



SWITCH

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Chapter One

Kate wasn't herself.

She was alone in an unfamiliar room, in an unfamiliar body, staring into a smeared mirror at a reflection that was not her own.

What was happening?

A moment earlier she had been in her own skin, sitting on the couch in her new apartment, flipping through the cable channels. She hadn't yet settled into the apartment, but she belonged there - at least until she found a permanent place to live.

Kate had known where she was. *Who* she was.

Who are you now?

She was supposed to be twenty-eight years old, have light brown hair and blue eyes. Breasts that would fill a C cup. A strong, healthy body that she worked hard to keep in shape.

The girl in the mirror looked like she didn't get enough to eat. Her body was matchstick thin. Big brown eyes stared from under a ragged fringe of brown bangs. The rest of her hair had been cropped short at the nape of her neck.

Kate clenched her fingers into a fist and looked down at the hand that had moved. It was smaller than her own; the skin was pale, with no trace of her own fading summer tan. Patches of greenish grey polish clung to nails that had been chewed down to jagged stubs.

Just above the sharp wrist bones of the right hand, a tangled design of roses and thorns coiled. Kate ran a finger over the marks, wondering if it was a tattoo or something that the girl had done herself with colored felt pens. It looked like ink, but Kate had never examined a tattoo closely before.

"Who are you?" she asked again. The waif-like girl couldn't be much more than eighteen.

She isn't a real person, Kate reminded herself. Waif Girl

is a figment of your imagination, maybe something that you saw on television while you were dozing off.

A weird dream was nothing to get upset about. Kate had had vivid dreams before, experiences that were completely real until she woke up in her own bed and they faded away.

The unshaded bulb of a cracked orange lamp provided enough light for her to clearly see herself in the mirror, an unframed rectangle of glass that sat propped on the cluttered top of an old dresser. The air reeked of mildew and stale cigarette smoke. Clothes and garbage were heaped in the shadowy corners, on either side of a bare mattress that took up most of the floor space.

Loud rock music throbbed up through the floor, vibrating into her body. An occasional shout rose over the din.

Most of the clothing strung around the room was male. As Kate realized that, she glanced around to reassure herself that she really was alone.

Waif Girl made her very uncomfortable. She did *not* want to meet Waif Girl's man. Not even in a dream.

If they lived here together he'd come back eventually. Maybe in a few hours. Or a few minutes.

So she was leaving. Now.

Waif Girl wore only threadbare cotton underpants and a black concert t-shirt that barely covered her butt. Kate searched the room until she found a pair of torn jeans and some battered black boots. No socks, but she wasn't going to waste time digging through more dirty laundry. Not to avoid dream blisters.

It wasn't until she was tying the boots that she noticed the scars running up and down both wrists. They weren't brand new, but they didn't have the faded appearance of an old injury. They didn't look like an accidental injury at all.

Looks like Waif Girl isn't much happier with her life than you are.

The door to the room wasn't a real door, just a sheet of rough plywood hinged on one side. It banged shut behind her as Kate stepped into the adjoining room. Light from the bare windows reflected off of the dusty red tinsel of old Christmas

decorations. Cardboard cutouts advertising different brands of beer leaned against the walls of the otherwise empty room, confirming her uneasy feeling that it was probably a bar downstairs.

As much as she didn't want to go down there, it had to be better than being alone in these rooms when Waif Girl's man - or someone else - came up the stairs at the far end of the room. She was too alone. Too vulnerable.

No one would hear a scream for help over that music. Even if they did, Kate doubted that they would care.

She hesitated at the top of the stairs before starting down. She would be okay if she got out of this place, found safe and familiar surroundings where she could wait out the dream.

There was no handrail or light switch so she trailed one hand lightly along the wall as she descended into the blackness. Debris that littered the steps crunched under her feet.

As she neared the bottom, odors of alcohol and popcorn and smoke nearly overwhelmed her. This was all too real. Kate's insides - no, someone else's insides - cramped in terror.

She was Kate Hayden. She had just packed all of her belongings and moved halfway across the country to Oregon to start a new job with Stork Shop, a mail order company founded by one of her college friends. She was staying in a nicely furnished, boring apartment until she found a permanent place to live.

She was never in places like this. She wasn't a fragile little waif. She didn't have a rose or anything else tattooed anywhere on her body.

Right?

Kate pulled her lower lip in between her teeth and squeezed down. The pain was real.

You aren't going to wake up.

The plywood door at the bottom of the stairs rattled as someone bumped it from outside. Kate could hear the murmur of drunken voices now, just loud enough to carry over that never-ending music.

If she couldn't leave here by waking up, she would have

to go out through the bar. Kate laid her hand flat against the splintered wood, then pushed the door slowly out. It met resistance and she heard whoever she'd bumped into swear loudly.

"Sorry." Kate slipped out of the doorway into a narrow hallway. She had to do this, she told herself as she brushed past the man.

Kate crossed the crowded, dimly lit room as quickly as she could, skirting clusters of people. Hoping that no one would notice her, especially no one who knew Waif Girl and might ask where she was going.

When she finally stepped onto the sidewalk, Kate's spirits sank even further. She had hoped for a busy street where the traffic and lights might offer some sense of safety.

Instead, she found herself on a deserted side street where faded posters advertising X-rated movies filled heavily barred windows. Battered cars were parked here and there along the curb. There wasn't another person in sight.

That was probably a blessing.

Kate backed into the recessed doorway of the bar so that she would be less conspicuous while she figured out what to do next.

She had no idea where she was. After living in the city for less than a week, she was familiar with the routes between her apartment and office and the grocery store. That was about it.

For all she knew, she might not even be in Portland.

It was getting harder to believe that she wasn't really anywhere at all.

Kate started to walk. Sooner or later, she'd get to a place that felt safer. Or she'd wake up.

Don't look scared.

Kate clenched her hands into fists and stood straighter. She was taller than this, stronger than this. Not that a few more or less pounds of terrified woman would make much difference if someone did try to hurt her.

Wishing for her own key ring with its attached cylinder of pepper spray, Kate tried to call to mind everything that she'd read in women's magazines about self defense.

Scream. Run. Make a scene.

None of that would help much with no one to witness her scene and no place to run to.

Kate spotted a newspaper machine and stepped over to check the masthead. Its logo was the same one that she'd seen on the paper that was delivered to her new apartment every morning. The headlines were the ones she'd skimmed that morning while eating breakfast.

A car door opened and she stiffened, turning to look toward the sound. Across the street, a man emerged from a sleek silver car. Kate watched as he raised the hood and bent to do something underneath.

The car didn't belong here. It was expensive. Refined and sophisticated. Like the man who stood beside it.

Without thinking, she crossed the street. She was drawn to the man, probably because he was more like her than the people in the bar that she had just escaped.

She watched silently as he lowered the hood then pulled out a cellular phone and punched in a series of numbers. Although she was close enough to hear the soft beeps of the phone, he hadn't noticed her. Over the low sound of traffic from a nearby street, she could hear the soothing tone of his voice.

Before he could disappear back into his car, Kate stepped toward him.

"Hi." Her voice was wrong, not the sound that she'd expected.

He turned to face her. "Hello."

Now what? She couldn't fling herself at him, babbling that she was trapped in a strange body and that she didn't know where she was. She couldn't do anything that might chase away the closest thing she had to safety.

"Do you need something?"

She needed her own body. She needed to be far away from here. She needed him.

"You're having car trouble?" she asked in that unfamiliar voice.

"Yeah. On a night when every tow truck in town is tied up for hours."

A tiny glimmer of hope began to form. "Would it be okay if I waited with you? It's kinda scary out here by myself."

He walked around to the passenger side of the car and unlocked the door. "Hop in."

Kate gratefully slid into the soft white leather seat. "Thank you."

She only saw him clearly for an instant before he closed her door and the interior lights went out. Just a good enough look to decide that he was extremely attractive.

Clean-shaven with neatly trimmed dark hair. A friendly smile. Good clothes. Great car. What was he doing *here*?

As she watched him cross back in front of the car, Kate squirmed deeper into the seat. Why couldn't she find a guy like this when her life was normal - when she was awake?

"I'm Ryan Chase." He slid into his own seat, turned to her and held out his hand. Kate responded with her own practiced handshake.

"You do have a name, don't you?" he prompted when she didn't speak.

What on earth was her name?

"Waif."

"That's an interesting name."

"Kind of a nickname," she explained. "My real name is Kate."

"I like Kate better."

She did, too. Especially when Ryan was saying it.

"So why are you out by yourself in the middle of the night on a street that makes you so nervous?"

"I'm not supposed to be here." She still had hold of his hand. "It just happened."

Kate loosened her grip, feeling a sense of loss as Ryan pulled back to his own side of the car. The physical contact between them had lasted only a moment but his touch had been solid and reassuring, the only part of this whole awful experience that felt right.

Kate glanced out the windows at the darkness and scooted away from the door, stopping only when the center console blocked her hip and she couldn't move any closer. The car was like a cocoon, an oasis.

Out there was a nightmare. Here, with him, she felt safe.

So don't look outside. She turned away from the windows, back toward Ryan.

God, he was sexy. Sexy and safe and warm and alive... A little shiver raced through her.

He noticed. "I'd put the heat on, but the engine won't turn over. I might have a jacket or sweatshirt or something in the trunk."

"It's okay. I'm not cold."

He watched her so intently. His gaze hadn't left her at all since he got into the car. He kept watching her every move and breath, almost as if he knew that there was something wrong with her.

Did he know her?

No. That couldn't be it. If he knew Waif, he wouldn't have asked her name.

"We could go someplace warmer," he offered. "I can have the tow company call me when a truck is on its way."

"No!" Kate shook her head. She wasn't going back into that bar or into another place like it. She wouldn't step back out into the nightmare.

Kate focused on the shadowy outline of his face, the sound of their breathing. The spicy air freshener smell that filled the car. She tried not to listen to the sounds of distant traffic, not to look out the windows at dark buildings with images of naked women in the windows.

All of her attention was focused on the man beside her. Almost without thinking about it, Kate reached out, barely brushing his cheek with her fingertips.

He didn't move, didn't speak, just let her explore the side of his face with a light feathery touch. The instant she pulled her hand back and broke the contact between them, she felt a plunging sense of loss.

You don't have to feel this way.

Kate leaned across the center console until her lips met his flesh, just to the side of his mouth. He did move then, turning his head and returning the kiss. Lips parted, tongues explored... He reached out and caught her waist between his hands, pulling her the slightest bit closer.

She could feel the heat of his touch through the thin cotton of Waif's T-shirt as she leaned into the kiss. The hem pulled up from her jeans, exposing her skin to the cool air inside the car for just an instant before his hands moved to

warm her bare flesh.

Kate pulled one of her hands free from their embrace to guide his touch to the sides of her small breasts. Neither of them was willing to let go. She was dimly aware of Ryan reaching down, fiddling with something under his seat. Then it slid back and he pulled her over the console and across his lap.

He was hard. She could feel him through the double layers of denim that separated them. Really hard. What was she doing?

It's a dream. She could do whatever she wanted. Didn't have to stop or worry about the consequences. Kate reached down between them, fumbling for his zipper.

It was a bit of a shock, too much reality for a dream, when he stopped her just long enough to retrieve a condom from his wallet.

There wasn't room for two adults to share the front seat of the Jaguar. Maybe that was the problem, the reason why her body didn't respond the way she expected it to once they came together.

But even though it wasn't as perfect as it should have been, Kate was left with her heart pounding hard and her breath coming in jagged heaves. Ryan lay under her, equally spent.

It was time to wake up, to snuggle deep under her comforter and savor the fantasy. But nothing changed.

Kate pulled the worn jeans up over Waif Girl's hips and groped around in the dark, searching for the t-shirt as Ryan put his own clothes back in order.

The cell phone shrilled from his pocket, and he answered the call, talking briefly before he turned his attention back to her.

"The tow truck should be here soon. Is there someplace I can take you?"

Kate shook her head. Where could she go? Not to her apartment. She didn't have a key. Didn't have any identification or any way to convince anyone who she really was.

"Not a ride home?" Ryan asked again. "Or to a friend's place?"

10 She hardly knew anyone in Portland. The few people that she did know would never open their doors to Waif Girl. And if she was Waif, where was Kate?

She pressed her cheek against the cool glass of the window. Down a side street, she saw the glowing sign of a convenience store.

"I can't go home now. Would you mind walking with me down to that gas station? I can call someone to pick me up."

It was a lie, but it would get her to a bright safe place where she could figure out what to do next.

"Okay." Ryan's tone was doubtful. "If that's what you want."

As they walked the two blocks to the store, he kept his arm protectively curled around her waist. Kate dreaded the thought of being alone, even in a place that was brightly lit and probably monitored by surveillance cameras. But she didn't know what else to do.

He wasn't going to take her home with him.

She glanced back down the street at the building that she had emerged from. Green neon tubes spelled out *The Grotto*.

"I'll be fine now," she told Ryan as they reached the gas pumps. *This dream has to end soon*. "You'd better get back to the car so you don't miss your tow truck."

"Yeah." Ryan looked down the dark street. "You're sure you don't need anything?"

Kate nodded, then watched him disappear into the darkness before she went into the store. It was bright and familiar, identical to the store where she'd bought gas every week for the past few years.

Nothing scary waited for her inside. Except for the uncomfortable fact that she was still in someone else's body.

The aroma of hot dogs turning slowly under a plastic hood caught her attention and Kate's stomach let loose a hungry gurgle. She'd been nibbling on fat free potato chips in front of her television just a couple of hours ago, but that was *her*. Judging by her bony hips, Waif Girl wasn't used to eating very well.

Kate dug her hands hopefully into the pockets of the jeans. Nothing. She closed her eyes and thought longingly of

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Michelle Marr

Her purse full of credit cards, of the fifty dollars she'd taken out of the ATM earlier that afternoon.

God, she was hungry.

She wandered to the back corner of the store, where the shelves were stocked with motor oil and household cleansers. Where she wouldn't have to watch the greasy hot dogs turning endlessly under bright lights.

Was she ever going to wake up?

Chapter Two

What did you do?

While he was still half a block away from the Jaguar, Ryan had seen the flashing lights of the tow truck and broke into a run, hoping to catch it before it took off and left him stranded for another few hours. The question hit him at about the same time as the stitch of pain in his rib.

He yelled for the driver's attention just as the man was climbing back into the cab of the truck.

"Where can I drop you off?" the driver asked after Ryan had handed over his AAA card and verified the information that he'd given the dispatcher when he called earlier.

Ryan started to say that he'd walk back up to the gas station, then changed his mind and gave directions to his apartment. He didn't need to find out if Kate was still there. He wasn't going to see her again.

What did you do?

He'd had sex with a complete stranger in the front seat of the Jag. On a city street. Ryan closed his eyes and groaned.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. It's been a long, messy day."

She'd walked up to him and he'd let her into his car without hesitating at all. Without considering that she might be a junkie or a hooker or God only knew what else.

Her appearance hadn't suggested anything more respectable. She was too scrawny, too young, and not at all his type.

Ryan wasn't attracted to skinny, bony women. Calling Kate a woman was stretching it. She was a girl. A girl with thorns and roses circling her wrist in a wide ugly band. There might be something alluring about a tiny image hidden on a woman's body, but there was nothing subtle about Kate's body art. Ryan had always thought tattoos on women were an unattractive trait, something that canceled out whatever other appeal there might be.

13 He'd never even picked up a hitchhiker, but he hadn't hesitated before inviting Kate to join him. Why? She wasn't particularly attractive. She was way too young.

But she'd touched him and he'd reacted. He'd never in his life indulged in a one night stand, had never even been seriously tempted. So why had he had sex with a complete stranger, a woman he knew nothing about?

He hadn't given a single thought to the possible risks. Kate could have any number of diseases - some of them incurable. Some fatal.

A shiver of fear shot through him. There might still be consequences to his stupid mistake.

He'd used a condom, which would have provided some protection. But he'd get tested. Just in case.

Ryan was still trying to fit the disturbing pieces of the puzzle together as he let himself into his condo, then showered, then climbed into bed. It didn't make any more sense when he stopped by the repair shop the next morning to drop off the keys to the Jaguar.

Before leaving the car he checked its front seat, running his hand along the seam between the seat and the backrest. Then he bent to examine the gray carpet in front of the passenger seat.

She could almost have been a figment of his imagination. Except for the bundle of napkins which he'd wrapped around the used condom before stuffing it into the litter bag the night before, there was no sign that she had even existed.

Ryan disposed of the ugly proof of their encounter, determined to put the whole weird incident out of his mind for good. He'd done something colossally stupid, but he would never do it - or anything like it - again.

When Ryan got to the office a half hour later and saw Rob Watson standing outside he swore under his breath. Rob's presence was bad news; they'd finished work on his project earlier in the week. That he was waiting outside was worse; it had to mean that Ryan's partner hadn't arrived yet.

"I want to redo everything." Rob began speaking as soon as Ryan was close enough to hear him.

"Let me get my first cup of coffee, Rob. Then we can

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Michelle Marr

talk." Ryan stepped around the other man to unlock the door, then left him standing alone in the reception area while he continued in a straight line for the coffee machine.

He had already downed two cups at home and another cup at the auto shop, but he needed more. With enough caffeine zinging through his system, he'd be able to focus on Rob's problem, whatever it was this time.

He would be able to stop his thoughts from drifting back to the previous night.

Owen and some of the guys from the office downstairs had talked him into going to a couple of bars with them. Although he didn't usually go out drinking after work, the Watson project was finally done and Ryan had decided to take a well-deserved break and celebrate a little.

Owen's directions were wrong, as usual, and by the time Ryan had realized how far off track he was, the Jag had given out.

Ryan poured a long stream of sugar into his coffee mug, hoping that it would succeed where the caffeine had failed him.

Even if he wanted to see Kate again - which he didn't - it was impossible.

He didn't know a damn thing about her. Just her first name and what street she didn't want to be on alone in the middle of the night.

"Why don't you tell me what you have in mind?" Ryan asked as he rejoined Rob.

While they sat in his office and Rob droned on and on about how he appreciated all of the work that they had already done but wanted to try something else entirely, Ryan kept dissecting the time he'd spent with Kate, trying to figure out how it had happened.

He couldn't claim that he'd been drawn to her personality because he hadn't seen any evidence of one. She had told him that she was afraid to wait outside alone. She had refused his offer of a sweatshirt. Except for some moans and sighs and her request that he walk her down to the gas station, there had been no other conversation.

What he needed was to forget about her and concentrate on work. Nothing like that would ever happen

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Michelle Marr

Again. He wouldn't let it. He didn't want it to happen again. The sex hadn't even been that great.

Ryan looked up to see his partner leaning against the doorframe. Owen looked like he'd just stumbled out of bed, which he probably had.

"What's he doing here?" Owen silently mouthed the words, tilting his head in the direction of their least favorite client.

"Morning, Owen," Ryan cut into whatever Rob had been saying. "Rob here has some new ideas that he wants to run past us this morning. Why don't you let him fill you in while I grab his files?"

Ryan stood up from his desk. How long ago had he stopped seeing Maggie? They'd spent a long holiday weekend moving her things out of the apartment they shared. Labor Day, he realized after he thought about it for a moment. It had been over a year since the breakup.

Ryan got in the morning, came to the office, then went home and flipped through the cable channels until it was time to go to bed and start the whole cycle over again. No wonder he'd been willing to leap into the arms of a stranger.

He needed a relationship, needed to find a woman who was his type, someone he could call at the end of the day and share some time with. It was as simple as that.

He needed to start dating again, to find an outlet for the hormones he apparently hadn't realized he was losing control of.

That would solve all of his problems.

Chapter Three

As abruptly as she'd found herself in the stranger's body, Kate realized that she was herself again.

It's okay. You finally woke up.

She stretched and almost tumbled to the floor before she caught her balance and realized that she had been perched on a high stool in the little kitchenette of her apartment.

Bright sunlight poured into the room between the slats of the mini-blinds, casting ribbons of shadow over everything. Three containers of Ben and Jerry's ice cream sat out on the counter, all of them empty. Melted chocolate and banana ice cream had leaked out into the grout between the white tiles.

While she'd dreamed that she was starving, had she actually been stuffing her face? Kate did feel like she'd eaten three pints of Chunky Monkey. The sugar and fat had probably done something to her brain.

Although she'd heard that food could trigger nightmares, Kate had never experienced the phenomena first hand. She hadn't eaten anything out of the ordinary before the nightmare, just a few potato chips. She'd been curled up on the couch in front of the television set, munching chips and flipping channels until she found herself in that dingy room.

And a split second ago, she'd been sure that she was standing in a convenience store, exhausted and hungry, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Kate raised her fingers to touch her own face. No sticky tear tracks. Her head didn't have the stuffy feeling that lingered after a long crying jag. She hadn't been crying at all. That had been part of the dream.

She started to pick up the mess from the kitchen counter, wondering what had really happened last night.

Sleepwalking?

She'd never done it before. At least she didn't think she had. Kate had lived alone for years; there had been no one to tell her about it if she staggered from room to room in the

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Michelle Marr

Middle of the night. But surely she would have figured it out on her own. There would have been some clue.

What a dream. Kate didn't feel like she'd just slept through the night, more like she'd snapped out of a daydream.

What time was it, anyway?

She glanced around the unfamiliar kitchen, finally spotting the digital display on the front of the stove. *Ten o'clock?*

Horried that she'd managed to sleep through the morning, Kate dumped the ice cream containers into the trash and hurried to the bathroom. She should be at work.

Scattered through the apartment were more signs that she'd been busy last night. The bed that she'd left neatly made was in a hopeless tangle. Jewelry and makeup were scattered across the big bathroom counter.

Kate sighed and reached to plug in her curling iron so that it would be ready when she got out of the shower. She yelped as the hot silver tube sizzled against her hand.

She yanked the curling iron's plug from the wall socket, then ran cold water into the sink and shoved her hand under the faucet, staring into the mirror.

There were a few sloppy ringlets still in her hair. Her stomach twisted.

What was wrong with her?

She fought back the panic. It had to be something simple, maybe the stress of packing up everything she owned and moving to a new city.

She'd feel better as soon as she found a place of her own and settled into the routine at the office, she reassured herself. Last night was probably just a one time thing.

It would not happen again.

If it did, she was going to find a therapist. Before she hurt herself.

It was almost noon when Kate pulled her newly leased car into an empty spot between two mini vans. The offices of Stork Shop were in a sprawling old house surrounded by enormous oak trees. Playground equipment and plastic riding toys covered the sloping lawn.

The front room of the house was in chaos. Toys were scattered across the old flowered carpet. Childish shrieks and

giggles bounced off of the walls. Kate still couldn't tell all of the kids apart. There seemed to be even more than usual this morning.

Except for Kate, every woman who worked for the company was a mother. The first time she saw the offices and realized that she'd be spending her days surrounded by children, she had almost told her friend Colleen to forget it. She was looking for a change, a job where she could do what she did well, without wasting a lot of time with endless corporate politics. She didn't want to work in the middle of a nursery school.

"Think about it," Colleen had told her. "Take a few days, and if you're still sure that this isn't the job for you, I'll start looking for someone else."

Kate had taken a couple of days, reluctant to disappoint her old friend. She'd expected to say no, but it hadn't been long before she convinced herself that the job was worth a try. She was looking for something new and different. Stork Shop might not work out in the long run, but Kate had already decided that she wanted to stay in this part of the country.

She picked her way through the mess and stepped over the gate that blocked the little ones' access to the upstairs rooms where the inventory and her office were located.

Kate didn't know a thing about babies or toddlers or the endless paraphernalia that came along with them. But she was a whiz at setting up software to track inventories and billing and everything else that Stork Shop needed done. So far, it was working out. She enjoyed the job and her co-workers didn't seem to mind explaining what the things they sold were and why anyone would need them.

There was a stack of new product descriptions on her desk, topped by a piece of pale blue construction paper with torn edges. *Here's the new stuff for you to add to the inventory. Hope you found an apartment this morning!*

It was going to take time to get used to working in an office where memos were more likely to be written in pink crayon than in ink.

Kate set the note aside. Colleen was right -- she needed to find an apartment and get settled in before she plunged into work. If she didn't, she'd be living out of boxes forever, paying

astronomical rent for a place that she didn't even like.

On her way home from work that evening, Kate picked up a stack of rental brochures. She tried to read through them after dinner, but her thoughts kept wandering.

Would she have another of those dreams?

It wouldn't be so bad if she could skip the ugly details of Waif Girl's life and go straight to the good stuff with Ryan. And keep herself from trashing the apartment.

When she woke up in the morning, she was under the blankets of her own bed and there was no sign that she'd gotten up during the night. She couldn't remember what, if anything, she'd dreamed about.

Not Ryan. Which was a little disappointing.

The details of the dream had already started to fade from her memory, but she could still picture him and hear his voice. Too bad he wasn't a real person.

Before driving to work, Kate decided to swing by her storage unit and pick up her own bedding. There hadn't been many promising leads in the rental brochures. It wouldn't hurt to make the temporary place a bit more homey while she looked for something better.

Everything around her was new, even her work clothes. She'd tried to stick with her regular wardrobe until her new co-workers convinced her that jeans really were a better choice. It was far easier to get peanut butter and jelly out of denim than the dry clean only clothes she'd worn to her last job.

Before you know it, you'll be driving a mini van. Kate glanced down at the unfamiliar gauges of her car. The gas needle was hovering at empty, so she turned into the first gas station that she passed. She wasn't sure how far down she could safely let that little red line drift.

Kate parked at the island of pumps and went inside to pay, thinking that she'd grab a Danish or something to make up for the breakfast she'd skipped.

As she glanced around the bright displays, a chill raced down her spine. Even at 7am, hot dogs turned slowly under a heat lamp. From the doorway, she could see the far corner with its shelves of motor oil and Windex.

All of these stores look the same. It's part of their corporate identity. Just because she'd dreamed a

perfectly detailed gas station didn't mean a thing.

A few minutes later, she turned into the storage lot. She'd only been to her unit once before, counting boxes as the movers unloaded them and making sure that nothing had been lost. Then, she hadn't realized how run down the surrounding area was.

The rows of rolling metal doors were deserted so Kate parked directly in front of her unit and locked the car tightly after she got out. She looked around to make sure that she was alone before snapping open the new silver padlock and rolling up the door to expose her things to the world.

The box of bedding was easy to spot. The movers had put the light stuff on top and she'd labeled everything herself in big red letters. She pulled out a box of books to use as a step. That gave her just enough height to hook her fingers around one corner of the box and knock it down to the pavement.

It only took a moment to load the box into her trunk and lock everything back up. While she waited for the spiked metal gates that enclosed the lot to slide open, she tried to decide if there was anything else that she should do before she went to work.

There were a couple of apartments that she wanted to drive by before she scheduled an appointment to see inside. Colleen wouldn't be able to go over the new inventory system with her until after lunch...

Kate turned to check for traffic before pulling out onto the street and her heart jumped.

Even from blocks away, she could read the unlit neon tubes.

The Grotto

Chapter Four

It doesn't mean anything, Kate told herself firmly. You noticed the building when you were here with the movers last week and it popped up again in your dream.

You weren't here.

Seeing the Grotto in broad daylight didn't mean that she'd been inside. Neither did the gas station. There were identical gas stations scattered every few blocks in all of the big cities in the United States.

The logic seemed sound, but it didn't make her feel any better.

She would have to prove it to herself. She might have seen the building the last time she was here. The gas station was a mirror of the one in her dream because it was the same as so many other gas stations she'd been in.

But she had *never* been inside of The Grotto.

All she had to do was find a parking place and take a quick peek inside. It wouldn't look a thing like the room from her dream and she could go on to work without any other worries. Except for the sleepwalking, and if that happened again she'd ask around for the number of a good therapist.

Kate's low heels clicked across the broken sidewalk. She unsnapped the leather flap that covered the business end of her pepper spray, then laced her keys between her fingers.

It would only take a moment to open the door of the building and see what she needed to see. Then she would run back to her car.

Flakes of the building's peeling gray paint littered the dirty sidewalk. Fake portholes with rusty metal frames and pieces of thick rope hanging up at the roof line still hinted at the nautical theme that the Grotto must have once had.

It was just a run down restaurant. Kate wondered why she'd turned it into a bar for her dream. Then she saw the faded sticker in the center of the door. No Minors. She'd been right.

She took a deep breath and reached for the handle. You

Switch

Michelle Marr

~~Don't~~ have to take more than one step inside, she promised herself. It won't be that bad.

The door didn't budge. Kate gave it a little rattle, then sighed with relief when it still refused to open. The place wasn't even in business anymore. It had probably been closed for years.

Or maybe it didn't open until later in the day. Either way, she wasn't coming back at night to find out. The mystery of the Grotto would remain unsolved.

She turned to walk back to her car and froze. A silver Jaguar had pulled into the space behind her Jetta.

The same car?

Your imagination just dragged it into the dream from somewhere else.

That didn't explain how it could be here again now. Then Kate saw the man get out of the car. Ryan. The man who had made love to her while she was ... dreaming? In someone else's body?

While someone else was in her body eating all of her ice cream and playing dress up with her clothes?

If I see *her*, I'll scream. Or faint. Or collapse into a babbling heap that they'll haul off to the nearest asylum.

Waif didn't appear, much to Kate's relief. She looked up and saw that there were windows on the upper story of the Grotto, the rooms where she would have been that night if she'd been there.

Too spooky.

Could she really have seen Ryan and his car while she was at the storage unit counting boxes? Maybe it was that simple -- there was a quick way to find out.

"Ryan?" She called his name before she had time to talk herself out of it.

He turned toward her.

It doesn't mean that his name is Ryan, she told herself frantically. People turn toward unexpected sounds. It's human nature.

"Yes?"

Uh-oh. He might have turned involuntarily to look at a stranger who called out someone else's name, but he wouldn't have responded. Not unless his name was Ryan.

Switch

Michelle Marr

23 He stepped toward her. It was him. The car. The voice. The body that had pressed her down into the front seat of the car while she was in someone else's body.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

Kate stood frozen, unable to reply. A wave of dizziness rushed over her, her body threatening to crumple to the pavement.

It. Was. Him.

And she'd never met him before. Not while she was herself.

"I thought that we might have met the other night," she said, her voice shaking a bit.

His eyes widened, but he gave a quick negative shake of his head. "No. You must be thinking of someone else."

He was the one thinking of someone else, but Kate couldn't explain that. So she shrugged and went back to her car.

He was still standing outside the Grotto. She watched him as she put her key in the ignition. What was he looking for?

You.

Was he really looking for her? That idea was too complicated, far too frightening. But she knew she was right.

The whole thing had been real.

Kate could prove it to herself if she got out of the car and went over to him again, asked him if he was looking for a skinny brown haired girl he'd made love to in the front seat of his car two nights ago. Even if he didn't answer her, she was sure that she'd be able to tell from his reaction.

But going over there to confirm what she already knew wasn't going to do any good. She was herself now, which was a good thing. She was perfectly happy to be in her own body.

Ryan, on the other hand, was looking for someone else. If Waif really did live over that bar, sooner or later he'd probably find her.

Kate sat there, watching Ryan and trying to sort the whole mess out in her mind. Who was he really looking for -- the woman he'd had sex with, or the body?

And why was she so worried about it? Kate didn't want a guy who would have sex with a stranger in the front seat of

Switch

Michelle Marr

~~At~~ his car after exchanging only a few sentences with her.

Did she?

She was trying not to think about her own responsibility for the whole mess, what she'd done to someone else's body while she was in it. Waif had filled her up with ice cream and made a mess of her apartment, but she hadn't gone out and thrown herself at a total stranger.

Kate watched as Ryan got back into his car, suddenly wishing that she'd introduced herself and at least found out who he was. He was her only link to what had happened that night. Once he drove away, she would never see him again.

She put her own car into gear and followed him, keeping the Jaguar in sight until he finally parked in front of a brick office complex. She drove another block before pulling into the parking lot of a medical office.

Kate sat and watched the silver Jaguar. Why couldn't she have met him as herself? They wouldn't have had sex. They might have gotten to know one another like normal adults. Instead of sitting and staring at his car, remembering how disappointing their one and only time together had been, she might have been looking forward to seeing him later for dinner or a cup of coffee.

After almost an hour, she decided that he wasn't coming back to the car. He'd probably gone in to work for the day. Like she would have done herself if she hadn't suddenly become a stalker.

She should get going. It was too late to do anything else; she'd had her chance to talk to him and it hadn't developed into anything.

Kate sighed. Colleen would tell her to head into the building and track him down and worry about an excuse for being there when she found him and he asked for one.

She gathered her purse and keys and got out of the car. It was a bad situation already. How could anything else she did make it any worse?

Kate went into the lobby and scanned the building directory, sure that there wasn't a chance she'd find him. She didn't know what he did, let alone what company he worked for. Then she saw it -- Chase-Lyons Consulting, Suite 205.

That had to be it. Kate headed for the stairs.

25 When she found the right office, the small reception area was deserted. She stood just inside the doorway for a moment, taking in the empty chairs and the silk ficus tree in the corner. There was a desk facing the entrance, bare except for a telephone and two clear plastic holders full of business cards.

She crossed the room in two steps, plucked up one of Ryan's cards and slipped it into the back pocket of her jeans.

When she got to her own office, she pinned the card to her bulletin board and stared at it. Office number, email address, voice mail number, pager number, cell phone... It had all of the information that a good business card should contain.

By the end of the day, Kate knew every one of Ryan's numbers by heart.

Chapter Five

It could happen again.

Kate lay under her favorite comforter that night, her heart pounding. If it had really happened once, it could really happen again.

The frightening realization had come to her shortly after she convinced herself that she really had been in someone else's body for a while. Suddenly she wished that the only thing she had to worry about was burning her face with a curling iron while she wandered through the apartment in her sleep. If it was just sleepwalking and nightmares, she could get herself analyzed or medicated. She could take care of the problem.

But if Waif got into her body again and did something stupid, there wasn't a thing Kate could do to save herself.

Horrible as it was, she wasn't as worried about what she'd done with Waif. She hadn't realized what was happening. Now that she did know she'd be much more careful.

It's not like she was a virgin.

Kate closed her eyes and wished that she could take that whole night back. She never would have done it if she'd known that it was real. It didn't matter whether or not Waif was picky about what she did with her body. That she hadn't understood what was really happening to her wasn't a good enough excuse, either.

What if she gave Ryan something?

Kate flopped over and buried her face in her pillow. They'd used a condom. Ryan had seen Waif. He'd made the decision to have sex with her. If he made a habit of that sort of thing, it was just as likely that he'd given something to poor Waif. The only one who hadn't known what was going on and was innocent of any wrongdoing.

She was going to make herself crazy if she kept going over and over all of the what ifs. If one of them had a disease, or if Waif was pregnant...

27 The only thing that she could do about it now was make some preparations in case it happened again. She would need access to money, to her apartment and her possessions.

If she could figure out how to do it, she needed to limit Waif's access to those same things while she was in Kate's life.

Before leaving her house the next morning, Kate slipped a twenty-dollar bill under the rubber doormat. Even as she pushed the mat back into place, she knew that it wasn't enough. It would buy her some of those gas station hot dogs, but only if she could get to it. Without access to a car or anyone to turn to for help, that didn't seem very likely.

Instead of driving straight to work she stopped at a hardware store and bought a combination padlock to put on her storage unit. If she wound up near the Grotto again, she could get there easily enough.

Kate changed the lock and tucked most of the cash from her purse into a box of books. When she had more time, she'd add duplicate keys to her apartment and car. If something happened before then and the money she'd stashed ran out before she became herself again, she could probably hock her VCR.

She parked her car between the usual mini vans and went up to her office, turned on her computer and began to type. The whole time, she was waiting for it to happen, trying to remember if there had been anything - any thought or feeling that went along with the change.

The hours passed slowly and she was still herself. At noon, Kate headed downstairs to get her Weight Watcher's pasta out of the freezer and pop it into the microwave.

The small kitchen was cluttered with high-chairs and mismatched stools. Women fed their babies from bottles and little glass jars of strained vegetables. The older kids were eating fish sticks and peanut butter sandwiches.

Kate found an empty seat and sat down to wait for the microwave to beep. It had taken her a while to become convinced that the other women actually managed to get any work done, but they did. They rotated babysitting duties throughout the day, following an unwritten schedule that somehow seemed to work out fairly for everyone involved.

28 It was a far cry from what she was used to, either gobbling down fast food at her desk or going out for overpriced turkey sandwich with some of the other women she worked with.

Here, the gossip was about making your own play dough and the cheapest places to buy diapers, but Kate felt more comfortable than she had at her old job. It would be easy to settle in here.

If her life hadn't plunged into the Twilight Zone.

Kate was still waiting for another switch, fearing that it would happen at the worst possible time. She had no idea what kind of person Waif actually was. Except for the fact that she had a big tattoo and lived over a bar. Not good signs.

Being in someone else's body probably didn't bring out the best in her. It hadn't worked that way for Kate, who usually thought of herself as a good person.

Maybe if she locked her office door and hid the key...

The microwave pinged and she got up to get her lunch. Calm down, she told herself firmly. You haven't turned into a monster.

It wouldn't do anyone any good to have a screaming woman locked in an office upstairs. If Kate found herself locked in a strange place, she'd panic and try to find a way out. She couldn't expect Waif to behave much differently.

The girl probably wouldn't sit calmly and wait for them to switch back, even if that would be the best thing for both of them.

Kate could only hope that Waif had more common sense than she'd used herself. And that Waif didn't realize what Kate had done to her body and decide to pay her back.

"I think we might have met last night."

No one had spoken. Ryan sat alone in his office, but he could still hear the stranger's words clearly, even after several days.

The woman hadn't been confused, hadn't mistaken him for another man. Something in her tone made him sure of that. She'd known his name. But he'd never seen the woman

Switch

Michelle Marr

Before. Certainly not that night.

Whatever it was, there was more to it than a simple mistaken identity. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd missed something, some important opportunity. He'd even thought he saw her leaving his office later that same afternoon.

Maybe this was how he was going to pay for that one night stand. His conscience had to be playing tricks on him. He didn't really want to find Kate and pursue a relationship with her, so he was trying to substitute another woman. One who was more his type.

He'd only gone back to that neighborhood to convince himself that he had no business there. He'd started new projects at work and had gone out to dinner with Bethany Morris, a receptionist from downstairs. She was fun and cute. The evening with her hadn't been unpleasant, but Ryan hadn't made plans to do anything else with her.

He'd started to jog in the mornings again, returning to a habit he'd given up in college. But even the unaccustomed exercise left him restless.

He craved something, and he didn't know what. It was elusive, a feeling that he wasn't sure he'd ever experienced. But there had been a hint of it in the front seat of his car that night. And again in the encounter with the stranger.

Life was good. Or it would be, if he didn't keep remembering the voice of a woman asking if she knew him.

It happened again, with no more warning than she'd had before. Kate was transported suddenly from her kitchen nook, where she'd been flipping through rental booklets and circling listings that showed promise, to a narrow aisle in an unfamiliar store. There was no sensation, no movement. She was just there. Like she'd been lost in a daydream, then abruptly remembered what she was supposed to be doing.

It took a moment for Kate to get her bearings, to recognize that she held a plastic shopping basket, that Waif had been grocery shopping.

I am Waif again, right?

She glanced down at her hands. There was the tattoo.

Switch

Michelle Marr

~~And~~ the scars. So she was Waif and, she assumed, Waif was in her apartment.

Kate glanced down at the items in the basket. A blue box of sanitary pads lay on top of everything else. She squeezed her thighs together until she was sure she could feel the uncomfortable bulge of one inside her jeans.

Waif wasn't pregnant. At least her lapse in judgment hadn't led to that kind of trouble. There was only one other thing she could do to straighten out the mess she'd made.

Kate picked up the box of pads and returned it to its spot on the shelf in front of her. Waif would have to finish her shopping another time. While she was in this body, Kate had things to take care of.

She wandered down the next aisle, intending to put everything else back. It didn't take her long to realize that it would take forever. Time she wasn't sure she had.

She set the basket down on the warped tile floor and reached into the pocket of Waif's jeans. Her fingertips brushed coins and crumpled bills.

Good. She wouldn't have to make a trip to the storage unit.

There was an old pay phone in front of the store. She stepped into the glass and metal booth and dialed Ryan's office number from memory.

Chapter Six

"I think you were looking for me." The familiar voice was soft and hesitant.

Ryan didn't reply, just tightened his grip on the cordless phone that he'd picked up from his kitchen counter.

She had found him. She knew that he'd gone back to look for her. How?

"It's Kate." There was another long pause. "Are you there?"

"How do you know that I was looking for you?" he finally demanded.

"I saw you."

"But you didn't show yourself. How did you get this number?" A cold knot coiled in his stomach.

He hadn't been able to stop thinking about that night, but he'd convinced himself that whatever it had been was over. Neither of them had any way to contact the other. He didn't want to contact her and he had assured himself over and over that she had no interest in him.

How had she tracked him down? And why?

"Are you still there?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"I need to talk to you about what we did."

"So talk."

"I can't do this over the phone. I need to see you and it has to be right now."

"Can't do *what* over the phone?"

"I can't explain it." Her voice shook a bit. "Please. We have to do this. Just tell me where we can meet. I've got to figure out a bus route from here, so it might take me a couple of hours to get to you."

"You said that you had to talk to me now," he reminded her.

"I do. But I don't have a car."

He sighed. "Where are you?"

"I'm not sure. But I can get to that gas station where

Switch

Michelle Marr

"You left me. Will you meet me there?"

"Yes." He didn't know why, but he'd do it. If she was alone, they would talk. If he saw anyone with her, he'd drive away.

Which won't work because she apparently knows where you live.

If he didn't hear her out, he'd drive himself nuts wondering what she was after, so a half hour later, Ryan turned into the small parking lot of the gas station and spotted her next to the building. He watched her approach as he pulled into a parking spot at the far end of the lot.

She was dressed the same as she had been that night, in torn jeans and a black T-shirt. Her hair looked like it needed a good wash. Nothing about her appealed to him, he realized as she hurried up to the car.

Seeing her again, he could understand his strange reaction to her even less. Ryan turned off the ignition, then pocketed his keys before walking over to meet her in the middle of the lot.

"I'm here. What did you want?"

She glanced around them nervously. "I'd rather we talk where no one can hear us. This is going to sound really weird."

What was she up to? She couldn't talk to him on the phone, it had to be face to face. Now it had to be a private conversation, which they could've done more effectively over the phone.

Just walk away, he told himself. But that wouldn't solve anything. She knew where to find him. Even if she didn't track him down again, he'd never stop worrying that she might or wondering why she'd called in the first place.

"Get in the car, then." Kate could say whatever she had to say and then go back to wherever she came from.

She glanced apprehensively at the Jaguar.

"It's the car or here in the middle of the parking lot. Or we can forget the whole thing." He wasn't letting her lead him anywhere else. Ryan turned and started walking in the direction of the car.

After a moment of hesitation, she followed. When he unlocked the door, she climbed inside, sitting with her back

Switch

Michelle Marr

pressed against the door. As far from him as she could possibly get. Lots more distance than she'd kept between them last night.

"I saw you," she finally said. "When you were looking for me."

"You told me that over the phone."

She clenched her hands on her thighs, then her voice got even softer. "I talked to you."

What was going on here? "You mean on the phone a little while ago."

"No. On the street. Except I wasn't the same person. This isn't really me. I'm that other woman who you asked if you knew."

Ryan could feel a tension headache gathering strength behind his eyes. The woman was crazy. Obviously she must've seen him talking to that other woman, or she knew the other woman and they'd arranged the meeting. Or something.

"What are you trying to pull?"

Kate flinched back into the door. "Nothing. I wasn't even there again on purpose. I'd gone to my storage unit to get my sheets and then I recognized the street, and you, and I worried that you might have been looking for that other girl who isn't me. But was me when you had sex with her." She took a deep breath before racing on, the words pouring quickly out of her.

"I was worried about what would happen if you did find her. I don't think she knows about you, about what we did that night."

She squirmed on the white leather seat. "You haven't found her -- have you?"

"No. And I'm not looking, so you have nothing to worry about."

There. Now she could get out of his car and take her two personalities or whatever other problems she had back to wherever she'd come from. Problem solved, and he would Never Ever pick up a woman on a street outside a bar again.

"So if this isn't you, then who are you?" He shouldn't have asked. He should have just let her go on her way and considered himself lucky that nothing worse had happened. But he didn't.

34 "My name really is Kate. And I'm the woman you saw on the street the other day. That's me."

"And how do you become this other person?"

"I don't know. It just happened that night. I'd been sitting in my apartment watching television and then I found myself in a room over a bar and I panicked. I had to get out of there and I was scared to death that whatever man Waif lived with was going to come back and find me there."

"Waif?"

"I don't know what her name is or anything else about her --"

"Except that she lives with a man?"

"I think so. The room was full of guy's clothes. And she was dressed for bed, so that's the conclusion I came to."

So she'd run out into the street and jumped into bed -- or the front seat of a car -- with another strange man. Made sense.

"I really was afraid I was going to die out there. Then I saw you and you were safe and human and I guess I kind of clung to you." She took a deep breath and continued. "But I didn't believe that it was happening. Not yet. I thought it had to be some weird vivid long dream. When I switched back to myself, I was sitting on a stool in the kitchen and things in my apartment had been moved around."

"But I still tried to convince myself that I'd been sleepwalking or something, until I went to get some stuff from the storage unit and saw the bar. And saw you."

She stopped and ran her hand over the white leather seat. "It really happened, didn't it?"

Ryan shrugged. Some of it had happened, but he wasn't convinced that it had all happened to her. "What happened after I left you at the gas station?"

"I stood there until I lost hope and then without any warning I was myself again. Everything was normal until this morning when I popped into Waif again. She was grocery shopping."

"And you called me?"

She nodded. "I was afraid to try to talk to you the other day. You were so sure that you didn't know me. So I followed you back to your office and picked up one of your business

Switch
35rds."

Michelle Marr

She had followed him. She knew where he worked. His headache was getting stronger.

"My name is Kate Hayden. I work at a company called Stork Shop. I'm not what I look like right now. Actually, I'm about ten years older, a few pounds heavier..." She shrugged. "You saw me."

"So what do you do now?"

"Wait to change back." She bit her lower lip. "It happened once before, so I guess it'll happen again before too long. I made sure that if it takes a while, I can get into my apartment and my bank accounts.

"If it never happens, I guess this girl is going to run away from wherever she's been living and whoever she's been living with. I'm not going to live the way she does."

She glanced at the watch on his wrist, trying to see the time. "I don't know when it's going to happen, so I'd better get somewhere else before it does.

"I just wanted you to know that you shouldn't be looking for her." She paused. "Unless she's your type or something...but I don't think she'll know you."

Kate reached for the door handle. "I'm going to go back to the grocery store and wait until I switch back."

Ryan watched silently as she walked away. The whole situation was weird. Unbelievable.

Chapter Seven

Kate sat at her desk, rapidly keying information into the computer. Over the past couple of weeks, she'd streamlined the system as much as possible. The task no longer required her full concentration. While she worked, her mind could wander. But not to thoughts about Ryan. She didn't want to think about Ryan.

She couldn't *stop* thinking about Ryan.

"What did you expect?" she asked the empty room. He had sex with a body that you happened to be in. Because you practically jumped on him.

The opportunity had been there, and he'd taken it. Whether or not he was attracted to Waif made no difference at all. Kate wasn't involved anymore. She was a complete stranger to him.

A complete stranger who knew and craved his touch.

The telephone at her elbow beeped, then Colleen's voice came through the speaker. "There's someone here for you -- I told him to go on up."

Him?

Kate knew only a handful of men in the area. None of them was likely to come see her at the office. Not the neighbor whose name she'd quickly forgotten, or the maintenance guy who'd fixed her garbage disposal a couple of days ago.

Maybe one of the kids was coming to show her something.

She was still wondering when she heard heavy footsteps in the hallway outside.

Ohmigod. Kate's heart skipped a beat as she looked up to see Ryan standing in the open doorway of her office. He'd come to see her?

She'd tried to convince herself that she wasn't really attracted to him, that she'd have leapt at any normal looking guy that night. Ryan had represented safety, so of course she'd gone to him. It was the situation and the dim lighting that had made her think he was so attractive. Yesterday, she'd

Switch

Michelle Marr

Been too worried that he was going to call the men in the white coats to take a good look at him.

Now he stood in her office, in dark slacks and a crisply pressed shirt. He'd come there to see her. Not Waif. Given the right situation, her own body, Kate realized that she would definitely leap at him again.

"Kate?" he asked as he stepped into the small room. Then he hesitated. "Or someone else?"

She closed her eyes for a second before answering. "That's my worst nightmare right now. I know how panicked I get when I'm her. I don't know what she'd do here at the office. And I don't know when it'll happen again. Or *if* it will."

Did he really believe her? She hadn't dared to tell anyone else. Colleen would be sure that she'd snapped. Her other friends were miles away.

"So far it's only been the two times." That was another reason she hadn't confided in anyone else. She still clung to the fragile hope that it wouldn't happen again. Kate reached over and lifted a stack of newly printed catalogs off of a wooden chair that she'd brought up to her office from the kitchen the day before.

Ryan pulled it a little closer to her desk before sitting down. For a long time, he just looked at her. Finally, he spoke. "How do I convince myself that you're the same woman?"

He believed her? Kate closed the gap between them and giving him a quick, tight hug. "Thank you," she murmured against his chest before letting him go.

"For what?" he asked as she retreated to her own chair.

"For even thinking about believing me." How could she convince him? Everything about her had been different that night. Her body, her voice. They'd barely talked at all.

What did she know that she could only know if she'd been with him that night? Nothing.

Except, maybe...

She rose from her chair and placed a hand lightly on each of his shoulders, waiting for his reaction. When he didn't resist, she slid into his lap. "Let me try something."

This wouldn't work. Kate lowered her lips to Ryan's ear. People probably kissed pretty much the same. There was nothing special about her technique.

38 But as she ran her tongue around the curve of his ear, she knew that it had all been real. The last tiny doubts melted away; she'd done this before, was meant to do it again. The smell of him, the heat of him against her, all of it was exactly what she remembered.

The only difference was that her own body was responding the way that it should. Her breath and pulse quickened and she felt as if every cell in her body was melting together.

She wanted to make love with him again, right here in her office and if they did it would be making love, not just a phrase she used because she was reluctant to admit to herself that what they'd done before was just sex.

Ryan caught her waist in his hands and shifted her so that he was looking right into her eyes.

"It *is* you, isn't it?"

Kate nodded silently.

He kissed her then, capturing her mouth with his. Her mouth. Not Waif's mouth, not a dream mouth. This was really her. As his tongue stroked gently inside of her, Kate let out a soft moan.

"You moan almost the same," he observed, chuckling softly.

Kate forced herself to squirm free from Ryan's embrace. "We can't do this here," she said softly.

Sex in the front seat of a stranger's car was bad enough. She never would have done it if she'd believed that she was awake. She could not allow herself to go any further in her office, in a building full of small children.

Sometimes trying to be a responsible grown up really sucked.

"So what do we do now?" Ryan asked, tucking a length of hair behind her ear with one finger. "Do you still want me to go away?"

Surprised, Kate shook her head. What would happen if she got to know Ryan as herself? Could they somehow pick up the pieces and continue on after the bizarre way they'd come together in the beginning?

"I like you a lot better this way," he admitted. "The real you is much more my type."

39 She smiled. "I'm glad."

"What do we do now?" He traced a finger along the back of her neck. "Is it backwards of me to ask you out for dinner?"

Kate wanted to say yes. She really did.

She shook her head slowly. "Maybe in a little while. When this stops happening, or I find a way to deal with it. Or I don't know what."

She gave a sad little smile. "I think I'm too confused for dating right now."

He kissed her again, briefly. "I guess I can understand that. Later, though?"

"Definitely."

He reached over to her desk and picked up a pad of pink Post-Its. "I want you to call me," he told her as he wrote down a series of numbers. "If it happens again and you find yourself in a bad position, get to a phone. I'll come get you."

"Maybe we need a password or something," she mused. "So that you can be sure who you're picking up once you get there."

Yup, she realized. She was jealous. Didn't want Waif Girl anywhere near Ryan, especially not after she'd been way too close already.

They picked a phrase that could come up in conversation, but hopefully not by pure chance. Then he left.

Kate walked him down to the Jaguar, standing outside the window and looking longingly at those leather seats. She'd call him soon, she hoped.

And not because she was in danger.

Chapter Eight

Kate was aware of the foot before anything else in the room became clear. Her toes had just grazed the solid flesh and she couldn't tell anything about it, except that it was human and not her own. Slowly, she pulled her leg away, trying not to jostle the thin lumpy mattress.

The room was dark, barely illuminated by moonlight that leaked in one on side of the torn shade. There wasn't enough light for her to look for the tattoo, but Kate knew that she was in Waif's body again.

Who else would she be?

She'd gone to sleep wrapped in her own comforter, wearing a faded pink cotton nightshirt. How long ago had that been?

It didn't matter, she supposed, looking at the tiny patch of dark sky visible through the window. It was still night. Waif was in bed, too. With someone else.

Kate slowly moved to the far edge of the mattress. She didn't dare leave the bed for fear that the creaking springs might wake him. And, as much as she wanted to put distance between them, just getting out of bed wouldn't help.

Even if she could get out of the room without waking him up, there was still the bar downstairs. Maybe it was closed for the night; she couldn't hear voices or music. It was possible that she could slip downstairs and through the empty room and out into the street.

But it was a long way to the gas station.

And Waif Girl was completely naked. Trying to find clothes and dress in the darkness would make noise. Noise that might disturb the man beside her.

So Kate lay there in the dark, hoping he wouldn't wake up while she was still there. After an eternity of listening to his breathing and the million other little noises that filled the room, she was drifting somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, trying desperately not to fall asleep even though she was exhausted.

41 He moved. Kate lay stiff and still as the man climbed out of the bed and crossed to the tiny bathroom. The light that he snapped on blinded her for a moment before she focused.

It was the same room as before. Kate closed her eyes and tried not to listen to the sound of Waif Girl's man urinating in the tiny bathroom.

What was she going to do?

Kate opened her eyes and stared at his naked back, which was tattooed with a sprawling winged creature that covered both shoulder blades.

What would happen if she got out of the bed and ran? Assuming that the bar was closed and that she'd be able to get the door unlocked, she'd be naked on the street.

Kate clamped her eyes shut before she had to see him turn around. Please just go back to sleep, she prayed as the far edge of the mattress dipped under his weight.

The sudden pressure of a hand on her thigh made her stiffen. Not noticing - or maybe not caring - that she was completely uninterested, he slid his hand up until Kate reached down and blocked it firmly with her own.

"Don't." She was not going to let him do this. Not without a hell of a fight.

"C'mon." He pulled his hand away from her and tried again.

Kate clamped her legs together and rolled over. "We can't."

"Why not?"

Good question. Waif was naked in bed with this guy. She must be having sex with him.

He sat up, apparently not concerned that he'd just dragged the sheets off of her. "What's the matter, Jen? You've been acting weird lately."

I'm not Jen. She fumbled for the edge of the sheet and pulled it up to cover her bare breasts. Jen's breasts. Which this guy had probably seen a million times, but not while Kate was attached to them.

What excuse would satisfy him? Kate tried to come up with something - anything - that would turn Waif's boyfriend off until she was safely back in her own body.

We just did it? Their last encounter could have been

~~Free~~ weeks ago, or right before the two of them went to sleep.

"I just can't right now," she finally said meekly, hoping that he would fill in whatever excuse Waif would have used and wouldn't push it any further.

To her relief, he muttered something under his breath and flopped back onto his own side of the bed.

Kate lay in the darkness for an eternity, until she was sure that the man beside her was really asleep. She had to get out of the room. Would there be anyone downstairs?

Hoping the absence of loud music meant everyone had gone home for the night, Kate slid off of the edge of the mattress and groped for a pair of jeans that she'd spotted while the lights were on. Waif's shoes could be anywhere in the darkness, but she wasn't worried about finding them. She wasn't going to be walking anywhere dangerous.

Except for the filthy bar downstairs.

Telling herself that Waif had already been exposed to every germ in the place, probably had developed some kind of immunity, Kate slipped out of the room. She dressed just outside the door.

The filthy jeans felt creepy against her bare skin and were the wrong size; they probably belonged to Waif's boyfriend. For a moment, Kate considered going without. Then she pulled up the zipper and fastened the button. Even if the jeans were disgusting and barely fit, they were better than nothing. There could be someone downstairs.

Enough light filtered in from the street for her to find her way to the staircase. She took each step gingerly, fearing what might be in the path of her bare feet. At the bottom, she paused.

The only sound was her own ragged breathing.

Waif belongs here, she reassured herself, wondering if Waif felt safe in this place, if she was in love with the man sleeping upstairs.

Kate slipped out into the bar. Only the neon beer signs were lit, but they gave off enough light for her to make out her surroundings.

Empty, the room held no terror. It was just a dark and dirty space with booths lining one wall and a pool table at the far end. There had been pay phones in the little hallway at the

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base of the stairs, but she didn't have any money. There would probably be a business phone behind the bar, she decided.

It was where she expected to find it, on a crowded shelf under an ancient cash register. Kate picked up the heavy plastic receiver and listened to the dial tone for a moment before hanging up.

Ryan had told her to call him if it happened again. She just had to dial his number and he'd be on his way here.

She didn't want him to come. Not while she was Waif. She'd told him that she'd call if she was in a bad situation. And she wasn't, not exactly. The man upstairs had made no move to hurt her. With any luck, he'd sleep through until daylight when she could go up and finish dressing and go--

Where? How long was she going to be this way? She couldn't survive as Waif for long. She didn't know how the other woman lived or who she spent her days with. It wasn't as easy as it would be Waif hanging out alone in her apartment and eating her food.

Kate crossed the room to a booth and scooted to the back corner, her back against the wall. She was going to change back. Neither of the previous episodes had lasted long. She had no reason to believe that this time would be any different.

She wouldn't call Ryan or go to the storage unit until she had no other choice. She didn't want to become herself again and leave Waif with access to all of her belongings. Or access to Ryan.

In the morning she'd find a library, or a mall. Some public place she could wait. If she wasn't herself again by tomorrow night, then she'd call Ryan and have him open the storage unit for her, get her some clothes and enough money for a motel room.

Chapter Nine

Bethany caught Ryan's attention as he hurried past the small crowd waiting for their turn at the elevator. No one else ever seemed to remember that there was a flight of stairs hidden just around the corner. Instead they stood in an impatient huddle fought for their turns at the elevators.

He paused at the bottom of the steps, letting Beth catch up. Her arms were loaded with a thick stack of colored file folders. The straps of her black leather purse dug into her wrists and her fingers were wrapped tightly around a Styrofoam coffee cup. The whole precarious load seemed likely to spill to the ground at any moment.

"Can I give you a hand?"

She nodded and Ryan took the file folders, tipping them so that they slid into a neater stack.

"Thanks." Bethany pulled her purse strap up onto her shoulder and took a sip of her coffee. "There's no way I would've made it upstairs without dumping everything."

She unwrapped the napkin from around her coffee cup and used it to blot raindrops off of her face. Ryan waited for her to finish, then kept pace with her as she climbed the stairs.

"That movie that I was telling you about starts tonight," she said. "Want to take in an early show after work?"

"Can't." Ryan shook his head. "I doubt I'll get out of here until late. That project we just started is going to have me working long hours for quite a while."

Beth shrugged. "That's okay. Maybe I can round up some of the girls to go with me."

Ryan walked Beth to her desk, then left her with her mountain of file folders. Now what? His plan had been to start getting out after work, to do something other than going home and sulking in front of the television set. So why was he exaggerating his workload to get out of doing just that?

Because if he did go out and do something fun after work he wanted to do it with Kate, the woman who refused to plan anything after work because she didn't know which body

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She'd be in at five o'clock.

Was she doing all right? He hadn't heard from her at all since that day in her office.

It nagged at him until lunchtime, when instead of driving to the fast food place where he usually picked up lunch, Ryan turned off in the direction of Stork Shop.

A tall, slender woman with a toddler on one hip met him as he came in the door, the same lady who'd shown him up to Kate's office on his last visit.

"Is Kate in?" he asked.

"Not yet," the woman shook her head and readjusted her grip on the squirming little girl. "I think she's out house hunting this morning."

"Did she say what time she'd be back?"

The woman shook her head. "Kate hasn't been in at all today, but you're welcome to leave a note for her."

Ryan scribbled a couple of sentences and his cell phone number on the piece of paper that she handed him. Had something happened? Probably not. Kate's co-workers didn't seem concerned by her absence.

If she wasn't herself, she'd stay away from work. And if a situation did arise that was too much for her, she'd call him.

If she could get to a phone.

He was so wrapped up in his worries, that he had backed the Jaguar to turn down to the street before he noticed her getting out of her own car.

Something had happened. It was obvious from the way she was standing, even though he was too far away to make out the expression on her face.

"Kate?"

She hurried towards him. "It happened again." Her voice was low, even though there was no one nearby to overhear them. "In the middle of the night--"

She took a deep shuddering breath and Ryan reached out for her. "Let's talk about it in the car." If nothing else, she looked like she needed to sit down.

"I'm all right," she assured him as he led her over to the Jag.

Ryan listened silently while she told him how she'd woke up beside Waif's boyfriend. "I spent the whole morning

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#6the shower," she finished.

"I don't know why -- he didn't touch *me*, but I can't quite accept that. I don't even know who I am right now."

"You need help with this."

"I know," she sighed and balled her hands in her lap. "I can't talk to Colleen. If I could get her to believe me, then what? I'm not even sure that I should be around the kids while this is going on..."

She looked up at the house. "But I can't walk away from my job."

"Can you take the rest of the day off?"

Kate shook her head. "I'm starting to get behind. Missing the entire morning didn't help. But I'd like to see you tonight, if you haven't changed your mind?"

Chapter Ten

Although she'd been sneaking glances at the clock all afternoon, Kate forced herself to stay at her desk until she had finished absolutely everything. Her in basket was empty. All of the routine stuff was done as far ahead as possible.

She had flickered once. Just for an instant, she found herself standing someplace else, her arms full of plastic boxes.

As soon as the sensation registered, Kate was back at in front of her computer, fingers posed on the keyboard, the cursor blinking on the last field that she'd entered.

Should she call Ryan and cancel -- just in case?

No, she quickly decided. She already knew that she could become Waif at any moment. The fact that she'd already been her twice in the past twenty-four-hours might even mean that she stood a better chance of remaining herself for the rest of the night.

In any case, she couldn't spend the rest of her life waiting in fear.

Ryan understood what was happening to her and he'd promised to leave if it happened while they were together. She'd be in a far worse situation if she changed here at work.

She wanted to leave with everyone else at five o'clock, but she knew that she should catch up while she had the chance. She was leafing through a stack of memos, making sure that she hadn't forgotten anything important when the phone at her elbow beeped.

"Stork Shop," she said, balancing the receiver on her shoulder and tucking the memos under the corner of her keyboard. All of their business calls should be forwarded to the voice mail system, so it had to be someone who knew her extension.

"Should I bring over a pizza?" Ryan's deep voice sent a delicious warmth flowing through her.

"I'm just about through here," she told him. "I didn't expect to stay this long. If you think it's too late for us to get

together tonight, we could wait until tomorrow --"

"It's not that late," Ryan quickly cut her off. "Now that you've actually agreed to a date, I'm not letting you off the hook unless there's a real crisis."

She knew exactly what kind of crisis he was referring to.

"Should we meet someplace?"

"I'd rather not," Ryan told her. "I don't like the idea of just leaving you at a restaurant if you do a disappearing act on me."

He did have a point. Now wasn't the best time for her to be exploring a strange city.

"Why don't you bring that pizza over to my place?" It would give them the chance to be alone together and if the worst did happen, he wouldn't have to worry about leaving her there alone.

She gave him directions and drove straight home. When she got there, she had just enough time to change.

As she was smoothing her skirt down, she heard a knock at the door.

"I guessed on the pizza toppings." Ryan entered the apartment carrying a large flat cardboard box. "But I didn't have any idea what kind of movies you'd like."

"If you don't mind the pizza cooling off a bit, we can walk to that video store across the street and see what they've got."

"As long as we don't get a horror movie." Kate reached for her jacket. Her life was weird enough without fueling her imagination with someone else's nightmares.

Hand in hand, they left her apartment and crossed the street to the video store. The shelves of new releases had already been picked clean, so they split up to see if they could find something interesting to watch.

Kate wandered down a narrow aisle, glancing at the titles. Whatever they chose, she wouldn't be paying attention to it, not with Ryan at her side.

She kept looking, hoping that something would jar her memory, remind her of a movie that she'd wanted to see, then forgotten. Maybe Ryan was having better luck at the other end of the store.

She turned a corner and found herself facing a floor to

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40iling display of shiny black and red boxes. The horror section. Suddenly, Kate realized where she'd been earlier that afternoon - a video store. Not this one. The room she'd been in had been much smaller and less brightly lit. But she'd been holding an armload of video boxes, staring at garish titles on the wall in front of her.

"Find anything?" Ryan came up behind her, a couple of plastic cases in one hand.

They settled on a movie, then went back to the apartment.

"This is a nice place," Ryan said as he watched Kate get plates out of a kitchen cupboard.

She chuckled. "You don't have to say that. Except for my clothes, just about everything came with the apartment. I was only planning to live here a few weeks, but things got out of control before I found anything else."

"What are you looking for?"

Kate set the plates on the tile counter and reached for the box of pizza. "I hadn't made definite plans yet. Maybe renting an apartment or a townhouse. Or maybe buying a condo, if I can find something that I really like. Building equity would make more sense than paying rent, but right now I can't concentrate on any of it."

She put two slices of pizza on each plate and handed Ryan his before carrying her own into the living room. Ryan started the movie. As she ate, her attention kept wandering from the screen to the man beside her.

This was the only time that they'd truly been alone together while she was herself.

Their first date. If they'd met under normal circumstances, Ryan probably would have taken her out to dinner. Depending on how the evening went, there might have been some hand holding or a kiss goodnight but not much more than that.

Instead, less than five minutes after first laying eyes on one another, they'd had sex. So Kate had no idea what to expect tonight.

Now that she was in her real life, did she want to make love with Ryan?

Yes. She did. But she didn't know when. Under normal

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50 circumstances, she would never leap into bed with a man on their first date.

They'd already done it once. And then she'd crawled all over him in her office, when she knew exactly who she was and what she was doing. He'd responded to her, too.

The movie they'd finally decided on was a romantic comedy, cute, but not good enough to take much of her attention away from Ryan. No film ever made had that kind of power. Kate kept her gaze on the screen except for occasional glances in his direction. At one point, she left the room long enough to go into the kitchen and microwave a bag of popcorn.

As the popping slowed, she searched the cupboards for something to serve it in. She poured the popcorn from the greasy paper bag into a clear glass dish and was turning to walk back into the living room when Ryan met her in the doorway.

"Did you want another drink?" she asked, knowing that wasn't what had brought him into the kitchen. Neither of them was watching the movie. Neither of them was hungry for the popcorn -- it was just another way to distract them from the problem.

"I'm fine," Ryan said softly. "Do you really want to finish the movie?"

"No."

"Good." Ryan pulled two stools away from the counter and held one out, waiting for her to sit. "Let's talk, then."

Kate placed the bowl of popcorn on the counter between them, then settled on the edge of the stool. They had to talk, had to discuss what they'd done. It would always be between them, a shared part of their history.

"We should have met under normal circumstances," she said softly. In some ways, that might have made their relationship easier. But if they had been introduced by a mutual friend, if they'd bumped into each other at the grocery store, it would have taken them months to get to the point they were at now. They might never have met at all.

"There was something between us that night, not me and the body that you happened to be in." Ryan took her hand. His thumb traced designs across the sensitive skin of her

51m.

"I went home that night and I couldn't sleep, couldn't stop thinking about what we'd done and wondering what the hell had come over me. I knew exactly who and where I was. I knew what we were doing. I don't do things like that, not ever. I wasn't even attracted to that other woman. To her."

"Then why?"

"It's us. Somehow, even though I couldn't see you, even though we didn't talk, I knew that I wanted to be with you."

"We -- you and I -- haven't made love yet. I don't know when you'll want to, but whenever you're ready *that* will be our first time together."

"So we're supposed to forget about what we did?" Kate couldn't do that. Every time she rode in his car, she'd think of how the seats had felt against the bare skin of that other body.

Ryan shook his head. "We can't pretend that it didn't happen. But I don't want to base the rest of our relationship on a moment which was a dream for you and temporary insanity for me."

"We're starting over." Kate wasn't sure how easy it would be, but she liked the idea.

"Something like that."

"When we do make love together, it'll be better." She knew that. Because it wouldn't be sex between strangers in a parked car. It would be a woman and man who cared about each other.

Ryan's gaze was openly questioning.

"It was like my body wouldn't work right last time," she tried to explain. "It didn't respond like it should have; things didn't feel right." She drew her lower lip in between her teeth and bit down softly. "Maybe that means it'll just be better for me."

"No." He said, his voice soft. "For both of us. I wasn't going to complain, but since we've decided that time didn't count--"

Kate giggled. The whole situation was ridiculous, the two of them sitting in her kitchen and deciding that sex didn't count if they weren't both in their proper bodies.

It was a strange conversation, but she was glad that they'd had it.

52 "What do we do now?"

"We could finish the movie." Ryan picked up the bowl of popcorn.

"Okay." Kate followed him back to the couch. She didn't care if she ever saw the last half hour or not. She was already sure that the hero and heroine would live happily ever after. But she needed some time to absorb what had just happened.

Even though it had gotten off to a strange, rocky start, they both agreed that they had a relationship. They'd continue seeing each other and, eventually, they'd make love.

Kate stole a glance at the man sitting beside her. His leg touched hers from thigh to knee, a comfortable warmth spreading between their bodies. When they did do it again, she knew that her body would respond in exactly the right ways.

The big question was when it would happen?

In past relationships, Kate had waited until she was sure that her feelings were strong. Maybe not "til death do us part" love, but definitely more than a brief attraction.

She already felt far more for Ryan than she had for any of the men in her past. And, even though they both claimed that it "didn't count", they'd already done it.

So what are you waiting for?

Kate wasn't sure. But she wasn't going to make the first move, not tonight. If Ryan started something, she'd help him finish it.

If he didn't, she might seize the extra time to go shopping for some pretty new bras and panties. The stuff she had on now wasn't exactly frumpy, but it was very well worn.

"How did you wind up in Portland?" Ryan asked.

"I grew up back East, then spent my college years in Colorado. After graduation, I found a job in Denver since the area had started to feel like home. Big company, great benefits. Lots of opportunity to move up.

"And so boring that it was driving me slowly nuts. Colleen had come back here after graduation, got married, had a couple of kids, then started Stork Shop.

"She knew I was getting restless in my little gray cubicle. When my predecessor at Stork Shop had twins and

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Decided to quit, Colleen offered me the job.

"I don't think I realized how big the change would be, but I'm starting to acclimatize."

It was true. She didn't even cringe at the sound of a baby wailing in the supermarket line anymore.

"What about you?" she asked. "You've got my life story."

"I was already in a relationship when I graduated college. Not married, but we might as well have been. We shared an apartment, spent every moment that we weren't working together.

"I don't know if it went bad because I was working so hard to keep the company going, or if I was working more than I needed to to keep from going home.

"She found someone else. I kept working. It's been a year now, and I haven't done much else."

They stayed together on the couch, cuddling and exchanging histories until both were having trouble staying awake.

Chapter Eleven

Kate left the door of her apartment wide open as she hurried into the kitchen to answer the ringing phone. She picked up the receiver just in time to beat the answering machine and let her shopping bags and purse fall to the linoleum floor. "Hello?"

"Kate? How are you?"

It took a second for Kate to recognize the female voice. "Hi, Hailey. I'm good." It wasn't a total lie.

"What have you been doing?"

"I'm finally settling into the new job. It's been a big change. Colleen's kids are walking and talking already, which is just amazing. What're you up to?"

"Same old stuff. Spending too much time at the shelter because half of the volunteers are only there to get college credit. Anything exciting in your life lately?"

Hailey was fishing. She'd been Kate's friend for years, but she'd never been a good listener. Given the chance, she'd go on and on for hours about her pet projects. It wasn't like her to call long distance if she didn't have something important to say. She was after specific information. But what?

She couldn't know what had been happening. Unless she had called while Waif was in Kate's body. That was unlikely. Waif wouldn't have confessed to a voice on the other line, not when she hadn't even told her own boyfriend.

"I'm stressed from the move, I guess."

"Is that all?"

"Hailey, I'm not in the mood for games. If you want to know about something specific, ask."

"I think something spooky might be happening to you, but if I ask you outright, you're going to think that I've lost my mind."

"Spooky, like --" Kate waited for her old friend to continue.

"Spooky like doing things and not knowing why you did

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55 em. Or remembering them."

Or like finding myself in someone else's body for a while?

"You know what's happening to me." Kate's voice was calm, but her mind was racing. A vague suspicion had started to form, filling her with dread.

She'd stayed with Hailey for a few days during her move. While she was there, Hailey had dragged her to a "meeting," asking her to bring a dress or something nice that she could donate to a good cause. Kate had assumed that she was donating it to the shelter where Hailey worked, but instead she'd found herself in the middle of some kind of magic circle, concentrating with a bunch of other women to help people they didn't know, while their "donations" smoldered on a portable barbecue.

The whole thing had seemed silly, but it was harmless and Kate had gone along with it. They couldn't have actually done anything with that bit of hocus-pocus. It wasn't possible.

"You did this to me?"

"I think we did something. It's happening to all of us who were there that night."

Kate fought the urge to scream. "Undo it."

"We tried. It's worked for everyone but you. I think you wronged her somehow, did something while you were in her body."

Wronged her? Kate's mouth went dry and she struggled to swallow. *Oh, God.*

"She knows what happened when I was her?"

"Do you know what she does when she's you?"

"No."

"Then probably not. If she knew, then you'd know. At least I think you would."

"But you've gotta make whatever happened right again."

"How?"

"You have to undo it."

"And if it can't be undone?"

"Katie, you have to find a way... There's something else."

What else could there be?

"Remember Emily? The woman who's always donated

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56 much to the shelter? She had a fit at a posh dinner party, acting like she suddenly didn't know who she was or what was going on around her. They sedated her and took her home and after that she seemed fine.

"A couple of days later, she killed herself."

Kate remembered the woman. She'd seemed to feel just as ridiculous as Kate had, sitting in that candle-lit circle and thinking charitable thoughts. Kate had expected her to leave, had told herself that if Emily got up and walked out, she would follow.

Emily had stayed until the end. Now she was dead.

Had she killed herself? Or was it the person she was "helping?"

Kate shuddered as she thought of those scars on Waif's wrists.

Waif hadn't been a happy girl before all of this started. What was she feeling like now?

Ryan had finally escaped the office at the end of an awful day. Owen hadn't come in at all, leaving him to cope with former clients who seemed to be coming out of the woodwork, all wanting "little favors" that would wind up taking him hours that he should spend on paying clients. He did the favors anyway to preserve good working relationships, but he resented the time that they took away from his other work and the time that making up the other work took away from Kate.

Ryan circled the parking lot of Kate's apartment complex twice, looking for a space that wasn't reserved for tenants. Even the fire lanes were filled with improperly parked cars. Swearing, he finally pulled out onto the street and found a spot there. He'd have to dash through the rain, but that was better than coming out later and finding that his car had been towed.

Ryan parked the Jag, then reached into the back seat to grab his jacket. He rarely bothered, but it was really coming down and he didn't want to spend the rest of the evening in damp clothes.

Kate was home already; he'd spotted her car while he was driving around the lot. It had made the day easier, knowing that he would see her when it finally came to an end.

57 Ryan sloshed across the parking lot, pushing back his hood when he came to the covered walkway. He stomped some of the water off of his shoes, then wiped them on the map outside Kate's door.

It swung open easily the moment he knocked. Expecting to discover that she was busy with something and had left it ajar for him, Ryan stepped in. The apartment was dark and silent.

Had something happened?

And if it had, when? Ryan's heart started to pound faster. He'd kept himself from calling her earlier in the day, giving her a chance to get some work done. If something had happened last night, just after he left...

"Kate?" He was afraid to hear her answer, fearful that it would be spoken by an unfamiliar voice. But the silence was worse.

He stepped further into the apartment and slid his hand along the wall for the light switch. He had to find out.

Kate was curled at one end of the couch, knees tucked against her body. She looked up at him, but didn't speak.

"Did something happen?" He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer, but he had to ask.

"I found out why Waif and I have been switching places." Kate explained what her friend had told her about the circle, what its horrible results had been.

"If we hadn't done what we did, this would be over now."

"And we wouldn't be together."

"I know."

She didn't think it was worth it. The regret was there in her face and her tone of voice. But how could she be happy with what had happened to her? She'd lost her whole life.

Ryan tried to chase away the troubling thoughts.

"You said we wronged her."

She nodded. "Hailey seems to think that if we can find a way to make it up somehow, then she can unbind us."

He should have turned her down that night. If he had, Kate would be safe now.

And he would still be going home from work and plopping down in front of the television. Maybe doing something now and then with someone like Bethany, but it

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couldn't be a relationship. He wouldn't feel involved, not like he did with Kate.

She'd be living her own life, doing whatever was normal day to day stuff for her. She'd never think about the man who'd rejected her that night. She might never have realized that the experience wasn't a dream.

If he hadn't let her into the Jag...

She might be dead.

If he'd left Kate out there alone, something might've happened to her before she returned to her own body.

"What do we do now?"

Kate hadn't moved from her position on the couch. She was still curled into herself, silent.

Ryan turned away just long enough to drape his wet coat across the back of a chair. Then he sat down beside her, wrapping his arms tightly around her body. Pulling her against him, he just held her.

For a long time, neither spoke.

"We have to fix it." Kate's voice quavered a bit. "Hailey tried, but she can't do it. She knows that I did something wrong while I was in Waif's body, but I didn't tell her what happened, what we did. I don't think that it would help. And I don't know how to make it better by myself."

"We'll come up with something." Ryan wished that he had faith in his own words.

"We can't make what we did right. It has to be something else, another way to make things better for her."

What? Ryan wondered. He could think of things that the girl might want -- money, a decent roof over her head...

Hell, he'd track her down and hand over the keys to the Jag if that would mean an end to Kate's problems. But he didn't know *how*.

"Nothing is enough." Kate had relaxed against him. She hadn't asked him to leave, had made no move to push him away. They'd face this together.

A tiny gurgle came from her stomach and Ryan rose from the couch, pulling her with him.

"Let me get you out of here for a while. We'll get something to eat, then figure out what to do about Waif."

Kate let him draw her to her feet. "Just give me a

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59 minute."

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On her way to the bedroom, she picked up two paper shopping bags from the carpet. Ryan heard water running, then the sounds of Kate moving through the room.

Moments later, she came out of the bedroom. She'd scrubbed away her tear-streaked makeup and changed into slim black jeans and a soft looking dark green sweater that he ached to touch.

"We're going to be all right, aren't we?" she asked.

"As long as there's a thing I can do about it."

They drove to a nearby restaurant. Neither mentioned Waif again until they were nearly finished eating their meals.

"I can't just go to her and ask her what will make her happy," Kate mused, poking at her pasta with a fork. "She has too much control already. I don't want to make it worse by letting her find out what's really happened."

She looked across the table at Ryan. "We're horrible people."

He understood what she meant, had been fighting the same feelings himself. But hearing her say it was too much.

"We didn't know. Neither one of us would have done what we did if we had known."

He'd thought that he was with another consenting adult. In a way, he had been. Kate hadn't been able to believe that she situation was real.

But it had been. Now they had to face what they had done.

Ryan hadn't discussed the situation with anyone. He knew what Owen would tell him to do. Walk away. Leave Kate to handle her own problems.

Not an option that Ryan was willing to take.

Even if he hadn't gotten Kate into this mess, Ryan wouldn't have been willing to leave her. She was his now. He wasn't going anywhere.

Chapter Twelve

They'd sat on her couch half the night, trying to figure out how to right the wrong, to make things better and free Kate to get on with her life. They'd come up with absolutely nothing.

Kate blinked her eyes, then rubbed at them with her fists. After Ryan left, she'd gone into the bedroom and right to sleep, but it had still taken all of her energy to get up and out the door after the alarm went off.

She had to let it go, at least for now. Something would come to them sooner or later. In the meantime, she was just making herself crazy.

"Kate?" Kimmy, one of the women she worked with, stepped into Kate's office with an infant carrier looped over one arm. In it, Kimmy's two-month-old baby girl was sleeping peacefully.

"Are you going to be in here for a while?" she asked softly.

Kate glanced up and nodded. "For the rest of the afternoon."

"Would you mind if Emma finished her nap in your office while I put together some orders?" Kimmy lowered the infant carrier to the carpet. "It gets awfully cold in the other room, and it's a madhouse downstairs today."

Kate stiffened slightly, but Kimmy went on, not seeming to notice. "She should nap for quite a while. As soon as she wakes up, I'll take her back down with the other kids."

She looked back up at Kate. "Is that okay?"

It was the first time that anyone had asked Kate to watch a baby. And Kimmy didn't look terribly confident that Kate would do it.

"I'm sure we'll be fine." They would. Kimmy would be right there in the next room, listening for Emma to wake up. Even if she did switch, nothing awful could happen with Kimmy so close by.

Kimmy arranged Emma's carrier across from Kate's

ask, arranging a receiving blanket over the handle so that the sun coming in through the window wouldn't be in the baby's eyes and checking to be sure that another blanket was tucked securely over her toes. Then she scooped up a pile of order forms and left the room.

Kate got back to work, glancing up now and then at the sleeping infant. They'd be fine together. Except for those quick little flickers that hit sometimes, it had been almost a week since the last switch.

And, while they were unsettling, the flickers had come frequently enough for her to identify the queasy drifting feeling that came over her just before she became Waif. If she felt at all odd, she'd slip out to the bathroom.

A little while later, Kate got up and quietly crossed the room to get a technical manual from the shelves under the window. With a start, she realized that Emma was staring up at her with huge dark eyes.

Not fussing or squirming. Just watching her.

"Good morning," Kate said softly, kneeling down beside her. "Did you have a good nap?"

She unfastened the straps that held Emma in place, then gently lifted her out of the carrier. In the few weeks that she'd been at Stork Shop, Kate had been shown the correct way to hold a baby and then had practiced the technique more than she ever expected.

That was all that she'd actually done, but she'd also absorbed a pretty good understanding of changing and feeding.

Kate carried Emma to the rocking chair in the corner of the room and sat down. She'd take her to Kimmy in a moment.

This was the first time that she'd been alone with one of the babies, and Kate found herself entranced by Emma's tiny fingers and nails. She was such a perfect little darling.

Would Kate ever have one of her own?

Along with the details of childcare, she'd overheard endless tales of pregnancy and childbirth. Enough to convince her that she didn't want to go through it herself soon.

But now, looking down at Emma, she wasn't sure.

She'd always expected that she would have children. Someday. After she had found the right job and the right man.

62 *You've found them.*

Stork Shop wasn't the kind of business that she'd pictured herself working for, but it suddenly felt right. There had been mothers at her old company, most of them women she only knew casually. Thinking back, she'd been dimly aware that some of them had children in the building, that there was a day care center somewhere on the first floor.

And in the rare instants that she thought of herself as a mother, Kate had assumed that she would do the same thing.

But the women at Stork Shop had managed to do something better.

Could she do that herself, with Ryan? It felt so right, like everything was coming together the way that it was meant to.

Except for Waif. Kate could never become pregnant until she knew for sure that the other woman was out of her life for good.

"It's called baby lust."

Kate jumped at the unexpected voice. Colleen had stepped silently into the office. Until she spoke, Kate wasn't even aware of her presence.

"What is?"

"The way you're looking down at that baby and wishing that you had one of your own." Colleen smiled. "It's contagious. But it usually goes away after a while. Unless, of course, your body is telling you that it's time to settle down and start trying."

"I don't think so." Kate snuggled Emma a little closer.

Baby lust? She wasn't craving a child of her own, just realizing that it might be a possibility. She could be a mother. Someday.

"There are other things that would have to get settled in my life first. Like a permanent place to live. And a husband."

"Seems like you have a pretty good candidate in mind for that," Colleen observed.

"Ryan? We've been seeing each other for less than a month."

"And you already spend more time with him than I spend with my husband most days. Any day now, I expect you to give up that awful apartment of yours and move in with

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him." Colleen exaggerated, but only slightly. Ryan joined Kate for lunch most days and met her each night as soon as she got off work.

She still hadn't let him spend the night, afraid that she'd switch while they were both asleep. Other than that, they might as well be living together.

But marriage? Children?

She didn't even know where Ryan lived. Until she was released from her strange bond to Waif Girl, she wouldn't go there.

Now, they might be able to do something about that, if they could find a way to make up for what they'd done. What would happen with their relationship then?

It wasn't baby lust, but something had definitely swept over her. Kate stood up, careful to keep Emma's weight balanced. She didn't just want to be pregnant, or to have a newborn to coo over.

What she wanted was more complicated, too difficult to slap a name on.

Ryan.

She had him already, at least in a way. Colleen had been right; they spent every spare moment together. But Kate wanted more.

Something more intimate than sitting in her apartment every night after work eating takeout.

"You *are* thinking of him as husband material." Kate spoke softly, her voice filled with awe.

"What?"

Kate jumped slightly, embarrassed to realize that Kimmy was standing in the doorway. Colleen must've told her that the baby was awake.

"Nothing."

Kimmy smiled. "I talk to myself, too. But you were probably talking to Em, weren't you?" She reached for her little one. "Thanks for watching her."

Husband Material.

After Kimmy left the room, Kate sat back down. Was she serious? Being with Ryan felt comfortable. Natural. Meant to be.

She grinned at her own wandering thoughts. Any

minute now, she'd decide that they were soul mates.

Which might not be far from the truth. She'd felt a definite pull to him, and the attraction hadn't lessened a bit. He admitted that he'd been drawn to her...

"Now you're getting silly." She couldn't propose marriage to the man, couldn't even suggest that he move in with her. She didn't have a place to live for crying out loud.

But that wouldn't stop her from doing what she could to increase the intimacy of their relationship. Kate stood up and headed down to the kitchen where Colleen's collection of cookbooks filled an entire set of shelves.

She pulled out an armload, then decided against lugging them all back up to her office. Menu planning would probably be easier with some input from people who actually cooked on a regular basis.

"Not that, that, or that." Colleen pulled books from the stack. "There's a reason I don't keep those at home. This one's good; I've got all three editions."

Kate flipped through the books that Colleen hadn't returned to the shelf, finally picking a recipe for stuffed chicken breasts. Then she went back upstairs to call Ryan.

"I felt like cooking tonight," she said after his office number shifted her over to his voice mail. "Why don't you meet me at my place at around seven?" That should give her just enough time to shop, change into some of her new lingerie, and get the chicken into the oven.

When she got to her apartment, Kate slipped the plastic bag of chicken into the fridge and left the rest of the groceries on the counter. It would only be a few minutes before she started dinner.

She hurried into the bedroom and stripped off the jeans and sweater that she'd worn to work. She balled up the dirty laundry and carried it to the wicker hamper in the bathroom, looking around the adjoining rooms to see if anything else needed attention.

She smoothed the comforter and fluffed the pillows, then picked up the shopping bags that still sat on the dresser.

She'd worn the ivory lace set already, the night that Ryan had taken her to the restaurant. Even though she was sure he wouldn't see it that night, she'd been prepared. Just in

Kate upended the bag, letting its contents spill out in a rustle of tissue. Then she began to sift through the lace and satin.

It was hard to choose. There had been only the slightest possibility that Ryan would see her in the white lace teddy. Tonight, if things went the way she hoped they would, he would undress her, touch her...

Kate drew her lower lip in between her teeth and surveyed the heap of lace and satin. Matching panties and bra -- or a teddy?

She scooped up a pair of plum satin panties and stepped into them, then reached for the matching bra. The color would compliment the sweater and skirt that she'd already laid out. She should be able to slip out of them gracefully, if the opportunity arose.

Kate stood for a moment, the front clasp of her bra not yet fastened. Ryan would see her like this soon.

Would he like what he saw? She took a nervous breath, then fastened the bra.

Ryan had been attracted to her. Not her body. Not her personality. She wasn't sure what that left, but whatever it was, it had drawn him to her.

She put on the skirt and sweater, then sat on the edge of the bed, contemplating an unopened package of stockings. Bare legs or not? Deciding that stockings were supposed to be sexy, she tore it open and slid them up over her legs.

Dress, stockings, shoes. Kate took inventory of herself in the bathroom mirror, quickly touched up her hair and lipstick, then hurried out to start making dinner.

She'd just slid the chicken into the oven when the doorbell chimed.

Kate's pulse gave a nervous little jump. He's here. You're going to let him in and then the two of you will talk or watch television until it's time to eat, and after the dishes are stacked in the sink...

They were going to make love.

Ryan might not know that yet, and Kate wasn't sure how she was going to clue him in. She'd figure it out.

She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and laid it on the

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66unter, then walked slowly to the door. You are not afraid, she told herself firmly. It's Ryan out there. The man you've been fantasizing about all day.

"I brought desert." He handed her a square white box that looked like it had come from a bakery.

Kate snuck a quick peek under the lid. Raspberries sat in a spiral atop a dark chocolate glaze.

"There's supposed to be cheesecake buried under all of that," Ryan said as he followed her into the small kitchenette.

"Sounds heavenly." Kate set the box on the counter, aware of how closely he stood behind her. They'd been closer -- much closer. But this was different.

What she did tonight would be real, would have lasting consequences. Maybe not the life-threatening kind that she'd brought on herself the last time she'd tried to be seductive, but their relationship would change based on what happened.

You can do this. You *did* do this. In a dream, it had been easy. Real life, when she knew that she was responsible, was so much harder. But not impossible.

Her skin simmered, waiting for his touch. Her earlier courage had deserted her.

She crossed to the oven and opened the door to check their dinner. "This'll need about a half hour."

Ryan had taken a seat on one of the tall stools by the counter. "Has it happened again today?"

She shook her head.

"I've been going over it again. We need to find out exactly who she is before we can try to come up with a way to help her."

"We can't do that," Kate said. "We can't walk up to her and say we're sorry for using her body the way that we did."

"You don't want her to know."

"I think it would make things worse for her." Kate busied herself rinsing measuring cups and utensils and then stacking them on the sliding racks of the dishwasher.

"We don't even know what we're going to do for her," she continued. "Let's leave her alone until we have some kind of a plan. If we're still switching places, I'll know where to find her."

"You're right. Should we let it go for tonight?"

67 Sometimes you have to walk away from a problem for a while before you can see the solution.

"We're going to figure something out," Ryan said. Kate was still facing the sink. She heard his footsteps as he crossed the kitchen then felt his hands on her shoulders, squeezing gently. "Whatever it takes, I'm going to make sure that you're all right."

She turned off the water, wishing that he wouldn't make promises that might be impossible for him to keep. Neither of them knew what was going to happen. In an instant, she could find herself someplace else. Neither of them could control that, or stop it from happening.

Kate leaned back into Ryan's embrace, sighing as he brushed a kiss across the top of her hair. His hands swept down her back and around her waist to the hem of her sweater, the up under the soft knit to caress the bare skin of her abdomen. She snuggled deeper into his solid, comforting embrace. It was where she wanted to stay.

"Is this okay?" he asked softly.

"Yes." Nothing could happen to her now, not while she was so secure in Ryan's embrace. While he held her, she would be safe.

Chapter Thirteen

She was Waif. Again.

Kate let out her breath in an impatient huff as she realized that she'd gone from a comfortable seat in her own office to a hard metal chair behind a high counter. White plastic boxes were stacked in front of her.

She was back in Waif's video store.

She glanced around to see who else was in the room, if someone might have noticed her sudden disorientation.

Hundreds of images of bare-chested women surrounded her on posters and cardboard video boxes. Kate shuddered. She'd never been in an adult video store before, but it was obvious that she was in one now.

And Waif would be in her office, where Kate had been waiting to meet with Colleen. It was lousy timing. They hadn't switched at all in days; even the annoying little flickers had tapered off.

Kate had hoped that it might be stopping, that she'd paid her debt to Waif without knowing it.

Apparently, she hadn't. They were still switching places.

Now what? Kate wiped her hands on the thighs of Waif's jeans. The big room she'd found herself in was empty, but there was an open doorway that appeared to lead into another room.

If Waif was working alone, it might be all right. Kate didn't know a thing about working in a video store, let alone this kind of place, but she could try to fake it for a while.

From the other room, she heard heavy footsteps.

Kate shot a longing glance toward the front door. It would be easy to just walk out. But she couldn't. If she left, Waif would probably lose her job. She was supposed to undo the wrong she'd caused, not add to it.

Could she handle this? The cash register looked pretty basic, similar to the one she'd used at a part time job years ago. She glanced at the clutter on the shelf under the counter,

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hoping to find some clues about how this place was run.

A stack of magazines slapped down onto the counter. When Kate didn't reach to pick them up, a pair of big hands shoved them across the scratched glass toward her and then dropped a few wadded bills on top.

She forced herself to look away from the disturbing image on the top cover and find the price, then to repeat the process with the rest of the stack. The cash register worked the way that she had hoped it would -- the whole process probably took less than a minute.

She could barely make eye contact with the man on the other side of the counter. Fortunately, he didn't seem to mind, just took his magazines and change and left.

After he was gone, she stepped out from behind the counter, peering into the adjacent room to assure herself that she was really alone.

She could call Ryan.

If he had any idea what kind of situation she was in, she knew that he'd come and stay with her until the switch was over, make sure that nothing bad happened.

But did she want him to?

Waif works here. Alone. You can handle a couple of hours in the middle of the afternoon. It would be different if it was late, but either way you'll be out of here by the time it gets dark. Someone will come to take Waif's place, or you'll be back in your own body.

She didn't really want Ryan here.

It was creepy enough sitting alone in the room, surrounded by pornography and sex toys. It was impossible not to look. Kate had known that some of this stuff existed, but not in such variety. The rest of it, she'd never even imagined.

She might've ventured out for a closer look, but she noticed a small panel of buttons under the counter. From the symbols, it had to be an alarm system with a panic button.

If she stayed close enough to reach it, she'd be fine.

Tacked up beside the alarm panel were checklists labeled "sales" and "rentals," each with step-by-step instructions. Kate read both.

When a scrawny young man came into the shop and

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Picked out two videos in plastic boxes, she at least had an idea what she was supposed to be doing.

Pull the card, write down the titles, collect the money, file the card. Easy.

Until she asked his name.

He gave her an incredulous look. "What's with you today?"

"Um -- force of habit, I guess." Kate pulled a random card from the file behind her and scribbled down the titles. She'd cross them out later so that the wrong person wasn't charged if this guy didn't return them.

"So, when are you gonna come watch a movie with me?"

You can *not* run, Kate told herself firmly. You can't even hit the panic button. He's just being too friendly, not threatening you.

"I have a boyfriend."

He gave a casual little shrug, took his movies and left. After he was gone, Kate slumped into the metal chair, staring at the clock and hoping they'd switch back before she had to go through that again.

Waif had been busy.

When she returned to her own body, Kate found herself sitting at her desk, just as she'd been before she left. Her purse lay on its side, empty. The top drawer of her desk was slightly ajar.

Her belongings were spread across the desk blotter. Driver's license, checkbook, credit cards, the pictures from her wallet... Everything that had personal information on it.

She's studying you.

Kate picked up her wallet and began sliding things back into the leather pockets. Nothing was missing. Nothing had been taken from her.

She still felt violated.

Maybe Waif was curious. Or maybe she'd been worried about passing herself off as Kate. There couldn't be much more to it than that.

71 Unless she was planning to do something with Kate's credit card numbers...

Kate zipped her purse. It wasn't fair to assume that Waif had evil intentions, but she hated being so vulnerable to a stranger. Maybe she should call and report the cards as stolen. Or maybe she should let Waif run up her bills. Maybe that would help even things out.

The phone on her desk chirped. "Kate?" Colleen's voice sounded strange, as if she was upset about something.

"Yes?"

"Ryan's holding for you on line two. And I need to talk to you before you leave."

"I'll be down in a minute." Kate reached for the receiver, hoping that it wasn't anything serious. She glanced at the clock, surprised to see that it was after five.

"I'm just about ready to leave the office. Are you going to be done soon?" Ryan asked.

"I'm not sure. Colleen wants to talk to me. I don't know how long that'll take, but I'll call you before I leave here."

Hoping that nothing had gone wrong that afternoon, but fearing the absolute worst, Kate went down to Colleen's office.

"Where were you this afternoon?"

"In my office." She hoped.

Colleen gave her an odd look. "We've been buzzing you and knocking on your door all day. It's not like you to barricade yourself from the rest of the world like that. I was starting to wonder if we should call one of our husbands over to break the door down and make sure that you were all right."

"I'm sorry," Kate apologized. "I came down with a really awful migraine and tried to get rid of it by lying down for a while. I must've dozed off."

Colleen patted her shoulder. "The noise level around here can do that to you. Go home and get some rest."

"You're smothering me."

Ryan started to shift his weight off of her, but Kate wrapped her arms around his shoulders, holding him in place.

"I don't mean physically," she said quickly. "At least not right this second." She loved the feeling of his body pressing

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mers down into the mattress, especially when they were resting in each other's arms after making love. "But you're protecting me too much."

Everything they did, every plan that they made together was based on one question. What if Kate and Waif switched while they were out?

Ryan had refused to let her join him on his morning jogs in the park by the river. Instead, they'd joined a health club together so that if he had to leave her, he'd know that she was in a safe place.

They were still trying to find a way to make things right, to break the bond, but they hadn't come up with anything. They knew almost nothing about Waif's life. Even though they could think of ways to improve it, there was no way to try any of them. After endless frustrating hours of brainstorming, they'd stopped talking about how to fix it.

They spent their time together waiting for the next switch.

"I'm probably in more danger wherever Waif leaves me than in any place you and I would go together, even if we weren't being so careful and waiting for it to happen. Except for the jogging by the river -- I think you were right about that -- I'd be fine on my own just about anywhere we want to go."

"Then let me spend the night," he said softly. "Or come with me to my place."

She didn't answer immediately. She wanted him to ease up, but she hadn't planned to change their sleeping arrangements.

"The same deal would apply. If you changed, I'd go home."

"If we were sleeping..."

"How much would it matter? The moment I figured out that something wasn't right, I'd leave."

He was right. She didn't really think that Waif would smother Ryan in his sleep. He wasn't in any danger.

Waif would probably respond the way she had when she woke up beside Waif's guy. There was no reason to think that she'd try to seduce Ryan. If she did, he'd leave. If Ryan wanted to be with Waif, he would have gone back to the Grotto and found her.

73 He'd tried that once, but he'd been looking for *her*.
He hadn't gone back.

"I don't want you to leave." She snuggled deeper into his arms. "I'm just scared of what could happen. I don't want to spend every day worrying that *she'll* pop up."

"We'll figure something out. It won't be like this forever." He kissed the top of her head.

"I hope you're right." She hoped that Ryan was attracted to her and not the supernatural intrigue that they'd become tangled in. That if she figured out what action would sever her bond to Waif she wouldn't lose Ryan as well.

Chapter Fourteen

He knew. Without even speaking to the woman, without asking her for the lousy password, Ryan knew that the woman sitting on the edge of the bed was not Kate.

It was time for him to leave, to get up, put his clothes on and get out. No conversation, no questions.

That was how Kate wanted it, and he'd given her his word.

But there was something wrong, something holding him in the apartment.

"Go away." She spoke in Kate's voice, but with no trace of her warmth or personality.

The woman who wasn't Kate stepped into the closet and reached for a silky white robe. She knew exactly where to find what she wanted.

Ryan knew that she'd been in the apartment before, had had time to explore. But it still chilled him to see how easily she slipped into the role of Kate. She wasn't frightened and uncertain.

She was *Kate*.

"Whatever you thought we had," she said coolly, "it's over."

She was dumping him, making permanent changes in Kate's life. Until he figured out why, Ryan wasn't going to budge. What was he supposed to do, though? She sounded as if she planned to stay in Kate's body, but that wasn't possible. She couldn't know any more about the situation than he did; Kate's friend had had no idea who she was.

There was no way that she could choose to remain Kate. Unless...

The scars. Ryan's stomach clenched as he remembered Waif's wrists, the other woman who had taken her own life to escape this same nightmare.

What was this woman planning to do? He had to get to Kate, and he had to keep this other woman in check while she was doing it.

His first instinct was to force her to stay put, but he couldn't just tie her to a chair. The neighbors would hear the noise, call the police -- and then he wouldn't be able to get to Kate.

She belongs here. If you drag someone else into it, they're going to take her side.

That was it. Waif didn't know what he knew. She was acting as if he didn't know about her. If she was settling into Kate's life, he could leave her here and come back to deal with her later.

Without a word, Ryan bolted for his car. Kate had to be at the Grotto. It was the only place he knew to look. If she wasn't there...

The Jaguar was a fast car and the streets were nearly empty, but red lights and stop signs forced Ryan to keep to a safe speed. Reckless driving wouldn't get him there that much faster; a ticket or an accident might make him too late.

Outside the Grotto, Ryan swerved the Jaguar toward the curb and cut the engine. Keys in hand, he sprinted for the door. No one paid much attention to him as he burst inside.

Where was she? The smoke and poor lighting of the bar made it hard for Ryan to see anyone clearly. He stepped into the middle of the room, hoping that he hadn't made the wrong decision, that he hadn't wasted what little time they had by coming to the wrong place.

But there was nowhere else for him to go. If she wasn't here, he wouldn't be able to find her.

Upstairs. Kate had described an apartment over the bar. How the hell was he going to get up there? In the back corner of the room, Ryan saw a narrow hallway.

Unless the apartment had a separate entrance, that had to be it. There were doors labeled Men and Women, a pair of bat-wing doors leading into the bar's tiny kitchen, and a pay phone across from a blank sheet of plywood that hung crookedly from hinges on one side.

Hoping that he hadn't attracted the attention of anyone who knew who belonged upstairs and who didn't, Ryan curled his fingers around the edge of the wood and gave a slight tug. It swung open to reveal a narrow set of stairs leading up.

76 He took them two at a time.

There was no sign of Kate in the dark storage room above the bar. Ryan's heart sank. Where had Waif left her?

"She's gotta be here." If she wasn't, there was no hope. Even if she was here, it might already be too late to save her from whatever permanent changes Waif had made.

"Kate?" He was hesitant to call her name, but at this point he had little choice. If she wasn't alone, whoever she was with was going to find out about Ryan's presence soon enough.

When he pushed open the door and stepped into the tiny room, it took a moment before he recognized the woman lying on the mattress as Kate. Waif. Whoever.

She wasn't moving, didn't respond when he called her name.

You're too late.

Ryan dropped to a crouch and laid his hand across her chest. It was moving, but just barely. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist, felt her faint and unsteady pulse.

Relief washed through him. She was alive.

"Kate?" He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her, but she didn't respond.

Ryan fumbled in the pocket of his coat, dropping his cell phone to the floor as he tried to untangle it from the lining.

The call only rang three times, but it seemed like forever before a voice at the other end asked the nature of his emergency.

"I'm at a bar -- I think the place is called the Grotto. There's a woman here, unconscious."

Ryan answered the few questions that he could, struggling to remember enough cross streets to pinpoint the address. What was her name? Jen. Did he know her last name? No. Had she taken something? He thought so, but didn't know what.

Ryan waited for the ambulance, his hand resting lightly on her chest so he could convince himself that Kate was still breathing, that he hadn't lost her yet. He glanced around the small room, his gaze landing on a folded sheet of paper taped to the dresser mirror.

"Leo" was scrawled across the front in big letters,

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Obviously meant to catch someone's attention.

"Hang in there," he begged her softly as he quickly crossed the room and snatched down the note.

...You aren't going to understand, but there's no hope for me here. Nothing is going to change or get better. I know you say to hang in there, that everything is going to work out. But if I do this, I can have a whole new start -- everything I want right now...

The scrawled paragraph confirmed his worst suspicions. Whatever Waif had done to her own body, it had been deliberate. A plan calculated to keep her in Kate's body with no way of going back to her own.

He wadded up the paper and shoved it into his own pocket. Leo, whoever he was, wouldn't need it because there would be no body to find.

As soon as Ryan heard heavy footsteps clomping up the stairs and the staticy noise of radios, he gave Kate's hand a tight squeeze.

"They're here. I've got to get going, but I'll find out what hospital they're taking you to."

While the paramedics were working with her, he slipped out of the room. Kate was in good hands; staying wouldn't help her.

Finding Waif might.

His fingers locked tightly around the steering wheel, he drove back to her apartment. He didn't know how he was going to get in if Waif resisted. He didn't know where he was going to take her, or how he would need to keep her there. He didn't know how long that was going to be necessary.

When would they switch back?

And what if they didn't?

Chapter Fifteen

Ryan had to keep Waif under control until the two women switched back again. He gripped his cell phone tightly, waiting for Owen to pick up.

"Hello?" His partner's voice was blurred by sleep.

"Owen, I need you to handle the trip alone."

"You decided that at three in the morning?"

"I've got an emergency here. Things are falling apart with Kate, and if I don't fix it right now, there won't be anything left to fix. Does your family still have that trailer up on the tree farm?"

"That dump? You can't be thinking of taking her up there." Owen's voice was filled with disbelief.

"We need to be alone for a while." Somewhere where no one could hear Waif's screaming. "Is it there?"

"I guess so. But the power lines went down years ago, and with the flooding we've had the past couple of winters, I'm not sure if you can even get to it."

"Have you got a key hidden somewhere?"

"I'm not sure that place has a *door* anymore. You really should rethink this. The last time I was up there, I didn't even go inside. You'd be better off getting a room at a nice hotel or just locking yourselves in at your place--"

"You're probably right. I'll figure something else out. The trailer was just a thought. Don't get too worried if you don't hear from me for a few days, all right?"

"Sure. But you're gonna owe me big."

"If this works out, from now on I'll handle every meeting we ever have with Rob Watson. Or anyone else you name." Ryan hung up his cell phone. The trailer would be perfect. If he could get Waif up there.

Before going back to Kate's apartment, Ryan swung into a convenience store to buy food and bottled water. He didn't know how long they were going to be up in the woods. Once he got her there, he wouldn't be able to leave her alone and come back for food.

79 He was going to abduct a woman. Ryan's stomach churned.

She wouldn't leave the apartment with him, not willingly. He was sure of that. He wasn't a good enough actor to lure her away, and it would take a damn good reason for her to agree to go with him. One better than anything he could come up with.

Could he overpower her? Probably. Could he do it without hurting her in the process? He hoped so.

It's not Kate, he reminded himself. The woman might look like her, feel like her, sound like her -- and in a way it was her, but it wasn't the woman he loved.

He would have to force her out of the apartment. Which left him with a new set of problems. Controlling the noise she was bound to make and finding a way to restrain her while they drove to the cabin.

He'd have to gag her, at least until they were out of the apartment. And tie her. With rope, or handcuffs... Ryan didn't have rope, could go back to the store and get some twine or something, but that would be hell on her wrists. Handcuffs would be better, but he didn't have any time to waste looking for a pair. And he still needed something to use as a gag.

Socks? He was pretty sure there was a clean pair in his gym bag in the trunk. Then he remembered the plastic straps that had come with his emergency car repair kit.

He already had the things that he needed, now he just had to go and do it.

Ryan parked in an empty visitor's space next to Kate's Jetta and looked up at her apartment. The lights were out in the windows that he could see from where he sat.

Would he be lucky enough to catch her asleep? He hoped so, but wasn't going to count on it.

Working quickly, Ryan went around to his trunk and transferred the plastic straps from the tool kit to his gym bag. Few of the windows above him had lights on; there was no one else in the parking lot.

Ryan let himself into the apartment, then shut the door softly and stood in the foyer, listening. If she'd heard the door open, surely she'd come to investigate . . . if she wasn't dialing the police from the phone in the bedroom.

80 Straining to hear what she was doing in the next room, Ryan lowered the bag to the floor, then took out two of the plastic straps which he slipped into the rear pocket of his jeans. Then he unrolled a pair of socks.

He had to keep her quiet. Even if she didn't scream, she might attract attention to herself by kicking at the walls or floor.

There were too many things that could go wrong.

Maybe he should just leave Waif to her own devices and count on the fact that they'd probably switch back soon. Ryan looked around the kitchen and living room.

The kitchen counter was covered with papers. When he stepped closer, he could see that all of it had come from the desk. Kate's resume, bills, correspondence -- all of her personal papers.

You have to get that woman out of here.

His gaze fell on a wooden butcher block of kitchen knives, and Ryan slid one out. He would get Waif down to the car.

He shoved a sock into the front pocket of his jeans and started toward the bedroom. Since he'd entered the apartment, there had been no sound from beyond the open doorway. She had to be sleeping. That would make things so much easier.

He stopped just inside the bedroom doorway. He could hear the soft rhythm of her breathing. She lay on her stomach, sprawled across the rumpled sheets. Naked.

Damn. He didn't need more complications. If her long coat was still hanging in the entry closet, he'd wrap it around her shoulders before they went outside. There were clothes in the gym bag; he could worry about getting her into them later.

Or Kate could --

How did he know that she wasn't Kate already?

He couldn't find out for sure, couldn't lose the advantage that surprise would give him. Ryan wadded the sock in the palm of his hand.

He had to do this. Now.

Three steps brought him from the doorway to the bed. Letting the knife fall to the mattress, he reached around her face and forced her mouth open, forced the sock in past her

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Michelle Marr

Heh, blocking the sound of her first screams.

"Stop it!" he ordered in a rough whisper, using his weight to control her thrashing body while he fumbled with one of the plastic straps. It slid out of his grip and tumbled to the carpet. He got the second one around both of her wrists and cinched it tightly.

The only way to get it off now would be to cut it.

He had to keep his hand across her face to hold the gag in place. With the other hand, he fumbled for the knife. He wasn't going to be able to dress her, so he pulled the comforter around her and dragged her to her feet, dropping the knife in the process.

He left it lying on the carpet. Waif didn't know that he'd had it in the first place, and he certainly wasn't going to *use* it on her.

She twisted her torso from side to side, trying to get free. Through the sock, he could hear her muffled screams. He wasn't going to be able to force her down the stairs while keeping the blanket around her and the sock in her mouth. But he couldn't let her go.

This is going to work. It has to.

Ryan looked around the room, desperate for something to tie the sock in place with. Through the open doorway of the bathroom, he saw a pair of stockings hanging over the shower railing.

It was hard getting her into the room and grabbing the stockings, but finally it was done. He used one to tie the gag in place, the other to bind her ankles.

Someone had to have heard the pounding and wrestling. With luck, Kate had the type of neighbors who would ignore anything, but he couldn't count on that. Ryan left Waif lying on the bathroom floor and got Kate's raincoat from the front closet, then wrapped it around her squirming body. Then he got some clothes from the laundry basket on top of her dresser and shoved them into the gym bag.

The webbed handle of the bag around one wrist, Ryan scooped up Waif and carried her out of the apartment, down the stairs, and to the car. He lowered her so that she was standing barefoot on the wet pavement, braced between his body and the side of the car. Then he unlocked the door and

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Michelle Marr

pulled the seat forward.

He wasn't sure if she could cause enough trouble from the front passenger seat to interfere with his driving, so he lifted her into the back seat and belted her into place. Then he flopped the seat back into place, dumped in the gym bag, and got into the car and drove.

As soon as he was out of town, Ryan pulled into a deserted parking lot and reached back over the seat to undo the gag. As soon as the sock was out of her mouth, she started screaming and thrashing all over again.

He turned up the radio and drove on, hoping that she wouldn't draw any attention to them. No one in a passing car would be able to hear her over the blaring radio, which probably wasn't even necessary, but *he* didn't want to hear her. They might see her, though.

"Your last name?"

Kate mumbled a reply, then realized her mistake as the woman standing next to her bed began to write. She'd given her own name, but there was no sense in correcting herself; she didn't know Waif's real name.

"Address?"

Another question that she couldn't answer. Shortly after Kate had woken up in the hospital, the nurse had come in with a clip board and started asking her questions.

"Where do you live?" the woman repeated with a touch of impatience.

"I've been staying with someone. It's an apartment and I don't remember the building number."

"You don't have a permanent address?"

"No."

"Do you have medical insurance?"

"I don't think so." Kate shook her head, wishing that someone would answer some of *her* questions. Waif had done something to herself, she was sure. Since waking up, Kate hadn't been alone in the hospital room. They were watching her.

They do that after suicide attempts.

"What is your social security number?"

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83 "I don't have it memorized. The card is in my purse, back at my friend's apartment. I think." Kate had decided that it was in her best interest to try to answer the woman's questions without making up any more information than she had to. But surely she was entitled to some answers of her own.

"How did I get here?"

The woman glanced down at her chart. "You were transported by ambulance after the man you were with called 911."

"Who was I with?"

"I wouldn't have that information."

"When can I go home?"

The woman frowned. "That depends on the doctors."

The doctors. Kate closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Waif had tried to kill herself. Probably. And now she was going to have to convince the doctors that she wasn't a danger to herself or others.

Unless Waif really did belong here.

Chapter Sixteen

It took several hours to reach the trailer. By the time Ryan found the right turnoff, the sky around them was starting to lighten. His eyes were heavy; the woman in the seat behind him had stopped screaming and fallen asleep some time ago.

The trailer still had a door after all; it was wide open, hanging from one twisted hinge. A corner of the roof had been crushed in by a falling tree that was still wedged into the twisted metal siding. Ryan glanced over his shoulder at the sleeping woman and decided to leave her where she was for the time being. The car was probably warmer than the cabin itself. If he locked the doors and set the alarm, he'd have some warning if she woke up and tried to escape.

The interior of the cabin was worse than the outside. Green mildew grew across the warped paneling that covered the walls. Leaves and dirt covered the bare floor. The few pieces of furniture that remained had been shredded by animals looking for nesting material.

Ryan spread his jacket over the torn vinyl seat of a kitchen chair and leaned back against a clean section of the paneling. He'd been up almost twenty-four hours; he'd need some rest before he dealt with Waif again.

The blare of the car alarm broke into his semi-doze and made him lunge for the door.

He could see her sitting there, glaring at him. She must have squirmed around enough to trip the motion detectors, then given up. For the moment, at least.

He couldn't leave her in the car. The plastic tie had to be hurting her wrists, but if he cut her loose he'd never be able to keep her in one place. The noise of the alarm was advertising their presence to anyone in the area. Even though it was private property, he wasn't going to take any chances.

Ryan walked back to the trailer. Except for a bathroom the size of a closet and a tiny bedroom with one window blocked by the same tree that had taken out part of the roof, it was one long open space.

85 He stepped into the bedroom and swung the door shut, trying to judge how escape-proof he'd be able to make it in a hurry. The door was a shoddy one; she could probably force the lock open with enough time and determination on her hands. Except for a narrow bed with a sagging mattress, the room was empty.

Could she hurt herself in here?

Easily. The window was missing most of its glass, but sharp pieces littered the floor and stood in the frame. He could eliminate the glass, but not the jagged ends of the branch just outside it.

The bed stood against the opposite wall. He could tether her to the bedpost -- there were plenty more of those stupid plastic ties out in the toolkit.

But she could drag the bed across the room to the window.

And if he tied both of her hands, she would be unable to do anything for herself.

Does she still want to die?

Waif already had at least two suicide attempts to her credit, even if this last one hadn't been an attempt to stop living; she'd wanted to become someone else.

She didn't seem to care what that meant for the woman who was already living the life she wanted for herself.

When she finally did get access to a phone, Kate dialed Ryan's cellular number, her heart sinking at the sound of a generic prerecorded message telling her he was out of the area or otherwise unavailable.

Where was he?

With Waif. Exactly where she'd left him when she agreed to let him stay the night. He wouldn't have stayed in the apartment, though. She was sure that he would've kept his promise once he realized what was happening.

But why would he have turned off his phones?

There was no one else who knew what was happening to her, no one else for her to call...

Hailey. She made the call collect, bursting into tears when the recorded voice of an operator told her that there was

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Michelle Marr

86 answer and suggested that she try again later.

You can't act like this. She wiped her eyes with a tissue and took a series of deep breaths. She would not be in this body forever. She would be herself again.

Ryan stared at the door to the silent bedroom, the door that he hadn't opened since the struggle to get her in there.

She'd screamed and sobbed and begged. And as they'd struggled, he'd realized that she had no idea what was happening to her. As far as Waif was concerned, he was doing all of this to Kate.

He couldn't give up, couldn't back out of this nightmare. The worst of it was that he wasn't even sure if Kate was okay.

He hadn't been able to call the hospital with Waif screaming in the back of his car. The phone didn't work up here in the middle of nowhere. He couldn't leave Waif alone while he drove down the mountain to use it.

If she got out of the trailer while he was gone, he might never find her.

"Damn." Ryan stood up and kicked the chair against the wall.

He should check on the woman in the room, but he couldn't bring himself to open the door. She had to be fine. He'd left her a bottle of water and one of the sandwiches he'd picked up at the convenience store, and a plastic dish pan he'd scavenged from the kitchen which she could pee in if she needed to. And the extra clothes that he'd brought with him.

He wondered if she would be able to pull a shirt on over the chain of plastic ties that he'd used to connect her wrist to the bedpost. Or if she'd be reasonable enough to eat something once she calmed down.

And how he would know when Kate *did* come back?

Chapter Seventeen

I will be myself again.

Kate paced the floor of her hospital room.

I will be back in my own body soon, living my own life.

She repeated the words over and over in her mind, never speaking them out loud. She would not be stuck in Waif's body, in Waif's screwed up life, for much longer. She would not spend the rest of her life locked in a hospital with people watching her every move.

The connection between them had to end.

A bond, Hailey had called it. How could two strangers who had never even met face to face be linked like this?

Kate kept going back to the idea that Waif's overdose might've been deliberate. Not a suicide attempt, but a way to keep herself in Kate's body permanently. The timing of the event was just too perfect. Waif must've known exactly what she was doing.

The switches had always seemed completely random, with no pattern to their timing or duration. Unless Waif had figured out a way to make them happen when she wanted.

Kate sat down on the linoleum floor, her back braced against the wall. Waif wasn't going to come back, even if she knew that her body was still alive. Having Kate locked away in an institution would be just as good as having her dead.

I know you have a lot of problems. I get freaked out after just a couple of hours in your life - and I'm sure there's a lot going on that I'll never know about. I can't even guess what's going on in your head. But this place can help you. Not if I'm in your body - I can't do it because I don't know what's wrong. But if you were here, you could do it...

Something had happened. The sounds coming from the bedroom had changed

First it was the sobbing, a little different from before. Then the sobs gave way to hysterical laughter.

88 Something had happened.

Ryan stood quickly, the chair falling from under him and thumping against the wall as he tore open the door to the bedroom. She sat there on the edge of the bed, her tethered wrist lying across her lap, tears streaming down her face, her body shaking.

"Kate."

He must've said it aloud because she looked up. Her eyes were filled with terror and confusion. She had come back into her own body only to find it chained to a bedpost.

And he had done this to her.

His gut churning, Ryan hurried back to the kitchen for the knife that he'd used on the first set of plastic ties. They didn't speak until after he had freed her wrist.

"Where are we?" she finally asked.

"Near Detroit." Ryan explained how he'd found Kate and then dragged Waif up to Owen's trailer.

"You didn't leave me." Her face was still blotchy and red from hours of crying. He didn't want to guess at how she must be feeling right now.

"I couldn't just walk away." He had promised her that he would. But if he had kept that promise, Kate might be dead now.

"I want to know what happened. While you were here with her."

Ryan told her about waking up and realizing that the woman beside him was a stranger. **"She told me to get out. She was going to be you."**

"And if you had left, she would be." Kate looked stricken, about to crumble. She had come so close to losing herself.

"Will you take me home?"

As he drove, she sat next to the door, looking out at the gathering darkness, not speaking.

"Want something to eat?" Ryan asked as they passed a sign indicating a number of fast food places at the next exit.

Kate shook her head, then spoke. "If you're going to get something, I guess I'll have some fries."

He didn't care about the food, but he took the exit. If Waif had bothered to eat at all, it had just been potato chips

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Michelle Marr

and a shrink-wrapped tuna sandwich.

"Want to eat inside?"

Kate nodded and Ryan turned into the parking lot. While he waited at the counter for their order, she disappeared into the restroom.

For several minutes he stood there holding the plastic tray, afraid that she might not come back. He'd kidnapped her, tied her up... Things that he would never do to Kate. Or to any other person. Unless it was to protect Kate.

When she finally emerged from the bathroom, Ryan gave a sigh of relief. Damp wisps of hair clung to her forehead and cheeks. She looked a lot better. Maybe not fine, but a lot closer to okay than she'd been in the car.

Ryan waved her toward a table in the corner. He'd ordered two combo meals, and Kate nibbled at a few fries before unwrapping her own burger.

"It's been two days?"

Ryan nodded. That sounded about right. He'd lost track of the time, but this was the second night.

She didn't speak again until they were back in the Jag.

"I hate your car." She snapped the seat belt buckle into place. "I'm never going to be able to ride in it without remembering what happened."

What happened. She spoke of it in the past tense, as if it were over and done with.

"You don't think that it will happen again?"

Kate shook her head.

After that, she remained silent, but Ryan's thoughts were racing. She wasn't going to be able to ride in his car again.

Did that mean she was thinking about a future together?

Chapter Eighteen

Two wrongs had made a right. Kate hung up the phone, her hands shaking. Hailey said that it was over.

Her coven, her circle, whatever she called her group of strange friends, had gathered again and tried to break the bond, only to find it already severed.

But Kate had known that even before she made the call. Something had lifted. There was a lightness to her soul, a peace that she hadn't felt in weeks. The edginess was gone, replaced by impatience to get on with her life.

She had started with the apartment. After Ryan left her there, she was up most of the night, putting away everything that Waif had touched. Her papers. Her clothes.

Everything.

Before, she had been unenthusiastic about the place. Now she hated it. She wanted to get out, away from all of the places where Waif had been, the things she had touched.

When Kate finally did go to bed, her sleep was deep and dreamless. She woke up early and lingered over breakfast, flipping through the rental guides that she'd been too distracted to look at until now, writing down the numbers of the most promising apartment complexes, intending to call later to schedule appointments.

The message that she left on Colleen's voice mail didn't explain her disappearance, just promised that she would be back in the office soon.

Everything was going to be okay. Kate left dishes and brochures spread across the table and started hot water running into the tub. She pampered herself, adding a ton of scented bubbles, pulling out shaving gel and a new razor.

And as she stroked the razor up the inside of her calf, her thoughts wandered back to Ryan. The one part of her future that she was still afraid to face.

He'd left last night without a word. No mention of when they might see each other next.

Kate straightened her leg, dunking it under the water to

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Michelle Marr

Wipe off the last traces of foam.

She'd told him that it wasn't worth it. That she'd rather not to have been Waif. Not to have met him.

She'd been wrong.

Kate flipped the drain of the tub open and stood up as the water began to gurgle out.

Apartment hunting would have to wait again, until after she'd tracked Ryan down at one of his half a dozen numbers.

She had tried them all and was punching her number into his pager for the third time when he knocked on her door.

He handed her a dozen cellophane wrapped roses, then kissed her solidly, crushing the flowers between their torsos. "That's to celebrate you permanently being you."

He followed her into the kitchen and waited while she found a container for the flowers.

"If you don't absolutely have to go in to work today, I need your opinion on something."

"Okay." Puzzled, Kate followed him down to the parking lot where he unlocked the passenger door of a car parked next to her own.

"Is this better?" he asked.

All that registered at first was that it was black, very nice looking. And not the Jaguar.

"What are we doing?" Kate asked as Ryan motioned her into the seat.

"Taking a test drive. If you don't care for this one, we'll find something you do like."

"You're buying a new car?"

"Yup. And you're going to help me pick it out."

"Okay. But then you get to help me find a new apartment. I'm dying to get out of this place."

Ryan shook his head. "That'll have to wait until after we shop for a ring."

"Ring?" Like a wedding ring?

"We can pick out the ring before the car, if you'd rather."

Ryan looked down at her. "If you're that impatient to move, there's plenty of room at my place. Until we find something we both like."

In the same breath he was asking her about a car, a wedding ring, and an apartment?

Switch

Michelle Marr

92 "Well? Are we going to do this together?"

**"Yes!" Awake and in her own body and knowing exactly
what she was doing, Kate flung herself into his arms.**

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Romance author Michelle Marr has a passion for books. She met her husband-to-be in a bookstore and walked around a book sale while in labor with her second baby.

Books have always played a vital role in Michelle's life. Some of her earliest memories include trips with her mother to their favorite used bookstore. Years later, she met her husband- to-be while she was working in that same store. Her daughter teathed on romance novels, then used them as building blocks. While she was in labor with her second baby, Michelle went to a book sale.

After accumulating boxes and boxes of books, Michelle is thrilled to know that she can keep all of the ebooks she wants safely stored on her computer.