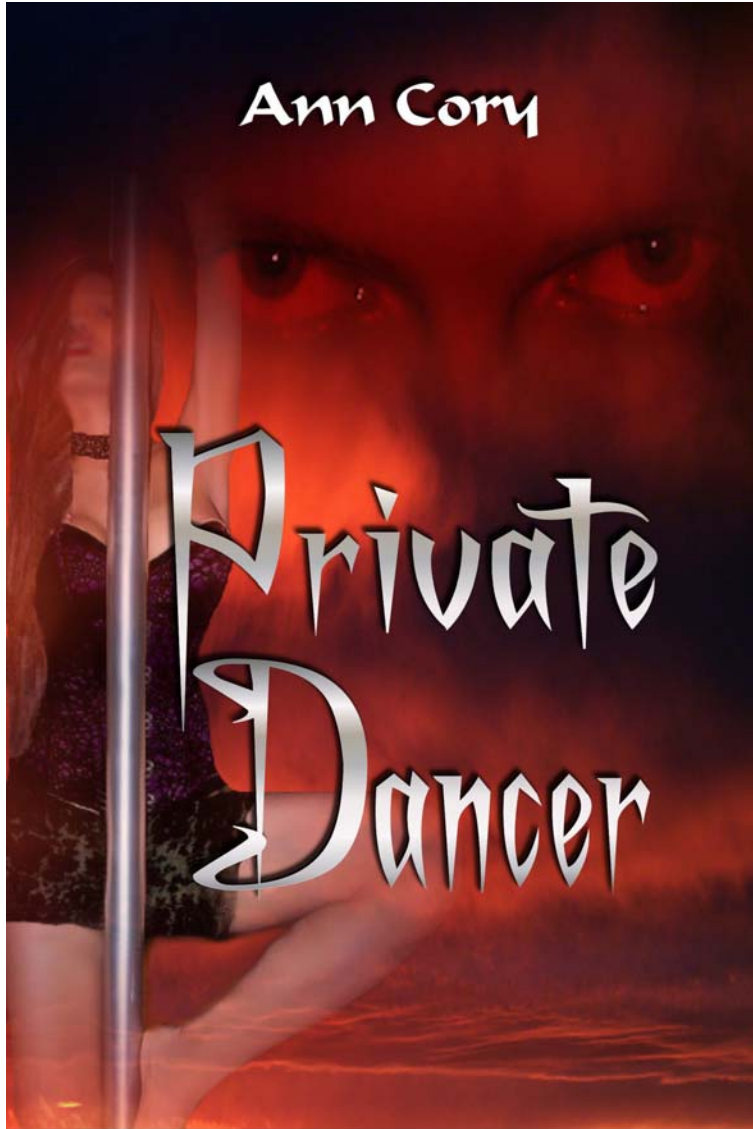


Ann Cory

Private Dancer



PRIVATE DANCER

by

Ann Cory

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Dedication

For my loving partner.
Through all the darkness in my life,
I found an
eternal light in you.

Chapter 1

Her body twisted around the pole, her legs spread wide for the boys to see. The glaring lights bounced off the red sequins on her skimpy bra and thong, making her look warmer than she was. Without all the gels and sprays, her hair would wilt like dried up flowers.

“Come on, baby, take it off for daddy!” The men from the bachelor party had guzzled one too many beers and were quickly becoming a nuisance.

Every few seconds, one of them hooted or hollered, standing around with their tongues hanging out of their mouths. Fallon knew Barry, her pro-wrestler-turned-bodyguard, was backstage and would come to her aid if need be, but that was the problem. Why should she have to be afraid at work?

Edge of Seventeen by Stevie Nicks belted out from the speakers, and she spun her body along the pole, one leg curled around it. The noise from the table of drunks competed with the lyrics of the music and she found it hard to concentrate on her routine. Never mind she’d spent hours rehearsing it.

“Show that luscious backside, baby, and I’ll slip you a hundred big ones!” Applause broke out in the club, with chants taunting her to take off her clothes.

The last thing she wanted was their hands anywhere near her backside, but what she wanted wasn’t a luxury in her profession. Rent was due in a week and she still needed to

finish paying off the cosmetic surgeon bill for her perky double D breasts that she selfishly installed on her petite frame.

Three months of dancing had afforded her a stacked chest, and she figured it would be worth it at some point. If she wanted to compete with the young, barely legal girls who were coming in droves these days, she needed to prove she was worth keeping around. It was too bad she'd lost sensation in her nipples after the breast implants. She used to orgasm at the mere pinching of them when she got herself off.

At least the tips exceeded the measly per hour rate she received from Jimmy, the mostly corrupt owner. She'd never cared much for him, or his greasy moustache. Stale fries. He swore he lathered himself in cologne, but all she ever smelled on him was stale fries. One day, she vowed to pull the toupee off his head if he so much as slipped his hand somewhere unwanted.

As a boss, he was ruthless, but he had rare moments of compassion. She had heard that one of the girls needed money for her son's hospital bills, and he lent it to her at no interest. Of course, the girl was told not to tell anyone, which she immediately did. No one mentioned it to Jimmy, because it was more fun accusing him of being a pig than fawning over him for his charity.

Mostly, he was a sleaze, happily flaunting his dick to any girl who'd suck it for a thousand dollars. He kept the girls around cheap because he knew the other places weren't even close to semi-respectable. Not that the Pleasure Zone was much better. The chump even took part of the tip money, claiming he was better than a savings account, and they could come to him if they needed a loan, which also meant a blowjob. Bottom line, he didn't want his women to get too rich and leave.

Survival was all about what you did for tips. She learned from day one when she was dressed in a virginal white teddy, looking as sweet as a lamb, and sent out to the hungry lions. She was a pretty face making peanuts. And then she learned how to add the pelvic thrusts and show a little more flesh. She went from barely paying her bills to having some cash to save from week to week.

With the extra money the man was waving around as motivation, Fallon shimmied along the pole and walked in her red stilettos over to the edge of the stage. She bent over in her thong to give the boys a show, running her hands around her curvaceous hips. From one leg to the next, she shifted her weight, doing her best to ignore their raunchy words.

The heels were killing her, straining her calves to a point that would require several nights of tender massages and soaking in the tub. Followed by a couple shots of whatever she had left to drink in the cupboard.

“Bring that fine ass over here and I’ll frost it for ya, sugar!”

She cringed behind the curtain of her chocolate colored hair. She had forgotten what color her hair really was. With a toss of her head, she smiled coyly and paraded around, squatting down so they could almost fondle her breasts.

The song was near the end, as was her shift, and it couldn’t come fast enough. She did a final walk in front of the groom-to-be, and slipped her fingers underneath the strings of her red thong, toying with the sides as if she were going to flash him.

No such luck, naughty boy.

The man waved a fifty-dollar bill in each hand, gyrating his pelvis to the beat.

If only they knew how stupid they looked.

“Come on, you sexy vixen, let me slip it somewhere wet.”

She came up close to the edge of the stage and let him slip the money wherever he could reach. The rest of his group followed suit.

Jimmy cut out the last beat of the song and announced the name of the next girl. Fallon stopped her routine and collected her money, blowing kisses to the crowd as if she meant it. The sound of dollar bills crunched against her skin as she disappeared behind the curtain.

Fallon sat in the dressing room, staring hard into the mirror. Her friend, Lena, sat beside her with one finger tugging gently on the skin below her eye, while running a thick line of powder blue above her lashes.

“How’d you do, sweetie?”

“Same as every shift. I fucking hate it.”

“Good to hear. I’d hate to think you actually liked this line of work, sweets.” Lena stood and bent over, adjusting her extra large breasts inside a blue bra. She turned and shook her ass at the mirror. “Christ, I’ve got another year left and I’m going to be doing lipo, whether I want to or not.”

“No you won’t. Your ass is as sleek as butter.”

“Nope, you need glasses. I can see the first layer of cottage cheese and you better believe the guys will too. Trust me.” She threw a bright colored feathered boa across her neck and flashed a big smile. “Besides, you’re one to talk, you got your boobs done not too long ago. If you weren’t concerned, I’d think you’d have spent the money on something less vain.”

“Yeah, yeah, I did it for the pressure. I know. I’m sorry I did. I need to find a new job.”

“Sugar, what are you going to do? Retail isn’t going to keep you in the good life.”

"That's the problem, I'm not living the good life. I'm just making good money."

"Unless you want to work ten hours a day, seven days a week, give up your car and nice apartment, and screw savings, you're not going anywhere. Where else can you bring home four thousand a week?"

"We'd have more if Jimmy didn't take out his cut."

"Yeah, I know, okay. Twenty-five hundred a week. But remember, he's more legit than the guys who run Kitty Kats and Sirens. Plus their girls are all doped up."

Fallon sighed and took off her heels. "Regina's working Sirens, and the last time I saw her, she didn't even recognize me. Her eyes were all bugging out and shit. It's messed up."

"You're only depressed because of the boob job."

"What do you mean?"

"The loss of sensitivity in your nipples, you feel less feminine, you're going to feel depressed for awhile, believe it or not. Mine lasted three months."

"I never noticed you were down. I'm sorry. I've always considered you the one broad to keep it together around here. How did you keep a smile plastered on your face?"

"Vaseline, booze, and I masturbate on my pile of tips every night."

She loved Lena dearly, especially her antics. "Lovely visual, thanks. Seriously, don't you ever want to settle down and have a husband?"

"Sure, some day. Right now, I'm not going to find a respectable guy when I'm here every night, and if I did, he damn well better not support my working here."

"Yeah, I hear you."

"I better get out there. Deb's almost done with her number. See you tomorrow night, toots."

"Yep."

Fallon stared into the mirror and grimaced. She had just turned twenty-eight; tonight, she looked forty. The heavy lights, layers of makeup, cigarette smoke and late nights were catching up with her fast and aging her quickly.

Her stomach grumbled and she guzzled a bottle of water. Just once, she wanted to scarf down a pizza without feeling her stomach stretch, or feel the need to stick her fingers down her throat. Starch was something that showed up on her body as an added inch or two around her waist. There was nothing sexy or tip worthy about that.

No more. Tonight was the last time.

She'd said it many times before, but she was sick of the life and the bullshit that came attached to it. Enough was enough. Of course, her paid-for breasts were a waste if she were to quit.

It was always something. This would be the tenth time in a month she swore it was her final night. But every time she thought about leaving, she remembered that she wasn't qualified for anything else except maybe waitressing and retail. Again, she cursed her decision to quit before she at least got her high school diploma.

She wiped off her excess makeup and tried to find the youthful face she once had. Her hair smelled musty and reeked of stale tobacco. She rummaged around for a rubber band in her makeup box and swept her hair into a ponytail.

After several minutes of going through her bag, she slipped on her favorite pair of light denim jeans with a tear at the knee, a decent t-shirt and her suede jacket.

"Night, Jimmy," she called over her shoulder as she strode quickly to the back door.

"Forgetting something, Fallon?"

"Jesus, Jimmy, I'm sorry. My mind's been on other things."

“I’ve had to remind you every night since you started here. Don’t you like me?”

She pulled out the wad of bills from her bag and slapped them on the table. “I think it’s fucked you take so much from me. I’m the one who does all the work.”

“Yeah, and I promote your sexy ass up there. Without me, you wouldn’t get the attention you do. I make you look good.”

“Wrong. I make the customers come in to your fine establishment, entice them to spend their hard earned money on me, rather than take care of their families, and then I still have to pay you. I don’t like you as my pimp.”

“Relax. With the amount you make, it’s not like you’re lacking in funds. You and Lena go home with a hell of a lot more cash than any of the other girls. And if I don’t provide booty for these boozers, someone else will.” He counted out his portion and handed the money back to her. He held it for a second too long, until she glared at him. He grinned and said, “I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“If you’re lucky.”

“You always say that. Unless you’re moving to some other state, you won’t find a business relationship as cozy as this one. I promise you.”

“One of these times, my sexy ass won’t walk through your doors. Then what are you going to do?”

“Find another girl. You’re all replaceable, you know. Every last one of you. There’s always some chick younger, sexier, and willing to go the extra mile,” he said, pointing to the bulge in his pants.

She scrunched up her nose and looked away.

“I like you, Fallon. I dream about you most nights, but you’re replaceable. It’s life. Nothing personal.”

She scowled at him and tossed her bag over her shoulder. “Fuck you, Jimmy,” she muttered and gave him the middle finger.

“You’re number one with me too, baby. Just remember, a thousand dollars is yours if you place those attitude-laced lips around my cock and suck.”

She slammed the door shut and climbed into her Trans Am, fighting back tears.

I don’t need this.

A block away from her apartment, she stopped at the liquor store and picked out a bottle of wine. It was fattening, but she’d worked off dinner and she needed something to shut her mind down. Grabbing a newspaper, she got back in the car and drove home, still sulking.

When she got home, she walked straight to the kitchen and opened the wine, poured a glass to the rim, and flipped the paper open to the employment section. Her manicured, red glittered nails slid along the job offers, and quickly bypassed all the jobs requesting a high school diploma, GED, or college degree. If she had any of those, she wouldn’t be bitching about the job she had now.

She took a sip and cursed as a she missed her mouth. A deep burgundy spot fell on the paper and grew to twice its size, highlighting an ad. Fallon squinted her eyes, not believing what she saw.

Wanted—Private Dancer.

Must be over eighteen.

Able to choreograph own routines. Music provided.

Dance experience preferred, unless a born natural.

Ask for Ryder.

The phone number flashed at her. Grabbing a pen, she circled the ad.

She glanced at the clock. Damn. Three o'clock in the morning was too late to call anyone. While she didn't doubt a musician would be up pouring over his music at three in the morning, she was beat and the wine was relaxing her. She'd call tomorrow afternoon.

After a second full glass of wine, she decided her brain was numb enough to crash. The doorway to her bedroom swayed a little as she made her way down the hall. She wadded up her jacket and threw it on a chair in the corner.

Falling back on the mattress, she watched the ceiling swirl above her and closed her eyes, dreaming of things that might have been.

Chapter 2

It was well after one in the afternoon when she woke and rubbed the remnants of sleep out of her eyes. A warm ray of sunshine draped across her bed and reflected off her vanity mirror. Her calves ached and she felt like she'd been run over by a semi. She wrinkled her nose. She usually took a shower when she got home to get rid of the smoke and the makeup, but the wine did her in faster than she expected. She didn't like waking up smelling like a cigarette butt. And she had just put on clean sheets, too.

Slowly, she sat up and raised her arms high above her head, stretching out her muscles. Pole dancing was murder on the back, especially with the addition of high heels.

She pulled off her wrinkled shirt and jeans and sat naked on the bed, running her hand along her stomach. Whether she wanted to or not, a workout was in order. She grabbed a pair of shorts and matching sports bra from the drawer and clicked on her step aerobics tape.

The instructor on the video annoyed the hell out of her, but the fantastic body she shimmied kept Fallon inspired. By now, she had the basic workout mastered and was working on the intermediate level. After a month of the step, she'd seen less sag in her behind.

Thirty minutes later, she was drenched in sweat and downed a full bottle of water. She flipped the knob on the

shower and waited for the water to turn warm. Still dehydrated, Fallon filled up the water bottle in the kitchen.

As she walked by the family room, she remembered the ad. The newspaper lay folded on the coffee table, *Private Dancer Wanted* circled in black ink. She was a natural born dancer as far as she was concerned, self-taught and moderately talented. The Pleasure Zone wasn't quite the style of dance she'd longed to do, but it didn't require training.

Her parents never had the spare change to send her to dance lessons; instead, they threw their money away on their own pleasures; gambling and booze. Vegas had been her home, although she never thought of it as one. Block after block held casinos, strip joints, gentlemen's clubs, and places a woman could show her tits and dance for money. It wasn't the glitz and glamour promised that caught her attention, but the way it was presented to her.

She learned quickly how women's bodies were ogled and fawned over. Late shows in the casinos were all about topless women and performers, whereas the family version at least had the women scantily clad. Her parents often won tickets to the shows, and much to her dismay, they dragged her along rather than spend their fun money on babysitters. She learned to sleep during the shows, but she never did like the evening buffets and one dollar ninety-eight cent steak dinners at two in the morning.

The only shows she found appealing was when there was serious, choreographed dancing. At night, she'd practice in front of her mirror in her bedroom, dancing like the showgirls, and pretending she was the lead dancer.

Her one and only year in high school led to a few dancing roles. Her favorite was as a saloon girl in *Hello Dolly!* It was a treat for her to be up on stage with an audience staring at her,

and she'd loved the green dress with black fishnet stockings she wore for the part.

For months after the production, she had no problem landing a date, but keeping them was another story. Once they learned she was quiet and reserved, not the vivacious vixen she'd portrayed on stage, they'd lost interest. At the time, she considered herself invincible and decided finishing high school would be a waste of her time. Hindsight was a cruel lesson.

Moving away from there was the best thing she ever did. New York wasn't exactly home for her either, but anything was better than Vegas.

As she headed down the hall to get in the shower, the phone rang.

"Fallon here."

"It's me, Nat. You busy?"

"I was just about to shower, but I can chat for a few."

"Cool, I'll be quick. I remembered a couple weeks ago, we planned to hang tomorrow and do the lunch and shopping thing. Wondered if we were still on."

"Hell, yeah. I totally need a day to get out and let loose. What time you want to get together?"

"Eleven's good for me. Oh wait, you work tonight, don't you? Is that too early?"

"Nah, eleven's good."

"I'll be by and pick you up. Now go clean up your act."

"Ha, ha, very funny. Catch you later."

She hung up the phone and ran to the shower. A huge cloud of steam met her when she opened the door and she fumbled for the cold knob to balance it out. There was something about water that soothed her and the only time she felt clean in her day.

Dozens of tiny bottles littered the shelves filled with sweet smelling lotions and gels. Anything to mask the smell of grunge and dirt from her work.

As the water sprayed along her body, she let her imagination wander. It would be fun to hang out with Natalie. They'd been inseparable when she first came to New York, working together as cashiers at Macy's. While all the other girls competed for commissions, they worked as a team.

Natalie was the first to get out of retail when she'd completed college and earned a law degree. Within months, she was hired by a mid-sized law firm as a junior partner. Nat's mother had given her enough money to buy into the partnership. Soon after, their friendship went through some rocky times. Along with being a lawyer, her friend decided to become a total health nut and environmentally conscious. Not that either was a bad thing, but it disrupted the flow of their closeness. The days of pizza, shakes, and fast food lunches went by the wayside, and her friend criticized her choice of clothing, makeup, and basic living.

Retail got old fast and she was alone, competing with the snobs for commissions all on her own. Fallon longed for something where she could express herself in dance, but everything required training and a suitable amount of years with dance schools. Competition in New York was brutal, even with training, and she was close to being past her prime. The tuition to performance art schools cost more money than she could possibly make, even on commission, and her one bedroom studio apartment didn't offer much space to practice. She'd needed money, and fast.

On a lunch break, she'd stumbled on a seedy corner of downtown and the flashing sign of dancing girls lured her in. She had come to New York to get away from Vegas, only to find a mini Vegas in New York. Based on a few provocative

moves and her shapely figure, she was told to lose ten pounds, consider implants at some point, and start in a month. She'd be responsible for learning her own routines, buying her outfits and makeup, but could dance to her heart's desire.

Fallon shook her head. *No more thoughts of work.*

She grabbed her waterproof vibrator and turned the setting to low. The sleek blue number had been her friend for some time and helped her forget how long it had been since something other than plastic had squeezed between her thighs. As she pressed the vibrator along her clit she leaned her back against the glass wall, making sure the sprays of water darted at her nipples. *Damn the loss of sensitivity.*

She turned the setting to medium and nestled it against the right side of her clit. With her eyes closed, she manipulated the vibrator back and forth, bringing a sudden charge of energy rushing into her lower abdomen. In her mind, she pretended a dark, handsome rogue pinned her against the glass and wrapped her legs around his chiseled abs and tight behind, thrusting his immense cock inside her. His lips would nip at hers in a fervent hunger, devouring her with a charge of his tongue inside her mouth.

The pressure continued to build and her legs tensed. She clenched her teeth together as she flipped the setting to high. A flash of the man ramming his hard, slick cock in and out of her dripping wet snatch propelled her senses to full arousal.

Fallon sucked in her breath as the orgasm barreled through her body. The vibrator dropped to the shower floor and she let the tension pour out of her.

Sex was the ultimate mood enhancer in her book. Spasms played about her body until her breathing evened out.

She opened a bottle of vanilla-scented gel and poured it into her loofah. As she lathered her body up, the soothing aroma seeped into her skin. She massaged a dollop of her

favorite shampoo into her hair and rinsed twice before coating the mostly fried ends with conditioner.

Fallon rinsed out the conditioner, turned off the water and grabbed a thick, thirsty towel, tucking the ends at the side of her breasts while she piled her wet hair into a messy bun on top of her head.

The mirror was heavily fogged in a grayish veil. She opened the door to let in some air and strolled around the apartment. Her place was nice and spacious, and much to her surprise, had come fully furnished. She had been here for two months now, moving from the small, one bedroom a month after she started working for Jimmy. Two large bedrooms, though one became nothing more than a junk room, a family room, dining room, extra large kitchen, and big enough patio to lounge around in the sun. While the rent took one-third of her income, it was worth it to have a place to practice her dance moves.

Droplets of water trailed behind her as she walked back to the coffee table and stared at the ad again.

What would be the harm in calling? The worst thing to happen would be that they wouldn't hire her. If she didn't try, she'd never know and it would eat away at her. Regret was a common theme in her life, and she vowed at some point to stop allowing the past to get in her way and only look forward.

She picked up the phone and dialed the number. Three rings later, a message machine clicked on and she paused. Self-doubt washed over her and she quickly hung up. *Who was she kidding?* If she had the courage, she'd try again later. In this city, it was probably some freak or pervert looking for cheap entertainment anyway.

The mirror in the bathroom was clear again and she put on a thin layer of foundation, lightly lining her lids with soft

charcoal. She smoothed a layer of raspberry lip-gloss along her lips. Weekends were the only time she got away with just a touch of subtle makeup all day long. Work was all about wild, bold, and suggestive, the complete opposite of how she was in real life.

She looked forward to hanging with her friend, and hoped they were on their way to getting things back on track. Their latest squabble had been all about her choice of a job, as usual. There was no way to please Natalie unless she conformed to a squeaky clean lifestyle and had a solid career.

It didn't seem to be in the cards for her, and she was tired of dealing with other people's expectations. All she knew was dancing was going to be a part of her life, one way or another.

Her stomach rumbled and she decided that sushi delivered from her favorite restaurant was in order. She punched in the number and ordered the number five, or what the owner pleasantly referred to as her usual.

From her closet, she pulled out a denim skirt and red tank top. With a few swipes of the brush, she pulled her hair back into a ponytail and sprayed on perfume.

Twenty minutes later, the ever-faithful delivery boy knocked.

"Delivery from Dynasty."

A tall blond in his late teens held up her box of food as she opened the door.

"Hey, Nick, how are you doing?"

"Great, even better now. I've got your usual."

"Thanks. Almost graduation time, isn't it?"

His brows furrowed a moment but then he broke out in his infectious grin.

"Two more months and then I'm free."

She grabbed her tote bag, still in its place on the floor, and pulled out two twenties.

“What do I owe you again?”

“Nineteen even. Like always,” he grinned.

“Great, here’s forty. Keep the change. Like always.”

Red splotches formed along his neckline. “No one tips me like you do.”

Her fingers lightly brushed against his as she handed him the money.

“Like I’ve said before, this all goes into a college fund. I want to see you continue your education. You’re going somewhere in life.”

“Are you going to wait for me to get a good job and a big house?”

She laughed. She had known Nick had a crush on her since the first day he brought over her food. Aside from the obvious fact he was much too young, she wasn’t into blondes and she quickly dispelled any thoughts of his payment made in other forms than cash. Still, she adored him and knew he’d make some girl very happy in the future.

“Now, Nick, when you get to be a millionaire, you can give me a call. But I think I’ll look like an old hag in about ten years, so you might want to set your sights on someone younger.”

“Are you kidding me? Older women are hot! Besides, you’re too gorgeous, you’ll never be a hag.”

“Would you get out of here?” She laughed, grabbing her order from his hands.

“I’ll see you next week.”

It never failed. Fridays were all about sushi. She had a feeling Nick made sure he worked every Friday and couldn’t remember the last time anyone else had dropped off her food in the last six months.

His most enduring trait was youthful energy. If she had half his zeal, she’d be someone else, working somewhere else.

She supposed, out of complete desperation, she'd consider having sex with him. At least he was eighteen. Her biggest fear was seeing him in The Pleasure Zone, watching her striptease. He'd never asked what she did for a living, but he often commented how he was sure she was a model. One thing she wasn't was a good role model.

Fallon racked her brain trying to remember what was wrong with blondes anyways. Nothing stood out in her mind, other than the fact the man from her dreams had always been dark-haired and mysterious. Every fantasy was about the dark-haired man, faceless except for full lips, and a glint of steely blue eyes. She never saw his face in her dreams, but the partial visual was enough to set her off.

By being so choosy, she was bound to continue her plastic vibrator streak. *Six months*. For a woman who loved sex as much as she did, six months was a ridiculous amount of time to be without a man. She blamed her job. She didn't want to have anything to do with a man who would spend his time in one of those places watching women strip, and that was the only type she'd meet there.

Other girls made extra cash on the side doing lap dances, and giving out their phone numbers for potential personal visits. There were lots of escort services, adult massage parlors, and plenty of places where money could be made by showing off clothes.

To her, The Pleasure Zone was bad enough. The men who frequented the club were immature, stunk, and most of the time, were married. Even lap dances were out of the question once she noticed the men coming in were usually drunk as hell, thinking they were hot. She wasn't about to sleep with married men and ruin other women's lives. It was about putting herself in someone else's shoes, and she wouldn't trade hers to her own worst enemy.

Men who cheated left a bad taste in her mouth. One wife had found out about her husband and a lap dancer named Shelia. She'd only been dancing a month but was being well tipped by a certain businessman. Apparently, the wife came in and cut a nice design along Shelia's face and after that, the man never returned. Fallon was glad she hadn't worked that night to see it, or Shelia.

In no time flat, she'd downed the sushi and ran through her dance routines for the night. Her tape collection consisted of mainly dance tunes, classic rock, and her favorite soundtracks. Sometimes, it only took a title to inspire her choreography, making a theme out of it and matching it with a costume. At least Jimmy let her pick her own music.

Each evening, she was to dance four to five numbers, then walk around serving drinks if she wanted to earn more tips. Rarely did she bother and Jimmy didn't seem to give a shit. To her, it was tasteless. Sweaty hands pinching her ass, men looking down her shirt, and the vulgarity out of their mouths only made her stomach lurch. Just because she worked at a strip joint didn't mean she was easy or accessible.

When she was familiar enough with her routines, she grabbed a trashy novel to pass the time. It was only six and she had another two hours before she had to be at work.

Words kept running together as she turned the page and she'd read the same line three times. Clearly, the book had been written to appeal to someone else, because it wasn't working for her. The only thing she focused on was the ad.

"Screw it. I'll try again," she said out loud in an attempt at bravery.

Fallon picked up the phone; amused by the fact she'd memorized the number so soon. She punched the buttons quickly. After the third ring, she almost hung up when someone answered.

“Hello.” The voice was laden with husky tones and vibrated in her ear.

She scrambled to grab the newspaper, having forgotten the name of the person to ask for.

“Um, hi. Yes, I’d like to speak with someone named Ryder?”

“I’m Ryder.”

Her knees buckled and she sank into the recliner. Was it possible for someone’s voice to get her so worked up?

“Oh, then hello. My name is Fallon and I saw your ad in the paper.”

“Which ad are you referring to?”

She scratched her forehead and stared blankly at the newspaper. Had there been more than one? Any chance of sounding professional had already gone out the door when she first said “um” so she had nothing left to lose at this point.

“I’m referring to the ad about a dancer. There weren’t a lot of details and I wondered if you could tell me more about it.”

“There’s not much to tell really. I play music and am looking for someone who can bring the songs to life through dance. Most of it is slow, almost classical, although a few are somewhat different. Do you have any professional training?”

Fallon took a deep breath. There was no sense lying, even though he was a stranger. If she did make up her answer, he might ask for a resume or references. “No. I’ve always loved to dance though.”

“I see. I pictured someone with a background in dance, but if you think you have the stuff, I’d be happy to set up an audition. If I decide to go with you, I’ll request your presence each Saturday and Sunday night for the next four weeks.”

“Oh,” she sighed.

“You sound disappointed. Is there a problem?”

“No, I’m sorry. I was hoping this was a more permanent kind of job. But I’m off on the weekends, so those evenings are free.”

“It’s only for four weeks to start. If I find the partnership has potential, I’ll be happy to discuss future arrangements. The pay will be ten thousand dollars after the four weeks are up.”

She almost dropped the phone.

“Is that acceptable?”

“More like unbelievable.” Fallon smacked her forehead. Was it so hard to ask to sound mature?

“The right person is important.”

“I’ll be there. Let me grab a pen.”

She jotted down the address, listening to the deep lilt in his voice. The man oozed sex whether he knew it or not.

“Have a good evening. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

He hung up the phone before she had a chance to say anything in return. She had to work five days a week dancing to sweaty drunks to make that kind of money.

She remembered a dance routine she’d made up to a song by *Secret Garden* with a flute and piano accompaniment. It would be perfect for the kind of music he was talking about. Aside from all the excitement, she couldn’t get over the sound of his voice.

Her imagination soared with tempting images of what Ryder looked like. She pictured him as the man of her dreams with dark hair, a clean-shaven face, steely blue eyes that went between sensitive and brooding in the blink of an eye, and a nice, strong build. Muscles weren’t important to her, but a decent amount of strength to pick her up and carry her off into the jungle made her body tingle.

A light layer of dampness along her silken panties caught her attention. She went into the bedroom and pulled up her skirt, slipping the soaked panties off. With her eyes closed, she drifted into her fantasy and let her fingers play out his role. Ryder. Soft whispers in her ear with his sultry voice while fingers dipped between her trembling thighs. The smell of musk as he dabbed her neck and shoulders with his lips, kissing her repeatedly.

Her own fingers trailed around her clit, rubbing at it in frenzied haste. She pictured his strong body, hairless, hovering above hers. His movements drawing out her breath, and sending shock waves through every pore. Red and raw, burning hot, her sex begging to be ignited with her secretions. Faster, her fingers simulated her fantasy of Ryder, bringing herself to a speedy orgasm.

She cried out as her body shook, her insides convulsing.

Damn, all from the sound of his voice.

Fallon lay on the bed, coming down from the euphoric high. She thought of the dance she had planned for the audition. Slow, controlled moves, almost ballet-like with hints of modernism thrown in. She knew the job wasn't hers yet, but she'd work for it.

The only question she had left was, what to wear? Maybe Nat could help her figure something out. It had to have some class. She wanted to radiate the subtle side of herself, not the sexually charged façade she displayed at the club.

With time ticking away, she changed into a clean pair of panties and pulled her skirt down. From her bag, she removed the cash from the previous night and put it in a metal box she hid under the bed. Saving in a bank never worked, but the metal cashbox did. There had to be twelve thousand dollars stashed away in there. It was to be put to proper use, not thrown away on frivolous things, or spent on bills, clothes,

the car, or entertainment. Whatever she brought home tonight would be spending cash for the weekend.

She tossed the bag over her shoulder and went to work.

* * * *

The Pleasure Zone was packed and a thick layer of smoke coated the air. Fallon stuck her head out to see what kind of crowd she had to contend with. Deb was doing her lesbian dance with Tina, and she watched as stacks of money were tucked into their garters. Jimmy pinched her ass and she sprang back.

“What the hell are you thinking?”

“Sorry, toots, I saw an opportunity and I went for it. You could do that, Lena and you,” he said, nodding toward the stage.

“I don’t do the lesbian scene in public. Not my cup of tea. If I were to be with a woman, it would be in private.”

“Are you bisexual?”

She didn’t care for the way his eyes popped out of his head.

“Shut up.” She sighed, putting some distance between them.

“I’m just saying it’s something to think about. Those girls make almost as much as you do.”

“Yeah, but on their own, they wouldn’t even draw a crowd. Let them do their own thing. It works for them.”

“You gotta learn to take some chances, girl. You’re not getting any younger. Gravity gets to be ugly when you hit the big three-oh.”

Fallon threw her bag down and turned, her eyes casting red rays in his direction. “Jesus, Jimmy, what is this, your week to rip on me?”

“I’m only looking out for you, and your future. That’s all. You know I’m infatuated with you, baby cakes.”

“Wonderful. But I don’t buy it. The only one you care about here is you, and the customers come second.”

He put his hand to his heart and stuck out his lips in a pout. “I’m wounded.”

“You’ll get over it, I’m sure. Now get out of here. I need to get ready.”

She watched him leave and quickly changed into her scanty costume. Fallon thought she looked decent enough and set herself up in front of the mirror. Rusted toolboxes filled with makeup and glitter cluttered up the rows of tables. The lighting was horrible and always made her look trashy.

She’d studied books on how to apply makeup to accentuate certain features. She learned to do things like tapering her nose, bringing out the eyes, creating fuller lips or thinner lips, and giving the illusion of high cheekbones. None of them worked on her.

Several bottles of foundation lay strewn before her and she chose one that matched the color of her skin. With a sponge, she dotted at her face and blended the color in, then added a light dusting of powder. Carefully, she applied eyeliner, mascara, and then a shadow to exaggerate her features so she could be seen from the back rows in the bar. When she stood next to a dancer on stage, it was almost disgusting to see how many layers of crap they wore, but it didn’t appear the same to their valued customers. It seemed the more lipstick, the better.

Fallon selected peach colors to go with the sunburst colored micro-mini skirt and cut off tank top. A peach bra and panty set in leather would be what she stripped down to, an outfit to please the horny bastards. Once the curling iron was hot, she curled the ends of her hair and applied a thick coat of lipstick.

Lena came in and threw herself into the chair next to her.

“Wow, baby doll, you’re going to knock them dead tonight. What did you do to get that glow, get laid or something?”

Fallon looked in the mirror, tilting her head one direction, then the other. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you had a sugar daddy on the side, and you just got a hefty dose of sweetener.”

Fallon laughed. “You’re so dramatic.” She thought about it a minute and realized she wasn’t actually too far off. Ryder had provided her with a sweet incentive earlier with his voice.

“You better get your head out of the clouds, girl. Jimmy has called your name twice.”

“What? Oh shit, okay. I’ll catch you later.”

Fallon waited for her song to start and bounded on stage. A surge of energy thrust through her body and she was met with thunderous applause. Men stood on tabletops whistling at her, while regulars chanted her name. She let their faces disappear and pretended she was dancing for Ryder.

The noise died down and she focused on the music, moving her body to the infectious rhythm and wrapping her body around the pole. From one side of the stage to the next, she posed and danced, gyrating her hips and flashing a suggestive glance. She worked the crowd, pulling her tank top and skirt off to reveal the sexy, body-hugging outfit. Her breasts pressed tightly against the leather, her nipples fully extended beneath. The leather hot pants fit her curves perfectly and showed off the swell of her ass.

She bent over and swung her hips side to side, feeling the wads of money slip along her flesh. Nothing was going to ruin the high she was on right now. Tomorrow night she’d be strutting her stuff, and hopefully, she would be what he was looking for.

When the song finished, she waited for the next one, which was at a slower tempo, lowering things a notch. Suggestively, she stepped up to the pole and wrapped her hands around it, lowering her body up and down, as if making love to it. She twirled around a couple of times and walked around on stage, stopping once to pull off her hot pants, revealing a leather thong. Her fingers traced her nipples beneath the bikini top, her head tossed back dramatically.

Hands wrapped around her and the audition fantasy disappeared. A little fat man, followed by his two equally pudgy buddies, had run up on stage looking for a little physical action. She yelled out for Barry and the muscle-bound bouncer roughly dragged them offstage.

The audience booed the men for disrupting her number, and convinced her to keep going. Fallon forced a smile and finished up the set with less enthusiasm.

She was glad she had a break for an hour before going back on. As she hid behind the curtains, Lena passed by her in a Hawaiian outfit screaming to the boys about getting laid.

Barry stood off to the side and she gave him a quick hug.

"In case I don't tell you enough, thanks for being around."

He smiled and tousled her hair. "It's not a bad job to guard such beautiful bodies."

She threw her outfit on the floor and kicked it under her chair.

"Your set rocked, baby doll," Jimmy's voice gushed.

A wad of paper lay under the table and she threw it at him.

"Leave me alone."

* * * *

After Fallon finished her last set, she changed into comfortable clothes and shoes and headed home. Her mind

was racing in a million different directions and she knew sleep was going to be difficult.

After a quick shower, she laid in bed thinking of Ryder, the audition, her dance moves, and how much she loathed the person she'd become. There was a bigger world out there and she wanted to do more with herself. The problem was, she didn't know where to start. If someone would come and whisk her away, promising a lifetime of happiness, she'd take it. Regardless of the price.

Chapter 3

Her voice had been an unexpected burst of energy entering into his tomb-like existence. A carefree sense of whimsy jolted him, almost burning through to his ears from the phone. The walls surrounding him had been gray for far too long and in one brief moment, she'd let in a wisp of light. He'd almost given up hope, and given in to the call of death, but she offered a ray of possibility, and if he could seduce her, there might still be a chance.

Crows flocked around him, having finished their evening snack.

"Come, my pets, let me share my most wondrous news."

When their caws had died down, they nestled their wings to their bodies and stood, staring at him intently.

"I think I've found the one who can break this curse once and for all."

The whispers started, singing their eerie song above, dusting him with their sorrows and pain. Every night, it was always the same thing. They'd never let him forget. He couldn't blame them. He'd placed them in a terrible position, and had he known what kind of life he was to expect, he'd have made different choices.

Ryder tried to ignore their howls and looked toward his pets.

“She will be here tomorrow evening. We must make sure the house looks inviting with candles and perhaps a warm fire in the mirrored room. I will know if she is the one by the way she moves to my music. She has restored the muse in my heart, and I shall play like I’ve never played before. Her voice holds sweetness, and spoke straight to my spirit.”

Several crows cawed and he put his finger to his lips, silencing them.

“Tonight I will bring passion back into my music, and record a song to seduce her very soul.”

He sat at the piano and stretched his fingers, flexing them until several knuckles cracked. A layer of dust rested upon the keys, barely allowing him to distinguish the black from the white ones. Gray. More gray, like everything around him. He placed his fingers along the trail he once played effortlessly.

Ryder missed his days as a famous concert pianist, playing beautiful music for people everywhere. They adored him once, sitting in stunned silence as his fingers worked their magic. He had been someone, worthy of praise and fame. The whole world was in the palm of his hands, until he became greedy and foolish.

It had never been for the money. Respect, admiration, and love were his obsessions. Money had proven worthless then, and still did now. Stacks of it lay in tombs, the only reminder he’d had time in the spotlight.

He pushed the record button on the tape player and shook his hands, loosening them up a final time. His fingers sampled a few notes and he closed his eyes, envisioning himself back on stage in the warmth of the spotlight, all eyes on him.

“Remember. I must remember,” he chanted repeatedly.

Some of it was coming back to him. He could feel it start from his core and rise up through his fingertips.

The whispers grew louder, almost deafening, and he had to force his hands up around his ears.

“Silence!” His voice echoed inside the room, and all was still.

The crows flew along the piano top and watched him, tilting their heads. Again he tried, mustering up the passion to play. Three notes pinged around the empty room and he was transformed.

Inside, he summoned a world he once knew, and laced the song with all the provocative notes he could. He would give her something no man ever could, and change her forever. In time, she would surrender, body and soul, and give up everything for a chance at a new life with him.

The whispers swirled around again, swarming like angry bees. Ryder opened his mouth and laughed heartily, the room echoing, and the crows flying frantically around.

“It is too late. I have found the one who shall be bound to me for eternity. I will make her mine, hypnotizing her with the sound of my music, and she’ll have only one answer to becoming my bride. Yes.”

His fingers crashed along the keys and thundered around his ears. Ryder imagined the applause and the standing ovations. He’d waited for this day to come, and now he had a reason to play. The sensuous voice on the other end of the line would be here and he would ready her for their future.

She would surrender. Or pay the price.

Chapter 4

The alarm blared noisily just after nine in the morning. Fallon pounded on the button until it shut off, groaning loudly. She was not a morning person. In fact, she wasn't much of a day person either. Part of her wanted to call Nat and cancel their outing, or schedule for later in the day, but she knew it would trigger a whole host of issues she didn't want to deal with. Coffee was going to have to happen, even though she detested the stuff. Tea with milk poured in was not her idea of a choice beverage, but she needed to wake up, and fast.

Sleep had been a lost cause, with one miniscule dream after another being interrupted. Her calves ached and if she wanted to continue dancing, she would have to find shoes with shorter heels. Getting old and playing stripper girl didn't seem to go together.

She set the coffeemaker into action and scrambled into the shower. It was going to be a long day and she hoped an ounce of energy would rear its head by the time her audition began. While the pleasant mist of water sprayed her face, she reviewed the audition in her mind.

There would be a few things going for her already, which she had to thank The Pleasure Zone for. She wasn't nervous to dance in front of a stranger, her body was flexible and supple, and she knew how to draw attention to herself.

Beyond that, she'd be a dancing virgin in a sense, not having had lessons and training. She never worried about discipline and patience, and had never come up with a routine from someone's personal music before. But creativity in her dancing came naturally to her. Through all of it, one thing stood out in her mind; she was sure she was meant to do this.

She stepped out of the shower and took her time doing her face in subtle earth tone colors. Later, she'd touch up her makeup, but she wouldn't paint her face like she did for work.

Two cups of coffee later, she started to feel human again. She went to her closet and chose a pair of comfortable black pants, baggy in the backside, with a crisp white blouse. Pearls added a touch of class and she dabbed on a coat of lip-gloss. In the mirror, she smiled and realized how much more appealing she looked without the caked on stuff.

A car horn blared and she popped her head out of the window. Leave it to Nat. Right on time. She waved and stashed some money in her purse. It never worked before, but she would try to pay for lunch this time. While it hurt her feelings, she knew her friend didn't want her to pay for things that included her because she disapproved of where she got her money.

With a quick turn of the key, she locked the door, ran to the car and hopped in.

"Lunch first or shopping?" Natalie asked, looking behind her while she backed up.

"I haven't eaten a thing, so I'm starving. Either is fine with me."

"You're funny that way."

"What way?"

"You give two answers to things."

"I don't. Well, maybe sometimes."

“See?”

“I did that one on purpose.”

Natalie adjusted the rearview mirror and laughed. “I wasn’t complaining, honestly, it’s what I first liked about you. I haven’t had breakfast either, so let’s go eat. Anywhere in particular?”

Fallon thought about a burger, but Nat was all about being a vegetarian. Pasta was out, dairy was out, anything fried or starchy was out. It made for a hard choice.

“Salmon?”

“Salmon and steamed veggies sounds right up my alley. Good thinking.”

She smiled to herself. Things were starting out well.

“I think Barth’s is just up the road here too, so no need to wait.”

Natalie pulled up to the restaurant and grabbed her purse from the back seat.

“Ready?”

“Oh yeah.”

As soon as they were seated, they ordered.

Fallon leaned back against the soft booth and eyed her friend over.

“You look really good. Very happy in fact.”

“Thanks. It could be a number of things, but I’ll call it blissful love.”

Natalie stuck out her hand and showed off a sparkly blue ring with a batch of diamonds surrounding it.

“Serious?” She threw her hands to her mouth and stared. They truly were going in different directions.

“Yep, Michael popped the question and we’re going to set a date tomorrow night at dinner with his parents.”

“I’m thrilled for you, sweetie,” Fallon cried, her eyes brimming with tears. “You guys have been together forever. It’s a wonderful testament to love.”

“Thanks. I’ll also be leaving my current job. I’ve been offered a partnership in a highly influential law firm.”

“That’s wonderful news! Sounds like things are really moving in your world. You totally deserve it.”

The server set their plates down and they both scoffed at the small portion of vegetables.

“I’m definitely going to be hungry later.” Her friend laughed. “Three pieces of broccoli and a mini cauliflower? Please.”

“No kidding. At least the salmon is fresh and decent sized.”

“So, what about you?” Natalie stabbed the fork into a piece of broccoli and waved it in the air. “Any plans to move up to a better paying job?”

Fallon swallowed a big bite of salmon without chewing. “Me? Why on earth would you think something like that?”

“Because a good job could really propel you into bigger things.”

She felt the salmon churn in her stomach. Here it comes. All the reasons she was irresponsible and unfocused.

“Sweetie, you take things too personally. I know you work, and indeed from what you’ve said, the pay is excellent, but don’t you want a respectable job with benefits, and develop a good business sense for your future? You can’t go on dancing forever.”

“You’re always knocking what I do. I’m not smart like you and my parents couldn’t afford to send me to a good school so I could get a degree and slap down an award-winning resume. We’re different people, but it doesn’t make me a bad

person. It may not be the best job, but it pays the bills, with money left over. And I only have to answer to myself.”

“You’re so damn stubborn. There is a bigger world out there you’re missing out on. If you went back to school and took classes, you could start over. I know you’re smart, Fallon. Think about the opportunity to have your own office, weekends off, paid vacations, medical coverage, and invitations to the best parties. You might even meet a reputable man and fall madly in love. Who knows?”

“Not all of us can live a fairytale life.”

“And I don’t. But I’ve taken charge of my life, and you should too.”

Fallon scraped her fork along the plate and sighed. It wasn’t worth arguing about.

“I appreciate you thinking of my future, really I do. Anyhow, tonight I have an audition.”

“You mean for a play?”

“Not exactly. There was an ad in the paper for a private dancer. I called and the man who answered said it was a four-week gig with possible future arrangements.”

“I don’t understand. Will you still be doing your other job?”

She hated the way Nat emphasized *other job*, which she knew was nothing more than a substitute for dirty and disresponsible work.

“Yes, it’s only on the weekends. Now get this. He’s going to pay me ten thousand dollars. That is, if I get it, of course.”

“Doesn’t sound legal to me,” said her friend, swirling the ice cubes in her water glass.

“Why the hell not?”

“Who has that kind of cash sitting around to pay someone they hardly know, and will only be employing for a month?”

“Why do you always knock the things I do? It’s a chance for me to strut myself somewhere other than in a club. He’s a musician and plays slow, classical music. His interest is finding someone to convey his music in the form of dance.”

“Sounds like for that kind of money, he’s going to want more from you than dancing.”

Fallon threw her fork down and folded her arms across her chest.

“You think you’re so high and mighty because you have a career, a great guy, a degree, and lead a choice life. Nothing about my life has ever been easy, things don’t drop right into my lap, and I have to work my ass off for everything. Finally, something comes to me, in the form of dancing no less, and I’ve been stoked about it since last night. If you were a true friend, you’d be happy for me and supportive, not judgmental.”

“You mistake my comments for criticism and take things too defensively. I want to know, what do you plan to do with your life? Where do you see yourself in five years?”

Fallon paused to think over the questions a moment. The answer was clear.

“Dancing.”

“You’ll be lucky to dance at the club after you turn thirty. Unless you plan to spend half your earnings on all-over cosmetic surgery, you’re out of luck. You can’t fight the onslaught of age forever. Younger girls will always be knocking down your door and walking all over you, regardless of your experience.”

“I simply said dancing. That doesn’t mean in clubs or on tabletops. One day, I hope to perform on a stage, maybe tour with singers, or maybe even teach.”

“Both require schooling.”

“I’ve been saving my money and the right thing will come along. Until then, I’m biding my time. Did you want the rest of my salmon? I’m not hungry anymore.”

“Dammit, I didn’t mean for things to turn into a fight. You’ve always been so childish. I swear, you take everything I say completely wrong so it makes you look like the victim.”

“Like hell.” Rage spewed through her body like an out of control fire. “This is how things have been progressing for years, all because you can’t accept me the way I am. I may not like everything about you but I don’t throw you under a microscope and magnify every single flaw until it looms like a monster. If you don’t like my life or the way I live it, then let’s just call off our friendship so you won’t have to deal with it anymore. I’m sick of feeling inferior next to you.”

Fallon threw down her napkin and opened her purse.

“I know you think my money is too dirty to spend on your food, so I’ll only cover my portion of the bill.”

Natalie’s fingernails tapped the tabletop. “How do you plan to get home?”

“I’ll take a fucking cab, thank you.”

Tears streamed down her cheek as she bolted out of the restaurant. A cab pulled up the second she stuck out her hand.

“Where to, miss?”

Her first instinct was to go home, but she desperately needed a new outfit for the audition.

“Parker’s department store, please.”

She threw herself into the cab and shut the door harder than planned.

“You okay?” The driver turned to her with a look of concern and she forced a smile.

“It’s nothing really. I hate judgmental people who call themselves friends.”

“I hear you on that one,” he said with a wink and turned on some relaxing music. “Maybe a little Sinatra will help.”

Rage still seeped through her pores. Nat’s implications stung. Sure, she was being defensive, but it’s because they had the same argument all the time. No one stuck up for her. She hated the thought of losing her only friend in New York, but it was becoming too much of a hassle to keep it together. Plus, no matter what she did, she was always in the wrong. Her victim comment was way too much; she never played into that kind of role. She was a survivor, through and through, and didn’t ask for anything from others.

Lena had often talked about the two of them hanging out, but she wasn’t sure, and she feared they would clash away from work. She thought of her more as a big sister anyways, and someone to vent to about work. In the end, she preferred her privacy and had been on her own for most of her life.

The cab stopped at the entrance of Parker’s and she thanked the driver with a hefty tip. Through the revolving doors, she headed straight up the escalator to the women’s department.

Her outfit had to be special. Something on the lines of an eye-catching dress with room to move, to accentuate her figure, show off some cleavage, but not too much, and in a soft color. The idea was graceful, demure, and elegant.

She perused the racks of dresses, throwing her favorites over her arm.

“May I start a room for you?” asked a heavily perfumed brunette.

“Sure, that would be great thanks.”

Nope, she didn’t miss retail at all.

After trying on fifteen similar dresses, she finally decided on the one she liked best. It was a deep green dress with a

loose skirt that hung at her knees. She had a pair of shoes to match at home to complete the look.

Outside she hailed another cab and patted herself on the back for being so brave to have made the call in the first place. Private dancer. There was something erogenous about those words.

As soon as she walked into her apartment, the phone rang. She picked it up and heard Natalie yelling something to Michael from another room. With a deep sigh, she cut right in.

“Hello.”

“Fallon, look, I’m sorry for being such a judgmental bitch. You were totally right to get mad at me and I need to learn to keep my big mouth shut. I guess I’m worried about you, is all. I read in the paper last week about a group of men posting ads, luring women to places, and I don’t want to scare you, but ten different women ended up kidnapped, raped, or dead.”

“It’s New York, Nat. You’re going to read something like that every day. In fact, a lot of cities have the same thing going on. You can’t be afraid to live life, or you won’t. This is one of those times I can’t let fear control me. Besides, in the end I know I can handle myself.”

“Yeah, but you see, at least in your other job, you have a bodyguard. When you go tonight, you’ll be on your own. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I won’t.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“Nothing’s ever for sure.”

Her friend sighed heavily and tapped her nails against the phone. “For your sake, I hope it’s legit, and everything you want it to be. I want your dreams to come true, sweetheart, honest. Just call me if something happens and you need me to

come and pick you up. I promise I'll come get you, any time. Michael feels the same."

"Thanks, Nat. I appreciate your words more than you know."

"Still friends?"

"Always."

"I'll work on my attitude. I think I get so demanding because I was the oldest of four kids or something mental like that. I tend to fall into the parenting shtick around people. Just ask poor Michael," she laughed.

Fallon heard Michael agreeing in the background and she couldn't help but laugh along.

"It's cool. Thanks for calling. I'll give you a shout tomorrow and let you know how everything went."

"Sounds great. Try and phone before three or you won't catch me until late. Regardless, call tonight if you need me to come get you."

"Will do. I better go."

She hung up the phone and hugged her new dress to her chest. In typical fashion, Nat made herself out to be the better person for calling and apologizing first. Oh well, it seemed the way their friendship would always be, but it felt good to know she had someone around to back her up.

* * * *

After pacing around for an hour, she started to get ready. Fallon put on black lace panties and decided against a bra. The bodice of the dress would cradle her breasts. She had to admit they looked good, but wasn't so sure they were worth the ridiculous expense.

If she could go back in time, there wouldn't be a need for such things as cosmetic surgery. Women could grow old gracefully like the men, and be proud of the shape of their bodies. She used to have a hundred different magazine

subscriptions, but gave them all up after each time she found herself unhappy with her looks. Countless pictures of distorted, plastic bodies ogled her from the grocery store aisles, and she found it intimidating. Because of her work, she'd only made matters worse, and gave into the pressure to look like someone she wasn't. It wasn't a proud moment. But, as foreign as they seemed, she had to admit they did give her some added sex appeal.

She stood before the mirror, in her panties, checking out her figure. Side to side she turned, scrutinizing every inch. Flawless skin. Long legs attached to a curvier ass than she cared for, a tapered waist, and sleek arms.

She slipped the dress on and twirled around, letting the skirt flair out subtly. The makeup she'd applied earlier was starting to fade and she retouched it all with a light layer. A million tubes of half-used lipstick were sprawled in her drawer. She picked one and tried it out. Perfect. If he didn't like her dancing, at least she hoped her looks would be memorable.

Fallon sprayed some perfume on and went to look for the paper where she'd written the address. He mentioned it was off Cathedral Street, but she wasn't entirely sure where that was. She would have to wing it, like she always had.

After a final glance in the mirror and a quick swipe of the brush through her long chocolate strands, she got in the car.

It took her several u-turns before she found Cathedral Street and drove along looking for Scout Avenue. The roads were dark without a single street lamp in sight. Her car inched along as she peeked out the window, squinting to find number twenty-four.

A large wrought iron gate with two stone pillars came into view and a shiver crept along her skin. It was the address she was looking for. But instead of the house that she

expected, she was staring at a mansion. And a large one at that.

No wonder he can pay so well.

Her car hovered at a snail's pace along the circular driveway and she turned off the engine.

Get a hold of yourself, girl.

This was a scene right out of a scary movie, and she hadn't seen one in years. All she ever got out of them were nightmares. She cautiously opened the car door, fearing big dogs would dash out at her, snarling with razor-sharp teeth.

Suddenly, all the self-confidence she'd worked up melted away. A draft in the air wasn't the only thing giving her goose bumps.

With her back against the car, she looked up, blown away by the architecture. It was a nineteenth century Gothic mansion, complete with fierce looking gargoyles staring down at her from arched rooftops. All the windows were stained glass, but in the dark of night, it was impossible to see what they looked like. They had obviously been made for the ornately grayish stone foundation. Fountains were scattered along the front yard with statues of crows, long since dried up and cracked. The grass had been left to brown, and crisp leaves fluttered from underneath a rotting porch.

She followed the stone pathway, climbing up creaky stairs to a large red door with a brass knocker. Fallon raised her hand to knock when the door opened, exposing a long hallway in dark oak.

She waited for someone to greet her, but it was deathly quiet.

"Hello? May I come in?"

Her voice echoed and faded, until only the ticking of a grandfather clock in the corner was heard.

"I'm Fallon."

If anyone heard her, they didn't respond. She walked all the way in, admiring the black, gold, and red décor. Etchings of gold leaves and foliage trailed along the middle of the walls, with red tracery adding a hint of boldness.

Above her head, tarnished brass chandeliers hung between exposed wooden beams. A flight of stairs blocked her path, and she noticed a trail of red rose petals. The house was dark except for a few sconces and lit torches to guide her way.

At the top of the stairs she followed the petals until she came to a large room with mirrors and an enormous stone fireplace. A fire burned quietly and shed warmth and some light, staving off the draft she felt earlier.

"Hello?"

"Are you Fallon?"

She recognized his voice instantly, and she turned to see a figure in the corner, sitting in darkness with only a faint glow from the fireplace outlining him.

"Yes, that's right. I've come to audition. Are you Ryder?"

"I am."

"Is this where I'll be dancing?"

"I figured the mirrors would be a nice touch. Do you think they're too much?"

"Not at all. Am I dressed appropriately?"

"So far, I haven't been able to take my eyes off you. That should say something."

She smiled and walked toward him.

"Stay right there. Don't come any closer."

Her body froze. Why didn't she want him to see her?

"If you're ready, I'd like to see you dance."

"Okay. I'm ready."

"The music I'm about to play is a newer piece. I've recorded it so I can watch you. Typically, I play with my eyes

shut to let the piece move me. The purpose of this audition is to see how comfortably you interpret the music with your body, how it moves you and stirs your soul. I want you to forget you're auditioning and dance the way you would if you were alone. I'll start it now."

Fallon waited for the first soft notes and she stretched out her arm, scooping it at the elbow, while her other hand gracefully extended behind her. She turned on the ball of her shoe, her back leg extending with her arm.

As the music grew bolder she was swept along, doing a combination of leaps, spins, and slow, controlled moves. The sound captured her and made her feel like wings were attached to her back, lifting her up and gliding her around. Tears welled up in her eyes and the lightness in her being spread along her limbs, freeing her of all the tension she'd held for months. She thrust her body around and dipped back, lengthening her right leg up and out. Her arms followed the flow of the music as her body spiraled and turned. When the music stopped, the feeling disappeared and she crumpled to the floor.

"Are you hurt?" His husky voice softened in concern.

She wiped at her eyes and rose on her shaky legs.

"Wonderfully so. Your music is exquisite; I've never experienced anything like it before. I could feel it in the very core of my being."

His silhouette elongated and he moved toward her. A streak of light illuminated only a thin line across his face, enough to allow her to gaze into his steel blue eyes.

"I've never seen anyone move quite the way you do. You said you haven't had previous training? I'm very surprised. You dance better than most professionals."

"I appreciate hearing that, but no, I couldn't afford them growing up. When I turned five, I was given a record player

and some classical records. The music moved me so much I couldn't help but get up and dance. I dreamed of being a ballerina for a few years, wanting to be as lithe and full of grace. I've been dancing ever since. I do what comes naturally. Is it a problem?"

“Not at all. I believe most of us are born with a natural talent. I taught myself how to play the piano, as well as the violin.”

Her eyes got wide.

“You play amazingly well for someone without any lessons.”

“Looks as if we have something in common.”

She strained her eyes to try and make out his face, but he stayed hidden.

“I’ll need to see you without your clothes on before I make my final decision.”

Fallon hesitated. Natalie’s words sprang into her mind, about the women found raped and dead in the news, and how he must want her for more than dancing.

“May I ask why?”

“Let me assure you I’m not going to force myself on you. I’ll try and explain my reasoning as best as I can. Your body is an instrument. Currently it’s encased in fabric, and makes it difficult for me to learn more of it how it works, smells, and feels. I’d like to see the craftsmanship, design, and intricate details. I want to know the texture and finish of your material. A dress only conceals what I’m trying to visualize.”

She thought about it. His words were intelligent, strung together without making her feel small or stupid. Either that or he was extremely persuasive in getting a girl naked. Still, when she thought about it further, it wasn’t a big stretch from stripping in front of rowdy men.

Slowly she pulled the dress up over her head, and let it fall to the floor. Her black lace panties were all that was left to hide her body.

“These too?”

“Unless you’re uncomfortable.”

She moistened her lips and slipped off her panties.

“Are those natural?” he asked, his fingers grazing along her breasts.

What kind of question was that for him to ask? The heat rose in her cheeks. She supposed this was going to look poorly on her chances for getting the job.

“No.”

“Were you unhappy with your own breasts?”

“In a way.” She felt like she was in a confessional.

“They still feel nice.”

He walked behind her and she felt his eyes on her skin. His warm breath charged her skin, leaving tingles across her back. A sweet smell she couldn’t place lingered in the air.

“Your body is streamlined, smooth, very much a dancer’s body. A little thin. Some muscle tone wouldn’t hurt, otherwise, you are well proportioned.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled, unsure if it were a compliment or an analysis. It was nice to hear a man say she was too thin, unlike Jimmy who made her obsess about her weight.

“You must take good care of yourself.”

“Not really. Too much wine and late nights wreak havoc on a girl. I think I look older than I am.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight. Though you wouldn’t think so half the time. I really need to start taking better care of myself.”

His close proximity sent goose bumps along her body. With his fingers he stroked her hair, and brought a strand to his nose, inhaling.

“Strawberries and cream, correct?”

She nodded her head. It was difficult to think of anything to say with his body so near.

“You may put your clothes back on.”

She watched his silhouette head back to the dark corner. Why would he not show himself?

“I gather you’d like to know if you have the job or not.”

“I didn’t expect you to make a final decision tonight. I’m sure there are plenty of other dancers, younger than I, who plan to audition.”

“I’m not interested in the others. I’d like to offer the private dancer position to you if it suits you. Your moves are indeed natural and you mesmerized me tonight. Rarely have I experienced such passion and beauty. I think our natural talents have found a striking balance. It’s yours if you want it.”

The dress was inside out and she hurriedly fixed it, throwing it over her head. She started to run up to him, wanting to embrace him.

“Stop!”

“I’m sorry, I just wanted to thank you.”

“Your words will be enough.”

“I don’t wish to sound nosy, but is there a reason why you won’t let me see you? I’m not a judgmental person, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I don’t feel the need to reveal my identity. You came here to dance, and I was here to watch. Nothing more. This partnership is based on my music and your moves. Everything else is irrelevant. Understand?”

Fallon looked down at the floor, circling the toe of her shoe around the floor. She hadn’t meant to offend him, especially after he’d just given her the job.

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I’m a very private person. It’s not often I share my music with another person, but I have and it drained me.”

“I understand. I often feel the same way. Most of the time, people sap me of energy so I rarely go out unless it’s to dance.”

“It would seem we have several things in common. Now, I must ask you to leave. My eyes grow weary. I’ll expect you tomorrow around the same time. There is a tape. You will find it at the bottom of the stairs on your way out, and I want you to listen to it tonight. Let the music infuse your soul, and see what kind of dance it inspires in you. I’ll want you to perform it for me tomorrow. My private dancer.”

His words cast a spell over her, exciting her, soothing her, and torturing her body sexually.

“Good night, Fallon. I’m anxious to know how my music makes you feel.”

“Good night.”

She practically floated out of the room and down the stairs. A tape sat on the last step, just as he said it would. In her fingers she felt its power and couldn’t wait to experience more of his talent.

Her steps slowed as she walked along the hallway. Voices whispered around her, saying words she couldn’t quite hear or understand.

“Is someone there?” The grandfather clock bonged ten o’clock, startling her. Time had flown by.

She glanced into a room and noticed a large oak dining table with authentic barley twist legs. Twelve chairs sat around it and she wondered if Ryder lived alone. It was an enormous house for only one person, unless that person liked his privacy. Knowing he was like that helped her make sense of the situation. Still, if she lived in a place like this one, it wouldn’t be so dark and foreboding.

Fallon showed herself out and started the car.

When she got home, she poured the rest of the wine into a large bowled goblet. After a good twenty minutes of searching, she found her personal headset and flipped the tape in. The headphones were a bit of a tangled mess, but she

managed to sort through them. She stretched out in the recliner and pressed play, then closed her eyes.

The music started out quiet with subtle undertones of bells accompanied by the intrinsic melody floating from the piano. It built up to a baroque melody, imploring other instruments with a haunting tempo.

She imagined ballet moves and how her body would turn, dip, and slide across the floor. Followed by graceful arabesques, lunges, and sultry swivels of her hips to add a distinct flair. The music soared, infusing itself into her veins, surging through her body with magnetic powers.

Whispery voices, the same ones she'd heard in the house, flooded her ears. As the volume increased, the chanting words became clearer. *Blood red. Cursed love.*

Her eyes closed and she felt herself being pulled back in the chair, thrust from her apartment, through the walls, between blades of glass, and into the stately gothic mansion.

Through the doors her body sped, along the hallway, where the whispers grew louder, and into the room filled with mirrors. Candles lit in iron sconces, ribbons of red streaking the walls, Ryder's dark figure, nothing more than a shadow, in the corner where he always remained.

The streak of light across his face illuminating only his eyes, and nothing more, bore into her jade green eyes. When the whirlwind stopped, she rose from the chair, facing him, unable to move or speak. He moved toward her with stealthy catlike motions, and a feral look in his eyes. His hand reached for her. Long, thick nails with traces of crimson underneath were aged, and pasty white.

Without question, she laid her hand inside his calloused palm, electricity flowing from his body to hers. A gentle tug brought her closer, and she pressed her body against his, breathing in the masculine smell of musk that accompanied

him. His hand moved to her back and they swayed together to the music, bodies uniting as one, a single entity.

Their bodies graced the dance floor, the music erupting around them, surrounding them in firelight and heat. The warmth of his breath across her flesh was irresistible. Fingers reached to her chin and tilted her face up. Heavy veils of velvet covered her eyes, keeping him a mere mystery. Lips stretched across hers, finding a place to nestle.

Hands reached beneath her dress and sought entrance between the fabric of her panties and her flesh. Fallon looked up and tried to see his face. She did not care if he were scarred or flawed. Why would he not show himself to her? Had she not stood there, naked, baring her body and soul for him?

His fingers scattered her thoughts, and he probed her smooth mound. Her body tensed. It had been so long. She needed this, more than he could ever know. From the moment she'd looked into his eyes, new emotions had pushed their way into her heart. Was it possible to love someone after only meeting once? She'd heard about such things, but it had never happened to her before. Perhaps the familiarity came with him being so similar to the dark-haired stranger from her fantasies.

The haunting music switched back to the bells and piano, and she felt her body float, light as air, as if a string were attached from her body to the ceiling, and someone was pulling her up. Her vision returned, the black veils removed, and she found herself on a large bed, lying on her back with her legs spread wide, body bare.

Darkness coated the room like a heavy blanket, small torches lit in the far corner, providing only a marginal amount of light. Dizziness surrounded her, a drunken feeling where she was unbalanced, teetering on the edge of something, but she didn't know what. Madness maybe?

A macabre scene unfolded before her, as the whispers returned, fluttering over her skin with butterfly kisses. Cold drafts rushed through the room, lingering for only a moment, hovering over her body like tiny fingers before they vanished.

A dark shape crept onto the bed, a shadow of a creature, with red eyes and a long pink tongue. Blood dripped from its fangs as it opened its mouth, inches away from her flesh. She blinked her eyes, having a difficult time seeing. Either her eyes were playing tricks in the dark, or her imagination was hard at work. She held her breath. What was it?

Hands gripped her body, forcing her back into the mirrored room. Flames from the fireplace roared, flickering and lapping at her skin, beckoning her to taste their heat. Ryder tore off his cape, his head bent, snuggling his face between her sleek inner folds. His tongue licked at her clit, lashing out along the throbbing muscle. Fingers explored deep inside, slipping in and out with ease. She melted into him and let the pleasures unfold. Faster he moved his fingers inside her and she gripped his arm. Her body swayed, almost losing her balance.

“Please, I want to know how you feel inside me, please,” she begged, her voice hoarse and desperate.

She stood silent, as she had before, waiting for instruction. Ryder lay her down on his cloak, spreading out her raven hair around her.

“Beautiful.” His voice was distant and low. Her legs quivered at the prospect of feeling him inside.

Fallon wasn't the kind of girl who liked it slow with a lot of foreplay and teasing in the beginning. Her body craved to be ravished, a hard and fast kind of sex with no holds barred. Rough was okay, kinky had its moments, but the fragile movements of exploring bodies had never been her forte.

Seduction for her was all about the mind, and this was the man she'd dreamed about for years.

Even a small thought of him touching her body had her yearning to feel him between her legs, imploring him to take her beyond any place of existence. His hard cock lay against her inner thigh and she hungered to feel it. She reached down to stroke his flesh, but he held her hands at bay.

"I just want you in me," she begged.

"When I slip inside you, there's no going back," he whispered in her ear.

More whispers followed and she didn't have time to rationalize the meaning of his words. A single thrust consumed her saturated folds and the surprising feel caught her off-guard.

Images blurred around her. In her mind, she realized it was all a dream and she fought to hold onto it. She forced herself to remember how his hands felt on her body, the way he felt inside. An incessant tapping sound grew louder in her ears, driving out the haunting beat of Ryder's music. Fallon felt herself slipping away from his warm body.

Chapter 5

Ryder had hardly moved since she'd left. Her perfection had almost rendered him speechless. She'd floated around the room like an angel with a gaze that told him everything he needed to know. Her heart was open and would easily succumb to his desire. This wasn't a mere adoration for the art of dance; she moved her body like a sensuous goddess, her body emitting the intoxicating aroma of life, lust, and sin. He had to have her, touch her, know her, and keep her. What's more, he had fallen in love with her.

She was the epitome of everything he believed love and life should be. Her presence had brought out the carnal side of him, aroused his appetite, and shown him what he'd been missing all these years.

His body craved the brutality of her pureness inside. And oh, he wanted to taste her delectable sweetness. She had a body that wouldn't quit, every boy's wet dream come to life. He'd happily spend an eternity making love to her, never tiring of the silkiness of her flesh against his. He'd been unprepared to meet such a divine creature.

Guilt, yes. The guilt was there. Her presence had been unselfish naiveté in motion. It was clear she'd come to dance, and expected the things he'd promised, but now he couldn't let them happen. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her, but in the end, he'd have to in order to keep her.

Ryder sensed the moment she'd turned on the tape. Her body had appeared in its writhing form, and he'd been so close, so very close to taking her right then and there. He would wait, and bide his time. He'd waited this long, been patient and tolerant.

There was a powerful entity inside her and it scared him. It could potentially make things difficult. The others weren't anywhere near as strong-willed, and it was because of that strength that he could end up losing her. With the amount of time that had gone by since he saw her, she would be susceptible to an array of strange reactions.

If he took her, and changed her without consent, she'd become nothing more than a mere whisper. He knew she'd haunt him with a vengeance. But would she say yes? The others never did, they were all too frightened. Perhaps if she were vulnerable enough, she'd have no choice. She was his last chance before the curse would be played out, and his body would turn to dust. Could he be so selfish?

Her smell lingered on his skin, drifting into his mind, doomed to remain a constant memory. It had been so long since he'd felt the touch of a woman, or warm breath against his flesh. Her skin was soft, like satin, aching to be touched. So supple, it almost hurt to touch her. Could she ever love a creature such as himself? If she saw his face, she would be frightened.

Ryder stood and walked to the mirror, touching the smooth glass. He wished there was a reflection, to let him know how grotesque he'd become.

His pets flew around him, pecking for invisible crumbs around the floor.

"My faithful friends, what did you think of her?"

They cawed as if in approval, their eyes darting to every corner of the room.

“She’s given me a reason to keep living this cruel life of mine. I won’t have to be alone anymore. I’ll feast on her blood and draw her essence into mine, until she becomes my bride.”

Again the whispers swept around him, poisoning him with their plea for his savage death.

“No,” he cried out to them. “I cannot live my whole life in regret anymore. I’ve paid the price. You have no idea what I was before you met me, or how great I could have been. You’ve become too bloodthirsty and vicious. I tried to love each of you, but love doesn’t work that way. She is the answer to prayers that have gone unanswered for far too long.”

He wiped at a tear in the corner of his eye. “I deserve happiness. You can’t keep her away from me, for my powers are too great.”

The whispers turned to shrieks and brought cold drafts along his face.

“I don’t keep you here; it’s all your own doing. Free yourselves of the need for revenge. I can’t change what I did. Let me go. Let yourself go. Once you do, there will be a beautiful place for you to roam, an enchanted paradise where you can be whole again. Anywhere but stuck in this sinister cavern.”

Ryder ran his hand along his coarse face, imagining how horrifyingly old he looked. The one who had changed him promised his final years would be painful, and his face would mask that of rot and decay.

“She mustn’t see me this way until I know she’s mine,” he sighed.

One large crow flew over and perched on his shoulder. He reached over to stroke its sleek head. “I wish you could talk and tell me how I look. If I am hideous, I will no doubt

lose her. She is such a beautiful creature and deserves to be

with a handsome man. I can be that way again, if only she will open her heart and mind.”

The crow cawed and nipped at his fingers.

“No, I mustn’t let too much time pass. It will have to be done quickly. Without her, I have no hope and all my dreams will fade along with the ashes of my body.”

He stared around at the darkened room. “I miss the warmth of the sun on my skin, and in time, so shall she.”

Chapter 6

Rain tapped against the window and the sudden swirling motion in her mind woke Fallon up. Her headphones lay in her lap, the cord wrapped around her wrist. Had it all been a dream? She rarely fell asleep in the chair, especially for the whole night, but she guessed she'd been exhausted.

The memory of the song she played haunted her, and had deeply affected her dreams. Ryder was an incredibly talented musician with an enviable ear for melody. She couldn't wait to dance for him later that night. Her trust in him was strong, even though she'd only just met him. When she'd seen his eyes in the glow of the light, they spoke volumes to her. Things she'd never experienced in any relationship in her past. She felt...trust. And security. And hope. And desperation.

It took all her strength to pull herself up out of the chair. She walked to her room and took off her clothes. Her panties were soaked and smelled of sex. The dream had been intensely vivid. She wasn't herself in the dream, throwing herself at a man she hardly knew, begging for him to take her. The words he'd spoken stayed with her, chilling her to the bone. In the shower, she turned the knob to as hot as she could stand it, and thought over the dream. No going back. What had that meant? Her mind played silly tricks on her all the time.

His music took her to a different realm, transforming her into a being of freedom and purity. Parts of the song lingered in her head and she counted out the beat, and her body began to answer the music in her head. She had an idea of the routine she would perform for him, but most of it was letting the music decide.

Fallon wondered if these intense images she experienced ever happened to him when he played. He mentioned he closed his eyes. Maybe it helped him tap into a deep place and it mesmerized him as well.

It baffled her why, even in her dreams, she couldn't see his face. Sometimes a splash of light would show his eyes or she could make out his chin.

Did he think her vain because of the way she presented herself? If someone asked her a year ago if vanity was a common trait of hers, she'd quickly say no. The pressures of her job had gotten to her and that's where the trouble began. She wasn't sure how far she'd go to stay in the limelight at The Pleasure Zone, but she figured the breast implants were a sign of things to come.

When he'd asked if her breasts were real, perhaps he had meant to ask if she worried too much about her looks or how others viewed her. She sensed that he would be disappointed if she admitted she changed her body to make more money. If she had to alter her looks to keep the money coming in, she would, she just didn't like admitting it. Ryder had nothing to fear, because regardless of what he thought, she was a loving, giving person with a big heart.

Flaws didn't concern her on other people, only herself. She'd always been a critical person, bashing herself when things didn't go right. It was something she'd picked up from her folks.

Fallon scrubbed herself in the shower and washed her hair with strawberries and cream shampoo. She couldn't believe her luck in finding someone who let her express herself so freely. The music took over and brought her to life. An empowerment had surfaced in the room of mirrors, sending her body currents of energy and allowing her to give the best performance of her life.

A strange sensation crept over her; something about the last moments she was in the room with him. She wasn't sure if it had been a dream, or had taken place while she was there. The two moments fused together into one, and left her confused. When she'd turned to see herself in the mirror, and Ryder's arms had been around her, she couldn't remember seeing his reflection. She'd gotten so caught up in the music and losing herself in the dance, she couldn't be sure of what she saw. It had been so dark.

The aroma of strawberries filled the bathroom as she opened the shower door and reached for a towel. She wrung out her hair and piled it atop her head until she'd finished with her makeup. It was nice that someone appreciated her talent, and supported her. Natalie could take a few lessons from the dark stranger in making a friend feel good.

Guilt shot through her as she realized she'd forgotten to call her friend to let her know she was okay. Part of her wondered if she had subconsciously ignored her friend. With her luck, she'd receive a two-hour lecture and nothing good would come out of the conversation. Still, she promised to call and would do so later.

Dried and clean, she sorted through her old costumes in the spare room. As much as she wanted something new to dazzle him tonight, there were plenty of outfits she'd only worn once, and a few had actually covered a good portion of her body. Not many, but a few.

In a box tucked away in the corner, she found a black dress, with a scooped out front. When she put it on, she noticed how pale her skin had become. Still, the dress flattered her figure and its silky texture sheathed her skin. With some gold jewelry and black dance shoes, she would look fantastic. Fallon took the dress off and threw on a long dingy shirt she didn't have to worry about spilling things on.

She took the better part of an hour doing her hair and makeup. A sense of calm settled upon her as she readied herself to see Ryder again. She couldn't deny the strong sexual attraction to him, but there was more to it than that. He was like an old friend and secret admirer in one. They shared a bond with the loves of their lives; his was music, and hers was dancing. She hoped he would consider working with her further in the future. At this point, she wasn't sure how she would feel if he wasn't in her life.

She rummaged through the cupboards looking for something to eat. She hadn't shopped in weeks, so all she found was a bag of pasta. Ryder did say she looked a bit thin. She decided pasta would be perfect for dinner and boiled some water.

While the pasta cooked, she practiced the dance she planned to do for him. It was hard for her to tell just how much he watched her from the darkness. While she wasn't vain, she was quite certain he was excited by the way her body moved. How could a man not notice?

She'd spent so much time in her youth watching the way women moved, it was natural for her to portray suggestive moves into her dance. By all accounts, even though she didn't have professional training, she had the best kind of training around. Life training. Any flaws in her dancing were outweighed by her skill in making her body stand out, move, and show off her best assets.

When she finished practicing, she drained the pasta and sprinkled cheese on top. It would have to suffice.

After she finished her meal, she put her dress on again, found a small pair of gold stud earrings and slipped into her black dance shoes. She smiled at her appearance in the mirror and headed out.

Fallon pulled up to the mansion, this time less afraid. It still had an eerie feeling around it, but she imagined it looked more harmless in the daytime. Gargoyles at night gave a definite message of terror.

As before, the door opened by itself, and this time she noticed white flower petals lead her upstairs.

The whispers started up again, chanting to her. *Blood red. Cursed love.* She had no idea what they meant and quickly dismissed them. Her excitement for the dance kept her focused. The trail of flowers brought her to the mirrored room and to the mysterious Ryder himself.

In the corner she noticed his frame, outlined by the orange glow of the fire. Just being in his presence thrilled her.

"Hello, Ryder," she said, twirling strands of her hair between her fingers.

"Good evening, Fallon. I'm glad to see you again. Tell me, what did you think of the tape?"

"Inspirational. I fell in love with the music from the first note. In fact, it left me with some explicit dreams. It all swept me away."

"How so?"

"I'm not sure, but it has just the right kind of melody and rhythm. It speaks to me somehow. The instruments you used were soft and elegant. When I listened, I felt my body grow light, almost as if I could fly. Sensations crept into my body and I felt an inner peace. There was balance, and I rarely ever feel that way. You have such a spectacular gift, Ryder. I feel so

lucky you would share your gift with me, even for a little while.”

“You flatter me.”

“I speak the truth.”

“You are different from the others. I’m not sure what to think of you.”

“Others?”

“Other women I’ve known.”

A pang of jealousy ate away at her. *Why should I care there are others?*

Ryder cleared his throat. “It doesn’t matter about them. They are of the past.”

“You said I’m different. Is different bad?”

“I’m not sure. I think it complicates things. I expected one thing and got something completely different. I’m not very good at explaining my words.”

“You’re confusing me. Have I done something wrong?”

“Not at all. I’m sorry if that is how I’m conveying my thoughts. My displeasure stems from a dark place inside and about myself. Perhaps I’ve spent too much time brooding in this dim and gloomy place. I find little has brought me joy. That is, until you came along.”

“Now I’m the one who is flattered,” she smiled coyly.

“I imagine you get many compliments from gentleman admirers.”

She shook her head. *If only he knew.*

“I long to see how you express my music with your body.”

Fallon smiled. “I’m ready when you are.”

She heard a soft click, and the music began, just as it had on her headset. As she spun, the room blurred and she felt her body being pulled into a tunnel, a portal of some sort. She found herself back where she’d been earlier, lying on a black

cloak with Ryder above her, his tongue flickering against the nub of her clit. Slick fingers slipped in and out between her thighs in time with the music.

His words rang out, just as she'd heard before.

"When I slip inside you, there's no going back."

Why did those words leave shivers down her spine?

"What did you say?" she whispered, not wanting the mood to change.

The whispers interrupted. She started to loathe their very presence. It was like they were trying to lead her astray, as if she didn't deserve to feel such immense pleasure from a man. *Blood Red. Cursed Love.* Haunting words like bugs crawling on her skin. Fallon fought to shoo them away and concentrate on the delicious moves of his fingers. Her whole body was alive and reacting to his rhythm.

"Please, let me feel you inside me," she begged, just as before. His fingers felt good but she'd longed to feel flesh between her thighs. It had been much too long and there was no turning back now.

His lips scoured the side of her neck and his cock pressed hard against her thigh. It was what she was waiting for. She spread her legs as wide as she could and raised her hips, anything to move things along. Her hand slid down and wrapped around his hard, pulsating cock. Its texture against her palm was delicious. His husky moans said enough to her. It was what he wanted as well.

There's no going back.

Were the words coming from him or the whispers? Her legs shook, she wanted him so much. Swiftly, she helped guide him into her. The sudden plunge took her breath away. His lips were nuzzling her neck, and she tensed when she felt a severe pinch. But the next second, he moved inside her, and all thoughts but one flew from her mind.

He moved in and out of her, faster and faster. She opened her eyes, and the room turned red—deep scarlet red—spinning around like a pinwheel. Her gasps grew louder as he plummeted further, pounding into her walls with a fervid pace.

She raised her hips, and together their orchestrated moves found a shared duet, locking into one another's inner rhythm, knowing where the finished score would end. He suckled at her neck and the blood swirled inside her head. Nothing else existed in the moment except their bodies, rabid with heat, savagely racing toward an orgasm to send them out of this world.

"Faster," she moaned, her hands pulling him tighter to her.

Her legs were spread and raised, opening her whole body to him in an offering. Ryder's lips moved down and found her breasts, teasing her nipples with his tongue. Her body reacted in jolts, having forgotten how good it felt. She couldn't believe sensation had returned to her nipples when he was near. A plethora of feelings resonated in her body like she'd never felt before, blazing a scorching path that seemed relentless.

His body jerked and he moved his hand between them, circling her clit. Together they reached the crescendo-like orgasm, both screaming out at the top of their lungs, releasing the breath they'd held so tight in the final moments.

He pulled out of her and lay on his side, his fingers looping around her strands of hair.

"Was that what you wanted?"

"Oh, hell yeah." She laughed, feeling free and loose. Plastic couldn't summon a moment like that no matter how wild her fantasy ran. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yes, it's been a very long time. Feels like centuries."

“Same here. I’d almost forgotten.”

Normally the moments after sex were awkward to her, or at least had been in the past. He hadn’t even wined and dined her, and she had thrown herself into his arms with a wild abandonment she had never felt before. Usually she felt the need to dress and run to the privacy of her home, or the guy waited around for the afterglow to wear off and left without a word. For the moment, Fallon was content and Ryder didn’t appear anxious to move from her side.

“Ryder, why are you so mysterious? I mean, I understand you’re a private person, but we just made the windows rattle and I still haven’t seen your face.”

“My life is complicated. The less others know, the less I need to explain.”

She took that to mean she shouldn’t ask further, but her curiosity got the better of her and she couldn’t stop herself.

“Will you let me see your face, all of it, just once?”

“In time.”

“Why not now?”

“Because I want to enjoy this moment with you.”

Fallon wanted to press on, probe for more answers, but she knew all too well what it felt like when others did the same to her. Invasive.

“Whatever your story is, Ryder, I want you to know I like you for who you’ve presented to me.”

“Are you prepared to love an illusion?”

She shivered as a draft moved along her body when he stood and walked away.

The music ended and her eyes snapped open. Sweat gathered along her neck, sticking to her hair. She couldn’t figure out why it was dripping down to her neck and shoulders in such large droplets. Was it her imagination, or

had she and Ryder just had the most incredible sex she had ever had in her life?

“Ryder?”

She called out his name several times and looked toward the corner, but he wasn’t there. Why had he left without saying goodbye?

Quickly she ran down the stairs and out the door, driving home as fast as she could. The sweat continued to drip down along her neck and shoulder.

* * * *

When she got home, she headed straight into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. A pool of blood was dried on her shoulder, with fresh blood oozing from two holes along her neck. Small patches of her hair were stained red, and sticky. *He bit me?* Fallon looked at the small holes again. *I wouldn’t have pictured him as the kinky kind.* She opened her first aid kit and bandaged herself up.

From the refrigerator, she poured orange juice in a glass and added a good portion of vodka. What the hell had happened? Everything felt, smelled, and appeared like they’d had sex, but something had changed, or shifted, she didn’t understand how to make sense of any of it.

She paced around the family room and noticed her answering machine blinking. All three messages were from Natalie sounding frantic, begging her to call and let her know she’d made it home alive. Fallon checked the clock. It was well after eleven, but from the desperation in her friend’s voice she figured it would be okay to call.

The phone rang twice and Natalie answered, her voice hoarse and sleepy.

“Yes?”

“Hey you, I just got your messages. I wanted to let you know I was fine.”

“Damn, girl! Why didn’t you call me earlier?”

“I got home late and it was after three when I woke yesterday. I remembered you saying you wouldn’t be home after three and I was out late again tonight. Anyway, there’s no need to worry, I’m sorry for not getting back to you sooner.”

“It’s okay, I guess. Thanks for calling, hon. Let’s try and get together real soon.”

“Night,” she said, slightly disappointed. She wanted to talk to someone about what had just happened, but didn’t know what to say. It all sounded so crazy, even to her. She hung up the phone.

Natalie hadn’t even asked how her audition went. It was hard to be too mad; she’d probably woken her up from a deep sleep. She was sure her friend cared. Or at least she hoped so.

A wave of fatigue consumed her body and she barely made it to her bed. In a swift motion, she tore off her dress, and fell to the bed. Within minutes, she was fast asleep.

Chapter 7

It was nearly three o' clock in the afternoon before Fallon woke and dragged herself from the bed. She sat up and her stomach lurched. She was ravenous. Naked, she walked into the kitchen and looked around, finding nothing that would satisfy her overwhelming appetite.

In the fridge was the leftover bowl of pasta, which she inhaled, but didn't do a thing for her. Jimmy would probably notice the added half-inch around her waist, but anyone who mattered wouldn't care.

She found a bottle of red wine and poured herself a glass, downing it in three gulps. It helped quench her thirst, but her stomach still grumbled.

In the phone book, she found a bar and grill nearby claiming to deliver to her address. She phoned and ordered two raw steaks. While she waited, she grabbed a robe and slipped it on, pacing around the house like she was stalking prey.

A young girl knocked at the door and handed her the food. Raw wasn't her idea of food, but she was beside herself with cravings. Without the bother of a knife or fork, she picked up the bloody steak with both hands and ate, hardly chewing at all. Fallon had read about anemic people having a horrific urge for raw meat and she realized she'd mainly been eating like a vegetarian, opting for fish once in awhile. It was

the only thing that made sense. Either that or she was starting her menstrual cycle early.

Her appetite was sated for the moment, but a strong force inside her body was wanting more of something; but of what she didn't know. She pictured the moment in the movie *Aliens* when a nasty creature popped out of the woman's stomach. If she didn't know better, she'd think one was ready to claw through her body any minute.

A shower sounded like a relaxing idea and she turned the temperature to the usual setting. When she got in, the heat was almost unbearable. She fumbled with the knob until it cooled. Fallon grabbed the loofah and scrubbed her body; the feel of the rough material against her sensitive skin made her thighs quiver. *I feel like a cat in heat.*

Grabbing a big towel, she tore herself out of the shower and dried off. In her closet, she went to pick out an outfit to wear to work. A lacy black teddy leaving nothing to the imagination caught her eye and she put it on. In front of the mirror, she checked out her figure.

For once, she liked what she saw and swiveled from side to side. Her breasts looked alluring, propped up with a hint of her nipples showing. Tonight, her theme would be sweet to sassy and decided on a pink baby doll dress to cover up her sassy attire. With her creativity and hormones on high, she opted for pigtails, loosely wrapping colorful ties at the ends that she could easily pull out. She was so restless, her body was jumping out of its skin. Fallon decided to pour herself another glass of wine to help calm her nerves.

Just before seven, she grabbed her bag and drove down to The Pleasure Zone to finish putting on her makeup.

When she entered, her eyes blinked, and she shied away from the bright lights. She had a hard time putting on her

makeup while shielding the glare. Jimmy poked his head in and whistled.

“Girl, you’re looking extra fine tonight.”

Normally his compliments sickened her, but tonight it fueled the fire in her belly.

“I’m feeling different,” she said, not sure how else to explain.

“You’re up. Have a great set.”

Fallon walked by him and brushed her fingers against his bulge. The look on his face was priceless.

She tossed her head back and slipped through the curtains. “Showtime.”

When she walked on stage, the music faded and all she heard was Ryder’s music in her mind. Tonight she’d move her body the ways she felt. Possessed, wild and free.

Her skin crawled with a sexually charged energy and she watched the men and the way they looked at her, worshipping her. She knew they wanted to taste her sacred juices and pump their rigid cocks into every orifice they could find.

Fallon shimmied out of her baby doll dress and paraded around in her sheer black lace teddy. Pulling out the hair ties she swung her hair around, giving the men a lot of sultry attitude. The music vibrated inside her ears, and the whispers, oh, the delicious sound of the whispers sent her body ablaze. She flirted with the men, smiling and teasing, rubbing her hands along her breasts.

Squeezing her nipples, she felt the familiar sensation and pulled down the top of her teddy. It was the first time she’d ever bared herself and the regulars went crazy. They chanted for her to take it off, take it all off, and she complied. She slunk to the floor and crawled on her hands and knees, ass held proudly in the air. Splaying her thighs wide, she exposed her smooth sex for the men to see. Fallon felt like a queen,

surrounded by her appreciative slaves. They were there to see her, throw wads of cash at her, and to keep her memory alive as they bedded their wives.

Heat radiated from her body, the smell of her sex permeating the air, canceling out the foul putrid cigarette and musty smell. A balding older gentleman waved money at her and she jumped down from the stage. She ran her tongue along the side of his face and sat on his lap, gyrating against the obvious erection in his pants.

“Stick it in me, baby,” she dared, delighting at the man’s shocked expression. She held up her peaked nipple to his mouth, outlining his lips with it. “You know you want to suck on this. I promise to thank you for it later.”

Her hands darted for his zipper and soon a whole crowd of men gathered around her, egging her on.

“Okay, break it up, you horny toads, break it up.” Lena grabbed Fallon’s arm, and with help from Barry, dragged her into the dressing room. “Don’t you move from here,” she insisted and threw a robe at her.

Fallon shook her head and looked around, wrapping the silk garment tight around her body. Was it her turn to go out and dance yet?

Lena stormed in with the black lace teddy and pink dress in her hand. “What the hell did you think you were doing out there?”

“I’m not sure. Did I already do my routine?”

“Routine? Honey, call it what you want but you just about fucked a guy out there in front of everyone. I don’t like this place, but I don’t want you to close it down either.”

“Seriously? I don’t remember.” She couldn’t remember anything. That didn’t even sound like her.

“Are you on something? Because if you’re doing drugs, let me tell you right now, I won’t put up with that shit. Hear

me? Once you get hooked, you're screwed. I thought you were smart enough to know better."

"I swear I'm not doing drugs. I've never done them. Wine is about as daring as I get, and it's not often. Honest, I don't remember what happened. I was sitting here wondering if I'd even gone on yet."

"Look, it's best if you just go home. I'll explain to Jimmy you're on your period or something he doesn't have a clue about."

"Okay."

"And just a minute." Lena pulled out a wad of hundred dollar bills from her pocket.

"You don't need to share your tips with me, I'll be okay."

"Share? You must really be tripping on something. These are your tips, honey, at least the ones I was able to grab. Knock yourself out."

"There's gotta be at least two thousand dollars there," she said, her eyes wide.

"And about another thousand I'm sure Jimmy will call his own. Now off with you. I don't want to see you back here until you're feeling better. Call in sick tomorrow if you have to, I don't care. But you can't act like a bitch in heat, or you're going to find yourself in the kind of trouble you won't like."

Fallon hugged her friend and grabbed her bag.

"You okay to drive?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks for looking out for me."

"Sure."

The rush of cool air on her face was refreshing.

She took her time driving home, her heart pounding rapidly.

What had happened at The Pleasure Zone?

Inside her apartment, she paced back and forth. She wasn't used to being home at this time of night on a Monday. Nervous energy ate away at her and she decided to listen to Ryder's music. Maybe it would calm her down. As she hunted for the tape, she noticed a message blinking on the answering machine.

She pushed rewind and hit play. A cacophony of whispers at a loud volume filled her room and sent icy shivers up her back. They stopped as quickly as they'd started.

Sleep was the only answer for her madness. With the headset in her hands, she peeled off Lena's robe and slid between the satin sheets.

She turned on the music and watched the white of the ceiling turn blood red.

In her black teddy, she was dancing in front of Ryder, her body pumping to the music, her hands rolling along her breasts.

"See anything you like?" she asked, baiting him.

"You don't need to act that way around me, Fallon," he said, his voice stern. "In fact, it's not the way I like to see you at all."

Frowning, she stopped dancing and walked to the middle of the dark room.

"It's the only way I know how to be."

"No, it's not. When you've danced for me before, you were graceful, like an angel. You were pure of heart and soul. Tonight you've changed. Are you aware why?"

"No. I feel like two people trapped inside one body and both begging to be let out. My body's on fire and I want something badly, but I can't figure out what it is."

"Do you want me to touch you?"

Her body convulsed at his words. More than anything she wanted him to take her, a million times, to never stop giving

her pleasure. Ryder's music exploded in the room and he was on her in seconds. She kept her eyes open, looking toward the mirror, seeing only her body twisting and turning. *Illusions*.

Black wings brushed along her face and she watched as crows encircled them, silently making a black ring around them.

"I think we have company," she whispered. Ryder's lips suckled at her earlobes and tickled her neck as he spoke.

"Those are my faithful pets. They like to watch."

She tilted her head back to the mirrors. His was not visible, but at that moment, she didn't care.

"So do I."

Her fingers found his erection and ran it along her thigh.

"Take me, Ryder, don't ever stop taking me," she begged, her pulse pounding like a procession of drumbeats.

"You're mine," he whispered and a sharp stab of pain stung her neck.

Before she could cry out, he was inside her, pumping fast and furious. She reached up to her neck and felt thick warmth along her fingers. Bells rang out, echoing along the walls, drowning out the flurry of wings of the crows.

Chapter 8

When she figured out it was the phone ringing, Fallon shot right up in bed and answered it.

“Yes?”

“How are you feeling, sugar?”

“Lena. I have no idea. My mouth tastes like I drank tar last night.”

She shielded the sunlight with her hand, surprised how it burned her skin.

“Sounds like you’re coming down with something. Jimmy agreed you went a bit wild back on Monday night and even he’s worried about you. He’s afraid it was his idea to have public sex to help boost your tips, but he doesn’t want to see you degrade yourself. Imagine that.”

“No kidding. ’Course it’s probably a legality thing.”

“Oh yeah, it’s business first. Though he was watching you and didn’t seem too interested in stopping you at the time.”

“I don’t think I want to know all the details just yet. I’m embarrassed enough as it is.”

“Understandable, though right now, your name is on the lips of every Tom, Dick, and Harry. I think you can count on huge tips from here on out. Speaking of which, how are you for cash?”

“Judging by my tips last night, I can afford to take the rest of the week off.”

“Sweetie, you didn’t work last night. It’s Friday. You sure you’re feeling okay?”

How the hell did it get to be Friday?

“I think so. I’m just out of it. Must be a virus.”

“If you need anything, let me know. I’ve been covering your shifts, so everything’s cool.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“I know. Bye, toots.”

Fallon lazily dragged herself around the house making it as dark as possible. Friday? How had she slept through the entire week? Under the lights in the bathroom, her skin looked unnatural, almost pasty. She showered under a stream of ice-cold water and threw on a tight green dress without a bra or panties.

The cat in heat feeling was back again and she couldn’t explain it. Yes, she’d always liked sex, and often got herself off one or two times a day, but the magnitude of hormones racing around her body was unfamiliar. It was like she couldn’t get enough. Was it because she’d finally tasted the flesh of man between her thighs that had her craving more?

The hunger was back as well, to savor something warm, thick, and juicy. A scent floated in the air, but she couldn’t decipher it. Her hormones raged and the only thing she could think about was sex.

A knock at the door brought her to her knees, sniffing about the doorway. *Fresh, young, naïve*. She stood and threw off her dress, thrusting the door wide open. Nick’s jaw almost touched the ground. A bag of food was tucked neatly under his arm.

“Um, hi. I got worried when you hadn’t called and decided to bring over your usual, number five, in case you were sick.”

She pulled him in and threw him to the couch. Effortlessly, she flung his zipper down, slipped her fingers inside the slit of his underwear and wrapped her fingers around his cock. Her mouth sampled the goods, relishing the taste of his youth. With her mouth enveloped around his shaft, her appetite grew ravenous. His moans and sighs were barely audible as Ryder's music played in her head. Her throat was parched and she craved sustenance. Warm, thick, and juicy.

A brief taste of his liquid furthered her need to quench her thirst. She went down on him, her hands, tongue, mouth, and lips working together, a symphony of movements to bring them both pleasures behind all realms of fantasy.

"I had no idea, Fallon," he panted as she milked him dry, drinking up every last drop. Her fingers reached down and flailed against her swollen clit, her need for culmination driving her to a manic motion, her arm aching.

Breathing heavily, she looked up at him and spread the taste of her sex along his lips. He stared at her, wide-eyed with a grin from ear to ear.

"I didn't know you wanted me so bad."

She should've been ashamed, and embarrassed, but the emotions wouldn't come. Instead, she felt proud, victorious. Another man conquered. She'd taken from him and gotten herself off. It hardly lessened her need for more, but now she just wanted him to leave.

"Here, take your money and go." She bared her teeth and hissed, throwing a wad of bills at him. "I'm not myself. Thanks for the food."

Nick gave her a confused look but didn't say anything. Closing the door behind him, she realized it would be a long time before she could show her face around him again. Her body hungered for more sex. She wanted to rub herself up

against anything phallic. Hell, she'd drive a stake into her burning folds.

Fallon needed something to take her mind off her body, something to extinguish its rabid control over her thoughts. The only thing that interested her was dancing, and she decided Ryder's music would help her to get in the mood. Or out of it.

When the music sounded, she felt her body thrust back again, into the house. Gargoyles stared down at her, and she found herself on the rooftop, screaming, naked with a cold wind blasting against her body. She called out for Ryder, but he wouldn't come. Along the side of the roof, she pulled herself out of the wind, until she found a small doorway. Fallon crawled inside, and found two large coffins. Curiously, she pushed the heavy cement lid aside. Ryder lay inside with a cloth over his face, covering everything but his eyes. They were closed, with his hands folded over his chest.

His eyes flashed open and he grabbed at her, pulling her into him.

She screamed and found herself on the floor of her home, her body feeling drugged and uncooperative. Her hands fumbled for the chair and she pulled herself up. Was this really happening? Why did she have intense dreams when she listened to the music?

Looking toward the window, she saw it was nighttime. If she stayed home, she wasn't sure what would happen. Her body felt strange, but more alive than earlier in the morning. She decided it was the perfect night to go in to work and make some money. Judging by the call from Lena, it sounded like an easy way to pick up some extra dough while she was at it. Fridays were always packed nights anyways. Either they'd love her or hate her tonight.

The phone rang and she answered it, expecting to hear Lena's voice. Instead, she recognized Ryder's voice, and he sounded insistent.

"Fallon. Come to me now."

Chapter 9

She hung up the phone and drove to Ryder's mansion. She made her way up the stairs amid the daunting whispers.

"You sent for me," she said, slightly annoyed. It wasn't until she walked in the room she realized his call had sounded more like an order.

"Yes, and I'm thrilled to see you."

Her taut expression softened, and she smiled. There was no denying how much she enjoyed their time together. Stubbornness would have to rear its ugly head some other time.

"I'd like you to listen to a new piece I've written, just for you."

He played her a wistful song on the violin and she couldn't help but move her body gracefully, swirling and dipping, her hands outstretched and holding her leg out behind her. It was stirring, gentle, and poetic. When he stopped, she stood in a pose, still feeling the pull of the music.

"What did you think of it?"

He stood by her now, his face near her ear, hands playing with her hair.

"I liked it very much. It's not like your other music."

"No, it's different."

"Why did you call me here, Ryder?"

"Don't you know?"

She shook her head. When she was with him, she didn't know how to respond.

"I needed to tell you what I feel for you. I wanted to let you know I love you."

Fallon closed her eyes and let the words affect her. Just like the music, they touched her spirit, soul, and most of all, her heart.

"I care very much for you," she said, careful in her words. If she let him know how much she loved him, she feared it would only complicate things.

"The music you heard was a wedding gift to you, only it's not finished yet. I want you to be my bride."

Her brows arched. *Marriage?*

"I take it you don't care for the idea." His voice was tinged with disappointment.

"I don't know what I think or feel anymore. There's something wrong with me, or different, at least. I don't feel like myself. I haven't for some time now."

"That's because you aren't yourself. You are a part of me now."

Her eyes shot him a quizzical look.

"What are you saying?"

"I told you, once I slipped inside you, it would be permanent, no going back. Don't you remember?"

"Your words confuse me. Things are moving too fast. I've had a week from Hell and I'm still trying to get my life straightened out. I lost out on several days in a row and it has me completely off kilter." Fallon walked around and struggled to put some of her concerns together. She turned toward the dark corner.

"Ryder, I need to ask you something and it's important to me that you be honest with me."

"I'll do my best."

“There’s something about your music, isn’t there? It makes me forget and feel things, all at the same time.”

She heard the deep sigh. “Yes. There is something in my music. But I don’t control your feelings. My music is arranged to speak to your strongest desires and to seduce you into the idea of being with me.”

“How is that different? It sounds like you’re controlling me either way.”

“I promise you that I’m not. I’ve composed a song to reach your innermost needs and wants, and let them unfold. When you auditioned for me, it was the first you’d heard of my music, but it wasn’t to the same magnitude as my second tape was.”

“Did you think I couldn’t fall for you without setting me up?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Sure it is,” she challenged, running her hands along her hair. “You could have just let things take their natural course, you know.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“There you go again, confusing me. I’m usually a very strong-minded person, Ryder, but around you, I feel like I’m not able to hang onto a single thought or emotion. Often I’m not sure whether I’m dreaming or the things around me are truly happening.”

“The answers you seek may frighten you.”

“Did we make love?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve shared with you everything of myself, at least the things that matter most. What have you done in return? You won’t even let me see you.”

“Will the answer to that make you love me more, or less?”

“You speak in riddles and I don’t respond to them. If you’re asking if your physical appearance will alter the feelings I already have for you, the answer is no. But this isn’t about loving you or not loving you. It’s about being real with one another. Ask me anything, and I’ll tell you. Consider me an open book. When I ask you things, you turn away and put up walls. I can’t explore my feelings for you further unless I know more of you, and yes, that includes seeing you. Just the way you are.”

“You’re an intelligent woman, Fallon. I’ll give you that. I can’t possibly continue hiding away from you when you’ve presented your concerns in such a manner. What you ask of me is very difficult. But if it’s a representation of my feelings for you, I will look beyond my fears, shame, and pain and give you what you ask.”

He took her hand and led her to the firelight. With a wave of his hand, the flames brightened and grew full. For the first time, she was able to see all of his face. The light of the fire reflected off his fangs, protruding from the corners of his mouth. His skin was deathly pale, almost translucent. Marks along his face were deeply embedded and patches of skin hung off his cheeks and chin. Along his cheekbones there were tinges of mold and the beginnings of decay. It wasn’t the sight of him that frightened her, but the knowledge that he’d kept it from her all this time. Everything about him had led her to believe he was the man from her fantasy. But he couldn’t be, could he?

“Why do you look the way you do?”

“I’m a vampire, Fallon. I did not always look this way, but a curse was placed on me and it’s coming to an end. I wanted you to see me for the man I once was, a great musician with music that could set your soul free. Being a vampire has enabled me to use some of my powers, one of

them being the power to persuade you to come to me. The bites on your neck have bound your soul to me. My final bite will secure you as my bride, bind our lives together for all of eternity, and allow you immortality.”

Fallon sank to the floor, wrapping her arms around her legs, hugging herself tight.

“This is a bit much to swallow all at once. A vampire? I don’t think I even believe in vampires. How is this possible? All this time you’ve been taking advantage of me, using me, luring me here to have your way with me?”

“I started out with the intent to audition women to be my bride, but right away, I knew you were different. Once I heard your voice, I knew I’d choose you. When I saw you dance, it confirmed what I believed about you. Passion abounds in you when you dance. I had hoped you would let the music take you away and get lost in the ecstasy. After seeing you, and realizing how deep my emotions ran, I second-guessed myself. At the same time, I wanted you all for myself and yet I wanted to let you go.”

“Obviously you’ve decided my fate without even asking me how I feel. Don’t you think I should have a say in all this?”

“About being my bride?”

“Yes, among other things.”

“I’m torn between letting you go, and wanting you all for myself. But in the end, it must be your choice.”

“What about the other women you spoke of before, what happened to them? Have you brought other women here to this house the same way you did with me?”

“Yes and no. There have been other women, but they did not choose to stay with me. You are the first woman I’ve ever seduced with my music. This has been a new experience for me. Your voice on the other end of the line shifted something inside, and awoke an old muse I thought was buried away.”

“What happened to them?”

“They are the ones who haunt these walls.”

“You mean, the whispers I hear? *Blood red, cursed love.* They even chant to me through your music. I take it they consider you to be a cursed love.”

He nodded his head, tears in the corner of his eyes. “Yes. They are trying to warn you.”

“Did you kill them?”

His eyes flashed wide. “No, of course not. I do not have an urge to harm others. My way of life is different from others, and is often misconstrued. When I have the need to feed, I am very selective.”

“I need to know, Ryder, if I walk away from you now, will I become like them?”

“Right now, you’re between the stages of losing your human qualities and gaining those of a vampire. You may have noticed you’ve shied away from sunlight, been craving something you won’t understand, eating and drinking everything to make the desires go away, only to find you’ll never fill the hole. It will gnaw away at you and continue to remain empty until the final bite. It will eventually consume you.”

“So in other words, I’m fucked.”

“Not entirely,” he sighed, pacing around the room. “You are of a strong mind and will. The others were weak and let the madness take them. I believe you will find a way to live with it if you choose a life without me.”

“In other words, I can never go back to normal.”

“I’m sorry, I was selfish. I wanted to taste you, feel you, and have you as my own. I couldn’t control myself. There was no going back once I gave you the first bite. I am ashamed.”

“I didn’t realize what you were saying to me that night. When you told me there was no going back, you didn’t say

from what. You decided the course of my life for me, and that's not right. I trusted you. Here I thought you wanted me to be your private dancer, and you used me."

He reached his hand out and she slapped it away.

"Don't touch me. I thought you were the one, the man from my dreams, but I was wrong."

"I am that man."

"No, you're a monster. How dare you put me in such a position? You know I only wanted to dance and you took advantage of me. I hate you!"

Fallon stormed out of the house, covering her ears as she ran through the rain of whispers. She would not become one of them. When she got home, she curled up in bed and cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 10

Fallon woke the next morning feeling like someone was knocking on her head. As her eyes opened, she realized someone was pounding on her door. She threw on her robe and ran to stop the noise. Natalie stood with her arms crossed in front of her chest, the sunlight pouring in. Quickly, she thrust the door between them, blocking out the harmful rays.

“Hey, what’s up? I didn’t expect to see you.”

“I needed to come check up on you. I’ve heard some strange things about my friend, and I wanted to see how you were doing.”

“What kind of things?”

“Could I come in? It’s not really something I want to discuss outside.”

“Sure,” she held open the door and quickly closed it. “How’s Michael?”

“He’s fine. He’s worried about you, too.”

Fallon pointed to the couch and waited for her friend to sit down first.

“I guess I should feel special if everyone I know is worried about me.” She laughed uneasily.

“Your eyes sure are red. You getting enough sleep, hon?”

Fallon rubbed at her eyes, and smoothed down her hair.

“I think it’s from the smoke at the club or something. So, don’t keep me in suspense, what have you heard?”

“An incident at The Pleasure Zone. Seems you were sitting on the lap of a man.”

“So?” She snorted and focused her eyes on the carpet fibers.

“You were apparently naked.”

“Oh.”

“He happens to be married to the woman who just made me a partner.”

“Isn’t that just the way things are? I was out of it that night and don’t remember much, to be honest. Besides, he’s the one who was there, so what difference does it make? If your boss wants to be mad or offended at someone, it should be him for even being there in the first place.”

“I’m not even referring to that stuff. I mean you had your breasts all in his face and were doing your best to arouse him. I thought you didn’t even go topless there?”

“I don’t. It was a rare one-time performance. I’m not real proud of it. I haven’t been back since. Lena’s been taking over for me.”

“How kind of her.” Fallon held her breath at Natalie’s obvious sarcasm toward her friend. “I just couldn’t figure out how you’d be naked and rubbing yourself along some guy. It didn’t sound like you. I wondered if you’d changed professions. I thought I’d prepare myself to hear more of this stuff in the future.”

“You won’t,” she said flatly.

“I’m not so sure. The other piece of news really rubbed me the wrong way.”

“Oh come on, just one other thing? Since when has there ever been only one other thing? You hate everything about my life.”

“I may have come across that way, but I hold your best interests at heart. In a small way, I think it’s cool you get to

do what you want, and obviously it's better than being homeless or on welfare. It's just not my choice. Can't say I wouldn't be doing what you're doing if I were in your shoes. Sometimes you have to do things in life to get by and make a living. I can also see where it would be hard to leave once you've established a certain pay rate."

"I'm speechless."

"Don't be. I'm not through yet. While dining with a client at Dynasty, you wouldn't believe the earful I got. The place was packed and we sat at a small table in the back. From the kitchen, I heard my neighbor's son, Nick, talking all about how wild you'd been when he delivered food to you; this happening only a day after your little topless escapade in the club. I didn't want to believe it because I've never heard an ill word spoken about you. Even when other men who've seen you dance talk about you, it's with complete respect, admiration even. By no means is it an easy job. They consider you classy and an important fixture, for lack of a better term. But it seems you gave Nick a gift that made him a man. Please tell me I heard the embellishments of a horny eighteen year old and you didn't get it on with your delivery boy?"

The heat spread through Fallon's whole body. She had been trying to forget the whole scene even happened, but it didn't look good. How was she ever going to face him again?

"I, uh, guess that happened."

"Guess? Sorry, but either it did or it didn't."

"It did. I'm so ashamed, I don't know how to explain."

"I wouldn't mind hearing."

"Look, we're not going to get anywhere like this. Obviously, you're sorry you know me and are disgusted by my job. There's not much I can do about it right now. If knowing me will interfere with you getting a great job, then

we can just part ways now. I wouldn't want to continue humiliating you."

"You're way off base on that one. I don't want to lose our friendship."

"Fine. I don't either." Fallon crossed her arms and glared at her friend.

"I just want to be sure you're not mixed up in something."

"I'm not doing drugs, if that's what you're getting at." Fallon took a deep breath and looked at her friend. "Nat, I've been thinking over what you said earlier."

She watched her friend's eyes light up.

"You mean about going back to school?"

"I'm interested. Let's say I'm more receptive to it."

"Cool. I should get home." Natalie got up and gave her a hug. "Give me a call when you've decided and I'll help you figure out which classes to take. And hey, try and control your hormones, girl, or you're going to give yourself a reputation you don't want."

"Yeah, I know. I'll be a good girl. Bye."

Her body was drained. She strongly considered going back to bed when she noticed the light blinking on her answering machine. Someone must have called when she was with Ryder. She pushed the button and sat on the edge of the couch to listen.

"Hello, Fallon. My name is Dustin Parr. I've seen you dance at The Pleasure Zone and got your number from a friend of yours, Lena. I'm looking for someone to fill a spot at the local theater company and wondered if you'd be interested. While the kind of dancing you'll be required to do is different from your night routines, I think you'd be perfect in the role. If you're interested, please give me a call back so we can arrange a mini audition."

Fallon scrambled for a pen and wrote down the number, playing the message back a second time to make sure she got it right. This sounded right up her alley! Here was an actual shot to be on stage, dancing in front of people without showing skin for tips.

Damn Ryder and what he'd done to her. She'd rise above it all and come out on top, doing what she loved best.

Picking up the phone, she dialed the number, crossing her fingers in hopes that he would answer.

"Dustin Parr here," echoed a cool sounding voice. A cultured voice. A theater voice.

"Hello, this is Fallon. I received a message from you, I guess last night. My apologies, but I just noticed it now. I'm most interested in your offer about the dance position you have open."

"It's wonderful to hear from you. Yes, I think you'd be perfect for the part. Are you aware of where the Butterfly Theater is located?"

"I haven't been there in years, but yes, I know the place."

"Are you able to do a mini audition this evening, say around six?"

"I'd be happy to be there."

"Wonderful. I'm confident you're perfect for the part, but my assistant has never seen you and I want him to feel like he's part of the decision making process. Keeps things smooth between us."

"I understand. Do I need to bring anything with me? I don't have any professional training, so I don't have a resume or references. Is that a problem?"

"Not at all. The best talents I've seen yet are the ones who have a natural ability to move their body."

"Great then, I'm your girl. I'll see you tonight."

She hung up the phone and twirled around.

“Yes!” she cried and hugged herself.

Finally, someone would appreciate her for her dancing ability. She was sick of people looking down on her, asking her to do things to be more like them. Her parents had never been there for her, Natalie always made her feel small, and Ryder...he'd selfishly changed her world. She'd be the one laughing at them from onstage.

A tinge of guilt prickled at her skin. Try as she might, there was no way she could stay mad at Ryder. Aside from everything she'd just learned, she couldn't deny her strong feelings for him. She'd fallen in love with him, and now, the way things stood, she couldn't have anything more to do with him. A betrayal was not a good way to start a relationship.

After a cool shower, she took her time getting ready. Tonight, she wouldn't bother with a dress. Instead, she went for black form-fitting pants and a snug green top. She kept her hair long and her makeup light, only doing up her eyes a little more.

Routines raced through her mind and she decided to go for something simple and fun. She grabbed a tape and determined to stop off for a steak somewhere. It wasn't until the second bite of her rare steak when she noticed her teeth felt strange. Two teeth on each corner had become sharp, like they'd been filed to a point.

An image of Ryder's face with fangs flashed in her mind and a sinking feeling gripped her. More changes she would need to learn to deal with. The blood of the meat soothed her dry throat and her energy level quickly increased. For the time being, she'd have to ignore the changes and concentrate on the dance routine. This was an opportunity she didn't want to mess up.

Fallon drove up and down the street, looking for a big sign. It wasn't until she parked and walked along the sidewalk

that she noticed the Butterfly Theater. There weren't any posters or pictures up to promote anything; in fact it looked like it had been out of business for quite some time.

She tried the door but it was locked. Looking around, she decided to knock, and waited with her ear pressed against the door. The sound of a chain being unlocked caught her attention and she stepped back. When the door opened, a tall dark-haired man popped his head out. A smile spread across his dark features and he let her in.

"Are you Dustin?"

"In the flesh." He locked the door and turned to her, holding out his hand. With a gentle shake, she looked around the room.

"Is this place even open for business?"

"We're slowly getting it back to how it used to be. My assistant and I saved up a lot of money and have high hopes in making it even better than it was before."

"But I thought you said there was a position open? I thought you were referring to right now."

He held out his hand and ushered her to the stage.

"I figure we'll have all the stuff fixed up in a month, but we want to do a grand opening and present a show at the same time, to garner lots of attention. Know what I mean?"

She shrugged her shoulders and nodded her head politely. It didn't really make much sense to her, but if she would get to dance, she didn't much care about the details.

"What kind of dancing will I be doing?"

Dustin brought a chair to the middle of the stage and all the lights dimmed in the auditorium except for a spotlight on her.

Three other men joined them on stage. Fallon's warning instincts kicked into overdrive and she felt a chill run down her spine.

“These here are my partners Pat, Steven, and Seth.”

The man he’d referred to as Seth took out a pair of handcuffs from his back pocket, and swung them around.

“The kind of dancing we’d like to see is the kind where you are naked, and we join in.”

“I think there’s been some kind of mistake,” she said, backing up. Her eyes flashed around, looking for a different way out. Her legs felt like rubber, but it wasn’t the time to let fear get the better of her. She turned to run but the men grabbed her arms and pushed her into the chair.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she cried, struggling against their strong grip.

“You sounded very eager on the phone to perform, and we’ve been so generous in giving you a coveted solo act. Most girls would go nuts to know they get the spotlight all to themselves. Each one of us gets a special dance, and you’ll be well paid, we assure you,” explained Dustin, as he undid his belt buckle.

“We watched you dance at The Pleasure Zone and liked the way you gyrated on that man’s lap, practically doing him in front of everyone. We’ve been looking for a hot mama, and you seem to fit the bill.”

Fallon would regret that moment for the rest of her life, and it was one she hardly remembered. People kept talking about it, but to her, it was like it never happened, and she wished it hadn’t.

“The girl you saw that night wasn’t me, it was someone else.”

The men laughed. “Look, she’s an actress too. We’re in for a real treat. Why don’t you play the damsel in distress who turns temptress.”

Seth ran his hand along her hair and dangled the handcuffs in front of her.

“Just give us your pretty little wrist, and then you can lap dance for each one of us. We’re not greedy. We’ll be patient and take turns.”

She wanted to act tough, but it wasn’t working. Tears threatened to fall and her heart pounded inside her chest. These goons outnumbered her and were far stronger.

“Please, if you let me go, I won’t tell anyone I saw you. I swear. This isn’t what I wanted.”

“What, did you think a tramp could possibly do something classy? You’re a stripper, baby, and that’s all you’ll ever be. So come on and strip for us. In fact, we’ll help you.”

He reached up to unbutton her shirt when the door to the auditorium opened.

“Bring up the lights.” Dustin turned to the noise.

The lights of the auditorium brightened, but all they saw were rows of chairs.

“Hey, who’s there?” Seth called out. He looked around and nudged his friend. “Pat, go check it out. There’s no way in hell that door could open by itself. No way.”

He squatted down, in front of Fallon, his face in line with hers. “Did you bring some big tough boyfriend with you or something?”

She shook her head. “No, no one.” She bit her lip, cursing her response without thinking. Maybe if she had said yes, she could have bought some time.

At that moment, it dawned on her how no one knew where she was. Both Natalie and Lena would think she’d gone off her rocker or something, but no one would think to look for her here. This was the sort of situation Natalie had warned her about. Men who lured women into out of the way places, and they were never seen or heard from again.

Twice now dancing had put her in her harm's way. Was it really worth it anymore? She should just take up Nat's offer and learn to live life the way other people did.

Dustin nudged Seth and pointed.

"Hey, what's going on?"

Fallon followed the gaze of her captors to their friend, Pat, who was standing in the aisle. Crows came flying at him out of nowhere, pecking away at his face. He screamed and batted them away.

"Somebody help me!"

Steven jumped down from the stage and ran to help. Suddenly, his body was catapulted through the air and landed against the far wall.

"What's going on down there? Are you guys playing some kind of game or something?" cried Dustin, peering over the ledge of the stage.

Pat continued screaming and flailing his arms at the crows, slowly sinking to his knees.

"Are you okay, Steven?" called Dustin from the stage.

"I think this place is haunted!" he cried, wrestling to get up. "Something's on top of me. I can't get up!"

Seth started to walk away when Fallon readied herself to run. He whipped back around and backhanded her, slipping the handcuffs on her wrist and the chair.

"Sorry, sexy, you're not going anywhere. You still have a show to do. I'll be back for it."

He jumped down from the stage with Dustin right behind him.

A man dressed in a dusty black cape stepped in front of them and blocked their way.

"Theater's closed down, old man," Seth spat out. "I think you'd better leave now before we get the cops involved."

“That would be interesting. But I’m enjoying the free show. Four men screaming like babies, or should I say, soon to be four dead men if they aren’t careful.”

“Look, I don’t know what kind of tricks you’ve got up your sleeve, but we don’t have any business with you. Leave now and there won’t be any trouble.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. Why is that woman chained to the chair?”

“None of your business. Dustin, you hold him and I’ll beat the shit out of him. Mister, you’re going to be sorry you didn’t leave when we told you to.”

Ryder put his arms out and at the same time, both men flew to opposite corners of the auditorium.

Fallon gasped when she recognized him.

“What are you doing here?” she cried, both relieved and embarrassed.

“I could sense you were in danger.”

“You two know each other?” Seth hollered. “What, are you her father?”

Dustin picked himself up and charged over.

“Close your eyes, Fallon,” Ryder commanded. “I don’t want you to see this.”

She did as she was told, but there was no way to keep from hearing the tortured screams of the men.

By all rights, she should be afraid, knowing he was a vampire. She was just becoming aware of the powers he held. But he’d come to her rescue at a time when she had no one else. Just like the mystery man she always dreamed of, the hero who would walk through the burning fires of hell to save her.

When it was quiet, she opened her eyes. The crows circled around her face, blocking out everything else around her.

“Ryder, are you still there?” she called out. Dozens of black wings circled, flapping like mad, gently stroking at her face. They circled so fast, she got dizzy, and her eyes couldn’t stay open any longer.

“Sleep now,” came a voice, somewhere off in the distance.

She was vaguely aware of the cuffs falling off her wrist. She felt strong arms gently lift her, but then a strange heaviness overcame her and she blacked out.

Chapter 11

When Fallon opened her eyes, she found herself on a bed, the same one she'd been on in one of her dreams. Candles were lit, adding a cozy glow to the room. A vase of lush red roses sat on the nightstand amid a bouquet of baby's breath.

She sat up and looked around, having no idea how long she'd been unconscious. Rose petals were strewn across the floor and trailed out the door into the hallway. Carefully, she climbed off the bed and followed, ending up in the room of mirrors. She didn't have to look to know Ryder was sitting in the corner, softly playing the piano.

"Thank you for rescuing me," she said, feeling guilty for her earlier angry thoughts about him.

"As I said, you're a part of me now. I could feel your fear and it ate away at me. What were you doing there?"

"I was called and asked to audition as a dancer for a role."

"I'm glad I arrived in time."

"Me, too. I'm afraid of what might have happened. I don't remember anything after you told me to close my eyes. Did you...kill them?"

"Let's just say I made better use out of them. They had it coming. You aren't the first girl they lured there and prison wouldn't have changed them."

She nodded her head. "I have no doubt they got what they deserved."

Ryder turned and looked at her. "I imagine that didn't help your image of me."

Fallon was silent for a moment. "I don't think any less of you for it. Do you feed often?"

"No, the need for it is very rare. In fact, they will last me until, well, the next little while."

He came up to her and gently stroked her face.

"I must seem so hideous to you."

"No, but I think that's because I had fallen for you before I'd ever seen you."

"Then you'll be my bride?"

She pushed his hand away and turned her back to him.

"That's not what I said. I admit I fell for you, your music, and the pleasures you gave me. While I appreciate you rescuing me, it doesn't automatically mean I'm indebted to you for the rest of my life. I still have to think about this."

"I see."

Fallon turned back toward him and looked in the mirror. Her image was faded.

"Tell me what happened to you. I want to know how you became a vampire. Until now, I believed they only existed in books and movies. But I have to believe the things I see before me, and you are a vampire. If I'm to become one, I must know how you came to be. Or were you born this way?"

"No, and in some ways, like you, I didn't ask to be."

"Please tell me. I want to get to know you better. We've been intimate physically, but missed out on knowing each other on a more emotional basis. Will you let me in?"

Ryder sighed and nodded his head.

"The memory is not pleasant, but you deserve to know."

He walked across the room by the fireplace and sat in a large chair. Fallon sat across from him, and watched him, patiently waiting.

“You see, at one time I was on my way to becoming a great concert pianist. When I was young, I played every afternoon for a rich old gentleman. I never asked for payment, but did it for the sheer joy of playing his piano. When he died, he willed me the piano, and gave me a letter of reference to what was then the best music school in New York.

“I found out later that a condition of his contribution to the school was that they give me an opportunity to play in front of audiences. I was the only one out there who hadn’t had a single lesson behind him. Of course, that caused a lot of jealousy and trouble with the others, those who were students and spent a lot of money on the best schooling. Who was I to step into the spotlight without an ounce of training?

“A rival of mine insisted there was only one way I could be better than him, though I had my doubts. I thought I already was. He told me Franz Liszt, possibly the world’s greatest concert pianist ever, wore a ring when he died that held all his talent. They said that whoever dug up his body and put the ring on their finger would absorb his talent. I was driven by greed and power, wanting fame all to myself. I wanted the whole world to regard me as the best, and to have the love and admiration of everyone. I longed for my name to pass along the lips of the elite members of society. So one night, I went to the graveyard and started to dig up Liszt’s body. My rival was there with three others I did not recognize. They beat me quite badly. I was never a fighter, and feared harming my hands, so I didn’t try to defend myself. The three took turns biting me and left me for dead. In the morning when I woke, I had become the creature I am today. The sun burned my skin and I had a voracious appetite. Sunlight became my enemy from that day.” He closed his eyes against the memory.

“Did you really believe his talent was encased in a ring?”

“I thought I had something to prove, to myself and to others. There isn’t much I wouldn’t have done to be the best. I’ve paid for it ever since.”

“What about the curse?”

“When I realized what had happened to me, I struck out at everything and everyone in my new world. I finally pushed too hard, and angered someone who, I realize now, was only trying to help me. He was a very powerful vampire, and told me that I needed to learn to love and trust someone. To teach me a lesson, he put a curse on me, granting me one hundred and twenty years to find someone to love me and marry me. If I didn’t, my body would turn to ash and soot. My time is running out.”

Fallon leaned over and took his hand.

“Actually, I’ve done plenty of stupid things out of desperation. What happened with the other women?”

“Once I came here, to be away from the people and hole myself up in darkness, I found different ways to bring women here. I’d wine and dine them, buy them fancy clothes, and tell them what they wanted to hear. By the second bite, they’d be too frightened and despised me for what I’d done. I’m ashamed to say I never felt any real connection with any of them, but I wanted the curse to end so badly, hoping I could go back to leading a normal life, that I didn’t care about their needs. The longer it went on, the more rapidly I aged. They didn’t want to feed on others and they wouldn’t agree to the conditions of my alternative lifestyle. The price of loving me was too high for them. I could offer them immortality, but they didn’t want it. I couldn’t let them leave. I feared they’d hurt themselves or others, or bring people to cause me harm. Soon they gave in to the madness. They blame me and will haunt me until I die. I don’t blame them though. Each day as

I'm closer to my death, I age. I long to reclaim my days as a musician. I hadn't played since the day I went to the cemetery. You see, there was something about your voice that brought the passion back to me. I wanted one more chance to see where it could take me."

"I don't know what to say, Ryder. There's so much about this I don't understand. I realize money makes a person do things they normally wouldn't. I'm not real happy with what I do in my life, and never have been. I've made sacrifices hoping to find happiness along the way, but it's never been there. The only time I feel good is when I dance, and I found something in your music, a passion as well. But what you ask of me, I find it very selfish. At the same time, I see it as a way out. So I'm torn."

"How is it a way out? From what?"

"From the direction my life is headed. I'll never be one of those career women. It's not in the cards for me. I don't look forward to a life behind a desk, without time to dance. I also can't remain in my current profession. It's only been a means to get by, and it's not worth it anymore. It represents all the things I detest about my life. Do you know what I do?"

He shook his head and ran his hand along her arm.

"Those things don't matter to me."

"They matter to me. I work at a strip club. I take my clothes off, not all the way, and dance around the men for tips. It took me forever to find a way to shut down while I was out there and ignore what was really going on around me. The older I get, the less opportunities I'll have. I guess what I'm getting at is, what can you offer me? I need to know what you can offer me, to make me choose you."

"I can offer you honesty and true love. Immortality. You'll never have to worry about growing old, getting wrinkles, or worry about your looks. You'll stay, as you are,

young and beautiful. I believe together we can both pursue our dreams by bringing out the passion in one another. I offer you a lifetime of love, respect, and admiration. I can play my music and you can dance to your heart's desire."

"What you say is all very appealing. In a morbid way, it's all the things I want. To start life anew, dance forever, and not have to worry about aging. But is it the right decision? Can I just step out of the life I lead now and into yours, like a portal?"

"I'll give you everything you want, you just name it. I want you to know I love you. I'm not saying that to get you to stay with me. I speak those words from my heart."

Fallon stepped back and looked at him, trying to imagine her life with him. Was fear holding her back, or instincts?

"There's no going back. One more time and everything will change."

"I don't feel I'm giving up much."

"Trust me, you are. More than you realize. You are giving up sunlight soaking into your skin, all the activities you normally do during the day, friends you've made, family you have, and the material things you've acquired. Money won't mean anything to you anymore. It will be just you and me."

"Do you have friends?"

"I have some acquaintances. That may change if you want to socialize more, but I never chose to. Especially when the curse started to affect my appearance."

Fallon laughed to herself. Did she care about any of those things in the first place?

"The things you mention aren't things I'll miss."

"You're not looking at the big picture."

"Listen to me. Because I've just realized these things myself. I work at night and sleep my days away as it is. I rarely go out unless I have to. To be honest, I can't remember the

last time I sat out in the sun. The friends I have are more acquaintances than anything else, though I've tried to make it out to be more. My family has been gone for years, and personal possessions don't matter to me. I've saved up money, but it was for the hope that one day, I could open up a studio and teach dance. I'm very private. So you see, I can't figure out what I'm giving up. You've been the mystery man of my dreams. Somewhere along the way, I must have known I'd be with someone like you. I know my feelings for you run deep, and while I've never been in love before, I truly believe I'm in love with you. I've been searching for a purpose with my life for so long, I didn't realize it was standing in front of me this whole time."

She threw her arms around him and nestled her body close. The moment the words were out of her mouth, she knew there was something she needed to do first, or she'd regret everything.

"I choose an eternal life with you, Ryder. I choose you."

The smile on his face made Fallon's heart fill to bursting. "I love you."

"Let me take care of a few things and I'll return. There are some loose ends that I need to tie up and then I'm all yours."

Fallon could see the pained look in his eyes, but she couldn't explain, not now.

"Very well. I shall wait for your return."

* * * *

He felt his heart ache as he watched her go. She said she'd be back, but when she was once again out in the real world, would she change her mind? She wouldn't be back. He felt it deep in his gut, and he couldn't blame her. He knew how easy it was to not see things clearly when emotions were running things. Those emotions were what got him into trouble in the

first place. He loved her too much to be angry with her for choosing a life of her own. If tables were turned, he knew he wouldn't have traded anything for his chance of playing music.

She was a dancer; it was her dream. It didn't seem possible for her to follow her dream from the confines of these dreary walls. There was a world out there in the night he'd often wondered about, but never wanted to take part in alone.

His companions swarmed around him.

"Yes, she's gone. I had to let her go. I have no one to blame but myself. I'm foolish and selfish to think anyone would love me this way. If only she could look past this layer of darkness and see me for the man I am inside. I've done nothing but push her away by being dishonest and deceitful when she's always been open with me."

Ryder walked into the bedroom and took a rose, scattering its petals along the sheets. He leaned forward and smelled the pillowcase. Strawberries and cream. A scent he truly loved about her. Sadness washed over him. Forget the curse. If she did not come back to him, he would walk out into the sunlight in the morning and let the rays burn him to a crisp. There was no point in going on anymore, and he couldn't put himself in this position ever again. Time was something he'd had too much of, and at the same time, not enough of.

He walked back in the mirrored room and sat at the piano. His fingers walked along the keys, playing nothing in particular. The muse was fading and he couldn't recollect a single song. His music would start and end with her. Love had revived it, and the loss of it had made it disappear. If he wanted, he could order her to come to him; he could slip into her headspace and control her thoughts. But that wasn't love. It had to be of her free will.

“I will wait for you, my love,” he whispered into the room. His fingers moved along the keys in a clumsy fashion. “After tonight, I’ll no longer pine away for you or the life I once had. My fate rests in your hands and I unselfishly leave with you my heart.”

Chapter 12

Fallon drove home as fast as she could and strode through her apartment. In the bedroom, she pulled out the cashbox, and filled three envelopes with her savings. One envelope was for Natalie as a wedding present, another was for Nick for his college education, and the third was for Lena to make back some of the difference Jimmy always took out of her tips. Looking through her things, she tried to find something that had any value to her. All she grabbed was Ryder's tape.

Part of her wanted to say goodbye to Lena for being such a wonderful person, helping her to stay sane in the crazy world of stripping, but she didn't want to explain herself. She knew she could never look Nick in the eye again after the way she used him, but she hoped he'd spend the money to further his education. Only Natalie seemed like the person she should say a personal farewell to, but she went with her instincts on this one. She would be missed.

Fallon dropped off the envelopes one at a time. Not wanting to go to Nick's house, she put his envelope in the mail slot of the Dynasty restaurant.

With a deep sigh, she realized how free she felt right then, and knew she was making the best decision for herself.

She drove back to the luminous gothic house. She was home. Fallon walked up the stairs and made her way into

Ryder's arms. A look of relief washed over him and he held her tight.

"I take it you have completed your tasks?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"I was afraid you'd change your mind."

"If anything, my answer became even clearer. I feel an amazing sense of freedom. I'm not trading one life for another; I'm finally doing the right thing."

"Then you are prepared to make the changes. Our world will exist only in the night."

Fallon laughed. "Are you trying to make me change my mind?"

"Certainly not!"

"Well then, you'd better stop talking about what else I'll be giving up."

"I just need you to know..."

She pressed her lips against his to silence him. Heat rose up from her toes as the kisses became impassioned. Her lips opened and welcomed his tongue and breath, igniting the fires from deep within. When she pulled away, the lightheadedness returned.

"Before we go further, tell me what will happen to me."

"The final bite will suck away the remnants of your mortal blood. In that moment, you'll feel very weak and have a strong urge to taste blood. I'll offer you mine. If you don't feed, you'll become very sick and it will be a long time before you'll regain your strength."

"Will it hurt?"

"You won't feel it any more than you did the other bites. You'll notice the changes immediately and everyone experiences the change differently. But you're safe, and I won't let anything bad happen to you. I promise. You have nothing to fear."

Fallon smiled. "I'm not afraid."

Ryder picked her up in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. The candles were still lit, and rose petals adorned the sheets.

"You're such a romantic." She sighed contentedly.

The whispers entered into the room and swarmed around the bed.

"Are they angry with me?"

"No, but I think they want to sway your decision. Once you've fed, the whispers will stop for good. Take a good look at my elderly face, because the next time you see me, I'll be the man I should be."

"I love you no matter how you look."

"I appreciate the flattery, but I promise you'll be pleased."

Blood Red. Cursed Love.

The whispering chants grew louder, but she looked into his eyes and blocked them out. Ryder laid her on the bed and unbuttoned her shirt, one pearl button at a time. His lips followed the trail of his fingers until the shirt came apart and she wriggled her arms out.

"I must say, paid for or not, you have incredible breasts."

"They ought to be for the amount I spent on them. I'd lost all sensation until you first touched them."

"All your senses will come alive tonight. More so than you've ever felt before."

Fallon smiled. "I like the sound of that."

Sitting up, she unhooked her bra, and let it leisurely fall away from her breasts. Immediately, his lips sought out her nipples, circling his tongue around one, and then the other. Soft brushes with his tongue brought a rush of excitement throughout her entire body.

She lay back and melted into the sheets, the rose petals swirling around her. His hands found their way to her pants and worked them down, kissing every inch of her flesh until they were off. As he stood, he threw off his own clothes, their gazes locked on one another. Inside she felt like a kid going on her very first roller coaster ride. Exhilarated, yet nervous as hell. Fallon slipped her thumbs along the sides of her panties and pulled them off, wanting to be ready to feel him inside her.

She was vaguely aware of the whispers and used it as fuel for her moment of empowerment. The others had been weak, but she was the only female who would be whispering in the house after tonight, whispers of love and lust.

Ryder was back above her body, his hands caressing her breasts, fingers squeezing her nipples. Her body writhed beneath his, the urgency unbearable.

“Why must you always make me beg for you?” she cried.

“Why are you always so impatient?” He laughed and sought out her lips, plunging his tongue inside her mouth.

His fingers walked along her stomach, briefly circling her navel, and rested along her mound.

“Please take me,” she begged. “Make me whole again.”

She parted her thighs wide, rising up her hips. Her sex was drenched and waiting for him to relieve her. He teased at her wet lips and thrust inside her. The swift descent into her silken folds drove her mad. His body hovered over hers and he grabbed her wrists, pinning them on either side of her.

“I love you,” he whispered, his nose nuzzling along her ear and neck.

Fallon held her breath, anticipating the pain and pleasure of his bite. She was in a trancelike dream, where time had suddenly stopped. His body moved with hers, their sex holding tight to one another for dear life. The warmth of his

breath found a sweet spot on her neck and he kissed and suckled at it, prepping her.

Do it, drink my essence. I surrender my soul to you.

His thrusts inside her became swift and her mind entered into a delirium of pleasure. A wondrous sensation overtook her body and she opened her mouth, her eyes wide as his fangs bore into her. She pressed his body into hers as the room spun around. All she heard was the sound of her blood swishing around inside her head.

A cover of heat crept up from her toes while he saturated his palette and made love to her at the same time. Pressure against her lower lip felt comforting as her teeth elongated. Surges of energy started at her core and jolted along to every part of her body.

When he pulled away, a tiny stream of her blood slid along the sides of his mouth.

“My beautiful bride,” he said, licking his lips.

Fallon’s stomach lurched and she bolted up, flipping him to his back. The hunger was back with more intensity than she’d ever felt before. She guided him into her moist sex and gyrated her hips, riding him in a merciless frenzy.

“You must take my offering or you’ll get sick,” Ryder insisted, holding up his arm to her. She eyed his wrist, her starved state of mind seeing it as a fountain of delectable nectar.

“With pleasure, my love.”

Fallon drew back her lips and set her pointed teeth along his skin. The whispers turned into screams and goaded her on. In a swift motion, she broke the skin and her fangs sank into his wrist. The moans of the women faded away while she drank his elixir, cooling her throat in its thick liquid. Renewal. Reborn. All that had been dormant and dying inside her had suddenly been rekindled. *More.*

The more she drank, the more surreal things looked and felt. His cock swelled inside her sex, elongating and growing within. It filled her up, stretching her sex, his rigid shaft stimulating every nerve. The crows became black veils, shielding her eyes, and the sweet scent of roses wafted about the room. A scent she always smelled around him.

“Don’t drink too much,” he whispered, his hands squeezing her nipples.

She released her teeth from his wrist and lapped up the remnants of blood.

The path from her throat to her stomach bubbled and raged.

“Give it a moment,” he said soothingly, wiping the corner of her lips. “It will pass.”

Fallon swallowed and found her appetite satisfied for the time being.

“You taste good, lover.” She rested her hands on his chest and continued moving atop him.

His features started to change, the years melting away before her eyes. All the grayness dissipated, the pasty skin and decay dissolving away like dried up layers. She blinked her eyes and admired his healthy glow, a smooth clean-shaven face, with eyes that sparkled against the candlelight. The strands of his hair shone like ebony silk. Even the tone and texture of his skin changed. The curse was broken.

“Mm. I am not disappointed.” She sighed.

He gripped his hands tightly around her hips and pulled them closer together. Fallon clenched her inner muscles tight around him, rubbing her fingers against her clit. She was swimming in a crimson sea, with her handsome lover taking her over the edge.

“I’m so close,” she moaned, her head tilted back.

Her hair swayed side to side as the final invigorating push pummeled her into oblivion. She cried out, but held on, waiting for his release. His body shook as he moaned, spasms erupting through both of them.

"I'm hungry again," she panted, rubbing her hands on his stomach.

"I know. It will take some getting used to." He pulled her down so her head lay against his chest.

"You're even more handsome," she murmured, listening to the rapid beat of his heart. "It was incredible to watch you change. Everything happened so fast."

"Well, judging by the way you feed, I can see I'll have my work cut out for me in keeping you satisfied."

"I like the thought of you satisfying me forever. In more ways than one."

She clasped her hands in his and kissed his chest.

"Will I be able to control my urges?"

"Soon. But don't worry, you're in good hands."

"I've loved those hands from the moment you played your beautiful music for me."

He stroked her hair, spreading kisses across her forehead.

"How are you feeling?"

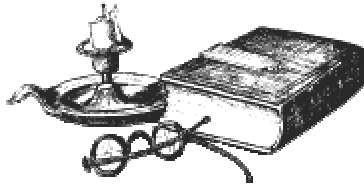
"Energized, drained, and at complete peace, all at the same time. I even feel like dancing."

"It looks like I have my own private dancer after all."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Cory's work has been published online as well as in print. Her current and upcoming titles include Mask of the Matador, Royal Robes, Bard of Bristol, Insatiable Interludes, A Haunting in the Cathouse, and Dressing the Empress. Visit her website to see her other taunting titles: <http://www.anncory.com>

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