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***Catherine Chernow's Bride's Inn series***

*Lady in White* – Book One

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*Ghost Seeker* – Book Four

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## *Chapter One*

“I’ve never seen a pear-shaped emerald,” Seth Masters gazed at the shimmering gemstone ring he held in the palm of his hand.

The sign above him read: Crystal Jewelers - Rare Gems and Unique Crystal Designs – Brides and Browsers Welcome!

Crystal Lane, owner of the Bride’s Inn jewelry concession, lifted the emerald ring from Seth’s palm and held it up to the light.

“Look at that sparkle,” she grinned as she admired the piece of jewelry she had designed. “I think Serena will love it.” She laid it gently in Seth’s large palm.

“I think the color will match Serena’s eyes, don’t you?” Seth’s deep voice resonated with the sound of love.

A sharp pang of envy pierced Crystal’s heart.

“Let me wrap that for you.” She reached under the counter for the wrapping supplies, then centered the magnificent ring in a velvet-lined jeweler’s box. She shuddered as a gust of cold air blew around her, rustling a stack of papers next to the cash register. Crystal caught them just before they drifted to the floor.

“We have to do something about the front door,” Seth told her. “I’ll get one of the maintenance people to see if they can’t get it to close properly.” He grinned sheepishly. “Seems like the renovations for our seventy-year old Bride’s Inn aren’t complete.”

Crystal closed the ring box, placing it on the glass counter. For just a second, she thought she saw a shadow move in the far right corner of her shop

The lights above their heads flickered once, twice.

Seth shook his head and gazed upwards. “When did that start?”

Crystal shrugged. “It’s been happening all morning, actually.”

He sighed. "I'll get someone on that, too."

Crystal laid a hand over his when he placed his wallet on the counter. "No," Crystal shook her head. "This is on me."

He raised one dark brow, his handsome, chiseled face set in determined lines. Seth had always been a knock out, even in high school.

Crystal smiled as his beard-shadowed chin tightened—a sure sign that he was about to argue. "Put your money away, Seth."

He placed some bills on the counter. She gave him a stern look, but then her face softened. How could she be angry with him? Whenever she was around Seth, Serena, and their sweet baby boy, they made things seem normal. Like she was just a nice, normal girl. With a nice, normal life.

*Right.*

Well, she could dream, couldn't she?

She smiled once again, all trace of her stern demeanor gone. "So, Mr. Tough Guy, what are your plans for today?"

Seth glanced at the watch strapped to his wrist. "I've got a meeting in a little while."

"Oh," she placed the jeweler's box in a gift bag, stuffing the top with bright green tissue. "With who?"

"The Amazing Zodan—our star attraction for the holiday crowd. You remember him, don't you? He went to school with us."

Memories of tall, lanky Anthony Zodan swirled through her mind.

"Jake and my Aunt Clarice booked him for the holidays, so we're going to meet with him today. He's the hottest thing going right now—a mentalist and a magician." Seth snapped his dark brows together. "I think the term for him is—"

"Mind freak." Crystal replied, recalling the time she had watched Anthony levitate before her eyes. She remembered a sultry, summer night when she had been with a group of friends, including Seth and Anthony. In her mind's eye, Crystal could still see Anthony rising from the ground, his feet dangling in mid-air, the full moon bracketing his tall, bony frame as a lone wolf howled in the distance.

She angled her head. "Don't let Serena see this bag."

Seth frowned. "You're right. Can I leave it here with you, away from those beautiful, prying green eyes?"

She laughed, grateful for the light moment they shared. "Of course."

"Okay then, I'll be in next week to get it."

Seth made his way out of the shop, his long legs eating up the floor beneath him as the bell tinkled above his head.

Crystal grabbed some paper towels from underneath the counter. As she spritzed the glass countertop with her special cleaner, a chilly breeze kicked up once again.

"Oh for Pete's sake," she muttered as she wiped the foaming liquid from the side of the cash register.

The lights flickered again, causing the bright power-track lighting over her jewelry cases to fade, plunging her shop into a state of semi-darkness.

"Damn," Crystal muttered. She flipped the light switch on the wall behind her, but nothing happened.

Crystal shuddered as the ice-cold air swirled around her shoulders, lifting the ends of her hair, sending the shoulder-length tresses skimming her cheeks. She removed the errant strands and made her way towards the entrance when she saw a woman standing just inside the door. She wore a long white dress and held a bouquet of white roses in her hands.

"Can I help you?" Crystal's eyes remained intent on the woman. Her beautiful gown had the most delicate beading and lacework Crystal had ever seen, but parts of it seemed tattered and worn. It was probably an heirloom passed down through her family for generations.

Crystal bit down on her lower lip as thoughts swirled through her mind. She hadn't heard the woman come in.

The odd woman stared straight ahead. Even though a veil covered her face, her eyes appeared wide and vacant.

Crystal's heart pounded with apprehension. "Are you looking for something in particular?"

She swallowed hard and watched the woman's slippered feet, which barely skimmed the ground as she seemed to float across the room, stopping near the display of diamond wedding jewelry.

Crystal shook her head to clear it—she must be seeing things.

The woman looked down at the diamond-studded rings, the ends of her tattered veil trailing across the glass countertop.

“Why don't you give those flowers to me?” Crystal asked, trying for some levity. “You won't be able to try on anything if you're holding your bouquet.”

The woman's skin had an odd, shimmery, translucent quality, as though Crystal could see through her hand, straight to the counter.

Crystal stuck out her hand. “Crystal Lane,” she said by way of introduction, giving the woman a smile.

The woman's sad face and her wide, unblinking eyes remained fixed on the rings displayed in the case.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss...Ms?”

Silence.

Crystal sighed in frustration.

The woman started to move toward her. Straight through the counter.

“Hey!” Crystal shouted. “What are you doing?”

The lady stood in front of Crystal, staring at her with those wide, unblinking eyes, her cold, frigid breath forming a white, misty puff.

*Ghost.*

Terror clogged Crystal's chest as she grabbed the bottle of cleaning fluid and hurled it at the specter. It passed through the strange bride's body, landing with a loud crash against a jewelry case, the sound of splintering glass echoing throughout Crystal's shop.

The woman spun around, the tattered train of her dress swirling around her legs, the tiny beads and pearls glowing as she vanished.

Crystal tore out of her shop and flew down the hall towards the lobby.

“Oh God, please, someone please be there,” she cried, feeling her eyes well with tears.

Crystal skidded to a halt in the lobby, her eyes darting everywhere in search of a familiar face. Relief filled her when she saw Seth near a small alcove on the other side of the room, admiring the paintings that graced the walls.

“Seth!”

He turned his head and glanced her way. Dark hair brushed lean, fit shoulders. He wore all black, from head to toe – including a long, black leather duster. It trailed down to the tips of his black boots.

Before her mind could register the discrepancies, she ran straight towards him, her heart racing, her mind filled with the strange, eerie image of the woman in white. He opened his arms and reached for her just as she collapsed in a heap against his tall frame.

Slowly, her vision started to clear and she noticed his eyes. Like liquid silver, piercing as they bored down into hers.

He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand, his knuckles smoothing across her skin. She saw her reflection in his eyes, saw her mouth form a wide ‘O’ of shock when his long fingers trailed across her chin.

Strong hands circled her waist, pulling her against him and into the darkened alcove, cradling her between his long legs. Her eyes opened wide as he smiled down at her.

“You’re not Seth,” she whispered, barely able to speak.

He tugged her closer and closer still, leaning down to brush his lips across hers. “Sweet,” he muttered thickly. “So sweet.”

He had the most beautiful mouth—his upper lip slightly fuller than the lower.

Her eyes fluttered closed as the tip of her tongue trailed over his full upper lip. A shudder of pure erotic pleasure tore through her body and her fear melted away.

Her body hummed, her pulse quickening when his long fingers gently squeezed her waist, his stiff member brushing against her mound. Her clit pulsed with the most delicious throbbing sensation, making her body vibrate.

“Anthony Zodan,” he said by way of greeting.



She blinked as she registered his words, but it was hard to concentrate. In fact, it was getting harder to stand, too. Her knees gave way as her body started to slide, her nipples peaking when her breasts brushed his chest. Warmth washed over her, bringing with it an all-consuming lethargy.

“Easy, angel,” he whispered. “I’ve got you.”

Her eyes closed and she slipped into darkness.

## *Chapter Two*

“Pass the bottle under her nose. Yes, just like that.”

Through the hazy fog clouding her mind, Crystal thought she heard Serena’s cool, crisp voice. She snuggled into the warmth surrounding her, rubbing her face against something soft and silky.

“Don’t hold it there too long, just enough so she gets a good whiff.”

The strong odor of ammonia filled Crystal’s nostrils. She blinked rapidly as her throat tightened around the searing heat.

Soon her eyes dried and the burning eased. Crystal gazed at the chaotic scene before her.

“Looks like someone tried to rob her, Seth.” Jake Hunter, the Inn’s general manager, spoke quickly. “They cracked open one of the jewelry cases.”

Seth nodded in agreement then he turned to glance at Crystal, his face drawn in tight lines. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, but that’s not what happened,” Crystal replied, fearing Jake would call the police if she didn’t do something. She moved to get up, but a strong arm circled her waist, pulling her back down until her head lay pillowed against a firm, broad shoulder.

“You’re staying right here, angel.” A deep voice whispered in her ear. “Until I’m sure you’re okay.”

*Anthony Zodan.*

The feel of his hard, muscled thighs created strange sensations in her bottom cheeks—like tiny little sparks of electric energy. She rose from his lap, trying to ignore the rapid beat of her pulse, feeling The Amazing Zodan’s eyes on her back.

“Please don’t call the police,” she implored, looking at Jake.

Serena placed a hand against Crystal's cheek. "I'm sorry about the smelling salts, but you passed out. It was pure luck that Mr. Zodan caught you before you hit the floor."

Crystal groaned inwardly, not sure how much more embarrassment she could take.

"You stay put." Serena eased her back down on the couch, next to The Amazing Zodan.

Crystal shook her head. "I don't want anyone calling the police." She rose from the couch once more, placing a good amount of distance between herself and Zodan.

"What's going on?" All eyes turned to see Clarice Masters, Seth's elderly aunt, standing by the entrance to the banquet office. She walked over to Crystal and laid a wrinkled hand against her cheek. "What happened?" She asked, her voice filled with worry.

Crystal blew out a shaky breath. "I-I think I saw the lady in white. Th-the Inn's resident ghost."

Clarice shook her head. "Oh my, I was wondering when that was going to happen."

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Anthony stood off to the side, watching as the owners of Bride's Inn formed a protective circle around Crystal.

*Crystal.* The name suited her—it always had. With light blue eyes the color of topaz, and that long, pale blonde hair, she seemed almost ethereal.

Crystal turned her head and moved slightly away from the group, placing a hand against her temple, closing her eyes as her face formed tight lines.

"I think you should lie down," he said quietly. He moved to shield her from the rest of the small room's occupants as they gathered to confer about Crystal Jewelers and its lovely owner.

She shook her head, but he could see the slight movement pained her.

He drew his brows together. "Does your head hurt?"

Her eyes filled with tears. The sight of them made his heart squeeze painfully in his chest. "It will pass," she replied.

Anthony cradled the side of her head in his hand. “Look at me,” he commanded, his voice pitched low. When she didn’t raise her head, he lifted it gently, until her gaze met his. “Look directly into my eyes and relax one muscle at a time.”

Her pupils dilated. He bent his head slightly, drew his fingers across her forehead, and inhaled her heady scent—a mixture of some sweet, flowery fragrance and something strong and earthy. She smelled fresh, new...

Untouched.

“Crystal, you really saw the lady in white?”

She didn’t answer Serena’s question, but continued to gaze into his eyes.

“Crystal? Did you hear me?”

He cupped Crystal’s chin in his palm and gave it a gentle squeeze. She blinked several times, her pale lashes sweeping across her cheeks.

“What?” She glanced at Serena, stepping away from Anthony and nodding her head. “Yes. I saw her. She came into my shop. She didn’t utter a sound, but kept looking at the engagement rings and wedding bands in one of my jewelry cases. She had the saddest look on her face and then—” She drew a calming breath. “Then she walked straight through the display case.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

All eyes turned towards Anthony.

“There is no scientific proof that ghosts exist.”

Clarice walked up to him. “The skeptics who come to Bride’s Inn take the hardest fall, Mr. Zoda.” She poked him in the chest.

He grinned, admiring her spunk. “And who might you be, madam?”

“Clarice Masters. I’m one of the owners.”

“Clarice Masters... C. Masters. Are you the C. Masters who created those magnificent landscapes in the lobby?”

She smiled. “You’ve seen them?”

He gave Crystal a sideways glance. “I was admiring them when Crystal came barreling out of her shop.”

“Well, as long as you’re all right, that’s what matters.” Jake nodded at Crystal. “Seth, how about giving me a hand? We’ll grab a couple of the maintenance guys and get Crystal’s shop cleaned up.”

“I’ll help you.” Crystal told them.

Anthony reached out and snagged her belt, halting her movements. She turned to face him, her chin set at a stubborn angle.

“You should rest,” he told her. “You still look pale.”

She lifted one platinum, white-blond brow. “Thank you for your concern.”

“Of course I’m concerned,” he snapped. Softening his tone, he grinned. “I care very much about beautiful women who hurl themselves at me.”

She took a step towards him. “You don’t believe me.” Her voice sounded flat.

“I venture to say that I can explain anything, including the existence of this mysterious ghost, this lady in white.”

Crystal’s voice vibrated with anger. “I know what I saw.”

“The power of suggestion can be strong. Working at Bride’s Inn, you’ve heard the tales of the lady in white, so naturally, you just assumed it was she.”

“I won’t be dissuaded, even by you.” Her eyes shone bright with glittery tears.

He glanced at the stubborn faces of the owners of Bride’s Inn. They hadn’t balked at paying his exorbitant fee. If he didn’t need the money, he’d be just as well to leave this crazy bunch to their ‘haunt.’

“There are some things that just can’t be explained in scientific terms,” Crystal stated, her voice firm.

A tear slipped from her eye, then another...

As each one fell, they changed into tiny, glistening crystals, each one rolling down her pale cheeks to land against the front of her dress. They clung to the material, forming a shimmery shield.

Anthony reached out, catching one crystal drop on the tip of his index finger.

“How did you do that?” he whispered.

Crystal’s hand flew to her mouth, stifling a sob. She ran towards the door and wrenched it open.

Anthony stared at the tiny crystal that lay on the tip of his finger. In the next instant, it shrunk and disappeared before his eyes.

Seth nodded in Anthony's direction. "And just how do you explain that, Mr. Magician?"

Anthony Zoda, the world's foremost illusionist and debunker of everything mystical...

Didn't have a damned clue.

## Chapter Three

The following day, Crystal glanced out the window of her shop. The leaves on the trees surrounding Bride's Inn had turned vibrant shades of orange, rust and deep red, firing Crystal's imagination.

She grabbed her sketchpad and began to draw, her pencil strokes swift as a brooch resembling a tree took shape on the paper, the leaves studded with gemstones—golden citrines, deep green emeralds and garnets. She flipped the page, intent on drawing a design for a matching bracelet when her pencil strokes changed, her swift movements fashioning the image of a man.

“Your artistic talents are only eclipsed by your ethereal beauty.”

Crystal looked up to see the subject of her drawing standing directly in front of her.

He reached out to trail one long finger across her chin then dropped his hand. “Maybe it's your beauty that eclipses all else.”

She glanced at his upper right arm where a tattoo of a black hawk lay emblazoned against his skin. She managed to pull her eyes away from the large bird to view his muscular forearms, where a fine smattering of dark hair glistened against his olive, sun-kissed skin.

Crystal felt hot all over. The pencil tumbled to the floor, along with her pad. She bent to retrieve the pad and pencil, but Anthony beat her to it.

He raised one dark silky brow and smiled as he viewed the sketch of himself. “And just what do you intend to do with *this*?”

She shrugged. “Clarice asked me to sketch you.” Crystal hoped lightening wouldn't strike her for the lie she had just told.

“She’s a very talented lady, I’m surprised she didn’t sketch me herself.” He dropped his arms to his sides, snagging her hand in his. Crystal’s pulse skidded out of control when he ran his thumb across the back of her hand. “Perhaps you just wanted me all to yourself.”

She turned away, keeping her trembling hands busy by shuffling papers near the cash register. Crystal glanced at her charcoal pencil that lay on the glass countertop. In the next instant, it started to spin slowly then it picked up speed. It stopped abruptly, sliding across the glass to rest by her hand.

Her eyes flew to Anthony’s. Their small, red centers glowed.

She swallowed as she gazed down at the pencil, which now lay still. Picking it up, she held it in her fingers, feeling heat pour into their tips. “H-how did you do that?”

He grinned. “I’m renowned for using my mind to move inanimate objects.”

She shook her head, wondering at his other skills. “Did you have a reason for coming into my shop today?”

“Are you free for lunch? Can you spare an afternoon?” A hopeful look crossed his features.

“Are you sure you want to go to lunch with a woman who claims to see ghosts?”

He nodded, his silvery eyes intense. “Yes, and I’d like to hear more of your experience. We can discuss that trick you do with your eyes.”

“It’s not a trick,” she snapped. “I-I’ve had that problem since I was little.”

She stacked some boxes, willing her hands to remain steady.

“I’m sorry, angel,” he said quietly. “The last thing I want to do is argue.”

He raised her chin with the tip of his index finger. “Please, have lunch with me. I might as well be a stranger to Long Island; I’ve been away so long. I want to feel home again and,” he hesitated for just a second. “I’d like to get to know you better.”

She swallowed around a lump in her throat when he mentioned home and her in the same breath. “I’ll see if someone can cover for me.”

He grabbed the bags from the counter. In the next instant, her lips buzzed, her mouth softening as Anthony’s fused with hers.



She swayed, her body humming, her lips tingling. Crystal shut her eyes, as the most delicious sensations pulsed through her.

When she opened them a few seconds later, the Amazing Zodan had disappeared.

A sweet odor drifted by her nose...

*Roses.*

She glanced down at the counter.

One dozen white roses lay there, the stems completely devoid of thorns, their perfect petals gleaming under the light.

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Anthony strode through the lobby and down the corridor towards his suite of rooms.

*"Anthoneeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee."*

He gazed upward, hoping to see a set of small speakers.

*"Anthoneeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee."*

He turned around, chiding himself for falling into the trickster's trap.

"All right," he called out. "Enough. I know what you're doing."

Silence.

His eyes shifted towards the end of the long corridor. For just a second, he thought he saw something, a flash of white.

"Mr. Zodan?"

A frigid breeze swirled up and around his legs.

"Mr. Zodan."

He turned quickly and collided with Seth. "I'm sorry," Anthony muttered. "I-I didn't see you."

"Our lounge is this way," Seth told him. "It's usually quiet at this time. The breakfast crowd is gone. We could have some coffee."

"That would be fine."

A few minutes later, they made their way to the lounge.

"Two coffees, Marie," Seth told the girl behind the long counter.

Their coffees arrived. Anthony laced his liberally with sugar and milk and took a sip.

“I want to talk to you about Crystal. I couldn’t help but notice your interest.” Seth’s dark eyes bored into Anthony’s.

Anthony crossed one leg over the other, leaning back in his chair. “I remember her from high school.”

Seth knitted his brows, tightening his face into hard lines, the muscles on his neck bulging. “Cut the bullshit.”

He thrust a piece of paper, what looked to be an email, directly in front of Anthony. Anthony picked it up and started to read, then tossed it back at Seth.

“That happened years ago,” he spoke through clenched teeth

Seth picked up the email. “You settled out of court. Ten million dollars. That was quite a chunk of change.”

Anthony ran a hand through his hair. “My lawyers thought it best at the time. I uh, ran up quite a lot of debt on one of my charge cards and...”

Seth raised a brow as silence filled the air.

“So I have a gambling problem. It was a case of rising to the top too fast, and lots of quick money to spend.” He angled his head. “If you knew that, then why did you ask me to perform here at Bride’s Inn?”

Seth took a sip of his coffee. “My Aunt Clarice thinks you’d like to believe in all that magic you do.” He placed his cup back down on the saucer. When he lifted his eyes, they bored directly into Anthony’s. He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t want to see Crystal hurt or exploited.”

Anthony’s ring brushed the inside of his bare forearm, he could feel the silver hawk’s red eyes burn his skin, felt the centers of *his* eyes ignite as his temper simmered just under the boiling point.

“Maybe you want her for yourself,” he told Seth, a wry grin curling his lips.

In the next instant he felt the wind knocked right out of him. He shook his head to clear it of the fuzzy, dizzy feeling inside his brain and then his jaw started to ache. He blinked once, seeing Seth’s face swim before his eyes as he swayed against the bar.

Marie stood there, a hand over her mouth as she stared at Anthony.

He massaged his jaw as realization took hold.

Seth eased his tall frame into the one across from him.

“Crystal’s a good friend—like a sister. I don’t know if I can make you understand that, but if you ever say something like that again, I’ll—”

Anthony held up a hand, palm out. “No need.”

Seth raised one dark brow. “Then we understand each other?”

Anthony nodded his head and sighed. Crystal was damned lucky to have such loyal friends. He felt that spurt of jealousy. In the years since high school, he had made and spent a fortune. But he hadn’t made friends.

Anthony stuck out his hand. “Yeah, we understand each other.”

Seth grabbed hold of Anthony’s hand and shook it. “You should put ice on that.”

Anthony shook his head, smiling. “Your concern is touching.”

## ***Chapter Four***

Crystal glanced at her watch as she paced in the lobby of Bride's Inn.

Twelve-fifteen and no sign of Anthony. Maybe he changed his mind. Maybe he didn't want to be seen with a freak like her.

*Same old story, except now, it seemed to hurt even more than it did when the boys shunned her in high school.*

Her shoulders slumped as she plopped down on a leather chair.

She glanced at her watch again. Twelve-twenty.

Crystal was about to rise from the chair when a familiar belly came into view. She looked up to see Miranda standing in front of her. Reaching out, Crystal patted Miranda's stomach. "I know the doctor told you walking is good, but aren't you overdoing it?"

Miranda grinned. "Maybe it'll bring on contractions."

Crystal chewed her lower lip. "Have you seen Anthony?"

Miranda reached down and grabbed Crystal's hand. "He said to tell you that he's sorry he's late, and that you should join him in the dining room."

By the time they arrived at the large dining room a crowd formed around Anthony.

"Watch what he does," Miranda told her. "I saw him do this on that new TV show he's got and I still can't figure it out."

Anthony walked up to three women seated at a table.

"Do you ladies like to play cards?" His deep voice rang out. "Are you, by chance, the betting kind?" His grin widened.

He walked over to the redhead seated at the table. Sliding a deck of cards facedown across the linen tablecloth, he told the woman, "Pick any card." Anthony held up a hand. "Don't show it to me." He turned his back. "But you can show your friends."

Anthony turned around when she finished. He held out a magic marker. "Write your initials on the face side of the card."

The woman scribbled on the card with the marker.

"Lay the card face down, on the table."

Anthony reached into his pocket, withdrawing a black piece of material. "Hold this over your eyes then give it to your friends." He beamed a smile at the other two women. "I want you all to make sure that you can't see through the material."

The women took turns holding the blindfold up to their eyes, shaking their heads 'no' when Anthony asked each one of they could see anything.

"Good. Now, you my lovely lady." The redhead giggled. "I want you to stand up and tie this blindfold securely around my eyes. In the meantime, I'm going to turn my back and you, beautiful lady," It was the blonde's turn to blush and laugh. "Are going to place the card you marked with your initials back in the deck. Shuffle the cards then scatter them across the table face down."

While the red head tied the blindfold around Anthony's eyes, Crystal watched the blonde shuffle the cards several times.

"Tell the audience about the deck of cards, does it seem strange in any way? Marked in any way other than the one card you placed your initials on with that magic marker?"

The blonde shrugged. "It's just an ordinary deck of cards."

"Pass the deck to someone at another table. Ask them what they think. Examine the cards all you like."

As the woman passed the deck to a man seated at the other table, everyone watched as he and his companions examined the cards. "They're okay," he told everyone. "Just a regular deck of cards."

He handed them back to the woman.

“Lay them face down on the table,” Anthony told her. “Remember to scatter them around, anywhere you like.”

He turned around and told the redhead, “Hand me one of the steak knives from the table.”

She picked up a steak knife and held it towards him, handle out. Anthony’s hands touched nothing but the empty space in front of him for a few seconds before he was able to grasp the handle of the knife.

“Now, are the cards laid out face down?”

“Yes, they are,” the blonde replied.

“I’m going to find your card,” Anthony told her. “With this knife.”

“That’s impossible.”

Anthony walked to the table, bumping it with his thighs, the dagger held high above the cards. Crystal’s hand went to her throat as she watched the other woman seated at the table rise from her chair and back away. Anthony didn’t touch the cards, but held the knife in his fisted hand, point down. He went to the left, then right, keeping the knife positioned above the cards. Then he made a wide circle.

Crystal heard a whizzing sound then a loud thud, jumping as the noise echoed throughout the crowded restaurant.

The tip of the steak knife landed on the end of one card on the outer rim of the scattered pile.

“Now, lovely lady, please remove the knife from the card, lift the card, and tell me if it’s yours.”

The blonde shook her head and removed the knife, lifting the card. “This is impossible.” Her mouth formed a wide ‘o’ of shock. She held the card up for everyone to see her two initials that she had scribbled on the face of the card. “It’s mine!”

The sound of applause, Crystal’s included, echoed throughout the restaurant.

“Amazing,” Miranda told her. “I think I like his card tricks best.”

He shook hands with a few people as he made his way towards Crystal.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” he took Miranda’s hand and squeezed it. “How are you feeling, Mrs. Hunter?”

“Just fine,” Miranda smiled at him. “And please call me, ‘Miranda.’ That trick is unbelievable. I’ve seen you do it on television.” She winked. “Care to reveal the secret?”

He grinned back. “It’s all an illusion. A simple magician’s trick.”

Anthony turned his attention to Crystal. “Now that I’ve made you wait, I hope you’ll still dine with me.”

“Of course,” she murmured.

“Take good care of our Crystal, Mr. Zodan, or Jake and Seth will have something to say about it.”

Crystal watched Miranda walk away, then turned to face Anthony, suddenly feeling very tongue-tied. His proximity settled over her like a warm blanket, cocooning her in heat and desire. She glanced at his jet-black hair, noticing for the first time how some of it was cut shorter than the rest; a few of the dark locks hung near his very chiseled, very masculine jaw.

He took her hand, bringing the tips of her fingers to his lips. Crystal’s skin buzzed with energy, her fingers tingled as he trailed his mouth across her knuckles. Like a brand, his lips marked her soul as well as her body.

Steering her towards the exit of the dining room she had the oddest sensation, as though she floated with him.

“Where would you like to go?” she asked him once they got into the bright sunshine.

She stopped to shield her eyes from the sun, realizing the glare came from the chrome fender of a motorcycle parked at the curb. Two helmets hung from the handlebars of a long, sleek Harley Davidson motorcycle.

He regarded her for a few seconds, his head angled. “I’d like to go to that little pizzeria we used to hang out at in high school.”

She thought for a second. “Carmella’s?” Crystal grinned. “It’s still a hang-out.”

He reached for her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “You can’t go on the Harley unless you’re wearing a helmet.”

She swallowed. Hard. “I-I’m not sure I want to.”

“I promise you’ll be safe with me.”

She wanted to ride with him more than she cared to admit, but safe? Who would guard her from him?

Crystal placed the helmet on her head. Anthony reached out, securing the strap under her chin.

He placed the other helmet on his head.

As Crystal slid onto the soft, smooth leather, she felt butterfly wings beat in her belly.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

The long, sleek seat matched the Harley’s extended front. As she slid her leg against the leather, the tiny bud between her legs swelled. It felt as though she were going to ride *him*.

Anthony got on in front of her, throwing one long leg over the seat, securing his black booted feet on either side.

The engine roared to life. She felt the vibration clear down to her toes. Anthony reached back and hooked her arms around his waist. Her front brushed against his back, her nipples peaking in response.

He guided the long, sleek Harley onto the road.

Crystal snuggled against him, enjoying the feel of his muscled backside. She inched closer, holding him tight, enjoying the scenery as it flew by, realizing that she’d never viewed it like that before.

As the Harley coasted down the open road, she glanced to the right, across the cliffs that lined the two-lane highway. The sea stretched on for miles, the sun glinting off the water.

She leaned to the right to try and catch a look at his face. He was grinning. “Remember all those beach parties and bonfires we used to go to back in high school?”

“Sure I do,” she replied, remembering all too well that a few times, she had caught his eyes back in high school. “You never said two words to me.”

Soon they pulled into the parking lot of Carmella’s. He slid from the seat then helped Crystal do the same. She stood before him, her hands resting on his chest. His eyes held hers. “That’s because I couldn’t.”



She angled her head, enjoying the closeness.

“Couldn’t what?” she asked softly.

He removed the helmet from her head. Crystal’s hair tumbled down her back and shoulders. With his free hand, he ran it down the side of her hair then dropped his hand to his side. “I couldn’t manage to string two words together when I was around you.”

Anthony removed his helmet, then leaned down to brush his lips across hers. She swayed for just a second.

“Pepperoni or Sausage?”

She giggled. Crystal couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so relaxed and free. Raising a brow, she replied, “So, that’s what’s on your mind—pizza.”

Placing a hand on the small of her back, he guided her through the door of Carmella’s. He leaned down to whisper in her ear, his breath warm and moist. She felt that little zing of pleasure race down her back. It settled near the top swell of her bottom cheeks.

“Pizza’s not on my mind now,” he told her. “Not by a long shot.”

Lust and curiosity about the angel who sat across from him burned through Anthony like the spicy sauce on the crisp-crust pizza laying untouched on his plate. In his wildest fantasies, he never would have believed that he’d be sitting next to his high school crush.

He ordered a bottle of Chianti and now watched her sip from the wineglass, the tip of her pink tongue visible as she brought the glass to her lips. His cock swelled in response, reminding him again of the war he had going on between his desire and curiosity. Now, if she’d only let on about those crystal tears.

She looked at his plate and grinned. “Not quite the treat you remembered it to be?”

He smiled, feeling oddly relaxed. “Actually, it’s delicious, but I was enjoying you more.”

Her face and neck turned pink. He imagined her entire body turning that delightful shade.

Anthony shifted in the seat, trying hard to concentrate, but his cock wouldn't let him. Finally, he managed, "How about that little trick you do?"

She leaned her forearms on the table and took a sip of water, but Anthony caught sight of her trembling hand as she tightened her hold on the glass.

"What trick is that?"

"Those crystal tears?"

She sighed. "It's no trick. And it's been hell." Crystal looked away.

He angled his head. "Go on."

"When I was little, my parents took me to a ton of doctors, but none of them could ever explain it. Some thought it a hoax. But there's nothing phony about those tears."

He saw her eyes fill. Anthony's heart skipped several beats as he warred once more with his emotions. As much as he wanted to see those crystal tears, he didn't want her upset.

"It feels like tiny pin pricks in my eyes. It hurts," she whispered.

"I'm sorry," he extended his hand and she took it.

He heard some young girls whispering, the cadence of their voice growing more excited by the second. They kept shooting glances his way.

"I think you have a fan club here," Crystal murmured.

Two of the young women rose from their chairs and walked over to him. "You're Anthony Zodan, aren't you?" the brunette asked him.

"I am," he smiled at them. "And you are?"

"Oh!" she giggled, her friend elbowing her in the side. "Melissa."

"Well, Melissa," he stuck out his hand. "It's nice to meet you. Come here often?"

Her friend laughed again and motioned for the others to join them.

"Can you do a trick for us?"

Soon, other heads started to turn.

"Okay, let's go outside. I've got something I think you'll all enjoy."

He heard the click of a camera, saw a flash of light.

*Hell, nothing like a little publicity in your hometown...*

Anthony rose to his feet. When Crystal remained seated, he extended his hand.  
“You too, angel.”

She bit her lower lip. “That’s okay, you go on.”

He walked to the back of her chair. Bending down, he placed his arms over hers. Inhaling the fresh floral scent of her hair almost knocked him over. Maybe she had a few tricks up *her* sleeve, like how to make him her slave.

“I need you for this trick.” Anthony whispered in her ear.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. “Me? Why on earth do you need me?”

He grinned. “You’ll see.”

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Once outside, Crystal shielded her eyes from the afternoon sun, her attention focused on the crowd gathered around Anthony.

“Okay, you wanted a trick, well, I’ve got one,” he told them, most of his attention focused on the women.

Crystal felt a spurt of jealousy.

“What would you all say if I told you I can guess the color of each woman’s panties? Well, I can.” Anthony glanced at a woman decked out in a beaded jeans outfit. “Tell me, have you ever met me before?” he asked the woman.

The woman shook her head, ‘no.’

“We haven’t met. We don’t know each other. And I’m telling you, I’ll be able to tell you the exact color of the panties you’re wearing.”

The woman nodded. “Go ahead.”

He took a step towards her. “Concentrate on the color of your panties. Keep that color in your mind.”

Crystal watched as Anthony shut his eyes and took a deep breath. He bowed his head for a few seconds then brought his head up, his gaze fixed on the woman’s eyes.

“Concentrate,” he murmured. “Think of that color. Let it fill your mind.”

The woman stood still as Anthony reached out and skimmed his palm down the front of her body, connecting only with the space in front of her. “Concentrate,” he commanded again. “Think of nothing but that color.”

He turned his hand sideways this time, and repeated the up and down motion in front of the woman.

A few seconds went by before he dropped that hand to his side. Looking the woman right in the eyes he said, "They're a very nice shade of green."

The woman's eyes opened wide.

"Sea-foam green to be exact."

Her mouth hung open. She snapped it closed. "That's right. They are."

He folded his arms across his chest and said, "Care to demonstrate?"

She tugged on the waistband of her jeans, revealing the top of a pair of lace-trimmed, sea foam-green panties.

The men shook their heads and the women stood there, staring.

"Just to show you that it wasn't a lucky guess, I'll do it again." He scanned the crowd in front of him. "How about you?" Anthony asked a young woman in the back. "Come forward, if you dare." He grinned.

She maneuvered the crowd and stood directly in front of him.

"Now, we've never met before, either, correct?"

She nodded.

"Good. Now, concentrate. Close your eyes and think of nothing but the color of the panties you're wearing."

The young woman stood there, her hand at the waistband of her skirt. Anthony reached for that hand, placing it at her side.

"Just stand still," he murmured. "And think. Think very hard about the color of the panties you're wearing. Let that color saturate your mind."

Crystal watched in fascination as the woman did what Anthony bade.

Anthony placed his hand palm out, running it up, then down, touching nothing but the air that hung between him and the woman. He repeated the motion twice then grinned.

"Ah, I see, you have two thoughts at once."

The woman angled her head.

"You're telling me that you're wearing black, but they're not panties, are they?"

The woman inhaled sharply.

“You’re wearing,” he thought for a few seconds. “A thong. A black lace thong with lace around—,” again he stopped. “Correction, with lace up the back. On the thong part.”

Her eyes grew wide. “I-I am.” As if on cue, the woman turned her back. Anthony tugged on the waistband, revealing the thin, lacy line of the black thong lining her bottom.

Crystal blushed clear down to her toes, which curled in response to the sensations coursing through her body.

Anthony repeated the trick five more times, each with amazing, accurate results.

“Thank you, everyone,” he held up a hand. “Come see me at the legendary Bride’s Inn, where I’ll be performing these next six weekends.”

The crowd dispersed.

Crystal stood there, feeling awkward, her heart racing.

Anthony crooked his finger. “Come here, my angel. Step closer to me.”

She took a few tentative steps.

He shut his eyes for a few seconds then opened them. Passing his open palm in front of her, she swore she could feel searing heat burn through the denim of her jeans,.

“You’re going commando, aren’t you?”

She let go of the breath she’d been holding. “Y-yes.”

He pulled her to his chest and kissed the breath from her body, his lips fusing with hers until she felt mindless with need.

“That’s what you get for trying to fool me,” Anthony whispered near her ear.

“I-I promise to do it again,” she whispered back, a grin curving her lips upward.

He leaned down and kissed her again.

“That’s a promise I’m going to hold you to, angel.”

## *Chapter Five*

The late afternoon sun set as Anthony drove the Harley up the long drive leading to the back entrance of Bride's Inn. The magic of the afternoon he'd spent with his angel lingered, only to be shattered by the sound of Clarice's voice.

"I've been looking all over for you, Mr. Zodan. Miranda just took a message for you." Her bright blue eyes zeroed in on the bruise that lined his chin.

Crystal leaned up and whispered in his ear. "Serena and Miranda have done more than their share this afternoon. I have to get back to my shop."

Anthony picked up her hand, bringing the back of it to his lips. "It's been my pleasure."

Crystal walked back into Bride's Inn, turning to give him one last look as she disappeared from view.

Anthony rubbed his jaw.

"My, my, that's some bruise you've got there." Clarice peered upward, looking at his chin.

"I uh," Anthony gave her a sideways glance. "Bumped into something."

"Ah," Clarice replied, her eyes twinkling. "Looks like something hard and solid."

Anthony raised a brow and nodded towards the message in her hand.

"May I have that?" he asked as they walked inside.

She handed it to him. "It's from your manager."

He shook his head as he scanned the message. "I don't know why he didn't call my—" He fished in his pocket for his cell phone. When he glanced at the small screen, it was dark.

“Damn,” he muttered. “I forgot to charge it.” He raised his eyes to Clarice’s.  
“May I use your office phone?”

“Of course. I’ll walk with you and we can chat.”

Anthony gave her a sideways glance.

“I’m glad you and Crystal had a good time. She’s a darling girl. Very talented.”

He smiled. “Fishing, Clarice?”

She raised a brow as they continued to walk. “Well now, whatever do you mean?”

“If you want to know how my date with Crystal went, you should just ask.”

Her cheeks turned pink then she stopped, laying a hand on his arm. “All right. Do you have feelings for Crystal?”

Anthony felt as though he just received another punch from Seth. This family was chock full of heavy hitters.

“Yes, I have feelings for Crystal.” He felt like a kid again, a skinny, awkward seventeen year old. “I always did,” he murmured.

They continued walking.

“Let me give you a piece of advice, Anthony. Never hesitate to act on your feelings when it comes to love.”

He scowled. “Who said anything about love?”

“Feelings are strange things, they can take you down paths you’d never dreamed you’d go.”

They stopped at the door to the banquet office. Clarice opened it. “There’s the phone.” She pointed at the desk.

Anthony walked over to it and dialed. A few seconds went by then he spoke. “Marc, please. Yes. Hello. So, what’s so—what?” He ran a hand through his hair as he listened to his manager, Marc Reynolds, the news growing worse by the second. “She’s got what? Shi—” Anthony glanced at Clarice. “I mean, yes. Okay. Yes, just try and get me someone else by this afternoon.”

He hung up and faced Clarice.

“What’s wrong? She asked.

“The girl who usually helps me with my act is ill.”

“Oh my!”

He flopped down into a chair. “My manager says they’re sending me someone else, but—” Anthony sighed, wondering who in hell he would get on such short notice.

“How about Crystal?” Clarice’s eyes twinkled.

He thought about how Crystal would look in the costume. It would fit her like a silk glove. By the time the agency found someone else, it would be too late.

“You think she would do it?” He asked Clarice

Clarice beamed a smile in his direction. “Of course.”

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“No, I couldn’t possibly do it.” Crystal shook her head. She couldn’t seem to stop.

“You’ll look lovely, Crystal,” Clarice chimed in from her seat in the chair on the.

“That costume is perfect for you.”

Crystal glanced at the skimpy pixie costume’s accessories—a pair of shoes fashioned of clear acrylic, the heels a good six inches tall, the matching pale blue laces looked like they would wrap around her calves, all the way to her knees...

She swallowed. Hard.

“Mr. Zodan asked for you specifically,” Clarice told her.

Crystal blew out a shaky breath. What if she messed up? Worse, what if her wayward emotions took control and she started to cry? What then?

Clarice turned her towards the mirror and reached for the costume, placing it in front of Crystal.

“You’ll look stunning.”

The thought of floating, free as a bird, her body rising high in the air, made Crystal’s insides flutter.

If helping the Amazing Zodan is what Clarice wanted, then it would be the least she could do.

“All right,” Crystal told them all as she gazed at their reflections one last time.

“I’ll do it.”

Her palms grow moist and her heart pounded as she nodded her head with much more confidence than she actually felt.



“Wonderful!” Clarice hung the costume up and clapped her hands. “I’ll tell Mr. Zoda, I’m sure he’ll be pleased.”

Crystal wondered if the mischievous, knowing twinkle in Clarice’s bright blue eyes was real or a figment of her imagination.

## *Chapter Six*

Several hours later, as Crystal's body floated above the stage floor, she wondered the same exact thing about the Amazing Zodan.

Dressed in a black tuxedo that outlined his tall, lean frame, he pointed at a man in the audience. "You sir, would you like to volunteer to come up here and let the audience know that what I'm doing is real?"

Crystal continued to float upward, her prone body stretched end-to-end, her limbs feeling boneless.

"Yes, that's correct, sir, stand directly under our lovely angel," she heard Anthony's deep voice, but it seemed far away, as though he existed in some other realm, as though time and space as she knew it had suddenly changed.

"Do you see anything that would aide me in sending our lovely angel's body heavenward?" Anthony spoke again, his voice sounding further and further away as Crystal floated into darkness, the only light coming from the smattering of stars around her.

"I don't see a damned thing. This is unbelievable." The man shouted.

Crystal's body vibrated with the most delicious pulsing beat, a soft melody of desire.

Soon she discovered that she had stopped floating. Crystal lay in a wide bed, a fire burning in an ancient-looking hearth on the other side of what appeared to be a large bedroom.

Above her head she noticed the intricate pattern of a canopy that stretched from one tall bedpost to another. Strange images—small, golden crescent moons, bright yellow stars, fiery orange suns and what appeared to be planets, ringed with bright colors lined

the canopy. The signs of the zodiac peeked out from between each celestial image, her eyes settling on Virgo...

The Virgin.

"Did anyone see you come here, angel?" A man asked her as he stood near the window, his body shielded by the long curtains. He turned to face her.

*Anthony!*

What was he doing here, she wondered? Why wasn't he on stage?

She looked down, only to see a worn oak wood floor beneath the bed.

*Where was the damned stage?*

Crystal sucked in a breath as he neared the bed, his tall form clad in his usual black, but this time, a snow-white shirt lay beneath his long coat, the pale white lying stark against the deep olive of his skin. Nestled in the breast pocket of his oddly fashioned jacket was one small white rose. In the dim light cast by a fire's glow from the hearth, she could see his amazing liquid silver eyes, their deep red centers burning bright.

He leaned down to place a gentle kiss on her forehead, his silky lips grazing her skin.

"You took a big chance in coming here tonight."

"Wh-why are you so worried?" she whispered.

He frowned, settling his tall frame on the bed, sweeping his long coattails aside.

Anthony placed both hands on either side of her head, leaning down to slide his mouth across hers.

"How can you ask me that, angel? You know how dangerous it is. It's bad enough they want to burn me at the stake, let alone you. I couldn't bear it."

He held her head captive between his hands as he passed his lips across her cheeks, chin and nose.

"I couldn't bear to know that flames would touch your pale, silky skin," he whispered. His silver eyes turned sad. "I wish these people could understand that the magic arts I practice will only bring them good, but their trust has been eroded by fear. They're afraid that my powers will eventually bring them down."

She shuddered, whether from what he had just said or pleasure, she didn't know.

He angled his head. "How is it that you have come to me dressed like this?" He ran a hand down the side of her neck, the backs of his long fingers trailing across her skin. Crystal sucked in a breath when those same fingers trailed a fiery path across her breasts. "While I do like it," his voice turned wicked. "I wonder at your sense of fashion. The other women in the village would be jealous if they saw what you looked like in this."

What village was he talking about? What other women?

Crystal lost all thought when he placed one finger under the strap of her costume, sliding it down her shoulder and arm, the bodice dipping to expose the dark-brown crest surrounding her nipple.

"Lovely," he murmured as he kissed her there.

He slid his fingers under the other strap, sliding that one down, too. The tips of her nipples peaked when the chilly night air snaked across her skin, and from the hot look that burned in Anthony's eyes.

"I know what my angel likes," he whispered as he leaned down to kiss her breasts, his hair tumbling across her chest. He drew each bud into his mouth, laving the sensitive tip with his tongue.

"Anthony!" she cried out, arching her back, pushing her breasts into his magic mouth. He continued to suckle her as a deep, delicious, pulsing ache built between her legs.

She moaned, cradling his head between her hands, her fingers pushing into his thick, black hair. She shifted her legs, pulling them up, then down against the satin sheets, reveling in the silky, soft feel against her super-sensitive skin. Crystal swore every nerve ending in her body caught fire as his mouth slid across her breasts.

"Why do you call me Anthony when you know my name is Derek?"

*Who was Derek?*

"Call me what you will. I don't care. I simply want to love you, all of you," he whispered, helping her remove the costume. Crystal lay before him, her body sprawled on the bed, attired only in the sexy corset and high-heels.

“Magnificent,” he breathed as he gazed at her. He ran his hands across her breasts and belly, his fingers tickling the small thatch of hair covering her feminine mound. “We haven’t much time, angel. So I must bring you to heaven and back quickly. I wish—”

“What?” she asked, her heart beating wildly.

“I wish we could be together forever.”

He slid down the length of her body, hooking the backs of her knees over his shoulders, cradling the cheeks of her bottom in his warm palms.

Then he tongued her labia.

Moisture seeped from her channel; it trickled down the cleft of her bottom, the sheet growing damp.

“Don’t stop,” she moaned, bunching the sheet in her fisted hands. “Please don’t stop.”

“I always do what my angel commands,” he whispered, but she could hear the laughter in his voice.

He drew her little pearl of flesh into his mouth, sucking gently. Then he released it so he could lick her again, drawing the tip of his tongue up, then down, applying gentle pressure. Crystal’s breath caught and held as the tiny button of flesh throbbed.

She grabbed his head between both of her hands, digging her fingers into his scalp. Soon a giant crested wave of white-hot pleasure crashed over her, followed by a drowsy, languid feeling.

“Have I made you happy?” He grinned.

“Yes,” she whispered, “Oh, yes.” She wanted to say more, needed to say more, but couldn’t find the words.

The sound of angry voices broke her languid thoughts.

He rose from the bed. “You must hurry—get away from here, now!”

Derek helped her dress, but she fought him. “No, I won’t leave you.”

He took her shoulders between his hands, giving her a gentle shake.

“They’re coming for me. Their blood is up and they want to spill mine.”

Fear burned a scorching path in her throat when she thought of what they’d do to him. She shook her head, clinging to him.

“This is inhuman, it’s barbaric.”

“Goodbye angel,” he laid her back down on the bed, passing a hand across her eyes. “Sleep, and when you wake, you’ll be free of this cursed life. I’ll see you in the next, my love.”

*My love...*

Slowly, she descended, her prone form floating down, down, down until she felt a strong arm beneath her shoulders. Another one snaked across her waist as her legs lowered to the floor, her feet landing with a soft thud.

She swayed once then heard a clicking sound. When she opened her eyes, the Amazing Zodan threw an arm around her shoulders, tucking her against his side.

She remaining glued to Anthony’s side, a sweet odor drifting by her nose. When she glanced at the breast pocket of his suit jacket she saw it...

One perfect white rose lay there, nestled against a handkerchief containing a celestial pattern, every sign in the zodiac represented, including...The Virgin.

## *Chapter Seven*

Later, Anthony paced in his suite, his eyes focused on the waiter as he finished putting the last-minute touches on the small table set up near the windows.

“Will that be all, Mr. Zoda?”

Anthony gazed at the elegant little table laden with treats, hoping that Crystal liked the selections he’d chosen for their intimate dinner. As he fished in his pocket for some money, he was surprised when the twenty-dollar bill he withdrew felt damp. He handed it to the waiter, but as soon as he did, he felt perspiration line his palm.

The last time that happened, he had been on stage for the very first time.

He felt the same way now, while he waited for Crystal to arrive.

The young man smiled. “Our chef says he hopes you like everything.”

Anthony smiled, but he felt as though his face would crack. “I’m sure I will.”

“Well then, have a good evening.”

“Good night,” Anthony murmured.

He stood near the table and examined the snow-white linen tablecloth and napkins, the elegant gold-trimmed dishes, and crystal glasses.

He heard a knock on the door.

Anthony’s heart galloped. He couldn’t move.

“Come in,” he managed. His throat felt dry as dust.

Crystal opened the door and walked in, her beautiful face pinched and tense.

It mirrored how he felt inside. God, how he wanted her! Seeing her in that skimpy costume had made him burn with need, an endless, flame of heated desire scorched his body. When he levitated her, he had feasted his eyes on her breasts—their

full, rounded tops beckoned him, making him want to sample every single inch of what lay beneath that costume.

He wasn't about to waste a single second of his precious time with her.

It was just too damned bad he couldn't get his feet to move.

"I'm glad you came. More than you could possibly know," he murmured.

Glancing at the table, she replied, "That all looks wonderful."

Her eyes settled on the white roses in a round crystal vase set in the center of the table. When she glanced at him again, she noticed the small white rose peeking from the top of his shirt pocket and that strange little piece of material embroidered with those celestial designs she had seen in her dream.

"Where did you get that?" She nodded towards his shirt pocket.

He grinned. "Right from that vase on the table."

She shook her head. "I meant, that little piece of material. You had it in the pocket of your tuxedo jacket too, during the levitation act."

He reached for her arm and guided her towards the table, settling her in a chair.

Anthony reached over and lit the candles, their glow illuminating his lean, olive-toned face and his full upper lip.

He sat down, leaning back in his chair to cross one long leg over the other.

"It's a talisman."

She shook her head. "I thought you don't believe in magic."

He reached over to a silver ice bucket and extracted a bottle of wine. "It's a family heirloom."

He poured some of the wine into her glass; its fruity aroma wafted towards her nose.

"That cloth was once part of a bed hanging, a canopy of sorts," he told her. "The bed belonged to one of my mother's ancestors."

A tremor shot through her. "It belonged to Derek?"

His face softened, a smile lighting his features. "I'm pleased. You read my bio on my website."



“No, I didn’t.”

Anthony shrugged. “Then I’m sure you read some of the promo material my publicist sent.”

“I didn’t go to your website or read your promo material.” She placed her glass on the table. Needing her wits about her, she didn’t want to imbibe too much of the excellent vintage. “I met Derek tonight. He looks just like you.” She waited a second before continuing. “Or was it you?” she whispered. “Did you drug me?”

His eyes grew wide. “I hypnotized you, Crystal, just like we did when we practiced.”

“What happened to me tonight, what I saw during your levitation act, *did not* happen at rehearsal.”

“All right.” He leaned back in his chair. “Tell me what happened tonight.”

She sucked in a breath, her heart racing.

“Tell me,” he commanded. “Tell me what you think you saw.”

*He’ll think I’m out of my mind, he’ll think...*

“You did things to me th-that I—” She shook her head and looked away.

Anthony leaned forward and grasped her chin between his fingers.

His voice held a gentle note. “Whatever you saw, whatever you might have felt, it was an illusion. The mind can be a very powerful tool.”

“I know what I felt.”

He released her chin. “Then tell me.”

She whispered. “I can’t.”

He rose from his chair and walked over to hers. “You can tell me, Crystal. I want you to trust me.” He rested his high forehead against hers. “Please.”

Trust. Such a tenuous thing. What would he think of her if she told him all the wonderful wicked things he had done to her body?

“When we were in that bedroom, you made love to me.” It came out on a rush of words. Standing, wrapping her arms around his waist, she continued. “And I want you to do those things again,” she blurted.

He didn't say anything for quite some time. Then a small smile lit his face.  
"About those, uh, *things*. You enjoyed them?"

She could only manage a nod.

"I see," he murmured thoughtfully.

She held her breath, waiting for him to laugh or ridicule her or think she was the most brazen woman alive.

In the blink of an eye, he bent her back over his right arm and kissed the breath from her body. He released her lips just long enough for her to suck in a breath of air, then his mouth melded with hers again, sipping at her lips as though Crystal was his delicious evening meal. He groaned, holding her tight against his chest, his arm wrapped around her waist.

"What you do to me, angel." His entire body shuddered; she could feel the tremors running up and down his tall frame. "You're killing me." He didn't release her, but smiled down into her eyes. "But I know it'll be the sweetest death."

She had to tell him before her courage fled.

"Anthony, I have to tell you something, something you should know, something—"

He silenced her with a kiss. When she opened her mouth again, he laid his long index finger over her lips.

"Let me love you."

Anthony lifted her high against his chest and carried her to the bed, where he laid her down on the soft mattress. Slowly, he unbuttoned her blouse, pushing it aside to reveal her bra. When he released the front catch, her breasts spilled into his hands. "Lovely," he murmured. He ran his finger along the top of her breast. She shuddered pleasurably.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Crystal kissed him, stifling his moan as her mouth closed over his.

Anthony felt the world spiral out of control when Crystal's bare breasts brushed his chest. His cock responded, straining against the material of his trousers. He knew it would be over before it even started if he didn't slow them both down.

"Angel," he murmured, turning her so that she lay on her back. "We're going to take this nice and slow."

"I need you now," she murmured, running her fingers along his chest.

Anthony leaned down and kissed her. "I want to pleasure you. Would you like that?"

She inhaled sharply, nodding in response. Anthony felt a tiny tremor course through her.

He made quick work of the rest of his clothing, helping Crystal shed hers. Then he feasted his eyes on her nude form. Looking his fill, he wasn't quite sure where he wanted to touch and kiss her first.

His exploration began with a single kiss to her lips. She arched her back, melding her mouth with his, pushing her breasts into his chest. Easing her back down onto the bed, he kissed her nose, her cheeks, trailing his lips across her chin then down her neck, where they settled on her collarbone. Kissing the delicate bones at the base of her throat made him want to drive into her, but he held back, resisting the urge to relieve the burning, raging lust within him.

Anthony kissed her deep cleavage, cupping her breasts in his palms.

"I-I can't seem to catch my breath." She moaned into his mouth shifting her body in restless abandon. With each pass of his hands across her breasts, with each touch of her nipple, her feet and legs skimmed his.

Winding her arms around his neck, she brought his head down to meet hers, where she bestowed a deep, drugging kiss on his mouth. He held her tightly, returning the kiss, his tongue seeking refuge within her mouth.

He continued his sensual tour, making his way downward and pressing tiny kisses to her pubic bone. She moaned and grabbed the bed sheet, bunching it in her fisted hands. Anthony teased her there, inching lower, until his lips caressed the light dusting of hair

on her labia. Inserting his tongue between the soft folds of flesh, he sought her little bud and flicked it with the tip of his tongue.

“Anthony!” she cried out. She gripped his head, driving her fingers into his hair.

He continued his sensual pleasuring, kissing and nibbling her clit, enjoying the heady, sweet, musky odor of her arousal. The next pass of his tongue across the little pearl made her moan again, the sound deep and arousing beyond anything he could have imagined.

“Anthony, oh, oooh--” Her hips juttled up from the mattress as she ground her mound into his mouth. Gripping his back, she dug her nails into his flesh. He reveled in her scream of pleasure, rising up on his arms so that he could lean down and kiss her again, until all the breath left his body.

Minutes went by before he could calm the racing beat of his heart. He swore he came with her, as though they were joined by some invisible cord of spiritual union.

“I want you,” she breathed. “I’ve never wanted anything more in my life than you inside me right now.”

He grinned back. “It will be my pleasure.”

Crystal felt the tip of Anthony’s erect shaft at her entrance, where a tiny drop of his fluid kissed her clit. When he nudged the folds of her labia and started to push inside her, she inhaled sharply.

He looked down, a frown marring his earlier look of pleasure. “Are you all right?” he asked.

She bit down on her lower lip. “Anthony, I wanted to say, I need to tell you that, well—”

He leaned down, placing a tender kiss on her lips. “What?” he whispered. “What do you need to tell me?”

She lost her nerve. “You feel so big.”

That made him laugh. “You’re good for my ego.”

Inch, by sensual inch, he buried his shaft deeper, a puzzled look lining his face.

“Crystal,” he moaned. “You’re so damned tight, so, I can’t—” He threw his head back and roared.

She caught her breath as he spilled his seed inside her, his shaft pulsing.

His next words brought those tiny pinpricks to her eyes.

Anthony’s face tightened into angry lines. “Why in hell didn’t you say something?”

Crystal swallowed past the tears clogging her throat. “I tried to tell you, it’s just that—”

He pulled out of her, making her feel oddly bereft at the loss of contact. Then he rolled away, flinging one arm across his eyes.

“It was wonderful,” she laid a hand on his chest.

Throwing one long leg over the side of the bed, he rose to his feet.

She willed herself to remain calm. “I can explain--”

He spun around, towering over the bed.

“Crystal,” his voice deepened. “Why, *why*?” He ran a hand through his hair. “You haven’t, in all these years—”

“You’re my first,” she murmured. “My only.”

He shook his head. “I’ll be damned.”

She reached for his hand. He snatched it away. She sat up, pulling the sheet up to her chin, suddenly feeling cheap.

He pursed his lips, studying her.

“Did I hurt you?” He finally asked.

She shook her head. Crystal didn’t think she could utter one single word.

His question hit its mark when she felt a stinging between her legs.

Anthony flopped into a chair next to the bed.

“I couldn’t stop, I—”

“Didn’t want to or—couldn’t?” She raised a brow.

“Both. I, oh hell, I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Crystal rose from the bed and reached for her underwear. She yanked the panties up her legs. She started to cry again, the crystal tears spilling from her eyes.

His eyes grew wide. “How in hell do you do that?”

She threw the nearest thing she could find right at his head—a water glass. It hit the wall and bounced, shattering on the arm of the chair. Holding a hand over her mouth, she realized she had never resorted to violence. But Anthony Zodan made her feel violent. Reckless. Shoving her arms through the straps of her bra, she fastened it, not wishing to allow him one more view of her breasts, breasts he tenderly loved just minutes before her world came shattering down around her.

“You’ve made me feel cheap,” she whispered. “I’ll never forgive you for that.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice filled with pain. “That’s not what I meant to do, it’s not, it’s just that, I feel...”

She buttoned her jeans, her fingers shaking. “Tell me something, Anthony. Why did you want to be with me tonight?” Her heart raced as she watched his eyes cloud over.

He folded his arms across his chest. Her pulse quickened when she saw that his member stood stiff and straight...

As though it mocked her.

“I thought I’d get you to tell me how you make those crystal tears. I could use you in my act.”

She stilled. The room grew quiet—so quiet that Crystal could hear her own heart beating.

She finished dressing, shoving her legs into her jeans, hastily throwing her blouse on. He watched her every move, but didn’t say a word. Picking up her shoes, she ran for the door, barely missing the shattered glass on the floor.

It was a painful sight.

Reminding her that Anthony Zodan, had done the same thing to her heart.

## Chapter Eight

The following day, Serena came into Crystal's office at the store, worry lining her face.

Crystal drew her brows together and laid a hand on Serena's arm. She could feel her friend's body shake.

"What's wrong, Serena?"

Serena's pale face turned white. "Sit down."

Crystal plopped down into a chair.

"Two teenage boys were walking in the woods out on the cliffs. Th-they found a body, Crystal. The dead body of a young girl."

"Oh my God!" Crystal's hand flew to her mouth. She felt the tiny pin pricks in her eyes then her head started to pound.

*"The police are in the woods now, combing the area. They think someone murdered her and dumped her there."*

Bile rose in Crystal's throat, the taste acrid and burning. She shut her eyes as the dull, pounding ache grew inside her head, crying out as sharp pain pierced the muscle above her left eye.

Serena frowned. "Those headaches have come back, haven't they?"

There was no use in hiding from Serena. "Yes."

Serena angled her head, brushing some hair from the side of Crystal's face. "Does Anthony know?"

Crystal gave her a sharp, penetrating look.

"I don't want him to know." Softening her tone, she grabbed Serena's hand.

"Please. Don't say a word. To anyone. Particularly, him."

Serena nodded. "I won't. But you're going to see Dr. Crawford. Now."

Serena helped her rise from her chair and led her out of the office. As they walked down the hall, Serena kept a steadying arm wrapped around Crystal's.

Serena stopped to speak to Miranda for a few seconds while Crystal sat in a chair in the lobby, her gaze focused on the bright autumn sunshine outside.

When she turned, she noticed the fuzzy outline of a man.

Through the haze that clouded her eyes, she could see Anthony snap his dark brows together.

"Why are you so pale?" He asked, squatting down next to her. "What's wrong, angel?" He gentled his voice. "I'm sorry for what I said. I know I've been a complete ass."

She rose to her feet, her legs trembling. He did the same.

Willing her body to remain erect, her head throbbing, she looked him square in the eye. "I have no time for this now. S-Serena and I are—"

He angled his head, waiting for her to finish. "What?"

"We're going shopping."

He frowned again.

"Could you at least spare me a few minutes?" His voice held a pleading tone. "Just let me talk to you. Let me try and make this right."

"No," she shook her head, crying out as the pain knifed through her head.

"Crystal, my God, what's wrong? Look, I'm sorry..."

Her heart broke all over again. He was sorry? For what? Making love to her?

She'd never be sorry.

"Leave me alone," her voice was ragged.

Just then, Serena made an appearance. She rushed to her friend and led her out the door, leaving Anthony standing there.

Making Crystal feel as though he held her shattered heart in the palm of his hand.

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Less than an hour later, Crystal sat on an examination table in Dr. Michael Crawford's office. A light flashed in her eyes as he examined them, gently pulling down the lower part of her eye.

He shook his head as he turned off the small, pen-style flashlight he held in his hand. Shoving it into the breast pocket of his white coat, he said, "I've heard of the phenomenon of crystal tears only once. It was a Lebanese girl, and some believe it to be a hoax. Others, including physicians and scientists, have agreed that her tears were genuine crystals. They wonder how the child managed to pull the whole thing off with crystals coming out of her eyes in full view of television cameras. If the television pictures were authentic and anything to go by, then fraud would seem to be out of the question: the girl's eye was filmed close-up and showed pieces of glass slowly pushing out of her eyes, as if coming from the retina."

Crystal blew out a shaky breath. "Th-that's what it feels like, as though my eyes are pushing them out, as though they come from the back of my head."

He nodded then continued the examination. "Does this hurt?" he asked as he pressed on her forehead.

"Y-yes."

He continued his examination, his fingers pressing against her skull, her neck, and her shoulders. Then he checked her blood pressure and drew some of her blood.

"Have you ever suffered from migraines?"

"Never. The headaches didn't start up until a few weeks ago."

He scribbled something in her chart. "When they happen, do you feel nauseous or faint?"

"Nauseous. And today, my vision was blurry."

Again he wrote something in her chart.

"Are you allergic to any foods or medications?"

"No. Nothing."

"I'm recommending that you have an MRI and a cat scan."

Crystal's heart started to pound. "What do you think is wrong with me?"

He looked up. "I'm not sure, Crystal. It could be something hormonal. It could be something you're inhaling, an allergy, perhaps, that's recently developed or maybe it's something directly related to those tears. Or—"

"What?" Her heart raced. "Say it."

He hesitated for what seemed like hours.

"It could be a tumor."

She felt as though the wind had been knocked right out of her.

"Let's wait for the test results before we go jumping to any conclusions," Dr Crawford said.

Crystal barely heard him.

*A tumor.*

She rose to her feet, not wanting to stay one more minute. He wrote something on a pad, tore off one sheet then scribbled on another, tearing that page away from the pad, too. He handed both to her. Then he rose to his feet.

"That's a prescription for the MRI and the cat scan. You can have them done at Gray's Point Hospital or there's another location I can recommend."

She glanced at the prescriptions. The writing blurred, the lines on the paper becoming wavy.

"Get it done soon, Crystal. Don't wait too long."

She swallowed then looked at Dr. Crawford. He had a nice face, what she could make of it.

"I'm here if you need me, Crystal. I'm just a phone call away."

She left the examination room and joined Serena in the waiting area.

When she told Serena what Dr. Crawford said, Serena replied, "I'm taking you to Gray's Point Hospital now. I know some people there. We can get the tests done immediately."

Crystal gazed out at the passing scenery as they drove to the hospital. Her vision had cleared, but how long would it remain that way?

She longed to go riding on the back of Anthony's Harley. To feel the power of that machine, of him. To feel free again.

Like her ailing body, he had betrayed her.

He wanted to use her. Like the freak she was and always would be.

Anthony had made her feel like a normal woman, with normal emotions and desires...

It was just too damned bad that he didn't care a whit about her.

## *Chapter Nine*

Three days later, Crystal sat in Michael Crawford's office again, the results of her MRI and cat scan on the desk in front of him. Her heart pounded.

"The results of your blood work are here, too, Crystal."

"Wh-what does it say?"

"In simple terms, I asked that your blood be tested for a specific antibody that's present when I suspect a patient might have cancer."

Her heart skipped several beats. Crystal gripped the arms of the chair. "Does mine have—I mean—did my blood work show that?"

He nodded.

Tears stung the backs of her eyes and bile rose in her throat.

"Your MRI results and the results of the cat-scan confirm it."

Crystal let go of a sob. In the next instant, Michael was by her side.

"Crystal, listen to me," he squatted down on his haunches by her chair. "It's not a death sentence. The MRI and cat-scan indicate two tumors—one in the forefront of your brain, that's probably why you're getting headaches there, and one at the very top."

She clasped a hand over her mouth. Releasing it slowly, she murmured. "Two tumors?"

He rose to his feet.

"Surgery will confirm it. I'm going to say that they can probably remove the tumor at the front of your brain, but the one at the top, well, sometimes, they *can't* remove it. It will require chemotherapy to shrink it."

Her body felt limp and drained, her mind, dull.

"I can recommend an excellent surgeon."

Her eyes flew to his.

“And I suggest the surgery be done as soon as possible.”

She rose to her feet, her legs shaky.

“I-I want to, I need to—oh, God, I need time to think to—” Her eyes filled, the crystal tears spilling down her cheeks.

Michael gave her the same, shocked look everyone did when they encountered her tears.

He brought himself around. Clearing his throat, he replied, “Of course.”

Suddenly, her vision blurred. She swayed on her feet, but Michael caught her to him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“My eyes are blurry.” Panic rose within her. “I drove here, but—”

He gave her a measured look then glanced at his watch. “You were my last appointment for today. I can take you home.”

“Please take me to Bride’s Inn.

He nodded. “Of course.”

\*\*\*

That same day, Anthony stepped into the cigar lounge in Bride’s Inn, making his way to where Jake sat on a large leather club chair nestled in the back.

Jake glanced at Anthony. “Is Crystal talking to you yet?”

Anthony’s shoulders slumped.

“How did you know?”

“Miranda didn’t speak to me for days once,” Jake replied as he puffed on his cigar. “It was when I first came here, and I—” he looked away then his eyes sought Anthony’s again. “I came here with a lot of demons riding on my back. A lot of bad memories. I wasn’t exactly truthful with Miranda in the beginning of our relationship.” Jake flushed beneath the bronze of his skin.

“How did you make it up to her?” Anthony asked softly.

“She’s stubborn,” he grinned. “But so am I. My advice? Get Crystal alone, talk to her and get it straightened out.” He leaned forward in the chair. “If you care for her, hang on to whatever it is the two of you have together. Life’s too short to do otherwise.”

“I wish I could. But she won’t have anything to do with me.”

“Crystal’s stubborn, just like Miranda. But you’ll find a way around that.” He winked at Anthony. “I know you will.”

“You’re far more confident than I am.”

Jake threw back his head and laughed. “You’ll persevere.”

A group of young men gathered around Anthony and Jake. “Hey, Mr. Zoda, we saw you perform the other day. It was awesome.”

“Well, hello, gentlemen.” Jake greeted them then introduced the assembled group. “These fine young men are part of the Anderson wedding party.”

Anthony thought for a few seconds, and then turned to Jake. “Got a deck of cards?”

“Coming right up.” Jake rose from his chair and went behind the bar, where he retrieved a deck of cards. He walked back and handed them to Anthony.

Anthony gave the deck to one of the young men. “Shuffle that deck, then pick a card, but don’t tell me what it is...yet.”

The young man shuffled the cards then chose one.

“Show it to your friends, then place it back in the deck and reshuffle all the cards.”

The young man did as Anthony asked. Jake stood off to the side, puffing his treasured cigar, his eyes narrowed as he watched Anthony perform.

“Give me the deck,” Anthony commanded.

The young man handed it to him.

“Now, I’m going to go through all the cards, face up. But you’re going to notice something.”

“What?” the young man asked.

“Watch,” Anthony told him as he showed each to his audience, and Jake. “Do you notice something missing?”

The young man who shuffled the deck and picked a card, replied, "My card is missing." He frowned. "Where is it?"

"What was that card?" Anthony asked.

The young man shook his head. "The seven of clubs."

"Where'd it go?" One of the other young men asked.

Anthony grinned. "Oh, I don't know." He glanced at Jake.

Jake scowled, lowering the cigar he held in his hand. "Why are you looking at me?"

Anthony's gaze traveled to the group. "Mr. Hunter has it."

"I... huh?" Jake glanced around. "I don't have the card."

Anthony nodded. "Yes, you do."

He got up and walked over to Jake. Taking the cigar from Jake's hand, he snuffed it out in the ashtray. Breaking the cigar in half, he heard murmurs from the assembled group. "It's right here."

Anthony showed them the broken cigar then withdrew the seven of clubs from the inside.

All eyes opened wide.

A few mouths hung open.

"It's magic," Anthony told them, flipping the card high in the air. It landed on the table near Jake.

*Magic.*

He needed to believe in it. Had to.

Somehow he knew it was all he had left to bring Crystal back and bind her to him.

\*\*\*

He walked into Crystal Jewelers a few minutes later, determined to work things out with its owner, only to find Serena helping some customers. A few minutes went by before the man and woman left. Serena's green eyes met his.

Anthony strode up to the counter. "Where is Crystal?"

She ducked her head as she bent to look for something on one of the shelves.

The minx!

Anthony bent his head, too. "I repeat, where's Crystal?"

Through the glass front, he saw Serena's eyes open wide.

She lifted her head, her gaze traveling towards the windows.

Anthony's eyes followed hers.

That's when he saw Crystal get out of a car. A man came around from the other side and threw an arm across her shoulders, hugging her to his side.

Anthony felt his temper ignite.

The man turned her slightly, but Anthony swore he saw Crystal grab hold of the lapels of his jacket and kiss him.

*The son of a bitch.*

He felt like hitting something.

When he turned back to face Serena, she said, "She uh, well, she had a date, so to speak."

He lifted both brows. "Was it or was it not a date?"

She nodded. "Yes, it was a date."

*How easily she had replaced him.*

"I'm sorry, Anthony," Serena told him, her eyes round and sad.

He shook his head. "No one's sorrier than me."

He turned on his heel and strode out of the shop.



## Chapter Ten

“Thank you, Michael.” Crystal placed a hand on his shoulder.

He glanced at her face. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

She nodded. Her vision had cleared during the ride back to Bride’s Inn, but the dawning realization that she may not be able to do many of the things she used to do hit her hard.

Michael regarded her thoughtfully. “I wish I could say it was my pleasure, but it isn’t. Not this. I wish—”

“What?”

He placed a hand in his pocket. “I always wanted to meet you. I asked Serena about you and, well, I guess I just never got up the nerve to ask you out.”

She shook her head. “Oh, Michael,” she placed a hand against his chin. “I do wish the circumstances were different.”

*I wish I didn’t know what it’s like to be with a magic man like Anthony.*

“Well, take care of yourself.” He reached out and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Good bye,” she said softly.

She watched him walk around to the driver’s side of his car. He got in and started the engine, then pulled away from the curb.

Crystal walked up the steps to Bride’s Inn, just like she had done countless times before.

Seriously wondering if it would be her last.

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“Why on earth did you say I was on a date with Dr. Crawford?”

Serena sighed. “Anthony was here. You asked me not to say anything about your health to anyone, and I had to think fast. I’m sorry.”

Crystal shook her head.

“Don’t be.” She caught and held back a sob.

Serena placed an arm across Crystal’s shoulders. “Oh, sweetie. You’re going to get through this, I’ll help, I’ll—”

“Help her get through what?”

She wanted run straight to his arms, to pour her heart out to him, to draw on his strength, his *magic*.

“I repeat,” he said, his voice harsh. “Get through what?”

Crystal turned and faced Serena.

“It’s okay,” she patted Serena’s shoulder. “You can go. And thanks, again.”

“It was no problem.” Serena walked past Anthony. She gave him a haughty stare. “Don’t you dare upset her.”

He raised one brow.

“I’ll sick Seth on you,” she whispered.

He bent until they were nose-to-nose, but she didn’t back down.

“I’m not afraid of Seth.”

He noticed Crystal’s pale, almost white face.

*Something wasn’t right.*

Serena walked away, leaving him alone with his angel.

“Go away.” Crystal’s voice sounded odd.

Anthony walked towards her. “Does he make you happy?”

She folded her arms across her breasts. “He doesn’t want to use me then cast me aside like some freak.”

Anthony reached out, running the tip of his finger along her very prominent collarbone. She flinched, as though he had slapped her.

He dropped his hand.

“I didn’t know what to say, I didn’t know about your...situation, about—”

“You mean my virginity?”

He winced.

She laughed, the sound a grating facsimile of humor. “You can’t even say the word.”

He sighed. “We can go round and round this.” He stepped closer; she backed up. “The fact remains,” he took another step in her direction until he backed her against the counter. Placing his hands on either side of her, he caged her in. “You’re mine.” He saw the panic in her eyes.

She shoved at him.

“Get out of here.”

“No.”

Her chest heaved. “Get out, or I’ll call security. I-I’ll call Seth and Jake. They’ll throw you out of here so fast, your head will spin.”

“You won’t get rid of me, Angel.”

“I hate you.”

He felt as though he had been gut-punched.

“Get out, Anthony. And don’t come back.”

He held up a hand.

“I’m going. For now. But I’ll be back.”

She raised her chin. “Go to hell.”

“I’m already there, angel.”

With that, he walked out, and didn’t look back.

He couldn’t.

Because he didn’t want her to see him cry.

\*\*\*

A few days later, Anthony sat in the back of the bar, its only patron that evening. He sipped a glass of wine—his fourth in the past hour—hoping the alcohol would dull his memories of Crystal.

Disgusted with himself, he was about to leave when he noticed a woman standing just inside the doorway to the lounge.

She wore a long, white dress. It seemed to shimmer around her, giving her an odd, translucent quality. Upon closer inspection, he noticed she wore a veil, too.

What in hell was a bride doing here alone?

“Come and join me,” he called out. “Hell,” he muttered to himself. “Why not?”

She entered the bar. For a split second, Anthony thought she floated, as though her feet didn’t quite touch the floor.

*Ridiculous!*

She stopped near his table. Her face was hidden by her long, white veil. What he could see of it made the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

Her eyes were open wide. They appeared vacant as she stared at nothing in particular.

Then she spoke. A tremor shot through him when he heard her voice—in his mind. Not a word left her lips, but he heard the words in his head, clear as a bell.

*She’s hurting. I feel her pain, as sure as I feel my own.*

“Who are you?”

*I walk those steps, night after night...waiting.*

“For what?”

*The light.*

“The light? I don’t understand, what light do you mean?”

*Eternity.*

Sweat beaded on his forehead. One drop trickled down the side of his face.

She started to move forward. This time, he saw that her slippered feet floated a few inches above the floor.

“Oh, I get it. This is a joke. Well, I can levitate, too, sweetheart, so you can’t fool me.”

He shot to his feet, tumbling his chair behind him. It hit the floor with a loud crash, but she didn’t flinch, didn’t stop, she just kept on...floating. The air around him grew frigid as she drew near. The lights over his head flickered then they went out, shrouded him and the mysterious lady in white in darkness.

“Argghhhhh!” he cried out when he felt the blast of chilly air shoot through his body. He jumped back when he saw the top of her head as she passed through him.

Another scream lodged in his throat as he watched her walk straight through the wall behind him.

He blinked once, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. The lights above flickered, and came back on. Anthony walked over to the wall and placed a hand against it. It was solid wood; nothing could have passed through it.

“Are you finished?”

He looked up to see the bartender standing behind the counter.

“You’re damned straight I’m finished.”

Anthony strode out of the bar, knocking over another chair.

He didn’t stop until he got to his room.

## ***Chapter Eleven***

Crystal locked the doors of her shop the following evening, her head aching. She hated taking the pain pills Michael had given her. The damned things made her woozy.

Crystal wondered what would be worse: her illness or its treatment?

Walking into the lobby of Bride's Inn, the absolute quiet greeted her.

A chill snaked down Crystal's spine when she thought about the brutal murder of the young girl found in the woods. She sat down on a chair, intent on calling a taxi, when her eyes drifted to the front door as Dr. Michael Crawford sauntered through the main entrance.

Michael took a seat next to her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, his voice soft.

She slumped in the chair.

"Exhausted."

Michael glanced around the deserted lobby. "The purpose of my visit was to see you. I've got some news about your surgery."

Her heart started to pound. The sooner she got this over with the better. She hated waiting.

"How about I give you a lift home? I can give you the details."

She managed a small smile. "That would be fine. I was just about to call a taxi."

Michael reached out to squeeze her hand. "Come on. Let me get you home. You should take it easy until the surgery." He rose to his feet and extended his hand, helping her from the chair.

"Being here keeps my mind off the..." she couldn't say the damned word. She couldn't say *tumor*.

He nodded. "I understand."

Michael led her outside then helped her into his car. He got in on the driver's side. Easing the car from the curb, he drove it down the road, away from Bride's Inn. Crystal glanced back at the lights glowing in every window. She narrowed her eyes, her gaze riveted to a window on the third floor. A woman stood there, dressed in a long, white gown as she gazed out into the night.

"I spoke with the surgeon, Crystal. They're going to do the surgery on December thirteenth."

Michael's voice cut through her thoughts. Her heart raced.

"That soon?"

Michael gripped the steering wheel, turning right at the end of the long drive.

"Yes, Dr. Greene is an excellent oncologist and one of the best cancer surgeons I know. You're in good hands."

*December thirteenth.*

It was only a few weeks away.

By then, Miranda would have her baby. Crystal would have something to celebrate, something to look forward to, rather than something to dread,

She decided to change the subject. "I hear that Harlan, the police chief, asked you to work on the murders with them."

"I used to be a coroner."

She lifted a brow. "I didn't know that."

He smiled. "When I was younger, I got caught up in the furor and excitement that all those CSI shows created on television."

She gazed out the window at the passing scenery. The moon seemed to follow them as they drove along the highway that lined the woods and cliffs leading to the ocean.

"Why did you change your mind?"

"I wanted to help the living."

They drove for a few more minutes in silence. As Crystal gazed out at the darkness she suddenly realized something.

“Michael, you missed the turn for my house.”

He continued to drive, his hands locked on the steering wheel.

She glanced back. “You should have made a left.”

“No, Crystal. I shouldn’t have.” His voice sounded dull and flat, devoid of emotion.

She rubbed the skin above her right eye, the ache growing worse. A wave of nausea gripped her belly.

Crystal pointed straight ahead. “Make a right. That’s Ivy Lane, you can—”

“No.”

She glanced at him, her palms growing moist.

“You’ve got to.” She glanced behind her, at the darkened road, the nausea rolling in her stomach. “Michael, I feel sick.”

He continued to drive. “Yes, I’m sure you do, sweetheart.”

*Sweetheart?*

Michael turned the wheel sharply, causing Crystal to slide into the passenger side door. She gripped the handle.

“What are you doing?” The car bumped along the road. “You can’t turn around here. This dirt road leads to the woods.” She covered her mouth, willing the bile rising in her throat to stay where it was. “Michael, please.”

He didn’t reply, but continued to drive the car along the dirt road. Darkness surrounded them, the pitch-black night sucking them further into the woods.

Crystal’s heart raced.

Finally, Michael stopped the car.

An eerie silence followed. Crystal reached up to put on a light, but Michael slapped her hand away. She reared back against the door as her eyes adjusted to the dark.

She watched as he reached into his pocket, withdrawing a syringe. “What are you doing?”

“Soon, you’ll be like her.”

Fear clogged her throat as realization dawned.

“You killed that young girl, didn’t you?”



He laughed. "Stupid child. Wandering in the woods like that. She should have known better."

He uncapped the syringe.

Crystal gripped the handle on the car door. Wrenching it open, she swung both feet onto the dirt. She felt a pinch on her arm. Dizziness made her head swim. She forced her body to remain upright as she pushed on, determined to get away from Michael.

In the next instant, her right foot sunk into the earth.

Her body hit the ground.

She lost the battle against the tide of fatigue, her mind slipping into a black, endless void.

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The following morning, Anthony leaned against the door to Crystal Jewelers but saw no sign of its lovely owner.

His heart tripped happily when he heard footsteps behind him.

"She's still not here?"

His shoulders slumped when he heard Serena's voice.

Serena shook her head. "I've been calling her cell phone, but she doesn't answer."

Anthony heard voices coming from the lobby.

Serena's strained expression relaxed. "That's probably her."

They hurried to the lobby to find Seth speaking to Clarice.

Serena rushed by Anthony.

"Where's Crystal?" She grabbed hold of Seth's arm.

"Not home." Seth glanced around the lobby, then towards Crystal's shop. "I hoped to see her car outside or at least the taxi."

Anthony cocked his head. "Why would she take a cab to work?"

Silence greeted him. No one said a word.

"I'm calling Doctor Crawford." Serena dug a cell phone from the pocket of her jeans and started to dial.

Anthony took a step closer. "Why are you calling a doctor?"

Serena shot Seth a look, then glanced at Clarice who shrugged her shoulders in response.

“I, uh...well, she had another date with him, with our town doctor,” Serena told him. Then she walked away, her ear glued to the phone.

Anthony felt every vein in his body throb with anger. So, that’s why they all acted so strangely! They didn’t want to tell him that Crystal had been with the noble town doctor.

Anthony realized the battle to win Crystal back was lost.

He walked out of the lobby, determined not to stay another minute at Bride’s Inn.

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Anthony marched down the long corridor near the banquet office, feeling a cold breeze swirl around his legs.

*Anthoneeeeeeeeeeeeeee...*

Glancing down the hall, his heart skipped several beats when he saw the figure of a woman dressed in a long white dress. He heard her voice in his head.

*You can’t leave.*

His eyes fluttered closed as he slumped against the wall.

*You must help her.*

His mind opened, allowing the strange specter entrance to the deepest recess of his thoughts.

*What are you talking about?*

His heart raced as he waited for the answer.

*Crystal.*

Anthony pushed away from the wall and opened his eyes. The lady in white stood before him.

He stepped back, fearing she would walk through him again.

*She needs you.*

“Why?” This time, he spoke aloud.

Her voice filled his mind.

*She’s in the woods.*

He pushed his fear aside and replied.

“She’s on a date with Dr. Crawford.”

She laid a hand on his arm, her translucent fingers gliding across his skin. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

“Leave me alone. You’re nothing but a figment of my imagination.”

*She’s in trouble.*

He felt a trickle of sweat slither down his back.

“What kind of trouble?”

*Danger. The woods. He’s with her. I saw them.*

“Who? Crawford?”

*Yes. He is not what he seems...I’ve seen his kind before...evil.*

Her image faded before his eyes. The empty corridor loomed before him.

“Anthony.”

He jumped when he heard his name. Seth’s face came into view. Anthony grabbed hold of him.

“Crystal’s in trouble.”

Seth’s brows rose.

Anthony shook his head, impatience building inside him. “Come on. I know where she is.”

Seth followed him. “Jake’s outside waiting in his truck.”

“We’ll need it,” Anthony told him as they hurried down the hall, through the lobby and out the doors. “And we haven’t got a moment to lose.”

Anthony climbed into the back seat of Jake’s truck.

“Go!” Anthony shouted. “I’ve got a very bad feeling about all this.”

Seth turned and gave him a measured look. In the rearview mirror, Anthony caught sight of Jake’s golden eyes.

Anthony told them about his encounter with the lady in white and what she told him.

Seth dialed his cell phone. “I’m calling the police.”

Anthony nodded, balling his right hand into a fist. He dug it into his thigh.

*I've seen his kind before...evil.*

The lady in white's words rang in Anthony's head.

Now, he prayed he wasn't too late to act on them.

## *Chapter Twelve*

Crystal felt something hard and scratchy against her back. As her vision cleared, she could see the sun setting, a hazy outline in the distance, barely visible through the thick growth of trees and vegetation. She tried to move, but head spun. Opening her mouth to scream, her cry lay still in her throat when she realized she couldn't move her lips. She struggled get to her feet, only to discover her hands were bound behind her back.

"I had to gag you and tie you to that tree."

She recoiled when she heard Michael's detached, flat voice.

"You slept for hours and when you woke, you fought me."

Crystal's head started to pound. Tears filled her eyes as terror consumed her.

She pushed and strained against her bonds, but her movements proved useless.

"Don't exhaust yourself, Crystal. I don't want you falling asleep on me again. I want you awake, just like the other one."

Her crystal tears pricked her eyes and fell down her face.

Reaching out, Michael captured one tiny crystal teardrop on the end of his index finger. It glinted in the sun for a few seconds then vanished.

"A medical marvel is what you are."

She recoiled, pushing her back into the tree.

Michael reached out and stroked her throat with the backs of his fingers.

"I like your neck, it's longer than the hers."

Crystal whimpered, then something inside her snapped. She tried to kick him, but her legs wouldn't move. Glancing down, she saw that he had bound her legs, too.

"Bastard," she hissed behind the tape covering her mouth.

Laughter was his response.

“I like you Crystal. So, I’ve got something special for you.”

Nausea rolled in her belly.

“I figured everything out, down to the last detail. Everyone knows I’ve been helping the police with this case. What *you* don’t know is that I’ve told the police I found evidence linking Anthony to the last crime scene.”

Crystal struggled in earnest.

“They’re arresting him for the murder of that girl, and questioning him about *you*.”

“They’ll find your car,” she managed, her voice muffled through the gag. Michael’s face swam before her eyes.

His soft laugh echoed in her ears.

“No they won’t. I’ve got it well covered with branches and leaves. We’re deep in the woods. They’ll never find you.”

In the distance, the sun began to dip below the horizon. Strange shadows danced before her eyes as darkness settled over the forest.

“I’m going to slit your lovely, long neck, and as you’re dying I’m going to give you a special treat.”

He laughed again when she began to struggle against her bonds, turning and twisting her body.

“This time I’m going to destroy the evidence.”

Crystal stilled.

“I’m going to *burn* you.”

This time he laughed out loud, the harsh sound piercing her ears.

“Alive.”

\*\*\*

Anthony didn’t know how long he trudged along with Seth, Jake, Harlan and the myriad of police officers combing the woods, searching for Crystal. As night began to fall, and darkness shrouded the woods, the cool, crisp, November air turned icy. Still, they walked further into the deep forest.

His voice grew hoarse from calling Crystal's name.

Anthony felt a tug on his sleeve. He looked over to see Harlan Traynor, Gray's Point Police Chief. He wore a grim look on his face.

"I want to talk to you."

Anthony faced Harlan.

"I want you to tell me the truth."

Harlan's quiet, menacing voice startled Anthony. "What are you talking about?"

Harlan cocked one leg in front of the other, resting his hand on his knee, the other on his gun. "How long are you going to lead us on this wild goose chase?"

Anthony shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about. Look," Trying to curb his impatience at Harlan's delay. "We don't have much time."

Harlan raised a brow. "Crawford told us about the evidence he found at the last crime scene, Zodan, so cut the shit."

Anthony's blood ran cold. He glanced at Seth and Jake, who stood off to the side. "Are you implying that I killed that poor girl?"

"I'm not implying anything. I'm asking you for the truth."

Anthony threw his hands in the air. "I don't believe this. Crystal is missing, and after what I told you—"

"What? Some bullshit story about the lady in white? You told Seth a couple of days ago that you don't believe in ghosts."

Anthony shot Seth a look. Seth turned away.

"I didn't. Not before I came to Bride's Inn."

"Lots of things have happened since you arrived at Bride's Inn, Zodan. Like the fact that a girl was murdered and now, Crystal Lane is missing."

Anthony's eyes widened. "You son-of-a-bitch," he growled. "How dare you accuse *me*?"

"Prove to me you're not involved in this. Prove to me that--"

"Hey, boss!"

Harlan turned his attention to a young officer.

"What is it McElroy?"

“The guys up ahead found a car buried in dirt and branches and all kinds of shi—” he glanced at Anthony. “Stuff.” The young man took a deep breath and continued. “They sent me back to tell you, and to show you this.” He handed Harlan a leather billfold.

Harlan took it from the young man’s outstretched hand. He opened it, revealing what looked to be identification. Seth and Jake moved closer, next to Anthony.

He felt like beating the shit out of them.

His heart raced when he heard Harlan say, “The car belongs to Doctor Michael Crawford.”

Anthony blew out a sigh.

“Come on!” Harlan shouted.

\*\*\*

As darkness blanketed the forest, it became increasingly difficult for Crystal to see.

She only hoped it was the same for Crawford.

Turning her head, she chewed and maneuvered the thick layers of tape covering her mouth, praying for the chance to scream her head off.

Hoping against all hope that someone would hear her.

She tasted blood, knowing that her frantic movements ripped the skin from her face, but she didn’t care.

Michael stood off to the side, rambling, searching through a bag for something.

“I always liked Miranda, too. If she wasn’t pregnant, she would have been next.”

Bile rose in Crystal’s mouth. She remembered Miranda telling her how Michael came to Bride’s Inn when her endometriosis acted up.

Everyone trusted Michael.

“I found it!”

In the dim light that remained, she could make out the gleam of a scalpel.

Michael lifted it high, the moon’s pale glow reflecting off the long blade.

She made one final, frantic effort to loosen the tape at her mouth. Her scream came from the very bottom of her soul.

She didn’t want to die. *Not at the hands of a madman.*



Again, she screamed, but not before she felt the cold metal blade against her throat.

“Enough,” Michael commanded. “One more scream and I’ll slit your throat now.”

He turned and searched for more tape in his bag. Crystal took that opportunity to lift her feet and kick him with all the strength left in her body. Her feeble attempt worked, and he tumbled to the ground.

Then she heard someone shout her name.

She flexed her jaw moving her cheek muscles outward, loosening the tape some more.

“Here!” she shouted, her voice hoarse. “I’m here.”

Crystal saw beams of light, heard dogs barking.

Michael staggered to his feet and placed the tip of the knife blade against her throat. He nicked her once, the warm blood trickling down her neck.

Crystal grew faint, but willed her body to remain upright as pain shot through her neck.

She wouldn’t leave this world without a fight.

\*\*\*

“You take one more step and I’ll slit her throat from ear to ear.”

Anthony halted his movements, his eyes riveted to Crystal. He thought quickly, searching his mind for a distraction. Summoning every ounce of strength, he commanded each of his muscles to obey. Soon, his mind and body became one giant ball of energy as he feet left the ground.

Crawford’s eyes grew wide at the sight, watching as Anthony’s body floated upward. Against the silhouette of the moon, Anthony’s dark frame rose higher, moving forward, until he floated right in front of Crawford.

Throwing back his head, he willed his body and mind to stay erect. He hovered over Crawford, then tilted his face forward, a feral look in his eyes.

Crawford shouted once, dropping the knife as fear tightened his face, the color draining from his features.

Anthony heard the crack of a whip, the sharp sound breaking his hypnotic trance.

He fell to the ground, his body hitting the soft, moist earth with a thud, his mind engulfed in darkness.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

“Come on, Anthony, the doctor said we have to keep waking you every twenty minutes.”

He shifted restlessly.

“Anthony, open your eyes or I’m getting the smelling salts, damn it.”

Was that Serena?

“Anthony!”

His eyes flew open. He turned his head to see Serena squatting by his chair.

“You’ve got quite a bump there.” She fingered the bandage on his head. “How are you feeling?”

“Like crap.” His heart pounded in time to his head. “Crystal?”

“She’s fine. Resting.”

“I want to see her.” He moved to get up, but Serena pushed him back in the chair. He immediately tried to stand again.

“Stubborn,” she muttered. “Just like Seth.”

She helped him walk to Crystal’s room.

Crystal lay sleeping, her head nestled on a pillow. Her beautiful mouth—lips he’d kissed so tenderly—looked red and scraped.

“She refused to stay in the hospital. I told her she could stay here.”

He walked over to the bed, careful not to wake his sleeping angel. Easing his tall frame into a chair next to the bed, he told Serena, “This is where I want to be, too.”

She gave him a small smile and brought him a blanket. “I’ll be back to wake you if you should fall asleep again.”

Anthony blew out a frustrated sigh. “There’s no use arguing with you, is there?”

“No, so don’t wear yourself out trying,” Serena grinned. “I’ll be back soon.”

She walked out leaving him alone with Crystal. He watched her sleep, her breathing deep and even.

“Anthony?”

He froze in the chair, not daring to move a single muscle when he heard Crystal call his name. Taking a deep breath, he looked into her eyes. One tiny crystal tear lay on her cheek. He watched in fascination as it shimmered in the dim light of the room then disappeared. Leaning over, he gently wiped her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

She grabbed hold of his wrist, kissing his palm.

“Come to bed.” Crystal patted the empty space next to her.

Anthony climbed into the bed. She settled against his chest, one of her legs brushing his, the tips of her breasts gliding across his chest. His head ached, and now his loins. He didn’t know what felt worse in that moment, the battle he waged against sleep or the battle against his body, stirred to a fever pitch by his angel.

He blinked as his eyes grew heavy and he willed them to remain open.

“Sleep,” she whispered, her soft voice kissed his ear. “I’ll watch over you.”

Anthony’s eyes closed. He thought he heard “I love you” as he succumbed to sleep.

What felt like hours later, he woke to the feel of Crystal as she stroked his chest, her fingers gliding across his skin. His cock responded to her touch, rising as her hand settled over the tip. She slid the pad of her thumb across the head of his shaft, stroking it until he thought he’d lose his mind from the exquisite torture.

She gave him a small smile. “I didn’t want to startle you from sleep, I wanted you to wake up happy.”

Bending slightly, he placed a kiss on her platinum locks. His head didn’t ache as much, in fact—

Crystal slid a hand inside his underwear.

He felt damned good.

The urge to mate with her, to be inside her, grew to epic proportions as his cock swelled in her hand. Anthony glanced at the raw, red skin around her lips. How in hell could he make love to her now? He'd have to be the worst bastard, the most callous—

She whispered in his ear. "I need you. Please."

*Shit!*

He eased her away. "Not with your injuries. I'd only make them worse."

Her mouth tilted down into a pout. It was all he could do to restrain his need to pounce on her.

She trembled. He felt her body quiver as her mound brushed his cock.

"I won't shatter, Anthony. I promise."

She rolled away from him, rising on her knees, lifting the end of her nightgown, pulling it up to reveal the pale creaminess of her bare skin. Her long, platinum hair tumbled over her shoulders and down her chest. Placing her hands on her thighs, she leaned over and kissed his forehead, her brown-crested nipple inches from his mouth, the ends of her long hair caressing his chin.

"If you don't want to kiss my mouth, kiss me here," she spoke in a soft voice, lifting her breast to his mouth.

In a swift movement, he rolled her onto her back, his eyes roaming over her body as he ripped the clothes from his. He didn't think he could possibly bear another minute, but didn't want to blow it again. Not this time. He would love her until they were both mindless.

Anthony reached for her breasts, taking them into his hands, kissing one, then the other, sliding the tip of his tongue across the end of her nipple. She whimpered, the pleased sound drifting by his ears.

He wasn't sure who was undergoing more pleased pain, she or him. Every time she moved, her mound kissed his cock, fueling his body with desire's energy. He wanted to brand her, to fill her with his power—his life force.

He wanted to make them one, a solid union of man and woman that no one could tear apart ever again.

Wild, reckless abandon grew inside Crystal until it reached a crescendo. Her clit throbbed with need as passion's peak loomed before her. The need to mark her magic man, to meld her body with that of her dark sorcerer, filled her with urgency.

In a bold move, she placed her hands against his chest and hooked one leg across his lean hips, rising up on her knees over him. His dark eyes opened wide, then a grin split his face as he lay back, watching as she grasped his stiff member between her hands.

Crystal rotated the pads of her thumbs across the head of his shaft, leaning down to lick the tiny drop of clear fluid that seeped from the end. She placed her mouth over his penis, suckling him the way he had filled his mouth with her breasts. Crystal felt powerful, energized, the tiny nub of flesh between her legs pulsing in time to each flick of her tongue against the head of his shaft.

Anthony stroked her head with his hands, his fingers playing in her hair as she massaged the engorged sac between his legs, treating it to light flicks of her tongue.

Crystal took a deep breath, rose up on her knees, and grasped his erect shaft, placing the tip against her labia. Her hand shook as she guided it inside her.

Anthony covered her hand with his. "Let me help you, angel." Her vaginal walls tightened, as he helped her guide his member inside. He stopped, his face drawn in serious lines. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, taking a deep breath at the sensation of him filling her.

Grasping her waist with both hands, he slid her down the length of his shaft, a slow journey of bliss as the ridge she touched so lovingly before, slid along the tiny bud between her legs, the friction igniting the spark of desire.

She followed his lead, easing her body down as he guided his stiff member upward, enjoying the sensual ride on his body. Increasing the speed at which she slid up, then down, her journey to feel alive continued. The need to feel bound, his soul to hers, blossomed as her clit pulsed so hard she cried, "Anthony!" then she collapsed against his chest, curling her fingers against him.

What followed next was silence, their mingled breathing the only sound in the room.

Crystal lay still, her body still bound to his, his shaft imbedded inside her.

She remained awake, listening to the sound of the clock ticking, enjoying the sensation of being held in Anthony's arms.

The memory of their lovemaking would be all she had.

For what she needed to do next would cause him—and her—more pain and heartache than either of them could bear.

She had to force her magic man to leave her forever.

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Later, Anthony heard the soft knock on the door to his suite. He opened it to find Crystal there. Pulling her inside, he kissed her, being careful to avoid the tender, red skin around her mouth.

She pulled away and walked into the room.

His eyes didn't leave her face.

"I wanted to say thanks."

He frowned. "For what?"

"Oh," she said brightly, picking at a piece of something on her skirt. "For last night."

His eyes widened, then he grinned. "You're welcome. But it was mutual."

He watched her tongue snake out, moistening her lips. She did it a couple of times, as though nothing would ease what looked to be a very parched mouth. Her body shook, too. Anthony saw just the barest hint of a tremble as she stood before him.

She walked away and stood by the door. Anthony thought her face would crack any second.

"I told Serena that I finally got my chance."

He angled his head. "Your chance for what?"

"To make it with you. I bet her that I could."

He blinked once, not quite registering what she said.

"It was a lot of fun."

"What in hell is going on here?" He felt anger burn inside him.

Crystal took a deep breath. "You were a great fuck."

He stood still as board, afraid to move.

“I told everyone I had sex with the Amazing Zodan. Even a couple of those reporters that stopped by Bride’s Inn this morning.”

“I don’t believe you,” he ground out. “You’re lying.”

She shrugged again, folding her arms across her chest. “I kind of like the attention. It’s nice, knowing that I fucked a big-time celebrity.”

He moved with lightening speed, grabbing her wrist, pulling her towards him.

“I swear, if you say that one more time, I’ll—”

He ran a hand through his hair, watching as she rubbed her wrist.

“I’m sorry, Crystal, I-I didn’t mean that, it’s just that I don’t understand why you’re doing this.” Anthony shook his head. “Just tell me what’s wrong, and I’ll make it right, I swear it.”

She shook her head, the violent, side-to-side motion making her platinum hair swirl around her shoulders. His jaw dropped when he saw the tears in her eyes.

“You can’t make anything right.”

He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her forward. For just a minute, he felt her body relax, felt her begin to surrender.

Then she said the one thing that pierced his heart and his soul.

“You’re a fucking freak,” she told him, her voice pitched low. “You always were.”

He stepped back, his face changing from confusion to hurt.

She had fired her arrow and made her mark.

Now, she had to get the hell out of there before she changed her mind.

“Freak. I hate you.” She told him, hoping he didn’t hear the tremble she heard in her own voice.

She turned on her heel and ran, managing to make it to the door, but she couldn’t open it. Turning her head, she saw that he held one hand against it. Crystal turned and twisted the knob, pulling on the door, but it wouldn’t budge.

If she didn’t get out of there soon, she’d collapse.



Anthony turned her around, pinning her against the door, his mouth grinding against hers. The fiery, yet sweet assault on her lips strained every ounce of her resolve.

“Don’t do this,” he begged, his voice ragged.

She yanked open the door and fled out of Anthony’s suite of rooms.

She didn’t dare look back.

Fearing that he would come bounding from the room in search of her.

But also afraid that he wouldn’t.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Time passed, but Anthony couldn't be sure if it was days or hours since he'd seen Crystal.

His last encounter with her played in his mind like a movie rerun. He couldn't stop it, and he didn't know if he wanted to. The more it played, the more it fueled his anger, his hurt and his bitterness.

The memory also cemented in his mind that the world contained no magic. As he sat on the back porch of his parents' grand home that lined the myriad of canals running through Ft. Lauderdale, he brooded, wondering how in hell he could have been so stupid, so trusting, so—

“You haven't touched your lunch. Not hungry?”

His eyes met his mother's.

Anthony pushed his plate away. “It looks delicious, but I had something before I left New York.”

She nodded, her blue-gray eyes never leaving his face. “Your father will be surprised you're here. He's out playing golf, but he should be home soon.” She angled her head. “What's wrong?”

He pasted a smile on his face and took a sip from his water glass. “Nothing.”

Moirra dabbed her lips with her linen napkin, then placed it on the table. “Of all my children, I worry about you the most.”

Anthony looked away, hating that she always seemed to see right through him. He met her determined look with one of his own.

“I told you I'm fine.”

She glanced at the fork laying a few inches away from Anthony's plate. It slid over to his dish, making a clinking sound against the porcelain plate.

Anthony picked up the fork, running the pad of his thumb across the tines. They felt hot. He gave his mother a level look.

"Dad would be shaking his head right now if he saw you do that."

She grinned. "I always try to keep my hand in things. You know that." Her face turned serious. "I know you too well, Anthony. When you were 'up,' as I like to call it, you barge into town like a rabble-rouser. When you were 'down,' you'd slink back into our lives, your visit somber, and your father would say it was like walking on eggshells. We never knew what to say to you."

"That was when I gambled," he snapped. Softening his tone, he said. "That's all behind me now."

"It's what lies before you that's got me concerned." She walked over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Of all my children, you're the most like me. I never saw any of my abilities in them like I saw in you—the magic just wasn't there."

He shook his head. "There's no magic in the world."

She took the seat next to him. "But there is. And the real magic is love, it's—" "Bullshit."

Moirra shook her head. "Oh, Anthony, it is there. Truly."

She removed a pendant and chain from around her neck. "Here," she opened his hand, placing the chain and pendant in his palm. "I want you to have this."

For as long as he could remember, his mother had worn that pendant.

"Go on, open it." She nodded towards him. "It's a locket. There are pictures inside." She smiled at him. "I think you'll like it."

He released the catch on the locket and opened it to reveal miniature portraits of a man and a woman.

"The man you'll probably recognize—he's your ancestor, Derek Zodan. And the woman..."

Anthony's couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the picture of the woman. She looked just like Crystal!

“Her name was Larena. Very little was known about her, except that Derek loved her to distraction. You know about Derek, about...” Moira’s voice shook. “About how he died?”

“They burned him alive because they thought he was a witch.”

One tear slipped down Moira’s face. “People are afraid of the power we possess. They always were.” She ran her finger over Derek’s picture. “Legend says that Larena died by his side, but their spirits wouldn’t rest until someone in my family made things right. Until someone suffered doubt and ridicule like they did. Someone,” she gazed at Anthony, “Like you.”

His cell phone rang. Placing the locket on the table in front of him, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the phone. Glancing at the number in the window, his heart began to beat wildly.

*Bride’s Inn.*

“Excuse me for a minute,” he told Moira. “I have to take this call.”

“Of course,” she smiled.

Anthony answered on the third ring as he made his way to one of the guest bedrooms.

“Anthony?”

His shoulders slumped. “Hello, Serena.”

“I know she’d probably kill me for calling you, but at this point I really don’t care.”

He frowned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Who would?”

“Crystal.”

His hand shook. Gripping the phone tightly, he replied. “There’s nothing to say, Serena. Crystal and I are through. We’re—”

“She’s sick, Anthony. Very sick.”

He plopped down on the bed as Moira entered the room. “Is everything okay?” she mouthed to him.

He shook his head, no.

“She’s got cancer, Anthony.” Serena continued. “Michael Crawford had been treating her, upon my advice.” Her voice broke.

Anthony rose from the bed, his legs unsteady.

“Now Crystal won’t listen to any of us and she won’t go to another doctor because she’s scared. We don’t know where else to turn. We need you to come back, to Bride’s Inn...and to Crystal.”

“I’ll be on the next plane to New York,” he told Serena.

“Thank you, Anthony,” Serena’s voice broke.

He ended the call, fearing he’d cry, too.

“I’m going back to Bride’s Inn,” he told Moira.

She laid a hand on his forearm. “It’s where you belong.”

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Crystal heard what sounded like a motorcycle engine outside her bedroom window. Pulling back the curtain, she gazed out and saw a familiar figure on the seat of a sleek Harley. The rider pulled off his helmet, shaking out his long, dark hair.

Her heart started to pound, a bead of perspiration lining her upper lip as she watched the leather-clad rider dismount and walk up the path leading to her two-story home.

The man pounded on her front door. She watched as he took a step back and gazed upward.

He removed the dark sunglasses shielding his eyes from the late autumn sun. Even with the distance between them, she noticed his silvery eyes; she'd know them anywhere.

Crystal left her bedroom and crept down the stairs, her heart pounding in rhythm to the furious knocking on her door.

"I know you're in there, Crystal. If you don't let me in, I'll camp out on your doorstep. I'm sure your neighbors would enjoy the show."

Opening her front door a crack, she peered outside.

Anthony folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe. "Smart move on your part, otherwise your doorstep would have turned into my bed."

"Go away." Her voice shook.

He raised one dark brow. "No." Anthony plunked his tall frame down on her stoop.

"I'll call the police."

He glanced back at her. "Harlan's my friend now, remember? He can't say enough good things about me."

She shook her head and opened the door. Anthony rose to his feet and stepped inside, shutting it behind him.

Crystal backed up a step, afraid of her own reaction to Anthony's overwhelming presence. His black leather jacket lay open, revealing a set of heavy silver chains around his neck. They seemed a stark contrast to his black shirt. His right ear was lined with a set of small silver earrings.

She folded her arms across her breasts, hoping she appeared commanding. "You have exactly sixty seconds to tell me why you're here."

He raised one dark brow. "Is that how you treat the savior of Bride's Inn and you?"

She swallowed, hard. "I already thanked you for that."

He grinned, a wide, wicked smile lining his face. "And very nicely, I must say. I play that last time we made love over and over again in my mind."

Heat rose in Crystal's face. Her cheeks burned at the mention of their lovemaking. That traitorous, delicious throbbing began in the lower region of her body. Would she ever be immune to Anthony Zodan's physical presence?

"Ah," he said, reaching out to draw the tip of his index finger along the rim of her jaw. "I see you remember, too."

He walked further into the room and sat down in one of her living room chairs, looking as though he meant to stay.

"I'm busy, so state your piece and leave." She made her voice sound as snooty as she could.

He didn't budge.

Was he totally out of his mind? After the way she had treated him before, why didn't he just leave?

Anthony drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair.

"I can tell you that on the flight here to New York, I kept battling with myself."

She narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

He rose from the chair and walked towards her. Crystal wasn't sure what he meant to do. His gait seemed slow and measured.

"I kept asking myself what I should do first when I saw you. Paddle your very beautiful ass or kiss you senseless."

She glanced behind her, realizing he'd backed her into a small table. It wobbled, but she ignored it, choosing to scoot back further, until her back hit the wall behind her. The table fell over, hitting the floor with a loud crash.

He raised both brows. "Nervous?"

She angled her chin, but it wobbled, just like the table. "Why? Should I be?"

Anthony caged her in, leaning both hands on either side of her head, bracing his palms against the wall. Leaning his olive-toned face in close to hers, his eyes took on a stormy gray color. He looked positively delicious and male, like a sleek, black cat waiting to strike.

"You should be nervous, angel."

Her heart skipped several beats at the sound of her pet name.

Leaning down, he brushed his lips across hers, his voice a wicked whisper. "I really should beat you soundly for what you pulled. I'd relish every second of it. And I may do just that, if you don't tell me the truth."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Serena called me."

She lashed out at him then, hitting him squarely in the chest. He didn't budge, much to her chagrin.

"She had no right to call you." Her voice broke.

He grabbed hold of her hand, placing it over his heart.

"At least one of you had the sense to do so."

She balled her hand into a fist, digging it into his chest. He didn't flinch.

"Go away, Anthony, just go away."

He shook his head, drawing her close into the circle of his arms. Crystal gave in and snuggled against his chest. He smelled of leather and wind—of the inner freedom she



so desperately wanted. Wrapping his arms around her, he tucked her against his chest, resting his chin on the top of her head.

His voice held a tender, teasing note. "I won't leave until I make sure you can't sit for a week."

"What chance do I have? Do we have?" She wrapped her arms around her waist.

Anthony reached for her shoulders, drawing her close. He kissed her forehead, trailing his lips across her temple.

"I know a doctor. He could help you. He's one of the top oncologists in the country."

She shook her head then her voice became a mere whisper. "And what magic will he perform? For all I know, the cancer could have spread. Crawford was insane. How could I trust anything he said to me?"

"We'll show your tests to the new doctor and see what he has to say."

She shook her head, no.

He studied her for a few seconds.

"I want to show you something." Anthony turned her so that she faced a mirror hanging on the wall opposite them. "Look at your cheeks, Crystal."

Crystal blinked once as her reflection came into focus. Her face was wet! Lifting his index finger, he ran the tip of it across her moist cheek. A clear drop of water clung to his skin.

"Go on," he told her, smiling. "Feel your face. It's wet from your tears."

She ran a hand over both cheeks, feeling the moisture on her face.

She had cried a woman's real tears.

"You see?" he whispered in her ear. "There's always hope that things will turn out okay."

She turned in his arms, settling her head against his shoulder.

"Will you see that doctor I know?"

She looked up at him and nodded, yes.

"My magic man," she told him. Standing on her toes, she leaned up and kissed him full on the mouth. "I love you."

He let go of a glad cry. Lifting her off her feet, he twirled her around.

From the corner of her eye, Crystal saw them.

A shower of moonbeams hit the ground, pouring magic, and love, all around the two radiant lovers.

## *Epilogue*

A few nights later, the lady in white walked the halls of Bride's Inn, her slippared feet floating above the polished oak wood floors.

Traveling down the hall and up the grand staircase, she stopped for a moment, remembering how she tripped and fell to her death on her wedding day. She stood for a few moments, reliving the surprise and horror.

On she moved, desperate to get away from that memory, seeing a light at the top of the stairs.

She floated towards it, only to realize, it was Crystal and Anthony's suite of rooms. She floated through the door to check on Crystal, watching as she slept, trailing a shimmery hand across the small scar on Crystal's forehead.

Her surgery was successful.

Anthony's dark head and tall form moved closer, shielding his wife from the cool air the lady in white blew around them.

As the sun rose in the sky, Bride's Inn came to life.

Old guests left, making room for new.

When night fell once more, the lady in white paid a visit to a new arrival, the guest's shrill scream piercing the night air.

The lady in white knew what she had to do to get to the light.

The owners of Bride's Inn would have to help her now...

*They had no choice.*

## ***About the Author***

**Catherine Chernow writes sensual, fast-paced, contemporary romance – the kind of books that make your body sizzle and your heart soar.**

**She was born in Fairbanks, Alaska, an “army brat”, and at the age of three her family and she moved to Long Island, New York, where she still resides.**

**Check out her website at [www.CatherineChernow.com](http://www.CatherineChernow.com) for reviews and excerpts.**