she just finds me attractive – and two consenting adults are allowed to run and play.* Of course, he knew that wasn't true. At the evening's conclusion he was sure that she would be expecting an additional hundred and fifty bucks, plus a tip. And what gentleman wouldn't tip heavily for this kind of treatment?

With her tongue, she found the underside of his balls, licking in an upward motion to the very tip of his cock. Reaching the tip, she took him into her mouth, sliding her moistened tongue lovingly over the head until her lips closed around his shaft at the point just behind the corona. She encased the shaft of his penis with her hand. In an odd move, she twisted her head from side to side, her moist lips staying in contact with the coronal ridge. As she did this, she

gently moved her hand up and down his penis.

Body trembling, drenched in sweat, Brenden fought against the orgasm building deep in his loins. His cock was pulsing hard and he could feel that tightening at the base of his shaft that warned him that his climax was near.

"God," he grated through gritted teeth, senses totally thrown off by the bizarre reality of the situation. "I don't know how much longer I can hold off."

Líadán laughed and drew back. Her fingers teased back up his body, touching and kissing him all over as she slowly removed the blindfold and let it fall to the floor.

Brenden glanced down, seeing his half-dressed body, his cock pulsing with the need to feel her sweet cunt. He tried to clear his mind, think logically and calmly, but he was too dazed with desire. Heart beating fast in his chest, his need for her was driving pure adrenaline straight through his bloodstream, sending his system into a sensual overdrive. He strained against the scarves binding his arms, wishing he possessed the sheer brute strength to tear free. Once free, he would throw her to the floor and fuck her until she cried out his name.

"Untie me," he said fiercely through clenched teeth. "I don't think I can take much more." Suddenly the room felt closed, claustrophobic. Air was in short supply.

"Not yet, my sweet."

Líadán lifted one high-heeled foot, planting it firmly between his spread legs, the tip of her pump

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just inches from his straining cock. Balancing on one leg, she took the hem of her short dress and began to slowly pull it up over her hips. She had gorgeous long legs, and her thighs were shapely and firm. She pulled the dress up around her hips until she uncovered a pair of silky white panties. There was something in her move that was so sensuous—and very dangerous. He found himself struck anew by the power that shimmered around her like an aura.

Brenden stared at her panties, feeling his cock twitch like a hooked fish. The black light in the chamber gave her light-colored panties a glowing transparency. He could see the outline of her pussy lips. By the wetness spreading across the material he could see that she was clearly aroused by her power over him. He wished to God that he could rip those panties off her and slide his tongue between her legs.

"You're so beautiful," he choked out, not caring that it sounded inane. At this point, if she had put a gun in his hand and asked him to rob a bank he would have.

"You think so?" she asked in a teasing voice.

"Yessss.... Oh, baby...yesss...." He savored that delicacy of her bone structure, her long neck and the high arch of her cheekbones, her long slender neck and the pulse that fluttered at the base of her throat. Most of all, though, he savored the shocking electric light in her blue eyes when she looked directly at him.

As if reading his mind, she hooked her finger in the crotch of her panties and pulled the thin material over to one side. "You would like to be doing this," she whispered in a breathy voice. "Stroking my clit,

seeing how wet you could make me.”

Brenden caught his breath at the sight of her cunt, shaved and slick as a whistle. His cock surged and he fought to swallow the lump that formed in the back of his throat. Unable to speak, he nodded, unwilling to take his eyes off her shaved pussy.

“You would like your cock inside me,” she continued in a sultry tone. “Thrusting inside me, building toward the heat of climax.”

Very lightly, she ran her fingers over her cunt lips. She used her thumb and forefinger to spread herself open, her other hand moving so that her index finger lightly stroked her clit. Sliding her fingers up and down the little nubbin, she began to caress herself slowly, moistening her fingers with her own creamy juices and then sliding them inside her depths. Eyes closed, lips slightly parted, her hips rocked back and forth. Her chest was heaving, breasts rising and falling beneath her silk dress. She tilted her head back and moaned as she gave herself to her orgasm.

Letting her finger slide from her cunt, she lifted it to his mouth, tracing his lips with her sticky cream. Then, leaning over him, she cupped his face in her hands and kissed his lips softly. He accepted her kiss the way a man in the desert would accept a drink of cool water. He inhaled her sweet fragrance as she pressed her lips harder against his. Their mouths warmed one another. Her tongue thrust aggressively into his mouth and he felt a sensual stab of pleasure in his belly, as if she had entered him more intimately. She traced her tongue over his lips, pressing, seeking, demanding.

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A groan shuddered through him when he wrenched his mouth from hers.

"Please," he breathed. "I can't wait much longer." Hands balling into fists, he started to shake. His cock was aching with the need for release. He ground into the chair, trying to push his hips forward, damned near growling with frustration.

With a teasing laugh, she lifted her dress over her head and let it fall to the floor. She gave him a long, sly look, enjoying her power over him. She wore no bra. Her breasts were perfectly shaped to fill a man's hands. Her nipples protruded, topping her creamy mounds like cherries on top of vanilla ice cream. She squeezed them, rolling them, tugging them gently before sliding her palms over her flat belly, to the flare of her hips. Hooking her thumbs in her panties, she turned around and teasingly lowered them over her firm ass. Naked except for heels and a devastating smile, she turned back to him. Lit by the black lights, her pale naked skin assumed a strange glowing radiance. He wanted to touch it, flatten his palms along the curving planes of her breasts, her hips, her ass, touch his lips to hers, feel her body tense, then tighten. Those strange teeth of hers seemed sharper...longer. She didn't seem human, a creature of flesh. She seemed to be so much more... satanic. If she'd had a tail, it would have flicked.

Straddling his lap, she guided one nipple into his mouth. He suckled greedily, his tongue rasping against the hard little nubbin. He listened to her moans and felt her body rubbing against his. She wiggled and let out a little scream of surprise when

he nipped at her soft flesh. She laughed, guiding his mouth to the nipple he had yet to taste.

"I promised you exquisite pleasure," she whispered in his ear. "I will take you to a place you have never known before, a place you will long to return to again and again."

Shifting slightly, one of her hands moved between their bodies. He could feel her fingers encircle his penis, hold him steady as she guided her hips down onto his penis. He could feel her warm juices soaking his skin as her pussy muscles clenched tightly around his surging erection.

They moaned together as she started moving her body against his with a perfect synchronicity. In an unhurried rhythm, she lifted her hips until his tool was almost completely out, then came back down, taking him deeper with every stroke. He could feel his climax building even as her pussy's muscles began to shiver delightfully around his cock. The feel of him, thick and heavy, filling her pussy, was almost more than he could bear.

He gave a deep shudder, the smell of her skin lighting up the fires in his heart. He didn't like to get too emotional about anything, but something about this woman had caused him to throw all sense to the wind. What he was doing with her was wrong. Might get him fired, but he didn't care a whit. Something was driving him toward an urgency he could not understand, yet also could not deny.

"Líadán," he moaned as she squeezed him inside of her. His nerves were on edge, peaking toward the ultimate sensitivity. "I wanted you from the moment I

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saw you.”

She felt his probing stare and lowered her head to meet it. He could see a strange fire in her eyes, the reddish-orange glow flickering behind her gaze.

“As I have wanted you,” she murmured. Her tone mocked; her eyes had the wild look of a hungry animal.

Slowing her movements, she settled for a final time onto his shaft. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she wrenched his head to one side. She lovingly nuzzled the hollow between his head and shoulders, her warm tongue tracing a moist trail along his jugular. Burying her face in his neck, she whispered something in a language he could not understand. And then, as if she could not control a beast raging inside her soul, her strange sharp canines tore through his flesh, her amorous bite unmerciful in its penetration.

Brenden gasped, almost whimpered, shocked by the pain so searing that it seemed to brand itself on the walls of his skull as it ricocheted through his senses. The prickle of some kind of primitive fear ran up his spine. He was paralyzed, body and mind. His body quivered brutally and he felt the warmth of his blood trickle over his unexpectedly frigid skin. The pain was strangely exquisite, almost as welcome as the pleasure he willingly gave himself to. She had taken him to the edge...and then over it. As far as he was concerned, the mercury had just gone into the red.

Lost in the depths of the black-lit chamber, he gazed unseeing into the faux-starry nadir of the far

wall. He willingly let himself disappear into the all-consuming abyss of a demonic sexual deviation as she drew not only the seed from his loins, but also the very life from his veins.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was around one in the morning when Brenden arrived home. Squinting through a blurry haze, he struggled briefly to put the key in the lock before turning the doorknob with a shaky hand and stumbling through the door of his basement apartment. He wasn't sure how he'd gotten home, but he was relieved that he'd made it in one piece without getting arrested from point A to point B.

Letting his keys slip from lax fingers, he was barely aware of the muffled clatter they made when they hit the carpeted floor under his feet. Lurching through the dimly-lit room like a man who'd just consumed a dozen beers with tequila chasers, he flopped down in the nearest chair. His chest rose and fell as he struggled to breathe. Chilly sweat drenched his body. Sprawled out, he moaned.

"Oh, God," he gasped. "What the hell happened to me?" He felt alternately hot, then cold as his body convulsed with the frantic shudders of his strange illness. Sick inside, his nervous system was so knotted and cramped that spears of pain shot through his belly. He was at first unable to comprehend what had

happened to him.

His memories of the last hours were blurry, distorted. Closing his eyes, fighting against the dizziness in his brain, he struggled to bring the last few hours to the surface of his addled mind. He vaguely remembered Ládán...the wine... the strange room... her lush body and full red lips.

"What the hell did she do to me?" he gasped, gagging when his stomach rolled. Knowing he was going to be ill, he forced himself to stand, stagger into the bathroom. He barely made it to the sink before he threw up. Only a bitter yellow bile came up, burning his throat and scalding its nasty taste on his tongue. Chest heaving, he gagged, but nothing came up. He vaguely recalled that he hadn't had anything to eat since noon.

Turning the cold water tap on full blast, he rinsed out the sink before splashing icy water on his face. That helped to cool his burning skin. Unbearably thirsty, he cupped his hand near the faucet and drank until his body's need for water was sated.

Feeling a bit better now that his body had purged the toxins from his system, he reached out to flip on the light. At first he hardly recognized the pale, drawn face in the mirror that met his gaze. Jaw hanging slack, dark circles ringed his eyes. His eyes were huge, the pupils dilated. His flesh was dead white...bloodless. He looked like a junkie who'd been smoking crack for a week.

Like she sucked the life right out of me, he thought.

That bite.

That exquisite bite.

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He turned his head, letting the light over the mirror shine onto his neck. Pulling aside his collar, he could see that there was a large purplish-blue bruise halfway between his ear and shoulder. The impression of upper and lower teeth could be clearly discerned and two punctures had just missed penetrating his jugular vein. The holes were not small or neat, more ragged rips than a clean bite. The skin around the tears was prickled red and the punctures were puffy, as if sucked.

He grimaced and lifted a shaking hand to his neck, pressing the tips of his fingers to his neck, touching the distinct holes.

Swallowing, he felt the pain of injured tissue. "Jesus Christ," he whispered, comprehension dawning. "She bit me... She bit me and drank my blood." And whether she was a real vampire or an imagined one, this certainly wasn't the neat bite that the movies depicted. He hadn't just been bitten, he'd been mauled!

Strangely, the idea did not frighten or upset him.

It aroused him.

Closing his eyes, he easily recalled her image, how she'd mesmerized him, led him like a sheep. He'd gone into her lair, willingly, almost suicidally, ready to accept his slaughter.

Thinking of Ládán caused heat to creep through his veins, igniting the desire he felt for her. He had to admit that he was intrigued by what she'd done to him, more than a little turned on. Thoughts of her fueled his desire, which had flared hot from the moment he'd first set eyes on her. Even now his

slacks outlined his lean hips and the bulge in front. Closing his eyes, a low moan escaped his lips. Her remembered how her lush mouth had felt upon his, her tongue stabbing into his in a duel that was as delicious as it was dangerous. Remembered, too, was the feel of her warm, tight pussy as she slid over his cock to take him into her moist all-consuming depth.

I've been tasted, he thought. *Chosen*.

He swallowed thickly and dragged his thoughts from her cunt—where he wanted to be again.

Stripping off his shirt, he unbuttoned his slacks and let them drop to the floor. Underwear followed, and he kicked his soiled clothes out of his path. His brow furrowed. Strange how he didn't exactly remember getting dressed again and driving home.

Opening the shower door, he turned on the cold tap to full blast and stepped under the showerhead. Icy-cold water pelted his skin, immediately bringing him out of his bleary haze and back into full consciousness. He welcomed the powerful sting on his pale skin, as though by punishing his flesh he could subdue his yearning for Lídán. He quickly soaped his body, rinsed, then washed his hair.

Ten minutes later, dressed in sweat pants and a T-shirt, he bypassed the bedroom and wandered into the living room. The apartment was sparsely furnished because possessions had little meaning to him. Nothing personal marked the place as his; no photographs or mementos were displayed. Whether his stay encompassed a week or a year, he could pick up at any time and transport all he had in a single piece of luggage. Sometimes he didn't even bother

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with that. Clothes were replaceable.

Flipping on the television to an all-night news channel, he dug around in his cabinets for something to eat. As usual, there was damned little food in the house. Once again, he'd neglected to go grocery shopping. He'd known he was low on supplies, and had still neglected to go. He was currently using paper towels in the bathroom. He had two dollars until payday, no savings and his credit cards were to the max. He was sinking and wasn't a smart enough rat to abandon ship.

In the fridge he found a couple of eggs and some stale bread. Scrambling the eggs in a little canned milk, he poured it over the bread and fried it, making something that might have been French toast. He really wasn't sure. He didn't eat much anyway, preferring to keep his diet liquid. That would probably explain why he could still fit into his old Army uniform. He hadn't put on a spare ounce on his already-lean frame since his twenties.

Taking his plate of food, he settled down in front of the television. Not because he wanted to watch the news, but because he didn't want to go to sleep. He didn't like sleeping alone. Never had. It had been awfully quiet since Danicia had packed her bags and left a few weeks ago. He didn't understand why he missed her.

Forking some egg-fried bread into his mouth, he chewed slowly. It tasted awful, but he needed something to eat. He'd met Danicia when she was working and he was having one too many of the drinks he usually had after work. The twenty-two-

year-old dancer seemed to be just the balm he needed to assuage the sting of being suspended from his job. They'd both gotten drunk – and then gotten married.

The marriage lasted two weeks. Long enough for him to sober up and realize he'd married a cokehead anorexic. She'd come down off her high long enough to realize that she'd tied herself up with an alcoholic cop with three ex-wives ahead of her and four children to support on thirty-four seven a year. A man who had to rent out his house and live in the attached basement apartment because he could no longer afford to make his mortgage payments on his own.

He had wanted to stay married. After all, Danicia had a body to die for, even if she were killing herself to keep it. Danicia, alas, was wiser than he was and very eager to dump her new loser hubby. They fought, she won and he had gotten slapped with a restraining order. His days of drinking at Midnight Traffick nightclub were effectively over.

Four ex-wives in fourteen years. He didn't have a very good record with women.

Maybe it was because he didn't trust them.

The way his father couldn't trust his mother.

Finishing his crummy meal, Brenden set his plate aside. Too easily could he slip into the long scornful reflections of the two people who had called themselves his parents.

His father had been a cop, too. The long hours he spent away from home meant there were endless days for his mother to fill. Fill them, she had, with a variety of lovers. More than once, Brenden had come

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home from school to find his mother drunk and in bed with some strange man. He'd pieced his knowledge of sex together that way, eventually learning to be very quiet when he came into the house, sneaking up the stairs so that he could watch her have sex. In his gut he knew it was wrong—just as he knew that his mother knew her son could rat her out at any time.

But he'd kept his mother's affairs quiet. Because on the other side of the parental fence was his father, a crude overbearing bastard who drank too much and was a little too free with his fists. When his father said you'd be sorry, you damned sure were. Kevin Wallace did not spare the rod on wife or son. He had often told his son that he would not measure up to be a decent man.

And he was right, Brenden thought bitterly. I've been a screw-up from day one.

His jaw clenched. His relationship with his father had been an adversarial one. Kevin Wallace could only win if someone lost. Belt in hand, he'd make damned sure you remembered it, too. The list of his parent's transgressions went on and on.

It ended, in an odd way, the night his father was killed. In the line of duty. The way he died was far from heroic. Kevin Wallace was writing a traffic ticket on the side of the highway when a sixty-seven-year-old woman nodded off behind the wheel and veered off the road. Straight into his dad. It wasn't a heroic way to die. In fact, it was a thing that happened maybe once in a million times in this lifetime. Kevin Wallace just happened to be standing in the wrong

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place at the wrong time.

Brenden was ten, and his mother had wasted no time in finding her second, then third husbands. The men all seemed to hate him, too. Why is it grown men are damned good at swinging a belt? Just remembering the swagger in his dad's stride made him sick.

He didn't stay around to learn that answer. At fifteen, he'd begun the first of his running away stints. At fifteen, he'd landed in juvenile detention for stealing a car. By time he was eighteen, he was looking at some serious prison time. The judge had taken pity on him and given him a choice: serve your country or serve in jail.

He chose the Army. He gave his four years to Uncle Sam and actually made it out with an honorable discharge. After kicking around for a couple of aimless years, years when alcohol had begun to take a serious hold on his liver, he'd decided to become a cop. Yeah. Like his old man. Almost a laugh, now that he thought about it. He'd been a cop for fourteen years and he wasn't the kind that lived by the macho metal trinity of the shield, gun and cuffs. For him becoming a cop was a no-brainer. He liked being in front of the bars, not behind them. Six feet tall and muscular, a little ragged and ravaged around the edges, he could kick ass with the best of them. Sometimes he even liked the fear and intimidation his size could inspire.

He had four children, two boys and two girls. His oldest son was about to turn fifteen. More than half his salary went to supporting his kids. He tried to be

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generous, provide what they needed, plus extras for birthdays and special occasions, but it was never enough. His kids didn't exactly hate him—for that he thanked God—but they didn't exactly know him either. Years ago, his former wives had taken new husbands, packed up and jumped states. He hardly knew his kids, rarely heard from them except when they sent the prerequisite Father's Day cards. Years ago, his two daughters had ceased to send them. He understood those presently went to the new daddy in their lives. It was probably better that way.

Que sera sera, he thought. *Whatever will be, will be.*

He hoped they had a daddy who didn't drink, who didn't have a leather belt in the drawer. He knew he wasn't really much of a father. He'd contributed some sperm, money for living expenses, but little more. Certainly not emotional support.

Just like his dad.

His third marriage had lasted the longest. Eight years, no kids. For a while, life had been good. Moving to Louisiana from Texas was a fresh start for both of them. They both worked, had a comfortable life.

Except that he couldn't put down the bottle any easier than he could put down the wild suspicions that his wife was cheating on him. It wasn't true, but by time he'd realized it, Maria had also packed her bags and left. He got the house, the cars, the bills that went with them. And he'd learned that when two paychecks were suddenly cut down to one, he'd found he couldn't afford to live on the face of the earth. He almost wished his third ex-wife, Maria, had

taken the house. She could have afforded it better than he could.

He supposed he would be more successful with women if he'd get over the idea that all women were, basically, whores at heart. He knew that wasn't true, but he still couldn't completely quash the suspicion. The seeds that had been sown in his childhood grew and had blossomed into a poisonous, choking vine.

Sighing, he settled back in his easy chair, a garage-sale find, and fixed his eyes on the television. Now that he was on the wagon, he was suffering from insomnia. In past times he could always count on a bottle of tequila to send him into a sodden slumber. Without booze, he couldn't sleep. But it was better to do without sleep than to start drinking again. He had the sense to know that Ray Eddington was not joking. *Get sober or get fired.*

There were no ifs, ands or buts about it, and the situation was clearly black and white.

He let out a breath, his mouth twisting. He was thirty-nine years old, a few days away from forty, and his life was falling apart. He felt too exhausted, too battered emotionally to even want to think about the axe hanging over his career. All he wanted to do was to hide away from the world.

Maybe even hide away from myself, he silently admitted with a small sigh. *God, how is it I haven't turned my gun on myself?* A lot of cops committed suicide, ate one of their own bullets.

At this point he didn't know if his survival this long was a good or a bad thing. He'd thought of suicide, but in the end he knew he didn't have the

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nerve to pull the fucking trigger. Another weakness to chalk up. For some reason, he wanted to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It was a tunnel that was still six years long, a tunnel that would bring retirement from the police force if only he could hang in long enough to earn his benefits. Then he could retire with half his salary and get a job doing something else, something more constructive than hassling whores and busting pot smokers.

To take his mind off the need for a drink, he let his mind drift again toward Lídán Niamh. He liked the way she'd looked at him when they'd met, like that spark in the depths of her glittering blue eyes. A hot exhilarating surge filled his body. How he wanted to have her again. She was like a virus in his veins and he could not shake her image out of his skull.

Without his willing it to, his hand moved to his crotch, cupping his penis. He began to rub his cock slowly, with a subtle pressure. His heartbeat sped up. Tension shivered through him. A muscle jerked in his cheek. One corner of his mouth tilted up into a wry smile.

Eyes closed, he savored the sensations masturbation brought. In his mind's eye he imagined that he was driving his hips between Lídán's thighs as she dug her fingernails deeply into his back and cried out his name. He wanted to feel her nipples pressing against his chest, hear her ragged breath as she begged him to suck them.

He wanted her so badly, wanted to open his eyes and drink in the sight of her naked flesh, see her face, alight with her need, feel the taut fierce intensity of

her pussy squeezing around his cock. He wanted to experience again the exultation of their joined bodies push her over the edge into a mind-shattering climax.

Her body...oh, God, that temple of pleasure. She'd deigned to share it with him, and he was profoundly grateful.

Brenden needed her, as he'd never needed or wanted another woman before in his life. This brand of desire was new to him, unsettling, but possessing a strange urgency that would not let him do anything other than give into it. He thought it ironic that the idea of pleasing her excited him. Somehow Ládán had touched a place inside him that was more sensitive than any nerve endings on the surface of his skin.

His pride was in rags. He didn't care if she was a whore, had taken money to screw him.

I'll see her again, he told himself. I'll have her again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fresh from her shower, Ládán wrapped a robe around her slender body. The night's business had come to its end, and she was eager to wash the smell of sex off her skin. Her last client, Brenden Wallace, had affected her more than she cared to admit. It was best that she put her thoughts of the tall, lanky man out of her mind.

Still, she couldn't help smiling a little as she toweled her hair dry. There was something different about this man who had walked into her life, something...special. He had an aura around him, one of vulnerability, of loneliness. She had sensed in him that he believed himself to be a failure. In his life. His career. And his relationships. Like her, he was reaching for an elusive something that would always be held out of reach. It was the human in him that attracted her, perhaps reminding her in a bittersweet way of her own lost mortality. By the way he had acted, she could tell he was floundering in his life, searching for a direction that would bring out his strengths and passions. He was a man who did not feel complete without a woman by his side, but he did

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not know how to treat a mate, make the connection that went past the physical and into the spiritual.

She knew how.

That is why she had chosen to taste him.

Hanging up her damp towel, she sat down at the vanity table and ran a comb through her thick hair, wincing as she tugged too hard. In the mirror, her reflection was blurry. She wiped the flat of her palm across the smooth surface, clearing away the steamy film. Reflected back at her was a face that looked bloodless without its thick layer of make-up, her eyes huge and strangely shadowed, her mouth...She shivered a little, rubbing the gooseflesh on her arms. Even to her own eyes she looked vulnerable, unhappy...damned. She was too familiar with her visage, one that she had been gazing at through four hundred and sixty-two years. Untouched by age, she had walked through time as one of the chosen, a *vampyr*.

Her mouth quirked up at one corner. It was not true that a true vampyr had no reflection—just as it was not true they were undead, occupying a corpse. Her reflection was very much in place, and how annoying to live without one! Her body was also very much warm and alive. She had never died, never would die as long as she fed the *jouyl*, the demon living inside her. Created of the darkest magicks, the jouyl was a gift from one vampyr to his or her chosen mate; a merging of blood, of hunger, of body... She had always tried to think of her crossing into the darkness as a gift.

Did I really believe that eternal life would be a gift? she

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thought silently. *Since the day I came into the darkness, it has been a curse – a terrible burden.*

Supporting her weight on her elbows, she leaned closer to the mirror. If she looked into her eyes long and hard enough, she was sure that she would see her lost innocence flickering like a monarch butterfly in their depths. Instead of innocence, though, all she could see was corruption, a slow decaying of her soul.

Innocence was a young girl, tending her family's flock of sheep in her small village. Innocence was hard work, from dusk to dawn, scrabbling to live, growing enough food to feed twelve mouths on. How easy it was to remember the picturesque landscape of Hungary embracing a bucolic tapestry of verdant meandering fields, winding stone walls, quaint cottages, a few satisfied brown cows, and goats with tinkling bells about their necks scampering amongst the chickens. Until her fifteenth year, her life was uneventful, the day before indistinguishable from the one to come tomorrow. Her future promised nothing more than eventual marriage, harder work and birth after birth until she died of exhaustion, just as her own mother had.

And then came the war, a brutal affair. In 1541, the Turks occupied Buda and Hungary was split into three parts. The Habsburgs of Austrian descent governed the western part of the country, and the central area was ruled by the Turks, and the southeast Transylvanian principality for a long time was the citadel of Hungarian culture.

I lost my innocence, she sighed. Lost it the day the Turks invaded the land, wiping my people from the face of

the land as a man crushes an ant under his boot.

Unable to look in the mirror any longer, she turned her eyes away. Even when she closed her eyes, all she saw were the faces of her family as if their images were burned into her eyelids. Father, brothers, sisters—all slaughtered under the trampling of horse's hooves and the unforgiving steel of the soldier's weapons.

Hand knotting into fists, she wanted to strike out at the mirror, shatter it into a thousand pieces.

"Why?" she cried bleakly, covering her face with her hands. "Why did they die while I lived?" A series of sobs shook her body. Even now, after all these years, what had happened when she was a mere girl of fifteen summers still rose up from the black pool deep inside her soul.

Swearing softly to herself, she scrubbed her hands across her face. Shedding precious tears on the dead was a waste of energy. They were out of this world. Safe. She was the one who had to live, to survive. How she wished she could forget, erase their memories from her brain. It hurt too much to think that she had survived and they had not.

But I was spared, because I was beautiful.

And because she was desired by Count Auguste Maximilian, an emissary of Emperor Ferdinand I of the Habsburg line and brother of Charles the fifth.

A rough soldier of aristocratic stock and manner, Auguste Maximilian was a dark and dangerous man, not only in looks, but in temperament. He took her, not as a wife, but as an unwilling mistress, and on their first night had introduced her to the pleasures of

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flagellation. Equipped with his heinous leather belt, he had generously indulged himself on her buttocks before raping her repeatedly. The more shrill her screams, the more exquisite and orgasmic his amusement became. He preferred to whip her on the front of her nude body, not only for the increased damage potential, but so that he could gleefully watch her face contort in horror and hear the pleas fall from her lips.

Auguste's preferences were, too, of a depraved cultic slant. Consequently he began to gather about him persons of peculiar and sinister arts. These he welcomed into his presence, affording them a place to live and lavish attention—as long as they could sustain his most unusual needs and interests. If not, they would be tortured and killed in interesting and particularly painful ways, for if nothing else Auguste was a master sadist of the highest order. Among them were those who professed to be witches, sorcerers, wizards and alchemists who practiced the most degenerate and corrupted deeds, as they claimed to be in league with Satan. They taught Auguste their crafts in intimate detail and he was enthralled.

But learning such unspeakable things was not enough.

Auguste feared death. He did not want to grow old, suffer the ravages of old age. Maintaining his youth and vigor became his sole obsession.

He was soon to learn that blood was not only the life...it was the key...

Shaking off the dazed feelings that thoughts of her past always delivered, Ládán tried to pull her mind

from her unhappiness and the past that haunted her. What Auguste had done to her was done. She could not change it nor deny it. She could only accept it and go forward.

Feeling too exhausted, too battered emotionally to think about the terrible Master who had first made her his slave and then damned her to eternal darkness, Ládán pushed herself away from the vanity table. She gave a tiny shiver and pulled her robe closer around her shoulders as she walked into her sitting room and sat down on the lounge. Her eyes immediately went to the spot where Brenden Wallace had sat.

Mmmm....quite a man.

Eager to think of more pleasing things, her senses responded helplessly at the thought of him, her nipples stiffening, suddenly sensitive. It had been a long time since she'd seen a man as more than a way to provide money and a meal. Between her legs she could feel a rush of moist, pulsing warmth. Her body quickened with desire as she remembered the sounds he had made in his throat when she had mounted him, taken his cock deep inside her.

Without thinking about it, she settled back on the cushions and parted her legs. Her hand touched her thigh, stroking its silken inner skin. How she wished Brenden were here with her now, his mouth moving in a slow hot kisses toward her dripping pussy. She began to stroke the lips around her vagina, softly and slowly, just the way she imagined his tongue would as he tasted her essences. Sliding open her robe, she bared her left breast and began to tease it, circling the

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erect nipple with the soft pads of her fingertips. Sliding two fingers inside her weeping cunt, she began to pleasure herself, wantonly soaking up the ripples of sensation as they gathered and undulated underneath her skin. Her breathing grew ragged as she thought about how his body had shuddered with need at the soft touch of her lips against his penis, the warmth of her mouth caressing him intimately. His response to her touch had been immediate and passionate. And she had responded to him eagerly, yearning to possess him even as she wrapped her legs around his waist and welcomed the powerful surge of his climax. He had somehow fulfilled and filled her both physically and spiritually.

She pumped her fingers harder, welcoming the shock waves of pleasure that should have left her satiated and exhausted, but which instead only fueled her need to have his cock inside her again. Hardly sated, she swore softly under her breath and straightened her robe. When she'd taken him, she could see the desire in his eyes, feel it in his quivering body. He wanted her, too, and his desire had allowed him to throw aside his pride, his very job and give into her advances with a sexual appetite that matched her own. Why had she let it happen when she knew he was motivated by his masculine lusts?

But it wasn't just for him that I made love to him, she realized shockingly. It was for myself. I wanted that intimacy with him...

That knowledge shocked and shamed her. How could she have allowed herself to get so carried away, and with an insignificant mortal, no less?

She half dreaded their next meeting, but knew it was inevitable. Just as she could still taste the warm pulse of his blood as if had flowed over her tongue and fed her body, he would surely remember the feel of her bite; the sensual moment when they were more than predator and victim, but a man and a woman coming together as one. She had always dreamed of a forever-mate. Trouble was, she was presently too old and too cynical to believe in the concept of 'eternal love'. How could she? She better than anyone knew that fate had a way of snatching away life and love the second you began to believe in it. She'd be a fool to expose herself to that kind of pain.

You are damned if you do and damned if you don't, she thought unhappily. Her instincts about Brenden Wallace had screamed 'no' from the first time she saw him. She knew he was a cop, knew why he had come sniffing around. She should have given him a drink and a pat on the head, not taken him physically. He should not even have been just another meal to feed her hunger. Other men paid heavily for that privilege. Instead she'd gotten personal with him, made love to him even as she took his blood. In the vampyr tradition, that was the first step toward taking a mate.

Brenden Wallace would come back. She had no doubt of that.

Trouble was, she now had to decide if she should send him away, or keep him.

Her mind said it would be safer to send him away.
But my heart says to keep him...

CHAPTER SIX

Monday morning came around with the same old predictability, giving new meaning to the old saying of 'same old shit, different day.' As usual, Brenden was over an hour late to work. As usual he had not bothered to answer his cell phone or pager, because he didn't recall where he'd last put them down.

The sky was overcast, leaden. At ten in the morning it was dark and gloomy from the thick fog that had settled over the land. The air was wet, sticky from the constant mist of rain. The storm had moved in over the weekend and looked like it was going to be staying awhile.

Although not a fan of the rain, Brenden was grateful for the unexpected cooling: it gave him an excuse to dress in a turtleneck. Thank God it was August and the beginning of the autumn storms. He would have looked pretty stupid running around in summer heat dressed that way. The strange bite that Ládán had etched into his throat was still very much in evidence, having turned into a large purplish bruise. Because he didn't want to answer any

questions about it, it was better to try to hide it. Having the wet weather would help. Hopefully in another couple of days it would at least fade to a decent yellow that would match the bags under his eyes.

He stalked through the station, ignoring the chaos of the front office and the people waiting to talk to the Chief. Bidding a few mumbled greetings to his co-workers, he slid behind his desk with a cup of coffee. The squadroom was thankfully empty and fairly quiet, so he spent an hour going through his messages, making return phone calls and following up leads from the few cases still open since before his suspension. Sometimes it seemed like his whole job comprised of spending the day on the telephone; certainly he spent more time thinking about investigating crime than he actually spent in the field doing it. It was almost a relief to be back to his old routine. It gave him the hope that things in his life could be straightened out. All in all, it was a fairly quiet Monday at the station. Finishing his second cup of coffee, he was sitting and staring at his scrawled notes, tapping his pencil on a yellow legal pad when Chief Ray Eddington ambled by.

Fat and florid, Ray Eddington was a hulk of a man. Standing only five ten, his belt line had long ago expanded to massive proportions, to the point that he couldn't even recall if he had feet or not. At sixty-four years of age, he was nearing retirement. He'd spent his entire career in Dordogne and still had yet to draw his weapon in the line of duty.

Ray Eddington was the kind of cop made to push a

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pencil behind a desk and kiss up to the city council when the budget got tight. Though he ran a loose and casual department, he expected his officers to be polite to the public, giving the same importance and attention to every call—even that goddamned old bat who used to call a couple of times a week because her cat was stuck in a tree. Brenden had gone on one of those calls once. Sure enough, Fluffy was high in a tree—to escape the old witch, he was sure. Hung over and pissed off to be called out to waste the taxpayer's money on a mangy feline, he'd pulled his semi-automatic out of its shoulder holster and offered to shoot the cat out of the tree.

Luckily, he was a lousy shot.

After that, the old woman called the fire department. Those guys did have a ladder.

Eddington gave him a not-so-subtle once-over. "Got a minute?"

Since he was doing little more than sipping his coffee and thinking about Ládán's womanly delights, the Chief could be forgiven for the slight note of irony in his voice.

"Sure."

Planting his copious butt on one corner of Brenden's desk, Eddington announced unceremoniously, "You look like shit."

Brenden groaned and leaned back in his chair. "Feels like it," he returned.

Eddington's face hardened. "Not chasing the bottle, I hope." There was a hint of warning in his tone. His bluntness bought silence in its wake. He wasn't wasting time, or beating around the bush.

Brenden lifted his gaze. He didn't smile, but looked at his boss without rancor. He hated being at another's mercy, but there was nothing he could do but buck up and hold his temper. He'd been walking the thin line for way too long. One misstep and he was going to fall over the edge, and there would be no net below to catch him. He seriously had to straighten up and fly right.

He held up a slightly trembling hand. "I'm off the bottle, Ray," he lied. "Not a drop past my lips. Just had a touch of the flu this weekend. You know, there's always a bug going around."

Eddington grunted. Brenden braced himself for what he knew would be a stinging comeback. Their gazes clashed for a moment.

"Missed your Sunday AA meeting, Bren. I called. You weren't there."

Brenden snorted. Sliding open a drawer, he found his cigarettes and a half a pack of matches. Taking one out, he lit it, inhaled.

"I hate sitting around with a bunch of other whining ex-drunks, sharing my tale of woe. Jesus, it makes you feel like a pathetic loser..." he said through an exhalation of smoke.

"You know —" Eddington started to say.

Brenden cut him off. "Yeah, yeah, you're preaching to the choir, Ray. I'm on probation, I know that. One more screw-up and I'm gone. My butt's in a sling and you're just waiting to haul it up the flagpole. Tell me something I don't know." He took another long drag, hoping the nicotine would help calm the shakes he was feeling this morning. It didn't.

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Ray Eddington shook his head. "You got it wrong, stupid. I'm not looking to bust your chops. You're not the only cop who drinks in this world. Most do. It's not a crime. Hell, it's almost part of the job to drink. But it is a crime when you get caught breaking the law. Get picked up by the Sheriff's boys one more time on a DWI and you're going to jail for sure. I can't keep raking your ass out of the fire by kissing theirs."

"I know, I know, Ray. And I know that restraining order Danicia slapped on me didn't help."

A puff of air escaped Eddington's lips, half a sigh, half disgust. "What were you thinking trying to drag her offstage like a big old Neanderthal anyway? You should have known better than to lay a hand on her, especially in front of witnesses."

Especially when I'm drunk, Brenden filled in silently.

"I know it was a dumb thing to do, Ray," he said, shrugging helplessly.

Eddington's dark eyes met his. "Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, Bren. Just keep your nose clean from now on, okay? It's hard enough to get anyone to come to work in this little backwater."

Grudgingly pleased, Brenden studied the Chief of Police. Today, Eddington wore a suit that hung on his massive frame, a fat man's attempt to disguise his flab. It didn't work. Gray trousers were paired with a white shirt, striped tie and black shoes. He looked more like a harried computer tech than a cop. But he was still a cop, and his willingness to keep from tossing Brenden's ass off the force showed that he was predisposed to go to the wire for his men. Eddington didn't consider him a losing battle. Yet.

He snuffed out his cigarette. "Sure. So what can I do for you, Ray, since you didn't come to take a breathalyzer on me?"

He could almost hear the cogs in Eddington's mind turning in the moment of silence that followed.

"Just wondering what you came up with on those, ah, ladies working the edge of town."

Brenden felt his stomach drop to his feet. Here was his big moment, the one he had been dreading. If he were going to do his job, he would have to admit that Ládán had sex with him for money. He swallowed, closing his eyes and squeezing the bridge of his nose.

Funny, when he thought about it, because it wasn't her glorious long legs, or lush mouth, or tangle of jet-black hair that had gotten to him, although he had noticed them and could not deny she was strikingly beautiful. It wasn't even those full breasts and tight cunt of hers. It was the way she'd taken him, claimed him with her erotic bite. The feel of her warm, soft tongue lapping up his blood as she'd drank in his essences. He'd never experienced anything like that before-never dreamed that such would ever happen to him. And now that he'd experienced it, he was loathe to forget it. The thought that it might never happen again had already fractured his mind into a thousand shards. He wanted her to take him again. Dreamt of it. Longed for it. And he would do anything in this world to experience those sensations again.

Even lie.

"I spent a nice evening with the owner, Miss..." he pretended to look at his notes. A nerve jumped under

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his eye. His face always got twitchy when he started lying. He rubbed his eyes, pretending he had something in them. "Miss Niamh. Not sure if I am saying that right. Anyway, she offered me a little wine, a massage..."

"And?" Eddington bent closer, ready to hear all the dirty details.

"And she kissed me on the head and sent me home, three hundred dollars poorer."

Eddington responded with a narrow squint. "No shit?"

He raised his hand, giving a brief scout's salute. "No shit, Ray. I speak the absolute truth."

"That's it?" the fat cop chortled. "A fuckin' peck on the cheek? Goddamn, for three hundred bucks she should have been down on her hands and knees giving you the best blow job of your life."

Brenden shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Eddington didn't know the half of Ládán's cocksucking abilities. Muscle jumping in his cheek, he said, "Yeah. Well, either she knew I was a cop and was being careful or all they do is lift some money off lonely men." He tapped his pencil on his pad. "You wanna send in someone else?"

Eddington shook his head. "And waste another three hundred dollars? Do you know how many screams I'm going to hear from the city council at the next budget meeting for even spending that much? Geez, everyone already knows that 'escort service' is just a nice way to say whore."

"As long as the ladies aren't peddling drugs, let them peddle their pussies, Ray. You can't stop men

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from wanting sex, and you can't stop women from making a living on their backs. It's a fact of life. Hell, what's a wife but a whore who's been bought and paid for?"

The men shared a brief laugh.

"You know my wife would slug you for that one," Eddington said, belly jiggling.

Relaxing a little, Brenden cleared his throat. "My wives just divorce me and take all I've got. She gets the coal mine and I get the shaft, every time."

The conversation drifted over to a few other open cases. Eddington was about to drift back into his office when the dispatcher came in. Her face was pale, hands shaking.

"There's been a murder," she said. "Body's laying on the edge of town. Sheriff Mallerd is requesting a little help."

Shocked silence.

"Shit. It's going to be a bad day," Eddington finally muttered.

Shit, indeed, Brenden thought. And knee deep in it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Just as reported, there was a body, dumped on the edge of town, just outside the perimeters of the city park. Technically, it wasn't within his jurisdiction. This one would belong to the Sheriff's department. He wasn't really there in any investigative capacity, just to act as a liaison and offer the resources and manpower of the city PD, which was, well, him.

Seeing the body, Brenden immediately felt some kind of primitive fear creep up his spine. It wasn't the first time he'd seen a body. He'd seen plenty on his fourteen years on the job. Death was never pretty, no matter how it happened. Death was ugly. Once the soul was gone, all that was left was an empty husk, a husk that would soon begin to decay, disintegrate into a stinking pile of shit. He hated finding a body when it had passed its ripe stages, just like he hated seeing body parts scattered high and low. Every cop had that one story about the horror of death they had witnessed, a happening so brutal that the faces of the victims were etched into their memories as if with acid.

He had his own. More than one, in fact. And he didn't care to think of them. It would only make him go back to the bottle, and he couldn't risk that.

Instead, he blanked his mind. The area he walked into had already been roped off by the deputies, the yellow tape a clear marker to prying eyes that something sinister was afoot. Peter Mallerd, Dordogne's sheriff for near twenty-three years, was already there, pacing the scene the way a bloodhound would sniff the ground. By the look on his face, Mallerd was a very frustrated man. His Bronco with its sheriff's department emblem was parked nearby. His two deputies stood around, sipping coffee, shooting the shit, waiting for the coroner and the meat wagon. At this point, they had a long wait. Dordogne didn't have a coroner. They'd have to wait for one to come over from the neighboring county.

Brenden shivered, pulling his raincoat a little bit closer around his body. A light rain had begun to fall, and through the fog everything had a dreamy, unreal look. It was almost like walking through a dream, not sure if you were awake or asleep.

Mallerd walked over and offered his hand. His face was wary, brown eyes wide open and taking in everything. "Brenden," he greeted. "Long time, no see." Translation: *Long time since I picked you up for driving while intoxicated.*

"Peter." Brenden shook briefly, then let his hand drop. "Looks like you got yourself a little problem here."

Mallerd reached into his back pocket, took out a dip of snuff and stuck it in his bottom lip.

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"Big problem, actually. Naked, dead man. No clothes, no identification, no tire tracks I can see in this goddamned rain and no reason I can think of why he should end up here." He grunted disgustedly. "Got the pictures, bagged and tagged what we could, which was fuckin' nothing. Waiting for the coroner's wagon to come and get him."

"Any idea what killed him?" he asked, expecting something simple.

Mallerd shrugged and pulled a face, his upper lip dropping over his lower one as he sucked his chew. "Turn him up and take a look. It'll shock the shit out of you."

Not giving the sheriff a second look, Brenden walked over to the John Doe. The dead man was Caucasian, about six feet tall, sandy brown hair matted with mud. No tattoos or other identifiable scars or markings that he could see. The man whose body he was looking at now, though, was still fairly fresh. Nude, he lay face down in the mud and the muck. He looked like a giant mannequin that had been discarded, the kind that often stood in department store displays. His skin was tinged an odd greenish shade. He looked waxy...stiff.

Hunkering down on his haunches, he slid his hands between the body and the muck it lay in and gave a hefty shove. He knew that rigor mortis began with the muscles of mastication and progressed from the head down the body, affecting legs and feet last. It was generally manifested in one to six hours. Rigor had already passed and the corpse was supple, an indication that he had been dead awhile. It was clear

that Mallerd had found the victim on his back and turned him over to see what else he might find.

Why the fuck did he leave this guy face down in the mud? He thought and rolled the body over on its back.

He soon found out.

He blinked and stared in horror, a mixture of fear and loathing on his face. Panic and bitter bile singed his throat. He swung around and suddenly bolted away from the body, going down a few feet away on his hands and knees. His guts heaved and he vomited up the coffee he'd drank earlier. He continued to dry-heave for several minutes until there was nothing left in his body.

"You okay, Bren?" Peter Mallerd asked from behind. He'd seen lots of cops vomit on the job.

Brenden wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his coat, grateful for the soothing cool wet rain splattering onto his forehead.

"Shit," he gasped though another gag. "I wasn't expecting that." His obscenity fairly well expressed how he felt about now.

Mallerd sucked his chew. "Remind me of a murder we had here, oh, maybe fourteen years ago. Right in the city park, come to think of it. Found a kid worse than this. Ever see a face lifted out of a skull? It's pretty gruesome."

He grimaced. "This is pretty damned gruesome, too." He looked back toward the corpse. His stomach made another lurch and he swallowed. His skin felt hot and taut, as if it was too small to fit over his bones and had to be stretched tightly to fit.

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"Looks like he was bit all over by an angry animal," Mallerd began to say, voice rough. It was clear that he was also affected by the sight of the naked, dead man. No sensible man wanted to die in the buff, stripped of his dignity and identity. Whoever had dumped this body damned sure knew what they were doing.

"Yesss..." Brenden echoed emptily. Needing to clear the nasty taste of vomited coffee out of his mouth, he dug for his cigarettes and lit one.

Replace it with another nasty taste, he thought dimly, almost grateful to feel the scorch of smoke on his lungs. He had no doubt that they weren't tarry black.

"Cept those bites seem more human than animal," Mallerd continued. "Looks like the coroner will get some good casts off those. Some of them are pretty fierce. If we find the mouth that made the bites, we've got a slam dunk case." His tone said what Brenden already knew, that there would be little or no traceable evidence. If fingerprints turned up nothing and the man wasn't reported missing, then they'd have a county burial on their hands. Happened every day all over the United States. The files were full of cold cases that would probably never get solved.

Trouble was, though, that Brenden knew exactly what had made those terrible marks on the corpse. The dead man's neck, arms and torso were covered in strange bites; his skin savagely ripped by tiny teeth-like tears. There was nearly no evidence of blood settling in the low points of the corpse; near total exsanguination was indicated. It was as though all eight pints had been sucked out of his body. Unseeing

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eyes stared emptily, his face still reflecting the traumatic terror he'd felt as death overtook him. It was the absolute worst expression that he had ever witnessed on the face of a corpse. Seeing the man, his senses went on full alert. He knew this man's face. He'd seen him, just last Friday night.

With Ládán Niamh...

This is the man she was with, he reminded himself wildly. He remembered the man's face simply because he had been so jealous that this stranger should have had his hand on Ládán's ass.

Uneasiness gripped his heart with cold hands and squeezed until he thought he'd lost all ability to breathe. His hand rose to his neck, to the place covered by the thick material of his turtleneck. Nearly in a panic, he pressed his fingers down hard, feeling the pain of the tender bruise still there. The bite on his throat exactly matched that of the corpse he knelt beside. But where he had one single bite, this man was riddled with dozens.

Shame over his jealously flushed his cheeks. Now the man was dead.

Oh, my God, it's like he was consumed by her...hunger.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brenden arrived at Ládán's residence just as soon as he'd gotten off work. Pulling his car to a stop, he slid out from behind the wheel. Barely hearing the slamming of its door, he bounded up the stairs, not bothering to knock as he burst into the foyer.

"Where is she?" he demanded of the startled faces that turned his way. "Where's Ládán?"

A tall brunette, one of the ladies in residence, stepped up to face him. Built like an Amazonian goddess, she well matched his height. Her hair was cut short, spiky, very mod, and her make-up was subtly gothic. On her right wrist she wore a slave bracelet. A rattlesnake tattoo curled down her left arm, rattlers at her shoulder, head imprinted across the back of her hand. Its forked tongue snaked up her middle finger. Her short mini-skirt showed her legs to good advantage. Her thighs were so hard they looked like they could crush a man's head if she were so inclined.

"I don't believe you have an appointment with Ládán this evening," she said in a crisp Cockney

accent.

Brenden flashed his badge. "I believe this just got me one."

The men in the room suddenly got very nervous.

"Is this a bust?" one asked, perhaps thinking of his wife and kids at home and how bad it would look if a call came saying he'd just been arrested.

"It can be," he growled. "You guys had better get the fuck out of here before I change my mind." He turned a leaden stare back on the brunette. "Where's Ládán?" he repeated. "You had better say right now where she's at or I'm going to call for backup and take the whole lot of you to jail."

Knowing they were goddamned well guilty of selling pussy, the brunette jerked her head toward the staircase. "She's upstairs," she said. "With a – client."

"Client, my ass," Brenden muttered.

He took the stairs two at a time, well recalling the suite Ládán had led him into Friday night. Of course the doors were closed. Images of what was going on behind those doors filled his mind. He knew too well what was up, precisely because he had been there himself. A surge of insane jealousy filled him. The thought of her doing to another man what she'd so mesmerizingly done to him almost blinded him with rage.

I swear to God, if they're having sex, I'll kill the guy she's with, he thought angrily.

Heart pumping pure adrenaline through his veins at a furious pace, he twisted the doorknob. It was not locked, and the door opened easily under his hand. Pushing it open, he stepped inside. The scene that met

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his eyes bought him to a dead stop.

A man sat on the lounge, head lolling back, eyes closed. His pants were unzipped. Cock in hand, he was stroking his member with a slow up and down motion. His free hand lay on the arm of the lounge. Sleeve drawn to his elbow, his bare forearm was turned up. On her knees, Ládán was bent over his wrist, her mouth fixed on his flesh. She suckled deeply, drawing the man's blood into her mouth as she fed her hunger. A crimson trail trickled from her lips when she lifted her head. Her features were contorted, animal-like, revealing in a brief flash the demon that lived inside her.

"My God," Brenden gasped. He could see that the man's arm was mottled with deep bite scars from Ládán's past feedings. He'd obviously been fed off of for a long time. The shock of it turned him rigid. He stared at them, unable to control the gamut of emotions tumbling through his brain.

This is a dream, he tried to tell himself. Some kind of macabre nightmare.

But it was all too real.

Aware that his pleasure had been interrupted, the man opened his eyes. Immediate shock and embarrassment colored his features.

"What the fuck's going on here?" he demanded, cock still in hand.

Snapping back to his senses, Brenden flashed his badge. "Police." His jaw tightened. "What the fuck's about to go is you, asshole."

"Oh, shit!" the man quickly stuffed his cock back into his pants and zipped. Droplets of blood

splattered over his clothes.

"You got two minutes to get the fuck out of here or I'm hauling your ass to jail," he threatened, his tone corroded with bitter jealousy.

Without bothering to grab his coat, the man skittered past him, damned near whimpering as he went.

Alone with Líadán, he swung around and glowered at her.

"What were you doing with him?" he demanded.

Coolly, calmly, her tongue snaked out to lick the blood from her lips. "You know what I was doing," she returned. "Because you have experienced it yourself." Her own gaze was level, unflinching. Unashamed.

"So that's what you do—lure men here and suck them dry?" Disturbed by what he had witnessed, deeply upset that he, was not the only man who fed her hunger, he wanted to grab her and shake her until her teeth rattled.

Her mouth quirked up at one corner. "Lure them?" she laughed. "I hardly have to lure them. They come of their own will, drawn by the dark thrills I can offer. That's why you have come back today, isn't it?" Her manner became softer, more seductive. "Because you hungered for the exquisite pain of the tasting." She began to undress as she spoke. "Come, you can have it again, have me. That's what you want. To know the pleasures anew."

Brenden's senses responded helplessly to the sight of her body when she slid her dress off her shoulders and let it fall into a silky pool at her feet. His stomach

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muscles clenched at the sight of her naked skin. She wore no bra, and her pert breasts seemed to beckon for his mouth, her nipples hard little pebbles of desire. A pair of black thong panties barely covered her Venus mound.

He muttered a profanity. He tried to look away and found he could not.

"No," he said hoarsely, thinking of the dead man he'd seen. "I came because..." He groaned in frustration. Now that he was here, with Ládán, all he wanted was her, to be with her, make love to her—experience her sensual bite. His job, his body, his soul...none of it suddenly mattered. He was close to losing all control.

"You came because you want me." Ládán was standing in front of him now, her face tilted up at him with a dreamy expression. She reached out and touched his face, causing him to shrink back from her. "As I want you."

Panic engulfed him. Once she touched him, once his body felt the longed-for contact with hers, he could be lost, helpless to control his responses.

"Yesss..." he admitted, the word slipping past numb lips. The knowledge shocked him, shamed him. How could he allow himself to be so carried away by his insane desire for this woman? The nearness of her, the smell of her perfume on her skin, it was all threatening to tear away his final shreds of self-control. If he allowed himself to experience the pleasure of her body a second time, he would surely be lost. It was as though he had hungered, starved for so long for this woman that now there was no

stopping his need for her.

Even though he knew he was making a tragic mistake, Brenden threw all sense to the wind.

Tossing aside his badge, he bent and pulled Ládán into his arms. He kissed her hard, almost brutally, his mouth claiming hers with a hunger she was not expecting.

"Your bedroom," he growled, need heating his voice. "Where is it?"

CHAPTER NINE

In the sanctuary of her bedroom, Ládán slid from Brenden's arms, watching as he closed and locked the door behind her. When he turned back to her, she could see his eyes quickly scan the bedroom, looking for...a coffin perhaps. She smiled to herself. She didn't sleep in a coffin. She rested in a bed, like everyone else. Clearly the sight of the bed relieved and aroused him.

When he reached for her, his hands trembled. She watched as his eyes betrayed the effect her almost nude body was taking on him. The knowledge that she could affect him so deeply touched her. While many men had gazed upon her body with admiration and desire, she had in turn despised them, knowing they were weak and could be manipulated by their sexual needs.

But Brenden Wallace was different. He touched something deep inside her, reminding her that while her body was no longer a mortal one, her soul was. It had been a long time she had allowed herself to think about loving a human. His desire of her was so clear and passionate. She could read in him that he was the

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kind of man who would throw his whole life away for the woman he loved. The idea that he would do that for her more than intrigued her. Even now, his eyes were hungrily skimming her body. She knew he was aching to take her.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured. "So perfect."

The humbling, marveling tone in his voice almost brought tears of emotion to her eyes. Her mind screamed a volley of warning and objections, but her senses screened them out. They were not what she wanted to hear. Instead she wanted to hear the sounds of love, the erotic sounds of his breathing, the soft feel of his hands as they moved over her skin. Mesmerized, she waited. Only when he drew her into his arms did she relax. She could feel his whole body trembling with anticipation, the fierce hardening of his cock under his slacks. She aroused him and he wanted her. Her heart fluttered with a ray of hope that he should so clearly demonstrate physically what she was feeling.

Brenden's hands touched her face, his fingertips skimming her cheeks before sliding to the nape of her neck, tangling his fingers in her long hair. His head dipped and his mouth captured hers. His skin carried the damp musty scent of the day, his clothing still damp from the rain. The scent of him only intensified her arousal, making her press closer to him.

"Líadán," he murmured. "It's crazy, I know, but I need you so much."

He kissed her again. She opened her mouth to allow the invasion of his tongue. She pressed herself closer to him, sliding her arms around his shoulders.

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Her heart was beating furiously as he lifted and carried her to the bed. As he lay down beside her, she knew that she was responsible for what was about to happen between them, but she was helpless to stop it. After all, she had first invited the passion they were sharing now.

“Are you sure you want this?” she murmured.

“Yes.” He kissed her long and hard, like a man who had been denied too long. By the time he ended the second kiss, she was caught up in a daze of fierce desire and soaring expectation. He kissed the hollow of her throat, then between her breasts. His tongue began to stroke her bare skin, and then the slope of her left breast. She could feel him against her hip, and the height of his arousal was intensifying her own. She shifted, feeling herself grow wet between her thighs as he brushed his tongue around the sensitive tip of her nipple. He suckled softly on the hard pebble, one hand feeling the fullness of her other breasts as he gently massaged it. She drew in a breath when his fingers took her hard nipple between them and rolled it.

“Do you like that?” he asked, pausing only a moment in his sup.

“Mmmm, very much.” A thickening haze of pleasure covered her eyes.

Líadán watched him suck on her nipples and moaned. She moved her hands to the back of his head, pressing his mouth harder against her tit. She arched her body up, rubbing against him and feeling his weight between her spread thighs. Only his clothes and her panties were keeping them apart. She

dropped her head back against the soft pillow and closed her eyes, feeling his tongue, lips, and fingers all over her. She moaned again as his fingers traveled her body, seeking, finding, exploring every inch of her. The caresses of his rough hands felt delicious on her needy skin, and he explored her body with the experience of a man who knew how to prolong a woman's pleasure until it bordered torture. She molded herself to him, relishing the hardness of his body against her bare skin, and the erection straining for release. She hadn't expected foreplay. Usually, men like Brenden got down to the business of their own pleasure. Not so with him. She was but a prisoner of his ministrations, a prisoner so desperate for release, she would willingly give him her soul.

Brenden moved down further, kissing her bra line and then her stomach. When he tongued her belly-button, she felt an odd stirring deep in her pussy. A wet warmth spread over the thin crotch of her thong panties. Positioning his shoulders between her legs, his eyes moved over her body before settling on her pussy. He spread her legs further apart, murmuring under his breath as he looked at her smoothly shaved mound.

"What you did to me the other night was incredible." He smiled wickedly. "I want to return the favor."

Líadán propped herself up on her elbows. "What I did," she began. "I do not do often."

"I'm glad you chose me," he grinned. He kissed inside one thigh and then the other, swirling his tongue in small circles over her skin. She shifted a

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little, and he kissed the top of her mound, taking in her fragrance. He ran his tongue down the slit covered by her panties. Running it back up, he could feel the moisture collecting on the material. Hooking his finger in the elastic, he drew it to one side and licked along her cunt lips before lightly brushing her clit with the tip of his tongue.

She moaned and raised her hips a little. "I want to feel you inside me," she gasped.

In response she felt him whisk her panties over her hips, removing the impediment. Then she felt his hands slide smoothly under her ass and lift her. The next thing she knew, his warm wet mouth was covering her clit, sending a delicious tingling sensation rippling throughout her entire body, making it tingle. She opened her legs wider and bore down, wanting to feel more. She could feel him licking, poking, and flicking all over her sensitive little nubbin. Stirring her lightly in one spot, and then nudging at her in another new place. Bolts of electricity crackled through all her senses.

"Brenden," she gasped, lifting her arms over her head and sliding her hands under the headboard to brace her body. "I don't think I can take much more..."

In reply, he shifted his body and slid two clasped fingers inside her. Her whole body began shaking as he pushed his fingers into her as far as he could. She moved her hips up and down, grinding on his hand as her climax approached. She couldn't believe the sea of pleasure she crashed into as she let herself sink beneath the waves of orgasm.

Líadán gasped for air and dropped her body back down onto the mattress. As her body went limp, Brenden licked her gently, clearly pleased that he was inducing the small aftershock of shivers running through her body.

"That was incredible," she said.

A smile lit up his face. Climbing to his feet, he quickly stripped off his own clothes, discarding them on the floor.

"I have only just gotten started, Lia," he growled low in his throat. "You haven't been fucked, 'till you've been fucked by me." Stretching out beside her, he leaned down, kissing her lightly at first. Then he forced her mouth open and pressed his tongue past the barrier of her teeth so that she could taste herself on him. His cock surged hot and rigid against the nest of her belly.

He pulled his head back, panting hard. "I want you," he stated. "I want to be the last man who'll ever have you."

"I cannot promise..." she started to say, but he hushed her.

"You can," he insisted. "You feel it as much as I do."

She pressed her palm against his mouth to silence him. "No, you don't understand. I'm not like you, one of you."

"I know," he murmured, pressing his lips to the soft pulse in her throat. "And I don't care. I only care that I've found you."

"Please..." she whimpered as she tried to shimmy out from under him. What had she been thinking,

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letting him come this far? She should be the one in control, he should be the one begging for release, not the other way around.

"I want you," he repeated, moving his body over hers, positioning the head of his cock between her thighs. "After tonight, you'll be mine."

His weight pinned her down, wiggling until he was in the right spot. She felt his shaft rubbing against her clit in the most delicious way. Moving his hips a little more, he thrust into her and felt her warmth surround him. Hands on either side of her body, he lifted his so that she could look down between their bodies, see their joining.

"You belong to me," he whispered. He started to move his hips slowly, pulling his cock out, almost to the end, then plunging back in. Her cream clung to his shaft, aiding his glide into her depths.

Líadán lifted her arms, fingers curling around the back of his head. As he leaned down to kiss her, she wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him down. She bit his lip as she arched into him. A quick well of blood dripped into her mouth.

"As you belong to me," she whispered and tightened her legs, thrusting up her hips. His blood trickled down her throat, feeding more than her body.

Brenden moaned into her mouth. "More," he urged, thrusting harder. "Take all of me."

She wasn't sure if he meant his cock or his blood. Her hands clenched at his back, scratching in his flesh, tearing his skin as she pulled him in. Spine-tingling sensations to wash over her as his hips undulated against hers.

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He pulled away from her mouth, running his tongue over his bitten lip. His eyes were filled with lust. Aggressively, he started pounding into her, sensing that it was what she wanted him to do. He could not hold back any longer from what they both needed.

"Yes," she moaned, digging her fingers deeper. "Don't stop, ever."

Brenden smiled. "You wild little vixen," he swore. He thrust in harder with long, solid strokes. Her pussy was wet and tight, contracting around his cock and hungrily taking him in. She began to buck wildly under him, moaning and cursing him in strange words.

He suddenly pulled back, leaving the tip of his cock inside of her.

"I want you in me..." Ládán cursed again, hardly recognizing her own voice. Her eyes grew wide, and she struggled to pull him back in, but she couldn't. He was controlling her, using his size and weight to manipulate their bodies. She whimpered helplessly, scratching her nails down his arms. She had never expected to experience such passion. It was so intense...so wonderful.

"More, honey?" he teased, obviously near to reaching the edge himself, not sure how much more he could take.

"Damned right!" she growled, squirming frantically under him.

Brenden pushed himself up and then rammed his cock back into her in one long, hard stroke. Then he began a rhythm that was fast and unforgiving. He

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moaned and Ládán felt his body begin to tense.

"I want you to climax again," he growled in her ear. Unexpectedly, he pushed himself to his knees. Reaching back, he grabbed one of Ládán's legs and propped it up on his shoulder.

He looked down at her and smiled before driving himself deeply into her again.

"Damn it," he muttered. "You feel so good."

Ládán thrust up against him and closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of their lovemaking, the sound of his cock pounding her dripping pussy. It was an incredibly sensual moment, made all the more sensual because she could feel the beat of his heart still echoing in the blood she had consumed. By the mirror over the bed she could see that her eyes were open, her lips half parted, and her thick black hair was fanned out over the virgin white pillowcase. The way their bodies were positioned she could see his wet cock slowly emerge. Between her thighs, her pussy was weeping with her cream. Her juices were thick and shiny, clinging to his skin.

"Let yourself go, beloved," she whispered. "Fill me with your seed..."

Brenden moved slower, looking down into her eyes. One hand settled on her breast, squeezing it roughly, teasing the nipple. When he pulled his hips back a final time, he looked at her and caught his breath. He stroked the thumb of his free hand over her clit. She whimpered more. The sound of their bodies slapping together filled the room. Brenden continued to drive into her until his body let go of the orgasm it had been building since he crashed into her

suite.

"Líadán," he gasped, finally able to enjoy his own climax. He moaned and dug his fingers into her hips. His cock released a spurt of hot semen into her womb as he jerked into her writhing body. He climaxed hard, locked deep inside her pussy.

For a moment they lay, stunned by the intensity of their sex. Then he groaned as he moved from between her legs to lie down beside her. She rolled onto her side and pressed herself against him. They held each other close, panting hard and enjoying the feeling of their heartbeats slowing as they basked in the afterglow.

Brenden kissed her forehead, then her eyelids, working his way down to her lips. The kiss was gentle and full of delicate feelings. "I love you," he whispered. He rubbed his swollen lip with a fingertip. "Even if you do suck me dry." He squeezed her tight.

Líadán looked at this mortal who had captured her heart. A bittersweet pang filled her. A vein throbbed in his neck, still bruised from her first taste. She touched it with her fingertips, counting the furious racing of his pulse. A new need filled her, one that tasting his blood had only began to ignite. She lowered her hand to his chest. His skin felt warm and damp and he smelled of the musk generated by heated sex.

His gaze caught hers. "Do you need...?" he started to ask.

"Yes," she admitted. "I must go soon."

His gaze not flinching, he nodded. "Take what you

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need from me."

She shook her head. "No..."

He caught her face in one powerful hand. "Please, don't deny me this gift."

It is hardly a gift, the bitter thought ran through her brain.

Nevertheless, it was one she could not deny long and survive.

Reluctantly lifting herself up on one elbow, she expertly pressed the heel of her hand against his chin and wrenched his head over to bare his pale throat. Bending close, she bit deeply into his skin, drawing a fresh well of blood. At the fierce rake of her teeth, his body shuddered, back arching, fingers digging into the comforter. A tiny groan was muffled deep in his throat.

Her need broke through her self-control and she drank deeply of the warm crimson life that flowed thickly over her tongue. She vaguely heard him moan, felt the warmth of his hands find her bare back, felt the deliciously wanton friction of his grasp as he gathered her against him, as though silently urge her to drink more...

He is dangerous to me, she thought, the need of the jouyl inside her underlining the chasm of differences between them. Perhaps her younger self would have allowed the belief that love could conquer all obstacles. Her older self, however, knew that was only a fairy tale. Seeing that he had wanted her had increased her own desires, her own needs, and she had been eager to give into them.

But such could not last.

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She had to think of tomorrow, of her survival in a world that condemned her kind.

He is only a human, weak and insignificant. The thought opened a wound in her heart. A small, very painful wound, but she refused to succumb to it. I have to deal with him before he becomes a problem, she warned herself silently.

CHAPTER TEN

Brenden came back to consciousness slowly, his memory distorted by strange dreams in his restless sleep. Every bone in his body ached. His limbs felt leaden and heavy. Despite his hours of sleep he felt sluggish, as if weighed down by some strange force of gravity. With an inner strength he didn't know existed until now, he clung to alertness. Opening his eyes, his vision was blurry. Hardly able to see, he lifted a hand to rub his eyes. Trouble was, he couldn't easily lift his hands. Something was weighing them down. Heavy chains rattling against hard stone echoed. His own breathing was a heavy rasp in his ears.

Blinking his eyes to clear away the film of fatigue, he struggled to drag his weary body into a sitting position. He felt the heavy steel cuffs biting into his wrists when he tried to climb to his feet. His gaze followed the cuffs from his wrists to the wall. Sudden panic flooded through him, and the instinct to flee prompted him to tug at his bonds. The ends of the chains were affixed firmly to bolts in the concrete wall.

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Stunned words escaped his lips. "What the hell?" Heart hammering against his chest, the cold fingers of panic seized his bowels and began to squeeze with a merciless grip. In his sleep, he had been taken and chained up like a dog.

"Shit," he breathed. "You're not going anywhere, Brenden." His mouth was dry, his tongue feeling as though it had been Scotch-taped to the roof of his mouth. He supposed that he ought to be more than a little bit afraid. But he wasn't. He'd lived with a multitude of fears for too long to waste his time trying to sort through them. Or understand their origin. One day at a time. It was all he could manage, and he was obviously doing a terrible job of accomplishing that much.

Settling down with his back against the wall, he gazed around his prison. The space around him was windowless and dimly lit by a single candle that burned on a low table just a few feet away from where he had been sleeping. He thought he might be in a basement. The walls around him were covered in thick black velvet, and the floor beneath him had been covered with a rich, deep shag carpet. A heavy drape of some dark material obscured half the basement from his view. It was a luxurious prison, but a prison nevertheless. A thick blanket and a few pillows had been placed under him to stay the chill that crept along the edges of the walls, but he'd apparently kicked them away in his sleep. He'd been redressed in his own clothes, though he was barefoot, missing shoes and socks. His shackles were heavy, barely long enough for him to stretch out his arms more than a

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few feet in any direction. Slipping his wrists out of the thick cuffs was out of the question. They fit tightly and appeared to be bolted. In his sleep he'd obviously chafed against his bonds, for his wrists were raw and sore.

I've heard of the chains of love, he thought wryly, but this is ridiculous.

He tried to remember what had happened that had seen him borne down to this place, but his mind was little more than a slate wiped clean. If only his blood didn't feel so hot and his skin as cold as ice, he was sure he'd be able to remember more. Tiny ignitions sparked off his nerve endings. His brain hurt as if it had grossly swelled and was pinched by the confines of his skull.

I remember going to work...seeing the body...finding Lia...making love to her...

Then, after her explosive orgasmic bite, darkness had swept around him, cocooning him in an airless void. He might have screamed within the confines of his mind when frigid hands he could not see penetrated every part of his body, reaching inside him to clutch muscle and joints and vital organs. A pitch-black dreamless void, a terrifying stretch of silence. He was trapped within the darkness, hands pulling him down, down, into what he dared not contemplate.

How many hours had gone by? By the arrangement of his clothes, he surmised that other hands had dressed him. And he doubted he would have come down into this depth willingly if he had been conscious.

He brushed aside his bangs damp with

perspiration. His skin felt tight. Suffocating. The sticky-sweet scent of aromatic candles spiced the air, almost too overpowering to his senses. When he tried to swallow, his throat hurt. He lifted a shaking hand to his neck, barely conscious of the clank of chains. His throat was tender, the glands swollen. He didn't need a mirror to know that his skin had been bruised, slightly ripped by her sharp teeth. The tips of his fingers felt damp and cold, as though something had drained the warmth out of his body. Remembering how she'd fed off him brought an immediate rush of desire to his loins. Surprisingly, he had liked the pain that she inflicted. Enjoyed it.

To believe fate had contrived to bring them together was perhaps selfish. But it was all he had to cling to. He was in love with the idea of permanently breaking down her resistance to him. She desired him but was determined not to allow her heart or drives to dictate her life. The question now facing him was simple and yet tormenting. Could he convince himself that their sex was a means to a physical end, and go on with his life without Ládán?

He rubbed his burning eyes. *If I ever get out of here*, he thought grimly, mouth drawing into a thin tight line.

The sounds of a door scraping back on its hinges caught his attention. He heard muffled whispers accompanying soft footsteps on the thick carpet. A moment later, the heavy drape cutting off half the area was lifted aside, and a woman stepped into the area carrying a small tray. Another of Ládán's girls...a woman he had not yet encountered, only

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viewed from afar. He struggled to recall her name and drew a blank. She glanced at him with a mixture of smirking superiority and a pity that bordered on loathing.

Líadán followed behind her. Immaculately groomed in one of her silk creations, her blue eyes gleamed with an unnatural chatoyancy in the candle's light, the undulating luster an eerie amber. She wore her long hair loose, a cascade of ebony across her pale shoulders. Eyes flicking over him, she said nothing as the woman knelt down and set the tray within Brenden's reach. Without a word, she scurried away, disappearing quickly back behind the drape.

He shifted, wondering how he could retain a shred of dignity when he was shackled and unable to stand. Licking dry lips, he cleared his throat. "How long have I been here?"

She didn't answer right away, but amused herself with smoothing the folds of her dress over her slender belly and hips before folding her arms across her chest and assuming a defiant posture.

"A few hours. It is nearing the dawn."

"Not exactly the time you're out and about. How long are you going to keep me here?"

"I haven't decided," she answered simply. He nodded, realizing all, even in her unspoken implication. How long would it be before someone would realize he was missing? Hell, it could take a couple of days before someone came looking for him. He rarely answered his cell or pager and was known to disappear more than a couple of days on drunken binges. If he didn't show up for work this morning,

Ray Eddington would probably assume he'd fallen off the wagon and fire his ass—that was, if he ever got to show up for work again. He was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to reasonably explain away that he was late because a beautiful woman had him chained in her basement.

Without moving, Brenden let his gaze skim the tray. He could see a large ceramic mug, a plate with some sandwiches, his cigarettes, a pack of matches and an ashtray. It seemed innocuous enough. He reached out and inched it closer to him.

If they're feeding me, they're planning to keep me alive.

For the moment, his mind echoed ominously.

"I hope that's a fuckin' cup of coffee with a shot of whiskey," he said, reaching for the mug. "I could damned sure use a drink about now."

Líadán's unblinking gaze followed his movements when he lifted the mug to his lips and drank.

"Milk," she said simply.

"Shit, milk is for baby cows," he growled between a sip. "Not grown men." Still, it was ice-cold and tasted damned good. His stomach rumbled, reminding him that he was hungry. He took another long drink and eyed the food. "Is this safe to eat or is it loaded with poison?"

A cool smile sidled into the depths of her crystal-flecked eyes. "If it was," she said smoothly. "Would I tell you?"

He shrugged and studied her face. He admired her stance—strong and determined. "Hell, I suppose not." He reached for a sandwich, gave it a suspicious sniff, then tore off a bite and stuffed it into his mouth. Roast

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beef and Swiss cheese on rye with mayonnaise. Not his favorite, but not bad either. It was edible. As he ate, Ládán watched him. A grimace of distaste twisted her lips down.

"Not to your taste, I suppose," he said, washing down his last bite with milk. The feeling of food in his belly made him feel a little bit stronger, put him on more solid ground mentally. He wondered what he would have done if he'd just been left down there to starve to death. It wasn't a fate he wanted to contemplate closely.

She gazed at him as though she were gazing out to sea toward a faraway horizon. Then she smiled coyly, as though a most pleasant thought had just occurred in her mind.

"I am no longer...bound... by the need."

He pushed the empty plate away and reached for his cigarettes, lit one. He leaned back against the wall and tried to draw a deep breath and steady his nerves. The nicotine wasn't helping. It was only serving to agitate him further. He pulled a leg up and tried to settle himself more comfortably within his limited space of movement. He wondered how much longer he would be kept chained up.

"But you still need to feed yourself," he stated bluntly, drawing off the filter. The pungent aroma of the tobacco tickled his nostrils.

"It is the hunger of the jouyl."

"Jouyl?" he repeated, pronouncing the word in an exhalation of smoke as he heard it, jewel.

Her face paled when a vein in her temple throbbed. She touched it with her fingertips. "My symbiote—the

companion that shares my body."

As if looking for some sign of abnormality, his eyes moved down her body, over her breasts hidden behind the silk to her slender waist and her long legs. He could clearly make out the outline of the taut, erect points of her nipples. He felt an involuntary sense of warmth and stirring in his crotch as his cock quivered. Given the chance, he would be willing to make love to her right then and there on the floor. Just looking at her made his heart flip.

"Companion?" he echoed, trying to forget the memories of how her body had felt under his. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine he felt her hot breath against his bare skin, the way her nipple had peaked under his exploring tongue, the way her body had arched in pleasure when he slid his cock deep into her pussy. Even as his brain screamed that she was a dangerous woman, the rest of him wanted to take her in his arms again.

"Yes." Her long black hair brushed her shoulders when she nodded. "It shares my body and grants me its gifts."

Shares her body? He silently repeated. *Is she insane?* His hand traveled back to his neck.

Immediately his mind leapt to the corpse Peter Mallerd had discovered at the edge of town, the corpse riddled with savage bites that matched the bite etched into his own flesh.

"And you feed its hunger?"

Her eyes grew shadowed, her body tense. "Yes. And if it is fed, it is content."

"But sometimes it gets too hungry-" he started to

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say.

An unsmiling expression crossed her face. "No!" she interrupted savagely. "Sometimes they get too eager to become like me."

"The men who pay you to take their blood?" he questioned.

A strange smile touched her lips. "I provide a pleasure mortal minds can only imagine," she affirmed. "More than sex, I take them to the edge of mortality and beyond. But some few get carried away, believe they want to become like me. When they reach that point, they become dangerous."

The chamber became oppressive. There was a tension building. His left hand trembled as he put out his cigarette. "And have to be disposed of," he finished.

Her strange smile widened. "Exactly. I see you understand. It is the law of nature that the weak succumb and the strong survive."

Even as she was saying the words, he was fighting to make sense of them. Could he honestly say that she had no right to survive, to exist in this world? What she was, his rational mind could hardly comprehend....could barely begin to conceive of.

To her, humans are the prey that feed her hellish appetite, he thought. A strange wraith, she existed in darkness, walked in the shadows.

And he wanted to walk with her.

It was crazy to think it. Insane to want it. But he would die to have it.

Rather wistfully, she said, "In my world there is no right or wrong, only survival. I do what I must to

live.”

“And now you’ll have to kill me because I know your secrets.”

Líadán’s head bowed as though she could not bring herself to continue, or more accurately, as though a fierce battle were being waged within her soul; a despair of sorts whose pains were made doubly worse by the attempts taken to conceal it. When she at last raised her head, a delicate color fluctuated under her skin. Echoing her doubt, her eyes took a silent inventory of his chained body.

Then she squared her shoulders, tightened her lips. She took a step over to him and then another, planting one of her high-heeled shoes squarely between his legs. The dangerous tip of her shoe was just inches from his crotch. Kneeling down, her knee planted him firmly back against the wall. Her hand snaked down, finding and fondling his cock. Her sharp fingernails dug through the material of his slacks.

“If I let you go,” she said, giving a not-so-gentle squeeze of his penis. “You will betray me.” She tightened her grip.

Beads of sweat broke out on his brow. “So you have to kill me.”

Not a question. Just a statement of the facts as he knew them.

He suddenly felt weak and foolish and stupid. Led astray by a piece of tail. It was the story of his life. He’d always confused sex with love. Trouble was, he’d really believed what he felt for Líadán was no fluke. He was not a believer in love at first sight. Lust?

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Yes. But love? Did that emotion really exist? He wanted to hope, almost desperately, that it did.

She loosened her grip. Her hand came up, stroking his face. "I should have."

He felt as though he was enduring a long fall. "Why didn't you?"

She looked instantly stricken with guilt and regret. "I—I don't know. I am old enough that my heart should be hardened against sentimental feelings." Despite her words, she gave a deep shudder. "Another man, I could have killed without hesitation."

Brenden sensed that she hated admitting her weakness, for she bit her bottom lip and shook her head.

"You did kill another man," he reminded, then immediately gave himself a mental kick. *Why tempt the devil, remind it for its hunger for flesh?*

There was a silence. She appeared to go blank, as if her mind had moved on to other matters in the brief interval. "Yes," she said vaguely, her blue eyes growing distant. Vacant. "If only he hadn't wanted to cross over so badly."

"Did he love you?"

"He said he did."

"Did you love him?"

"No."

"Would you believe me if I said I love you?" He captured her gaze with his own. "Will you kill me for saying that, Ládán? For admitting that I want to be like you if it's the only way I can keep you?"

She wavered, a muscle in her jaw hardening. "You

would wish to be like me?" As soon as she spoke the words, myriad emotions briefly played across her shadowed her austere features—bitterness, self-revulsion, despair.

Brenden reached for her hand, pressing her palm to his lips in a brief kiss. "If it's the only way I can be with you, then my answer is yes."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

At LÍADÁN's bidding, two women appeared and began to unbolt his wrist cuffs. He rubbed his sore wrists, hardly able to keep his eyes from roaming over their scantily-clad bodies. They lifted him to his feet even as a third woman drew aside the curtain concealing the rest of the room. Lit by a multitude of scented candles, a bedroom was revealed to his eyes. There was a king-sized bed draped in silk sheets of the purest virgin white. To one side of the bed was a strange altar of sorts. It was wide enough and long enough to accommodate a grown man, and stood three feet off the floor.

He shivered. The terrible look of terror frozen on the corpse's face floated up from the depths of his mind. Was this where that man met his terrible fate?

He was soon to learn the answers...

The women who had unshackled him led him toward the bed. They began to undress him, unbuttoning his shirt and sliding it off, running their hands over his back, shoulders and chest, lower toward his belt line. One unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off his arms, leaning over to lick both of his

nipples. She tossed it on the floor as she sucked his nipple into her mouth and pulled back, nipping it with her teeth. His hands flew to the back of her head, stroking her hair as he moaned. She licked and nipped. The second woman wiggled between them and began to kissing down his stomach, dropping to her knees in front of him and letting her hands roam over his crotch. He could feel his penis rising fast as he watched her unbutton his slacks. His cock started to throb when she pulled them down around his hips. For the first time he was aware that he wasn't wearing underwear.

The woman on her knees gave his cock a nuzzle with her mouth. She smiled before moving forward and letting her tongue run smoothly all over his head, tasting the pre-come that seeped from the tip of his penis. Her hands moved around his narrow hips and gripped his ass, pulling him against her as she opened her mouth and slowly moved her lips over his throbbing cock. Her lips tightened, holding just the head in her mouth, lashing at the swollen purple corona with her tongue. He moaned and roughly pushed his fingers in her hair, unable to resist pushing his hips forward to get her to take more of him into her hot wet mouth. He couldn't help whimpering softly when her sharp fingernails dug into his ass cheeks.

I think I've died and gone to heaven, he thought. And heaven's just a sin away...

But he wasn't seeking any salvation.

He was their willing victim when they pulled him down onto the bed. He couldn't protest. It was as

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though he was completely paralyzed. Both women stretched out beside him, and all he could think about was their hands on his body. Very softly, he moaned when two wet mouths pressed against his skin; licking, sucking, starting to explore every inch of him. He felt long fingers wrap around his cock, the beginning a slow, sensual hand job. A third woman joined, then a fourth, burying him under a mound of writhing female flesh. One rubbed her wet pussy against his thigh, marking him with her female scent before licking away her cream with slow moist caresses of her tongue. A nipple was pushed into his mouth. He suckled the hard nubbin eagerly. Through the haze of pleasure threatening to overcome him, a new set of warm full lips closed around his cock. His penis was solid and weighty, pulsing as she took him down her throat. When she pulled her mouth back, she let her white teeth graze over his skin while sucking in hard.

Brenden moaned and held the back of her head, guiding her open mouth back down onto his erection. He held back the urge to fuck her mouth faster, feel more of her soft tongue flick the underside of his erection. He was almost desperate to relieve the pressure building in his balls, but he didn't want to climax just yet. He wanted to be buried to the hilt into Liadán's pussy when that happened. Over the bobbing of a blonde head, Brenden struggled to find her. Liadán watched her girls make love to him, a gentle smile of satisfaction on her lips. Walking to the bed, she sat down on its edge. She stroked his bangs off his forehead, lifting his chin as she and bent to kiss

him. Their eyes locked.

"Let my brethren pleasure you," she whispered. "They will prepare you for your rebirth."

Brenden could only groan. A brunette, a redhead, two sexy blondes. It was every man's dream and he was living it. Lost in the sensual dance of skin on skin, he could hardly keep up with the sensations that were threatening to overwhelm him like the waves of an all-consuming ocean. He was barely aware that each woman captured a limb—two taking his arms, two his legs—pinning him down. Too late he realized their intention, for even as he watched he saw their features begin to change, distort, evolving into what he could only describe as demonic. Deep ridges began to appear along their foreheads, down the bridges of their puggish noses as their faces assumed animalistic characteristics. Ears morphing into points, the canines in their mouths became longer and sharper, completing their unholy transformation.

Brenden tried to draw back from the hideous visions. The pounding of his heart caused an unholy racket in his chest, sending a surge of adrenaline through his veins. His mouth opened and he tried to cry out for help, but no sound could escape the cavity of his throat. The women began to attack him, each biting deeply into his flesh, eagerly sucking up the blood that fountained from the savage wounds. Head pressing rigidly against the pillow, his eyes closed, his lips whispering frantically, "Please, God, please..." All his shock and horror was betrayed by his voice.

But God was not listening, having turned deaf ears on a doomed heretic.

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The women seemed to take pleasure in his useless straining, his pitiable cries for mercy. He was panting now, his fear almost smothering him. The sounds of sucking filled his ears, blackness flowing across his vision like ink over a sloping surface. He could vaguely hear Liadán crooning his name repeatedly, but as moments ticked by, her voice sounded farther and farther away until stark silence raged in his ears. The coldness of death started to wash through his body. Moments later, he felt buoyant, as if floating out of himself. The hurts inflicted by the savage bites was beginning to fade as a strange numbness overtook the pain. His heart thumped, raced, then grew sluggish again. Gasping for breath, he could feel his blood draining away and coldness ebbing in more quickly with each passing second. His jaws clenched with anguish. Unable to endure any more, but still pinned down, he was helpless to save himself.

It seemed an eternity, though in reality it was no more than a few minutes. He was vaguely aware of the vampyr women drawing away, lifting and carrying him to the altar to lay him on its cold stone surface. His head lolled weakly to one side. He was limp, pliant, too weak to resist. He lay in a misery of cold and terror. The world as he knew it was fading away. In every direction he looked he saw the women's demonic faces, felt the threat of their gnashing fangs. Hands limp, his body twitched, feverish, pained. He could not get warm. He could not free his mind of this damnable nightmare. He was whimpering like an animal, begging for death. Then, through terror-filled eyes, he could see Liadán

standing beside the altar. She had stripped off her dress. Gloriously naked, her flesh seemed to glow with an unearthly radiance, as though lit by some extraordinary energy from within. Stepping up onto the altar, she straddled his naked body, her hips meeting his. Her nipples were peaked, taut with her excitement. He could feel the moist warmth between her legs. In her hand was a dagger, its etched silver blade somehow reflecting the excited glitter in the depths of her blue eyes. Her expression was strange, almost calm, as though what she was about to do was confirmed by some dark knowledge in her heart. Her new aura of pain and brutality disturbed him.

Pressing the tip to his heart she dug it in deeply, carving out a circle of strange symbols. Strangely, he felt no pain, only the pressure. When she had completed her mysterious runes written in his flesh, she lifted the blade and cut quickly into her own palm. Blood began to pool into her upturned hand as she spoke.

"I evoke and conjure thee, O' spirit Au-Ayl, the true god who grants the gifts of our eternity to show your true shape to thine eyes."

Her blood began to rise and writhe as the demon sharing her body began to assume its foul shape. A misty vapor at first, it gradually assumed the shape of a grotesquely twisted imp. In its full form, it was no more than three inches high. Its face ridged brow and sharp fangs mirrored that of the women.

A single cry of terror escaped Brenden's lips. What was happening to him? Was he losing his mind? "I don't want that thing in me," he tried to say, but fear

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locked his throat and the words would not cross his numb lips. The four women surrounding the altar held his naked body pinned securely. Weak as a kitten, there was no escape...only a hellish fate waiting for him. He felt like a man clinging to sanity with tenuous fingertips.

Liadán smiled. Lowering her hand, she bid the demon to step into the circle she had carved over his heart. "Two hearts to beat as one. Two souls to become as one. I share with thee thy gift of the jouyl, forever to guide thee..."

As she spoke the words of her joining spell, the demon's tiny body burst into flames that seared their way through his flesh as they followed the circumference of the magical circle she had created. The evil creature screeched, its horrendous, ear-shattering wails swirling around him with the force of a tornado. His eyes rolled backward in their sockets and his body arched painfully as a cold more penetrating than any he had ever felt before in his life sliced into the core of his very being. He could feel the thing entering him, crawling beneath his skin and insinuating itself into his veins as it gnawed away his humanity. The blood that had been drained from his body was replaced by an element not born of any earthly realm.

"Join with thy chosen," she finished. "And return to your sphere of origin, O' spirit, Au-ayl. By the authority of the true god, I command thee do no harm to him."

Brenden shut his eyes, still able to see the terrifying demon that seemed to have burned itself into his very

eyelids. The chill was still deep inside him, plaguing him along with the terrible screams that he vaguely began to realize were his own, the substance of a man whirling into a vortex composed of the foulest of shadows. Body wracked by intense discomfort, feeling as though his very soul had just been raped, he ground his teeth together. His mind and tongue struggled to produce words and failed. Behind the barrier of clamped jaws and pinched eyes, he prayed fiercely, *Please, God, kill me now...*

An unending scream began to reverberate in his ears. All of a sudden, leathery black wings swooped through his mind like a blindfold. He was barely aware when a merciful unconsciousness claimed him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brenden woke slowly, consciousness creeping into his mind the way the morning sun crept through the heavy drapes covering the windows. Lids fluttering open, he groggily rubbed his eyes and tried to focus. He felt a little dizzy, a bit weak and headachy, like he'd had just a bit too much to drink the previous night. But he hadn't been drinking. Memories of the previous night, mercifully absent from his dreams, suddenly flooded back into his head, threatening to break through the barrier of his skull.

A hiss escaped his lips.

That thing Liadán conjured... it's inside me.

Sitting up, he felt a strange surge under his skin, as though snakes were crawling through his veins. Alarmed, he lifted his bare arm, digging the fingers of his free hand into his flesh as though trying to scratch away the peculiar sensation. He thought that he could feel it, walking around under his skin, trying to settle down in a comfortable spot.

Hand flying to his heart, his head dipped down. He expected to see the circle she had carved into his

flesh marring his chest. But there was nothing, not even the slightest hint of a scar. It was as though it had never happened. Throwing aside the light sheet that had been covering his nudity, he quickly scanned his body, looking for the bites the women had inflicted as they drained away his blood. Four sets of bites still lingered, the areas around the small tears in his skin puffy and bruised, more than a little sore. His skin was pale, almost unnaturally white and he looked as though he had been interred in a coffin for at least a month.

"Shit," he muttered. "That part wasn't a dream."

Confused, almost doubting his very sanity, his gaze searched the room around him. He was clearly no longer in the basement prison. He'd been moved again. It was unsettling the way they seemed to carry him around when he was unconscious. He was hardly a lightweight. It would take incredible strength—or a lot of helping hands—to move his dead weight. The room around him was comfortably furnished—one he had not seen before. At the foot of the bed was a large cedar chest. On top of that were his clothes, neatly pressed and folded.

Brenden swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. He didn't feel exceptionally peppy this morning, but he didn't feel completely like shit, either. In fact, he felt pretty normal for a man who'd had his blood drained by four beautiful naked women.

Stretching, he gave his balls a friendly scratch. The need to urinate was pressing in his bladder, so he took a chance and hoped that one of the closed

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doors across the room was a bathroom.

Excellent detective work, he congratulated himself, closing the door behind him.

Ten minutes later, he emerged. He was obviously in someone's guestroom, but had a few qualms about taking advantage of the amenities. By the clock on the bed table, he could see it was seven-fifteen. Whether it was seven in the morning or seven in the evening, he wasn't sure. In fact, he wasn't even sure what day it was.

Crossing to the window, he pulled aside the drapes. The bright morning sun flooded over his skin. Below his second floor window was an immaculately groomed garden, surrounded by high stone walls and a towering menagerie of trees. At least he knew where he was. He'd spent a lot of hours staking this place out from the exterior. He'd never thought in his wildest dreams that he'd one day be sleeping inside.

Enjoying the warmth on his naked skin, he stood basking in the glow. Something shifted in his brain. He thought he could sense a second set of eyes looking out behind his own. Curious eyes. Eyes that had never before viewed a sunlit day. Everything felt different, more intense. It was as though he was seeing the world through new eyes.

It will not last, a far away voice whispered from the shadows of his mind. *Soon the darkness must come...*

A shiver ran up his spine. For the first time he realized that he truly wasn't the only one occupying the cavity in his space. Some thing had moved in and taken up residence. The space for rent in his brain had been filled. It was a frightening sensation to know

that he wasn't quite alone in his own head, was no longer the master of his body.

Lost in his thoughts, he did not hear the door behind him open. A silent presence slipped into the suite.

A woman's voice filled the silence. "I see you have awakened."

Brenden glanced over his shoulder. Liadán stood at the edges of the room, well away from the light flooding in. Though immaculately groomed in one of her silk creations, she looked pale, washed out. Her features were taut, inexplicably thin, as though the ritual she had performed had depleted her.

"I thought vampires couldn't walk in daylight."

She smiled weakly. "It is always day somewhere in the world. In the day, our powers wane, but we are able to get around. I need only stay out of direct sunlight."

Curiosity filled him. "What happens when the sun touches your skin?"

Hesitating a moment, as though rethinking the wisdom, she abruptly stuck out her hand so that the sun's light touched her skin. Almost immediately her skin began to redden. Within a minute the blood under her skin began to boil, building into a series of large nasty pustules that began to break open and ooze. The smell of putrefaction singed his nostrils. Grimacing in pain, she quickly snatched her hand away, rubbing the injured area.

"We die," she said simply.

He quickly pulled the curtains closed, blotting out the light. Relief filled her face.

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"How come I can stand the sun?" he asked. "That...thing...you put in me... I can feel it. " At a loss for words, he stumbled into silence.

Liadán's eyes skimmed over his body, making him acutely aware of his nakedness. She walked over to him, running her hand with a familiar touch over his bare chest. Her hand came to rest over his heart, where the thing had entered. Her hand was uninjured by the sun's damage. In the space of a few minutes, the pustules had vanished and her skin was unblemished.

"The jouyl is there," she confirmed. "But it has not yet come to full maturity. Your hunger has not come."

Stomach lurching, churning bitter acid, he gulped. "My hunger?"

"Yes. Feed its hunger and it will grant you its many gifts. You will walk through time untouched. There will be no mortal barriers to stop you. We will be together...mated in eternity." Her hand slid lower, cupping his flaccid penis.

"What will happen if I don't feed my-hunger?"

"You will die," she replied simply. "Pass the time to take your first blood and you will be consumed from inside." She began to stroke his cock, pleased that his erection was growing harder and longer by the moment.

Brenden gritted his teeth. He felt his mouth going dry. Oh, God, but the way she was touching him was driving him insane. His hands slid down to cup her ass cheeks, pulling her close. His erection pressed against the soft nest of her belly, pulsing with the need she had ignited inside him.

"So you have damned me?" It was cruel and unfair and he hated himself the moment he said it. He had come to her willingly, seeking what she had to offer. He gave a deep shudder. He could never hate her, though, because he wanted her too much. Walk away now? It was not only impossible...it was unthinkable. Like a blind man given the gift of sight, he was reluctant to give it up.

She tilted back her head, gazing up at him with eyes so blue that he felt he could dive into the clear pools. "As I am," she said.

Would it be such a bad way to go? he silently questioned. *God, but she could melt pure steel with just a look.*

Without a word she pulled him toward the bed. Pushing him down on the mattress, she stepped back and lifted her dress over her head. Her muscles rippled, hard and firm. He could see her nipples were erect.

"Until your time arrives," she smiled and cupped a full breast. "Perhaps you would like to sate yourself with these."

"Yes," he nodded, mesmerized. She circled the pink aureole with the tip of her index finger. He wanted to suck her hard nipples so badly that he could almost taste them, feel their satin texture against his tongue. He'd draw them in deep and bite them, make her writhe beneath him even as he plunged his cock into her hungry cunt.

With a growl, he pulled her to him, attacking her the way a starving man would consume his last meal.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was going on five in the afternoon when Brenden returned home Tuesday. Amazingly, only thirty-one hours had passed since he'd gone to work Monday morning. He had not gone to work today. Instead, he'd called in sick—pleading the flu—to stay in bed with Liadán. From the sound of Ray Eddington's voice, he knew the police chief just didn't believe him. He'd been able to hear the wheels in Ray's mind turning, knew what his boss was thinking.

Bren's fell off the wagon with a thud.

Well, it was—and it wasn't—true.

He'd fallen, all right. Only what he had fallen for didn't come in a bottle.

It came in the form of a very beautiful woman.

Sighing, he tossed his keys onto the table along with the day's mail. A pile of bills, a couple of birthday cards from his kids. With a start, he realized that this day was his fortieth birthday.

"Shit," he muttered. "I'm old."

He didn't open the cards. He didn't look at the bills. He already knew he couldn't pay them. Why

bother?

His eyes raked his apartment. The place he lived looked squalid, shabby. Walls almost bare, boards and cinder blocks for bookshelves, tattered used furniture that even the Salvation Army would have rejected, big patches of concrete that he still hadn't covered with carpet. This was not the apartment of a successful man. It was the apartment of a failure...of someone who no longer cared about rebuilding his life.

No wonder Danicia packed up and moved out after two weeks, he thought bitterly. There was little ventilation, little natural light. The windows were at street level and looked out onto a driveway and a sidewalk. He still hadn't bought any food, still hadn't put together the cheap desk he'd purchased from the Office Max a few months ago.

"Jesus Christ, I live in a fucking hole," he said. "I might as well be dead and buried." His kicked at his torn lounge, the tears in its material taped over with duct tape.

"Stay here and stay human," he commented to himself. "Or have everlasting life with a beautiful woman?"

He shook his head.

The answer was a no-brainer. He knew what choice he would make when he picked up his keys and walked back out the door. He didn't bother to lock it. He wouldn't be coming back.

Going outside, he got back into his car and drove to the place where the body had been discovered. He walked around the area, pacing the bare ground,

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smoking cigarette after cigarette. He held the key the sheriff needed to solve his case. Give Mallerd the answers, and he'd have to reveal what he knew about Liadán and her girls. He'd have to admit that he'd slept with her, have to admit that he knew her secrets. The lines between good and evil, between right and wrong had become blurred and he didn't care anymore.

Tell the truth and I'll look like I lost my mind. They'll lock me up and throw away the goddamned key.

He was into this mess too deep, knee-deep. Trouble was, he'd put himself squarely in the middle of it by allowing himself to fall in love with Liadán and letting her draw him into her world. What she was into was some serious witchcraft. It was an invisible world he neither comprehended nor understood, yet one that he knew nevertheless believed in. Though not a practicing Christian, he knew without doubt that good and evil existed in this world. He had no doubt that there wasn't a battle going on, a battle between angels and demons for the souls of men.

Liadán was a demon. And she had his soul.

Looking into the west, he watched the sun sink into the horizon. The sky was hued with light blues and pinks, as though God had swiped his brush carelessly across the heavens. It was so lovely, he wondered why he'd never noticed the sunset before. And then it occurred to him. He noticed because he was probably viewing it for the last time in his life. Memories of what had happened to him passed through his mind like mists over the murky bayous.

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If I go to her tonight, he thought, I'll never again be able to step out into daylight.

He took a final drag off his cigarette, then flicked the filter away.

He no longer cared about the light. It was time to embrace the darkness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As night crept over the land, Brenden made his way back to the manor on the edge of town. Back to Liadán.

She waited for him in her private suite. Beautifully dressed, she lounged on the loveseat, sipping a glass of red wine. But she was not alone. Another woman was stretched out beside her, wearing only a lacy bra and skimpy thong panties.

"This is Sara." She stroked Sara's long blonde hair in an intimate way. "She is to be your first. She is pure, untainted."

Brenden's eyes raked over the woman. It was immediately clear that she was very young, no older than eighteen. Her body was firm and full at breasts and hips, her skin porcelain and unblemished. Her eyes seemed vacant, as though she were hypnotized. Or drugged.

"Take her, darling," Liadán purred. "She is for you."

Confusion filled him. Although he felt the jouyl's presence in his body, felt its hunger and heard its whispers echoing in his ears, he was unsure of what

he should do. It simply wasn't telling him. In desperation, he looked to Liadán.

"What do I do?" he pleaded.

Laughing, Liadán pushed aside Sara's long hair and gave her slender throat a soft kiss. Her hand stroked Sara's bare shoulder, then down her side, going lower to caress her gently flaring hip, palm sliding over her belly just above the small triangle of dark hair, pointing down to bare pouty lips. She watched him with amusement as he drooled over Sara's body.

"Do what comes naturally with a beautiful woman." Liadán slid her hand lower. Sara parted her legs, revealing her womanly delights. Liadán's finger slid under her panties, between the tender lips of her cunt to caress her clit. Sara closed her eyes and moaned softly with pleasure.

"Fear sours their blood." She smiled, showing her sharp teeth. "It is sweeter when they are aroused."

Without thought or question, Brenden went to the loveseat. He dropped to his knees between Sara's spread legs. Pulling in a breath of anticipation, he reached out, slowly lowering his hands to her skin, his palms settling just above her knees. Her skin was soft, glowing in the candlelight with the scented oil she'd bathed in. Hardly daring to breathe, he slid his hands up her legs, inside her thighs. Looking down at her beautiful pussy barely covered by the silky material, he fought the urge just to jump on her. He wanted to show her that he could please her before he took her blood. His cock was already pressing against the front of his trousers, hard as a rock and ready for

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action.

Not yet, he told himself. Or was it the jouyl guiding him? He wasn't sure.

Liadán's hand stayed in place as he leaned forward and kissed the soft pulse at the hollow of Sara's throat. The girl shivered, but did not protest. Growing bolder, his fingers traced along her breast, hooking into the cup of her bra and tugging it down to take one pink nipple into his mouth. He sucked it in, flicking at the tip with his tongue.

"That feels so good," she moaned softly. Her face showed the passion that she was feeling as he licked and sucked her nipple. Unhooking her bra and sliding it off, he licked the underside of her breast as his fingers pinched her nipple gently. She moaned again, wiggling in pleasure as he suckled and Liadán ministered to her, rubbing her dripping cunt. As Brenden slid his hands under the girl's ass and lifted her, she slid Sara's panties over her hips and down her legs. Sara was now completely naked, ready to be taken.

Like a conductor guiding her orchestra, Liadán shifted her position, moving behind him. He felt her reach around from behind him, tugging at the buttons of his shirt. Kissing the back of his neck, she slid the material over his shoulders, baring his chest.

"You are doing well, my love," she crooned in his ear. "Take her, possess her. She is yours alone."

Brenden groaned, features drawing into a grimace as though he were in great pain. "Oh, God, I can feel it inside me."

"Let it guide you," Liadán urged. "It will tell you

when the time is right.”

“I want her,” he growled. “Damn me, but I do.” He cupped both of Sara’s breasts, pushing them together as he rubbed her swollen nipples hard with his thumbs. He pinched her nipples gently.

Liadán unbuttoned his pants, lowering the zipper and freeing his penis from the tight confines of his trousers. His cock sprang free, purple head surging, a beast as eager for the feed as he was.

Brenden gripped his cock, looking down at Sara’s pussy spread out so enticingly before him.

Her engorged clit was wet and shiny and he touched it with the tips of his fingers, causing her to grind against the loveseat. Catching her hips, he pulled her forward into his lap and pushed his cock between her lips to enter her in a single hard thrust. She *was* a virgin, and he felt the barrier of her tender hymen as he ripped through it. He let out a deep moan at the same time she let out a little cry of pain. He raised her hips, pulled her slightly up, then impaled her again. Her fingernails scratched up and down his bare back as he ground her hips almost savagely against his.

Liadán slid into the place where Sara had been sitting, positioning herself behind the bodies locked together. She grabbed a handful of Sara’s long blonde hair and wrenched her neck to one side.

“Take her now!” she urged. “Bite hard and deep.”

It was then that the beast took over his mind, shoving his thoughts aside and assuming control of his body. A surge of unholy energy filled him. Head snapping back, he felt the transformation begin—the

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thick ridges furrowing his brow, ears elongating into long points, the terrible pain of teeth growing longer and sharper as the vampyr in him emerged. Its hunger raged through him, a terrible pain in his gut threatening to consume him unless it was fed.

Teeth bared, he bit into the soft flesh of Sara's neck even as he was inside her. She cried out as her skin tore under his teeth, body shuddering deliciously under his even as her warm blood spurted over his lips. He drank deeply, reveling in the coppery liquid that flowed so smoothly down his throat. Its taste was sweet, like sun-warm honey fresh from the bee's hive.

"Do not take too much," Liadán warned gently. "You do not want to get lost in the feed."

Sated, he drew away, the jouyl in him receding back into the shadows of his mind. In his arms Sara was semi-conscious, a slight smile playing on her lips. A thin trickle of blood dripped from the ragged bite in her neck. The deed was done. He'd taken her blood, fed the vampyr. A new strength surged through him. The demon whispered in his ear, promising everything even as it began to glut itself greedily on his soul. The symbiosis was completed and they were joined as one—forever.

Without regret, he lowered Sara's body to the floor. She lay crumpled, a thin track of blood still oozing from the jagged twin punctures he'd inflicted in her pale skin. Her face was agonized, as if she didn't quite comprehend what had just happened to her. During his feed, he'd climaxed hard and hadn't even been aware of the happening. Still he felt...unsatisfied. He wanted more.

His gaze locked with Liadán's. Slowly, oh so slowly, she leaned forward and they came together. She tasted the blood still clinging to his mouth, her tongue tracing his lips.

"You are whole, my darling," she murmured, smiling.

"Not quite," he countered.

Climbing to his feet, he pulled Liadán roughly to hers. Sweeping her off her feet with a strength he never knew he possessed, he stepped over Sara's body on his way toward the bedroom. It was time to claim his woman.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Behind closed doors, Liadán pressed her body against him and brought her hand to his cheek, stroking it as she smiled softly at him.

"I am glad you chose to join me," she whispered. Her fingers traced his lips. His skin carried the hot musky scent of an aroused male body, intensifying her own arousal.

"I wanted you the first day I saw you, Liadán," he confessed.

The sound he made as he said her name thrilled through her. He caught her hand and kissed her fingertips, then brushed her long hair back from her face, touching the soft skin of her cheek before cupping the back of her head with his hand and pulling her mouth to his. Their kiss was deep and hungry, tongues tangling deliciously. Her heart beat furiously as the tenor of their kiss changed, the slow gentle pressure of his mouth turning into something else, something more demanding, more emotionally charged. It needed no translations, no clarification, its message as clear as the one given by the fierce hardening of his cock. She excited him, and he

wanted her. Her senses trembled with a strange new joy.

Responding to him, she welcomed the intimacy, knowing that she was responsible for what was happening, that she was the one who had encouraged and invited the passion they were now sharing—the life they would share in the future. Her mind had already hurled all the warnings and protests at her, but she had ignored them, because they were not what she wanted to hear. Her life had been too long and too lonely. She wanted a mate. She needed a mate. Brenden Wallace was perfect, a man caught in the flux of having no direction or meaning in his life.

She would be that meaning, show him the way. The centuries ahead no longer seemed long and bleak. Instead, the future appeared to have opened and cleared. For the first time in a long time, she was happy.

She moaned softly as she leaned back towards the bed, pulling him with her. “I want you close,” she said huskily. “To feel your body covering mine.” Somewhere deep inside of her, she knew that this man had claimed a place in her heart, awakened emotions she had long believed she was incapable of experiencing again.

“I want that, too.” His slacks and the rest of his clothing was somehow removed, urgency overtaking finesse. Her own vanished just as quickly, landing in a pile beside the bed. The sensation of skin against skin when they were finally freed of them was so acutely heightened that Liadán actually felt her response to his touch deep within her body, a familiar

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warmth at her pussy as her own creamy juices began to prepare her to receive his erection.

Brenden kept one hand under her head as the other slipped down her side, gently caressing her. He pushed one leg between hers at the same moment that his tongue entered her warm mouth. His fingers tangled in her long black hair as she wrapped her long legs around his. It had been so long since she'd made love to a man she cared for. These human emotions were exciting, consuming and erotic. She could feel him responding to her kiss and her touch.

Pulling away, she put her hands on the top of his head and pushed him down, moaning when his tongue trailed down her neck, to her chest and then her breast. When his tongue moved against a taut nipple, her fingers sank deeper into his hair. He smiled at her impatience as he circled the pink aureole. He played with the tip, flicking his tongue hard against it, watching as it became harder and wet. She arched her body against him, moaning when she felt his teeth sink into her nipple.

Brenden grazed his teeth against her skin a little harder. "You like that?"

"Yes." She moaned and pressed against him. Her fingers clawed at the back of his head. She wanted him to taste her all over.

"Good."

He began to kiss and lick down her stomach, letting his tongue circle her bellybutton before he moved down to position himself between her thighs. Using the tip of his index finger, he ran it down her glistening slit. Her body trembled. Her lips were wet

from her arousal. He watched as her face betrayed the effect he was having on her. She was dizzy with the knowledge that he should be able to call up so much desire from her.

"Please..." Like a bitch in heat, she pushed toward his finger, wishing he would enter her.

"You are so hot," he murmured. The deep tone of his voice made her thrill with emotion. "And so wet."

The tip of his finger sank between her lips, immediately engulfed by her moist heat. Rubbing his finger up and down between her lips, he touched her swollen clit. Her juices clung to his finger when he spread open her swelling lips, like unfolding origami. His head dipped and his tongue stabbed at her erect clit, causing a tremor that went clear to her toes. Circling the hard little nub, he started to tease it mercilessly with his tongue.

She gasped with pleasure, closing her eyes as Brenden slipped his hands under her ass and lifted her pussy to his mouth. She shuddered wildly, her lips pressed tightly together as she struggled to suppress a primal cry. The touch of his mouth on her hungry clit was so familiar...so welcome. Circling her wet hole with his tongue caused her to tremble. He stroked harder and faster, replacing his tongue with his fingers. He slid two inside her sheath as she climaxed, moaning and whimpering loudly as her breath rasped over her dry lips.

Watching her reactions to his touch, Brenden smiled. "Did you enjoy that?"

"Mmm..." was all she could say.

He worked his way back up her body slowly,

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kissing and licking her warm, soft skin.

Hovering over her, he looked down into her eyes.

"I love you, Liadán."

"I want you inside me," she moaned, heart brimming. His lips were immediately on hers. Their kiss was hot, urgent, each one hungry for the other. She sucked at his bottom lip, fingernails digging into his shoulders. As much as she wanted him inside her, it was more than just wanting sex. There was a true passion behind this physical act that she hadn't experienced in centuries. Maybe she'd never experienced it. She wasn't sure. She lost all control, forbidden words of pleading flooding from her mouth as she arched and twisted under him, her senses overwhelmed by the sheer pleasure he was giving her. Even the brutal rake of his own teeth at her neck as his own control was swept away was a piercingly fierce sensual pleasure, an erotic underlining of the completeness of his desire for her.

Body on top of hers, Brenden pushed his hips down, guiding the head of his cock between her parted thighs. He plunged his cock into her, then slowly pulled back a little, sliding back in an inch at a time. She raised her head, looking down at the totally erotic sight of the male and female coupling. He began to move his hips in a rhythmic thrust, slowly...then faster as their passionate tempo built.

"Come for me," he demanded huskily, leaning down and whispering in her ear. "Come, Liadán, let me feel that hot pussy of yours dance around my cock." His head dipped and he captured a nipple in his mouth, nipping at it with sharp teeth.

Liadán arched and cried out as she exploded in a sensual release. Her body shook hard, and she reached out to hold onto Brenden, digging her nails brutally into his forearms, drawing blood. He winced at the pain, but did not stop pounding his cock deep inside her cunt. She felt him shiver, and smiled.

“Bitch,” he moaned. “You're so damned deep, I don't want to ever stop.” He lifted himself to his knees and grabbed her hips, slamming his cock in deep, then teased her by almost pulling right out, leaving only the head of his swollen cock inside. His hips jolted in one final thrust before he came, releasing his hot seed into her womb.

She mewled like a wildcat in heat and gripped the bedspread under her body, shaking hard as her second orgasm traversed through her belly and then shot like lightning through her entire body. Their sex was a savage, short-lived coming together, a powerful explosion of sensation that left Liadán feeling weak and dizzy, clinging to Brenden while their bodies shook with the aftermath.

Without thinking, she sat up and pulled his head down, kissing his mouth passionately. She couldn't seem to get his body close enough to hers. A vein throbbed in his neck. She touched it with her fingertips, measuring the furious race of his pulse. Her hand moved lower. Beneath her hand his skin was damp, his nipple a hard point against her palm.

“So this is what eternity will be like,” he whispered as they lay curled in each other's arms. “Not a bad fortieth birthday at all. I think I'm going to like it—a lot.”

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"There's only one drawback," she countered, stretching like a lazy cat. "We can only live our lives fully by night...that will mean spending our days in bed."

Brenden propped himself up on one elbow and gazed down at her. He leaned down and kissed her neck, sucking softly on her skin, tracing with his tongue the soft pulse there. He moved his hand under one breast, feeling its fullness as he massaged it gently.

"I don't think I'll mind that very much," he grinned. "I could never get my shit together in the morning anyway."

She laughed and kissed him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeya Jenson lives in the scenic Southwest, though she has called several other states her home. She is a fan of dark gothic literature, and reads tons of books on history and biographies. She especially enjoys reading books on Hollywood before the 1960's. She's now divorced, and happily so! She lives with her five cats and works full time. Luckily her job gives her lots of time to write and pays the bills at the same time. She is currently at work on several more erotic stories.