

s e l e n a k i t t



BLIND DATE

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By Selena Kitt

Foreward

This book is written in a style called “*magical realism*.” What in the heck is that, you ask? If you’ve never experienced the genre, it can seem as if the author has gone crazy...or maybe thinks you are.

The Wikipedia definition of magical realism is:

(a)n aesthetic style or genre of fiction in which magical elements are blended into a realistic atmosphere in order to access a deeper understanding of reality. These magical elements are explained like normal occurrences that are presented in a straightforward manner which allows the "real" and the "fantastic" to be accepted in the same stream of thought.

Basically, it just means that the author introduces something totally weird and out of place in a realistic setting. In most works of fiction, authors want to “suspend disbelief.” In other words, they want you to totally immerse yourself in the story and find nothing that might pull you out of it or make you question their created reality.

With magical realism, it’s nearly the opposite. The author will give you a realistic setting, and then introduce totally unexplainable magical or unrealistic elements to the story.

This book is a re-telling of the Eros and Psyche myth, but it doesn’t take place in ancient Greece—it takes place in suburban America with characters who are larger than life and behave in very unusual ways. What else could you expect from gods and goddesses?

If you haven’t brushed up on your Greek mythology lately, take a look at a brief synopsis of the story somewhere on the Internet. This re-telling doesn’t follow it to the letter, but you may have more fun reading if you are already familiar with the myth.

Magical realism can be a strange, disconcerting experience, but once you’ve realized what’s happening, buckle your seatbelt and hang on, because it can also be a fun, wild ride!

I hope you enjoy this re-telling of the myth. Happy reading!

-Selena Kitt

Chapter One

Annie found herself playing a game she hadn't even thought about since she was twelve years old and Robbie McCormick cut his lip on her braces. Her image of some benign affair, where everyone stood around with a wine glass and nibbled canapés, was deteriorating faster than her last blind date—with Stan the Used-Car-Salesman.

She'd had no idea when her sisters had invited her to this thing that it was going to be some nightmarish, pre-teen flashback. Annie felt ridiculous in such a revealing position, sitting cross-legged, trying to tuck her pastel patchwork skirt between her thighs. She noticed a lot of the women had discarded their shoes, but she was wearing soft, knee-high black boots that didn't lend themselves to a casual slipping-off. The entire room had morphed from mingling adults to a gang of unruly adolescents, hooting and howling and elbowing each other the minute they all sat in a circle on the floor in their suits and skirts.

Her oldest sister, Chloe, spun the empty rum bottle and everyone roared when the narrow end settled on Rebecca, the middle sister. While the men whistled and whooped, both women crawled, giggling, toward the center of the large circle. Their cheeks flushed the same shade of rosy pink as they briefly touched lips.

Annie blushed as well, appalled and astonished at how her body remembered these old games with a dreadful pang and tingle: first kisses and two-minutes-in-the-closet fumbblings. There was the time she and her sisters had tried to make their own soap opera just to have an excuse to kiss the boys. Then

there was the summer they'd built a fort made of someone's discarded turquoise carpet and played spin-the-bottle with an empty gin bottle Gary Hillman snatched from his mom's stash.

There was a burst of laughter from the other room and Annie glanced toward the adjoining door to the den. She wondered what they were playing in there. Truth or dare? They sound just like teenagers, she thought, like some feral pack full of adolescent angst. Are we really just one immature game away from that part of ourselves? She smiled wryly, feeling far removed from any sensible adult reality as she watched Rebecca creep back to the middle of the circle to spin the bottle.

A chorus of "woo-hoos!" sang out when the bottleneck found John, Becca's husband of two years, and they kissed. Annie winced when she saw his tongue slip into her mouth. She looked away, focusing on the red and white streamers hanging above her head. There were red foil hearts with plump cupids pasted in their centers spinning wildly on thread and attached to the ceiling by thumbtacks.

Annie was surprised Chloe had allowed tacks in her ceiling, even for something as important as maintaining the theme of the night—the sound of the bottle spinning on the hardwood floor brought Annie's focus back to the game. John's eyes were glued to the bottle as it slowed. She ducked as if she could avoid it as the bottle stopped, pointing just past her knee to the chubby girl on her left. Thank god. John was crawling toward them, grinning and eyeing Annie's

hemline, while the redhead next to her blushed to match her hair. Rebecca was watching, looking casual, but Annie knew better.

“Hey, I think this is pointing to Anne,” John exclaimed as he drew nearer. “Look at the angle.”

“This isn’t geometry, John, come on,” Annie hissed at him, keeping her voice low, hoping her sisters couldn’t hear. “Kiss the girl and get it over with already! Looks like she needs it more than I do.” Annie cut her eyes to the redhead’s face, which had flushed a deeper shade. The girl looked down at her lap as if there were something interesting there.

John raised his eyebrows at Annie, and she saw she had made a mistake. “Rebecca, I’m serious. Come look! I swear this thing is pointing at your sister. Chloe, are you the referee here?”

“John, it’s pointing at Lynn, not Annie,” Chloe called. “Come on, let’s keep the game going.”

“It is not,” John insisted. “You aren’t even over here! Come look!”

“Oh fuck this,” Annie muttered, struggling to stand without flashing the entire group a shot of her panties. For a moment, she thought she had succeeded, but from the look on a few of the guys’ faces, she realized they had seen something. Raising her voice, she said, “You know what, John? You kiss the fat girl here, and I’ll just step out of this juvenile little game that I never in a million years thought I’d be playing at the age of twenty-seven, okay? What do you say?”

Annie nudged him hard in the side with her shin as she passed. She heard him grunt. She turned back when she got to the kitchen door and saw the redhead standing, wobbly, making her way in the opposite direction. Annie felt a stab of guilt and shoved open the swinging door to her sister's pristine kitchen. The light was off, and she left it, knowing her way even in the dark. She plopped onto one of the stainless steel kitchen chairs and unzipped her boots with a sigh, then toed them off.

Annie could hear her sister busily trying to save the day. "Let's play the kissing game!"

She heard someone—possibly John—say, "I thought we were?"

Annie sighed in relief when that awful, stunned silence turned back to party chatter. She wished she drank or still smoked—or did anything dangerous and bad for her. Anything that could make her feel good—or just alive—even for a moment. Her sisters seemed to think the answer to Annie's attitude was a man and had set about finding her one—with a vengeance! When she looked at Chloe and Rebecca's lives though, she didn't find much to envy. If that's what having a man was about, she didn't want to have any part of it.

Besides, Annie wanted something more, something different. She was tired of all the games and hookups and pretending. She had been to hundreds of parties like this one, and she always felt like some aging, dark-haired Barbie doll propped up in the corner by her sisters for all the Kens to come by and gawk at. She could never be herself, even for a moment. She always felt too guarded to let herself really get to know people, let alone really feel anything for anyone.

Chloe poked her head through the swinging kitchen door, spilling light into the room. Annie covered her eyes, which had already adjusted to the darkness.

“What do you think you’re doing? You’re going to ruin everything!” Chloe hissed.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Annie spat back, giving her sister the finger.

Chloe rolled her eyes, opening the door to step in.

Annie leaped to press against the swinging door, trapping Chloe firmly between the door and the frame. Chloe grunted in surprise.

“I’m not kidding. I am not going back out there, so you can forget about it. What the hell are they doing now?” Annie stared past her sister, her brow furrowed and her mouth agape in horror as men and women in a circle were passing a playing card from person to person, mouth to mouth.

“The kissing game,” Chloe replied meekly.

“Oh my god. That’s it. Get out of this room and don’t let anyone else in here! You got me? I am done with this Hook-Annie-Up-Valentine-Shindig!”

“But, sweetie, you—”

“No! Not another word from you, okay?”

“Okay, fine. Could you...?” Chloe waved her hand, the one inside the kitchen, indicating the door where she was stuck. Annie eased off a little and Chloe sighed, stepping back out into the living room. “We were all just trying to do something nice for you, Annie.”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks a lot. Appreciate it. Go!”

Annie flopped into the kitchen chair, tipped it back and put her bare feet up. She smiled with a bit of satisfaction, knowing she was probably the first and

only person to have a body part other than maybe an elbow on Chloe's expensive table.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you that you could crack your head open doing that?"

Annie let out a yelp and the chair toppled backwards onto the hand-laid Italian tile. She saw stars bursting in the darkness behind her eyes and blinked rapidly to clear them. "Fuck!" she swore, rubbing the back of her head and rolling off the chair onto the floor. Her head was tender and already swelling, and she thought she could feel the wetness of blood. "I think I'm bleeding. Who's there? Where are you?"

"Right here. Are you okay? I'm sorry."

Annie saw the shadowy figure move out from underneath the kitchen table.

"I don't know if I'm okay. I think I'm bleeding." She tried to stand but immediately felt woozy again and had to sit. She rubbed the swelling on the back of her head, wondering how bad it really was. "Could you turn on the light, please?"

"I'm sorry, I can't do that," he replied, steadying her with a hand on her arm. It was a warm hand, large, with a firm grip.

"Gee, thanks, buddy. Fine, I'll do it myself." Annie sighed and started to stand again. His hand on her arm kept her from moving.

"No, please, don't." It was a request, but it didn't sound like one.

"Why? I think I'm really hurt."

“Here, let me see.” His hands were in her dark hair, moving over her scalp, finding the aching knot and massaging it. At first, she winced and pulled away, but then let him continue. God, it’s been too long since someone touched me like this.

“You’re not bleeding,” he assured her.

“How can you tell? It’s too dark in here. Let me turn on the light, and—”

“No!”

Annie jumped. “Okay, weirdo...who are you?” He moved away from her. “Hello?” There was no response, but she could make out his shape back under the table. Annie sighed and rubbed her head again. With her dizziness abating, she stood and headed for the light switch. “I don’t know what your problem is, but I’m—”

“I’m asking you.”

Annie’s hand hesitated on the switch.

“Please,” he implored her. “Don’t do that.”

“Why?” she asked again. There was no response, just a deep silence from the darkness under the table.

In the quiet, she could hear the party continuing in the living room. She turned her eyes to the dim outline of the door and heard Chloe direct, “No, no! Kitchen is off limits!”

Annie smiled gratefully. At least the door was being guarded for a while.

“Hey, are you still there?” She cringed, mentally slapping herself for asking such a stupid question.

“Yeah.”

Something in his voice drew her to him. There was a strength in it, a certainty that shouldn't be coming from underneath a kitchen table. She moved away from the door and back toward the voice, getting down on her knees to peer underneath. She thought she saw the shimmer of a pair of glasses. She saw his hands resting in his lap and found herself searching for the glint of a ring. A moment later, she smiled at her effort.

“So...why are you in here? Why don't you want me to turn on the light?”

“I don't...” He cleared his throat. It was the first time she had heard him hesitate. “I don't want you to see me.”

Annie sat back on her heels, unmindful of her skirt. There was no reason to worry about him glimpsing her panties in the dark! She let out her breath, feeling unsure and a little ambivalent about her sudden desire to reach out to him, this strange guy sitting alone in her sister's kitchen. Empathic by nature, she knew what it was like to want to get away from a party like this.

“Can I join you?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure, come on.” He patted the tile floor and she crawled under, leaning against the wall next to him. It wasn't a big table, pressed into a little breakfast nook. It only sported two chairs since only Chloe and David lived in the huge old Victorian house, but Annie and the stranger both fit comfortably enough underneath.

“So... you just wanted a break from all of that?” She waved her hand toward the door.

“Something like that.”

“Me, too.” Annie sighed and leaned her head back against the wall. She had forgotten about the bump and winced when she made contact. She brought her hand up to rub the sore spot—at least it was something to feel.

“I noticed.” He chuckled.

She flushed. “You didn’t hear what I said out there, did you?” That thought made her cringe with embarrassment.

“Yeah.” He sounded sad, but she didn’t sense a lot of judgment or a big guilt trip coming.

“Whoops. I was hoping you didn’t know what a bitch I can be,” she admitted. “First impressions and all...”

“Maybe it’s better if we all start out knowing who we really are. Wouldn’t that be a great change? Instead of just looking at people and assuming you know who they are...”

Annie waited for him to finish, but he didn’t, so she went on. “Actually, I’m not really like that. Most of the time. I mean, sometimes, sure, aren’t we all? But tonight, well, let’s just say there were extenuating circumstances.” Annie remembered John crawling across the circle, his eyes flickering between the hemline of her skirt and the V of her blouse. She couldn’t recall if he was licking his lips, but she could have sworn he was. It was always the same—even with her own brother-in-law.

“Were there?” He sounded interested, but Annie didn’t want to go there.

“Something like that.” They sat in silence for a moment, but it was a comfortable one. “I know what it’s like, not wanting people to judge you on appearances.”

“Do you?”

Whenever he asked a question like that, he seemed to want to know more. A man with a genuine interest in what she had to say was something Annie was unfamiliar with. Perhaps it was just that she found it hard to believe a man when he was looking at her. “Maybe not like you,” she said. “I mean, maybe it’s not the same, but I’ve spent my whole life being the beautiful one, and it’s just as hard as being unattractive. At least, you know, by society’s standards, or whatever...” Her voice trailed off and she wondered how that had sounded out loud.

“So I shouldn’t hate you because you’re beautiful?”

She laughed, embarrassed. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I shouldn’t have made that comparison. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound conceited, but maybe I am, a little. Maybe you can’t help it when everyone looks at you a certain way.”

“So, how is it the same?” Again, there was that interest.

Annie glanced once more at his hands. She loved a man’s hands—large, strong, yet capable of being so soft, so caring. His long legs were stretched out beyond the table’s edge, and she could see he was wearing boots. Darkness was funny. The way your mind used shapes and lines to fill in the blanks, how you could see some things and not others.

“Well,” she began, “it doesn’t matter, attractive or unattractive, really. At either end of the spectrum, people still judge you. They make assumptions about you based on how you look. They treat you differently. Do you know what I mean?” She found herself eager for him to understand. Her heart raced with the wanting.

Relief flooded her chest when he said, “Yeah, I do.” His fingers brushed hers in the darkness. “You have beautiful hands, Annie. So delicate.”

She flushed at the compliment, but didn’t respond, wondering if he had been looking at her hands with the same ulterior motive. Compliments often felt more like sharp barbs to her than anything else, but this particular arrow landed softly, with precision.

“What about that girl out there, the one sitting next to you?” he went on. His words jarred her, and she turned to look at him even though she could only see the outline of his profile in the darkness. “A little overweight, not conventionally pretty...”

“I...do you know her?” Annie asked, slinking down the wall a little.

“No, not really.”

Annie felt that flood of relief again. “I didn’t really mean it, you know. I wasn’t trying to be cruel.”

“No one tries to be cruel.”

“Well, that’s an unbelievably rosy view of the world, isn’t it?” Regretting the words immediately, she admonished herself and wished she could take them

back. She certainly wasn't succeeding in making a good first impression. She found it harder in the dark, and the irony didn't escape her.

He sighed. "Maybe I'm too much of an idealist."

"Or a romantic at heart. I can understand that."

The silence grew uncomfortable, and Annie tried to think of a way to say she was going to get up and leave. This was just too strange. Besides, she needed an aspirin. Her head was beginning to ache. She surprised herself when she asked, "What's your name?"

"Eric. You?"

"Annie."

"Well, Annie, since we're on the superficial questions, what do you do for a living?" She laughed, nudging him with her hip. She could almost hear him grinning.

"I'm a psychologist." She enjoyed telling people that for the varied responses she received, ranging from fear to curiosity. People were either afraid she was trying to analyze them, or they asked her to.

"Should I pull up a couch?"

She laughed again, giving him another nudge.

"Hey, I bruise easy, watch it."

This time she was sure she could hear the smile in his voice. She found herself genuinely wondering for the first time what he really did look like. "What about you?" she asked. She knew this was always the big question for guys, as if everyone of the masculine persuasion was defined by his profession.

“Me? I’m a matchmaker.” He said it without a hint of hesitation or pride, just a simple matter of fact.

Annie gasped out loud, covering her mouth with her hands in shock. “Oh, you’re kidding!”

“Nope.”

“Oh my god. Just my luck to be under the table with a matchmaker at a matchmaking party. Did my sister hire you?” she asked suspiciously.

“No. Which one is your sister?”

“I have two. Chloe and Rebecca. In that order.”

“And you’re the pretty one. Where do you fall?”

“At the end, the baby. And I’m really not that pretty.”

“Don’t lie. How’s your head?” There was that genuine concern again. In her playfulness, she had nudged herself quite close to him in the dark, and she was enjoying the warmth of his thigh, hip and arm touching hers.

“It hurts,” she admitted. “I think I need an aspirin.”

“I bet I can help. Do you want me to rub it?”

Annie hesitated. That was a fairly intimate thing to be doing anywhere, let alone in a dark kitchen under a table. Remembering how good his hands had felt when he’d checked to see if she was bleeding and then had continued to rub the growing knot, she relented. “Sure.” She suddenly didn’t care if it was sending him the wrong message. Then again, maybe it wasn’t the wrong message at all.

“Come here, then. Just put your head in my lap.”

Annie lay down on the tile, resting her cheek against his denim-clad thigh. His fingers slid through her hair, first finding then caressing the throbbing knot. The sensation seemed to lift and change as he touched her.

“This is cozy,” she murmured.

“Mmm.” His concentration seemed too focused for him to say much more.

His hands worked over her like magic. She closed her eyes and sighed happily. Eventually the silence stretched too taut for her. “You know, it was appearances that caused that whole scene out there in the first place.”

“Yeah?”

How could he show so much feeling in just one simple word, one genuine expression of interest? Feelings were the domain of her profession, for the most part, and she was well-attuned to them. This man could emote without any effort at all. That intrigued and disarmed her.

She sighed. “My sister’s husband, John. He came on to me for the first time at their engagement party, drunk off his ass and feeling me up on their own bed while I was looking for my coat. He’s never stopped. Sometimes I think my sisters got what they settled for in men, you know?”

“You don’t have a very high opinion of men, do you?” His fingers slipped lower, digging into the soft curve of her neck. She sighed, letting out a soft moan as he worked out the kinks. “Like that?”

Annie nodded. “Anyway, tonight isn’t the first time he’s pulled something like this. He made that huge scene out there because he wanted to kiss me

instead of that sweet little redheaded girl,” Annie sighed, listening to the sounds of the party, still going strong just outside the kitchen door.

“Now she’s sweet, not fat?”

The sound of his chuckle delighted her, but his comment made curl inward. “I was making a point. Let me tell you, it was for his sake, not hers.”

“It was quite a point. Game. Set. Match. But I think you may have missed your target. That’s the thing about going for the win like that. You need to have good aim.” His fingers worked their way down her spine, his other hand fanning her hair out over his thighs.

“Ouch.”

Eric’s hands paused. “Am I hurting your head?”

“No...my heart.”

He continued to rub her head in the silence, and slowly she found that the pain, at least the pain in her head, seemed to dissipate.

This time it was Eric who broke the quiet. “So, do you get along with your sisters?”

“I love them. Sometimes I can’t stand them, but I love them. They both set up this whole Valentine’s party to try to get me a man.” Annie giggled at the irony. She was now secreted in the kitchen with a matchmaker, despite her sisters’ Herculean efforts to line up all the single surgeons, tax attorneys and actuaries they could find—courtesy of Rebecca’s once-famous little black book.

“Sounds like you can get your own.”

“It’s not as easy as it sounds, actually,” she told him. “Ow, ow, too hard.” His touch became lighter, almost feather-light, and it made her shiver. “Most men just want one thing.”

“What’s that?” He sounded distracted as his hand stroked her shoulder.

“Um...”

“Oh, that. Right.”

Again, she could hear his smile. She had never noticed how much one could tell about someone’s expression even in the dark. That would make therapy interesting.

“And if I’m being honest, it’s not even that. I’m not averse to sex,” she admitted.

“Good to know.” It was a veritable grin now.

She smiled, too, letting that one slide. “If we could get to the sex that would be great, actually. Most men are, well...intimidated by me.”

“Is it your gracious charm?” He stroked her cheek with his fingertip.

She couldn’t even pretend to be angry at him with his hands doing such kind and generous things to her body. “Don’t be mean. I’m really not like that.”

“I know,” he said, and she believed him.

“Still, it’s funny how sometimes the prettiest girl in the room never gets hit on. Both of my sisters are married, and I’m by far better looking—at least that’s what everyone says.”

“You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were conceited. Who is everyone?” He traced the shape of her jaw, trailing his fingertip down her throat.

“I’m not conceited. Maybe I do sound it...to someone...like you...” she hesitated. “I just mean, you know, someone who feels like he wants to hide under a table...”

“Who is everyone?” he asked again.

“Oh, everyone.” She sighed. “You name it—my parents, my sisters, teachers, friends, family. The thing people say most often about me is: ‘Annie is the pretty one.’ It’s always followed by that silent assumption that I’m an idiot.”

“Hence the degree in psychology,” he mused. “Let me guess, you’ve got a doctorate.”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Law of compensation.”

“Very funny. So, do you have a degree in matchmaking, then?” Annie rested her hand on his thigh and snuggled up a little closer. The tile was getting cold under her hip and his warmth was comforting.

“They didn’t offer it where I went.”

“And where is that?”

“Olympia.”

Annie snorted, letting her Ivy League pretension show. “Are you kidding? Did you really go to Olympia? Which degree, medical transcription or vet tech?”

“Massage therapist.”

“Oh...” Annie tried to cover yet another unintentional, but clear, insult.

“Well, that explains why my head feels so much better.”

“Does it? Would you like me to do your shoulders? You’re pretty tight.”

“Eric, that’s gotta be the oldest line in the book for you massage therapists.” She laughed. Looking up at him, she could see the outline of his face—and yes, there were glasses—but she still couldn’t really make out his features.

“Perhaps.” This time she saw the flash of his teeth.

She smiled back. “Well, it’s working.”

“Then come here and sit between my legs.” His voice was warm and inviting and she flushed like a school girl as she delicately felt her way over his thigh, sensing him adjust to her shape as she settled herself.

“I haven’t been between a man’s legs...”

“In too long, I’d gather.” He chuckled.

The sound of his short laugh was rich and deep and it thrilled her again. She wondered what he would sound like if he really laughed out loud and she longed to hear him do so. His hands massaged her shoulder blades open as if they were wings she was just beginning to spread. She sighed, rolling her neck and inching back toward him. She heard his sharp intake of breath as she clutched his thighs.

“I take back what I said about Olympia,” she murmured. “Great school.”

“Is that a compliment?” He brushed her hair from her shoulders for better access.

“If I was a religious kinda girl, I’d say I’d died and gone to heaven,” she breathed, feeling both of his hands spreading over the entire expanse of her back from spine to ribs. “Ahhhh god, Eric, that...feels...incredible...”

“How about this?” His breath tickled the tiny hairs at the nape of her neck before he kissed her there, his lips full and warm. Annie shivered, her nails digging into his thighs, making him jump. She had forgotten they were sitting under her sister’s kitchen table in the dark, with a party going on in the other room. She had forgotten she didn’t know this man, that she had never seen his face. There was nothing but his hands, his mouth, and the soft velvet darkness all around them.

Chapter Two

“Can we stop talking?” she whispered, leaning back and turning her face so her cheek rested against his. “I don’t remember ever feeling this good.”

“Do you want to just see what happens?” he asked, his fingers trailing down her chin, her throat.

“No. I want to be what happens.”

His mouth found hers in the darkness, a slow journey from a mislaid kiss against her ear, a wet trail over her cheek leading to her open and anticipating lips. He kissed her like she was a secret he was keeping—something precious and tender and worth protecting.

Annie hesitated, waiting for him to stop her as her hand curled back to touch his cheek, expecting to find thick scars or warped flesh, but to her surprise, his skin was smooth and unmarred. She slithered her arm around his neck, slanting her mouth across his and teasing his lips with her tongue.

His fingers fumbled with her buttons and she helped him, exposing her skin to the cool kitchen air. Kitchens were always so damned cold when there was no cooking going on. She suspected it was the tile, but regardless, her nipples responded immediately to the temperature change. The angle of the kiss was awkward, but she was afraid to move and break their connection. His hand drifted over the soft material of her bra, and she was glad she had worn something with a definite texture, silky and light.

Annie believed she heard voices coming closer to the door and she pulled quickly away, listening intently. The conversation was muffled and unintelligible,

but after a few moments, she clearly heard her sister say, "In the kitchen." She looked at Eric, trying to keep her breath from being fast and audible. "Maybe we should go somewhere?" she whispered, ducking her head and moving to her hands and knees to crawl out from under the table. He grabbed her hips and she gasped, looking back at him as he held fast.

"No, we can stay here," he insisted, sliding his hands up her bare thighs.

"Are you sure?"

"Live dangerously." His hands roamed over ass as he lifted her skirt.

"What color are these panties?" He probed her crevice through the thin material and she wiggled and sighed, arching her back.

"Black," she whispered as he pushed her panties aside.

"Mm, shaved." He sounded delighted as his fingers investigated her moistness.

Annie was still worried about being interrupted and tried to concentrate on the sounds from beyond the door, but his fingers were too distracting. When she felt his tongue slip under the elastic of her panties, all logical thought was lost.

"Ohhh yesss..." She muffled her response against the back of her hand, biting and sucking her own flesh as his tongue found her clit. She arched her back, spreading her legs wider in a silent offering. He yanked her panties down, lapping at her, making her moan out loud.

"Shh." His breath was hot over her wet flesh, and she whimpered.

Annie thought the voices were receding, or maybe she just couldn't hear as well anymore with him sucking on her clit. As his mouth worked over her flesh,

she cared less and less about someone walking into the kitchen. Even if her sister's husband had burst in at that moment, Annie didn't think she would have reacted to him, except maybe with her middle finger.

He rolled her over on the tile, sliding her along the cold surface and pulling her panties off. Annie hissed, cradling her head in her hands. The knot there throbbed in protest after her short, but bumpy, journey across the tile.

"Ouch, my head." Her brief complaint was forgotten almost immediately as she swung her legs up over his shoulders, eager for his tongue again.

"Hm, oh, right..." He was silent for a moment, his fingers lost in exploring her folds. "Come here." He helped her sit, his hands cupping her breasts again as he kissed her, thumbing her nipples through the silky material. She gasped into his mouth, wrapping her arms around his neck and straddling his thigh as he inched them forward, out from under the table. She slid even closer to him, knowing she was leaving a trail of her juices, darkening the denim of his jeans.

"Up we go." He wrapped her legs around his waist as he stood, taking her along for the ride. She smiled in the darkness, thrilled at the sensation of being carried. He turned around and put her bare bottom down on the table, finding her mouth again. His hands kneaded her ass and pressed her hard into his crotch.

She reached down between them to feel the bulge there, cupping and rubbing him until he moaned against her lips. Sliding his tongue down her neck, he licked and sucked so hard she knew she was going to be covered with marks, but she didn't care. His tongue was exquisite, and she wanted more of it—everywhere.

Annie leaned back on her elbows, trying to remember if her sister kept anything on the table, like salt shakers or placemats. She didn't feel any resistance. She put her heels on the table and spread her legs wide, her skirt riding up around her waist and her blouse falling open. It was a position of offering, and she realized with a bemused smile that he couldn't see her in the darkness.

"Eric," she whispered. "Here, give me your hand." He reached out for her, finding first one raised knee, then the other. She lifted one of his hands, bringing a finger to her mouth and sucking it, tasting herself.

He made a low noise, and she heard him unbuckling and unzipping with his free hand. It was a sexy sound, although she was a little disappointed she wasn't going to be freeing his cock herself. She pressed his hand between her legs, making him cup her whole mound and rubbing hard. He caught her rhythm, letting her rock against his hand.

"God, please, your tongue," she begged.

He obliged, leaning in to suck and lick at her, no rhyme or reason to his efforts, just sheer lust and abandon.

Her hands found his hair, and she was surprised at the softness, how it curled, unruly and wild, around her fingers. She had a moment to wonder what color it was before he began focusing on her clit in earnest. His mouth seemed tentative, exploring her response, finding the place that made her squirm and gasp the most. Annie gave a loud moan when he found her sweet spot and his

tongue focused there with a gentle flickering that began spreading warmth through her in tightening waves.

Annie tried to be quiet, still partially mindful that she was lying on her sister's kitchen table and someone could walk in at any moment. Her whispered responses seemed to evoke such sensational growls from him. They shivered up her spine and sent her spiraling closer and closer to her peak. She couldn't stop chanting, "Yes, yes, yes!" as quietly as she could manage.

His tongue moved faster and he eased two fingers into her, staying just at the entrance, twisting and pressing her open. The sensation made her buck her hips, her feet coming off the table. His mouth didn't move from its position, and his fingers didn't deviate from their motion. He simply hooked one of her legs over his shoulder and continued, persistent, urging her to completion.

She never wanted it to end, but she couldn't hold back any longer. His tongue flickered with an unrelenting and enthusiastic insistence. She shuddered against him, lifting her hips and pressing his mouth down hard. Her hands fisted in his hair, while her whole body rolled with her orgasm.

Annie pressed his hand between her legs, covering her smooth, wet mound. He rubbed her gently, making her moan as little electric jolts ran through her body from every contact point—his hand covering her pussy, his tongue and lips moving to press against her thigh, the weight of him between her legs. She never wanted it to end.

"Don't stop..." Annie's voice was barely louder than a whisper as she spread her thighs wider, pulling her knees back. She felt Eric parting her with his

fingers, his tongue searching again to find that tender, swollen bud at the top of her cleft. He moved his mouth back and forth over that sweet, sensitive spot, and she rubbed her palms over her hard nipples, sending pleasure waves down through her belly toward her hips. Everything was centered where his mouth tormented her. The soft, wet friction made her wiggle and pull at his hair, wanting more.

She tried to be quiet, but he was pulling her against his mouth, wild and unrestrained. His tongue was flicking faster and faster, and Annie urged him on, her thighs tightening, her hips rocking as she used his tongue for her pleasure. This wasn't a sweet, slow spiral upward. She was flying, racing headlong toward exquisite release. Eric's tongue and mouth were a soft, wet, glorious push toward release. Annie moaned and twisted beneath him. She felt it begin in her belly, like a small earthquake, rumbling through her pelvis and driving her hips as she bucked and arched. Eric made encouraging noises in his throat, seeming to recognize the sounds and feel of her at her pinnacle, licking faster than ever. She gasped and quivered under his mouth, her belly convulsing, undulating. The little bud of flesh under his tongue pulsed with her pleasure and still he didn't stop, teasing her with his tongue until she begged.

"I can't stand it!" She half-laughed, half-sobbed as he flicked his tongue over that sweet, sensitive spot.

He cupped her ass in his hands as she began to spiral back down. His wet, tender kisses on her thighs and her lower belly made her tremble. She

allowed herself to be gathered against him and relished the musky smell and tangy taste of her in his mouth as they kissed.

Her longing for him hadn't abated, so she reached for the crotch of his jeans. She found his zipper down, his cock stiff and straining in his briefs. Annie slid off the table, noticing their height difference for the first time, how tall he was. She sank to her knees on the tile, and he groaned when she pulled his jeans down his thighs and grasped his cock with her eager hand.

Leaning back against the table, he arched his hips toward her mouth as she explored him. His swollen cock throbbed against her tongue, the tip wet with pre-cum. She drew lazy circles down his shaft, forgetting about his pleasure and simply enjoying the slick, hard, hot pulse of him.

When she moved to take all of him, he moaned, thrusting deeper, his hand going to her hair, rocking with her rhythm. She scratched her fingernails lightly up over his thighs. When she cupped his balls in her hands, feeling their weight, she was rewarded with a pleasure-filled groan. He was slippery smooth, her saliva and his pre-cum mixing to make the perfect lubricant. Her mouth took as much of him as she could, his thick, tender flesh a delight against her tongue.

He stopped her, moving her eager mouth off his cock. She sucked at his fingers, still hungry. "Annie, I need to be inside of you."

"Yes." She captured his cock between them as she stood on tiptoe to kiss him. He bent to meet her greedy mouth and she sucked his tongue, his lips. Her hands slid up under his shirt, seeking more of his warm skin against her.

His thumbs had found her nipples again, that silky sensation over the material making her knees weak. She wanted more and unhooked her bra, spilling her breasts. He pressed them together, creating a supple swell of flesh in his hands that seemed to sway him from his immediate need to be inside of her.

Annie wasn't so easily distracted and she turned in his arms like liquid, bending over the table and hiking her skirt up her thighs. His hands followed her in the dark like a blind man seeking his way. He seemed to be discovering her position by feel, the back of her knee, her hip. His hand pressed the slope of her lower back forward until her belly touched the cool surface of the table.

His other hand slipped between her thighs, and she spread them at his insistence. Two fingers pressed inside her, easing the passage. For Annie, it created an aching frame of reference and desire for more while she waited for him to replace his fingers with his thick, throbbing cock.

Impatient, she reached behind her for it, groping in the darkness. He helped her, grunting when she squeezed and pulled on him in her excitement. She stroked him that way for a moment, her movements awkward at that angle, but eager. He took his cock from her hand, positioning himself between her thighs and slipping the tip through her smooth, slippery little crease. When he entered her, pressing into her until there was nothing left, his hands pulled snugly at her hips as if to make sure. She sighed and moaned when he was all the way in, caught between the desire to stay filled and the longing to be fucked.

She wiggled an encouragement into the saddle of his hips, feeling the tip of his cock nudging against some deep, tender part of her as she did. His breath

drew in and he withdrew a little—only a little—before pressing into her again. She whimpered in frustration, but he teased her with those short, easy strokes until she found herself gasping with the desire for more, begging him in a whispered hiss, “Please, Eric, fuck me hard!”

He gave her a few more short thrusts—a reminder—and then pulled out of her almost to the tip and sank back into her flesh. She moaned her pleasure, spreading her legs wider to receive him, again and again, her pussy squeezing him involuntarily as if to pull him further into her body.

“Harder,” she whispered again, arching up on to her tiptoes, the wet, aching squelch a rising hum between them. “Fuck me harder... please... please...”

His answer was to shove into her so hard that the table slammed into the wall and he grunted with the effort. Annie gasped, praying no one had heard, but not willing to make him stop. The delicious friction between them built upward, carrying her with it on glorious wings. His hand reached under her to find her clit. She moved to give him better access and angle, rocking and whispering “yes, yes, yes” with every thrust, the added stimulation of his fingers pushing her further toward her climax.

She could feel the slap of his belly and balls, and he thrust, deeper and deeper, as if he were trying to bury himself into her as far as he could. She gripped the edge of the table to keep her balance, rocking back against him, spreading wider. His hands found the sway of her breasts, moving down to rub her aching little clit as he drove onward, upward, impaling her with every

delicious inch of him. Annie wanted to turn around, to see his face, to sit on his lap and ride him, but she felt transfixed, completely lost and taken by his lust for her.

She moaned and rocked back on him, sinking his cock into her again and again. Her hand joined his between her legs and she rubbed with him until her clit was throbbing for release. He pressed his palm to her belly, using the leverage to meet her as she ground her hips against him, dancing back onto the steel rod of his cock. She forgot about the party going on in the other room. She forgot about everything but the white hot sensation between her legs.

Annie begged him for release, whispering his name again and again in the darkness. She whimpered when he slowed, his hand gripping her ass so hard she thought she might bruise. Then he pulled out, grabbing her and turning her over, to slip back up into her without any guidance or direction at all, his cock already knowing the way up into her tight, wet passage.

She wrapped her legs around him, biting at his shoulder as they rocked the table against the wall. He growled and nuzzled her breasts as she arched, making her body squirm against his. She didn't want it to end, but they were breathless and panting, and neither of them could hold out any longer. They locked themselves together, both of them careening over a rocking, slick edge, arching and falling into the darkness of each other's eyes as they came. She could feel his cock pulsing between her thighs, spilling endless heat between them in long, shuddering waves. She sank her teeth into the soft flesh of her forearm to keep from screaming out loud, the force of it threatening to send her

bucking off the table. He held her hips tight, and she knew the involuntary fluttering and twitching of her pussy were milking him as he jerked against her, groaning and emptying himself into her flesh. They stayed that way for a moment, breathless, as he collapsed over her, both of them seeming to vibrate at some higher frequency together, out of time and space.

“Sweet Annie,” he whispered into her ear, kissing her temple, damp with their effort. “Everyone was right. You are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“You haven’t even seen me,” she murmured, rocking her hips forward. She felt him softening, his cock beginning to slide out of her, breaking that aching connection.

“Exactly,” he said, straightening, tucking, adjusting. She did the same, pulling her skirt down, buttoning her blouse, smoothing her hair. She turned to him in the darkness and put her arms around him, surprising them both with her embrace. He held onto her and they rocked as he leaned to kiss the top of her head.

Suddenly Annie laughed, hiding her face in his shirt even though he couldn’t see her blush. “I can’t believe we just did that.”

“I can.” He reached behind him to grab the chair, tugging it over to sit and pull her into his lap. “Do you regret it?”

“No,” she answered honestly, tucking her head under his chin. She seemed to fit perfectly there. “I’m just surprised, I guess. I don’t usually do things like this.”

“Neither do I,” he admitted. They both heard the sound of music starting in the living room. Annie couldn’t make it out, just the beat, a suggestion of a song. She hoped that was all they could hear out there, too—a suggestion of what might have happened in the kitchen.

“My sister is going to flip when she finds out that we had sex on her kitchen table.” Annie giggled.

“She doesn’t have to know. Hey, do you want to get out of here? We can go back to your place. Or any place.”

“Yes,” she agreed, tilting her face up toward him. He was still just a silhouette in the dark, a suggestion of a man. The intimacy of their act coupled with what might still be revealed tonight settled in her belly with a force that left her feeling uneasy and troubled. “Hey, I need to find my panties. Will you turn on the light?”

“They’re right here.” He dug into his front pocket and slipped them into her hand. She fingered them in the darkness. The crotch was still damp.

“Come on, let’s turn on the light and end the suspense,” Annie suggested. “I don’t care what you look like. I mean, obviously. We just had mind-blowing sex! Well, at least it was for me...”

“Me, too,” he agreed, hugging her hips.

“Eric, I have to see you.”

“If it doesn’t matter, why do you need to see me?”

“I...don’t know. But, sweetie, unless you’re a vampire or something, we have to go out in the daylight eventually,” she teased.

“One thing I’ve learned, doing what I do...women often say they want something, but that isn’t really what they want at all. You’re telling me you want to turn on the light and end the mystery, but that isn’t what you really want,” he murmured, kissing her temple, her cheek, her jaw line.

“That is the most sexist statement I’ve ever heard.” She snorted.

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged.

He kissed her temple. “Annie, will you promise me something?”

She looked up at him and marveled at how different she felt now than when she had stormed into the kitchen. Yet no more than an hour had passed.

“What?”

“A promise is a commitment,” he said, his voice low. “I would never promise someone something I couldn’t do, and I expect the same from others. It’s a matter of integrity, of keeping your word. Do you understand that?”

Annie swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“Then let’s do this. No lights. I’ll meet you outside, okay? On the front porch.”

“It’s dark out there.” She stated the obvious.

“Not as dark as it is in here,” he countered, making her smile.

“Okay, we’ll do this your way. Let me tell my sisters I’m going.”

Annie stood, using his shoulder to steady herself as she slid her panties on. She made a face she was grateful he couldn’t see. She was going to have to use the bathroom before they left, too. “Help me find my boots?” She found one

right away, but the other evaded their fumbling in the dark for a few moments until they found it wedged under the edge of a cupboard door.

“No lights,” he reminded her, kissing her mouth and making her remember the heat between them. “You promise?”

Flushing, she smiled. “Yes. I promise.”

She swung open the door, her eyes adjusting to see couples paired off and dancing in the half-light. Annie spotted her sister near the bathroom, dancing with her husband.

“Chloe, come to the bathroom with me,” she whispered, tugging at her sleeve. Her sister followed, shrugging at Dave as she shut the bathroom door behind them. Annie flipped on the light.

“You are not going to believe what just happened to me,” Annie whispered as she pulled her panties down and sat to pee. Chloe stood at the door, her arms crossed over her chest.

“You mean while you were alone pouting in the kitchen?” Chloe scoffed, rolling her eyes.

“I wasn’t alone,” Annie grinned and bit her lip, reaching for the toilet paper.

Someone knocked and the sisters both said, “Someone’s in here!”

“It’s me, Becca!”

Chloe opened the door for their sister, who came in and sat on the edge of the enormous Jacuzzi tub.

“What’d I miss?” Rebecca asked. “Holy cow, Annie, what were you doing in the kitchen, wrestling?”

"Is it that bad?" Annie flushed the toilet. At the sink, she peered into the mirror as she washed her hands.

"So what is going on with you?" Chloe asked, still propped against the door.

"There was a guy under your kitchen table."

"What?" Rebecca echoed Chloe as she stood.

"In fact...we had sex on your kitchen table."

"Annie!" both sisters exclaimed simultaneously.

Annie grinned into the mirror, rubbing her fingers under her eyes to lessen the raccoon-look and grabbed Chloe's hairbrush from the shelf.

"And now I'm going home with him." She yelped when she brushed the back of her hair, having forgotten about the lump on her head.

"Who is this guy?" Chloe frowned.

"I don't know," Annie admitted, grabbing a lipstick off the shelf and applying some. "Ick! Chloe, how old is this stuff? And cheap! You have more money than God, go visit the counter at Neiman Marcus once in a while, would ya?"

"What's his name? Is he cute? What does he do?" Rebecca stood behind Annie, helping her tuck her skirt tag in and straighten the lines of her blouse.

"Eric."

Chloe shook her head, still frowning. "I don't know an Eric."

"You don't know everyone." Annie sighed and grabbed a tissue to rub off the awful-tasting lipstick.

“I do in my own house!” Chloe insisted, reaching past Annie’s head and opening the medicine cabinet. “We didn’t invite any Eric.” She handed her a twenty dollar tube of Christian Dior lipstick. “All you had to do was ask. I keep that stuff out for the cousins to play with.”

“Thanks. Digital Brown? Who do they have naming these things now, robots?” Annie admired the way it slid over her lips, like silk. Much better.

“Don’t change the subject,” Chloe admonished. “We need to know who this mystery man is.”

Annie opened the cabinet back up to search for more. She found eye shadow, mascara, eyeliner, and put them on the counter. “What does it matter? Seriously. He’s incredible!” Annie beamed at Chloe in the mirror and then turned to grasp Rebecca’s hands, squeezing.

“She looks happy,” Rebecca admitted. She smiled back at Annie’s infectious enthusiasm.

“Yeah, and so did Diane Keaton in Mr. Goodbar. Remember what happened to her?” Chloe quipped, reaching past Annie into the medicine cabinet again. “You need darker mascara than that. Here.”

“Mr. Goodbar?” Rebecca giggled. “Wasn’t that like 1970-something?”

“Richard Gere.” Annie sighed. “Now there’s a man like fine wine...”

Chloe stepped between them like she was breaking up a fight. “Listen, you two, I’m being serious, now, okay?” Annie turned back to the task of applying make-up.

“So bring him out! Let us meet this incredible guy,” Rebecca said, flipping the fuzzy lid down and taking a seat on the toilet. “Does he look like Richard Gere?”

“I’m meeting him outside. He’s...kind of shy,” Annie explained, making her mouth that strangely perfect, unconscious O as she applied mascara.

“Shy enough to have sex on my kitchen table?” Chloe snapped.

“Shy enough to hide under it for most of the party,” Annie said with a shrug.

“What, is he deformed?” Chloe asked, making a face.

“Maybe he has social anxiety disorder,” Rebecca remarked, handing her sister the eyeliner. “My friend Bill has that.” Annie smiled a thank you.

“Annie, be reasonable.” Chloe smoothed her sister’s long, dark hair affectionately with her hand. “You don’t know this guy. What if he’s some psycho? I mean, a person has to be pretty weird to be sitting under a table at a party, right?”

“Well...maybe...” Annie admitted. She rubbed her lips together and grabbed another tissue to blot them. In the harsh light of the bathroom, with both of her sisters there to nudge her, she had to admit it was a pretty strange situation.

“Just bring him out and let us meet him.” Chloe rested her chin on Annie’s shoulder, looking at her through the mirror. “I’m sure if I don’t know him, Rebecca probably does.”

“Chloe, I can’t,” Annie admitted. “He wouldn’t even let me turn on the kitchen light.”

Chloe sighed, shaking her head and pulling Annie’s hair fully out from under her collar, gasping when she noticed the marks on her neck. “My god, did he do this?”

Annie blushed. “Yeah.”

“Okay, this guy is bad news, Annie.” Chloe fingered her sister’s bruised flesh. “I’m telling you. You can’t do this.”

“Maybe she’s right,” Rebecca said, coming to look at the marks.

The pair flanked Annie now, and her eyes flickered from one sister to the other in the mirror.

Chloe crossed her arms. “Annie, you are not leaving here with some strange guy I don’t know.”

“Who are you, my mother?” Annie scoffed, picking up the make-up and shoving it back into the medicine cabinet.

“Annie, please...we love you,” Rebecca said, holding onto her arm and resting her cheek against her shoulder.

“We’re just thinking of your safety,” Chloe added.

“I know, I know.” Annie sighed, doing a last once-over in the mirror and turning to face them. She put an arm around them both and they hugged her back. “Okay.” Annie relented, shaking her head. “You win, I’ll go get him.”

Annie made her way back toward the kitchen. She saw John on the way, dancing with the red-haired girl, his hands way too low on her ass. He leered at

Annie as she passed, and she gave him the finger. She wondered if Eric was already out on the front porch. She looked out the beveled glass in the door, but she didn't see him standing out there. She glanced behind her and saw Chloe and Rebecca talking to Dave, her sisters looking pointedly at her.

"I'm going!" Annie mouthed. She stood at the door for a moment, wondering why her hands were shaking, why her breath was so shallow and her heart was beating so fast. She had every right to go into her sister's kitchen, every right to turn on the light. Besides, they were right, she had to know.

She took a deep breath, opened the swinging door with one hand, and flipped the light on with the other. She stood, holding the door open, staring at the kitchen. One chair was still pulled away from the table. The table itself was slightly askew from their arduous attention.

Where is he? Annie stepped toward the table, letting the door swing closed, and peered underneath, just to be sure. She smiled, remembering, her hand gliding over the smooth surface.

"No lights, Annie. It was all I asked." His voiced was pained, hoarse. "You promised"

She whirled around, her hand over her heart, to see him standing behind the door. "Eric?" It was a question, but she knew. It couldn't be anyone else, although the difference between her expectation and reality staggered her. He was the most physically beautiful man she had ever seen."

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although the difference between her expectation and reality staggered her. He was the most physically beautiful man she had ever seen.

“You made a promise.” He turned and pushed through the swinging door.
“Why couldn’t you keep your promise?”

In her panic, Annie forgot how to breathe, and those few moments of stunned silence cost her. She followed him through the dancing couples, calling his name. The front door stood open, the porch light on. She hugged herself against the cold February wind as she peered out the door. Stumbling down the steps, she stopped at the sidewalk, looking frantically in both directions to see which way to run, but there was no sign of him. He was gone. Annie sat on the stoop, burying her face in her hands. She gave into her lament with a long, mournful wail that brought both of sisters running. They tried to comfort her, but Annie found no solace in their murmured words, lost in the sudden, unexpected breaking of her heart.

Chapter Three

“Annie, I think I got it!” Rebecca announced with a squeal.

Annie pressed the speakerphone button off, picking up the receiver and putting one finger up to her client.

“Yes?” Annie asked, turning her face toward the wall.

“Do you remember Sarah McLean?”

“No. I’m with a client.” Annie smiled an apology over her shoulder at the woman sitting on the tan leather sofa. The black bag she was clutching to her side shook so much with the woman’s anxiety that, when she first came in, Annie had been sure that there was a small dog inside.

“Okay, I’ll talk fast. Sarah McLean is organizing our ten year class reunion and she called me yesterday asking if I had any current numbers for people. Can you believe it’s been ten years since I graduated—?”

“Rebecca!”

“Yeah, yeah. So anyway, I was looking through my book, and I remembered who Eric was. He was that hot guy who moved to our school in my senior year, remember? My god, if he aged well, you’re right, he’s gorgeous!”

“Rebecca!”

“Yeah, okay. Anyway, I forgot that I had called Eric’s mom the week of the Valentine’s party, asking if she had a new number for him. He’s your Eric, Annie. I’m sure of it!”

Annie’s brow knitted, and she grabbed a pen. “Give me a number.”

“Now, remember, this is his mother. But I’m sure she can tell you his new number. I know I wrote it down once because I called and left him a message inviting him to the party, but I don’t seem to have it in my book—”

“Number, please,” Annie reminded her.

Rebecca rattled it off.

“Her name?”

“Gosh, I don’t remember. His last name is Desiree, but I don’t know if they’re the same.”

“Okay, thanks, I’ll call you back.” Replacing the receiver, Annie faced her client. “I apologize for the interruption. Please continue.”

The slight woman moved her purse to her lap, as if it was a shield, and began talking again in a small, quivering voice. Annie nodded, picked up her notepad again and scribbled as she listened. Her pen circled the number in the margin twice, and her brow knitted again, her lips pressing together.

Eric. She could still feel the disappointment of her error like a weight compressing her soul. She saw him in her darkest moments—his beautiful, crestfallen face—and his sad, betrayed look just before he had disappeared. Annie wrote down “severe anx/neurosis, further testing req” at the end of her notes. The client had stopped speaking and was looking at her expectantly.

“How does that make you feel?” Annie asked, and when the woman spoke again, her words droned with a troubled, rising buzz.

Annie often believed she could diagnose from tone alone. Her thoughts wandered again, and she remembered back in February, the secret feeling of

sitting with Eric in the darkness under her sister's kitchen table, how much they had learned about each other in that short hour together. Probably more than she had ever learned about any client in a fifty minute session.

"Well, our time is up," Annie said, sensing a pause. "Is there anything else you wanted to address today?"

Her client stood, still clutching her bag in her fists. "No. Thank you, Dr. Thanos."

"I'll see you next week." When Annie shut the door behind her and leaned against it with a sigh, she consoled herself that she had spent at least most of the hour being attentive to her work. She rubbed her eyes, sitting in her rolling chair and pulling it up to the computer so she could type in her notes. The number stared back at her—circled twice.

Before she knew it, the phone was in her hand. She punched the buttons with her pen, hesitating before pressing the last one. Do I really want to do this? Her stomach lurched, and she reached for one of the Saltines she kept hidden behind the Kleenex box, stuffing it into her mouth and pressing her pen down on the last number.

It rang nine times before someone answered. She counted, having resigned herself at ring six to give up at ring ten. Unfortunately, it was just a machine finally kicking in.

"Hello, darlings, this is Dita. You know what to do." BEEP.

Annie swallowed her cracker dry. “Hi there. I am calling for the reunion committee for the Class of 1996, and I’m looking for a current number for Eric Desiree.” She left her name and number on the machine and hung up.

Fifteen minutes later, having tried to find Eric using Google, the Yellow Pages, and every other means she could think of, she stared at her computer screen, her motionless hand still on the mouse.

I have to find you. Annie rubbed her eyes again, toeing off her heels and putting her feet up on her desk. She smiled, remembering how she had bumped her head leaning back in the chair that night and how he had comforted and tended her. She remembered the heat between them, like a shock, the incredible passion of that night. She drifted, giving in to her exhaustion.

Eric’s hands slid slowly up her thighs. She loved his hands the most, so large and warm, the way he pulled and grabbed at her, like he wanted her. What was it about him, that she knew it, without even a trace of doubt? It was in his eyes, his hands. He wanted her.

The black velvet darkness enveloped her and she strained her eyes in the dimness. Where was she? She touched the hard, cold surface under her hands. Her body was splayed for him, her arms and legs thrown wide, her hair fanning out over her shoulders. She knew she was beautiful, like a goddess. If only he could see her...

His hands spread her legs further apart and back, exposing her completely to him. His fingers probed, his tongue, too, the wet heat of his mouth

so hungry! He made eager sucking and licking sounds between her legs, drinking her like she was the only nourishment he'd had in eons.

Annie moaned in her sleep, shifting in her chair, the aching heat between her legs growing intense. Her hand found its way up under her skirt, cupping the damp crotch of her panties.

Eric's fingers became rougher, spreading her open, shoving into her and curling up again and again, like he could peel her from the inside. She writhed and moaned, bucking against him, not caring if someone heard. He wanted to hear her. Somehow, she knew he wanted her response, and she gave it to him.

Then he moved onto her. It was so fast, and yet it seemed to go on forever. He had a hundred hands, grabbing her breasts, pinching her nipples, cupping her ass, plunging into her pussy. She tried to keep up with him, but she couldn't. She could only let him have her, take her. My pussy was yours the minute you touched it, Eric... She knew the whispered thought was true. Her pussy responded for him in ways she didn't understand, as if it were weeping with joy at his touch.

His cock was hot steel, impaling her again and again. She couldn't get enough of it, of him. What was it about this man that she wanted to worship every sweet, glorious inch of him? Never had someone filled her so completely, made her long for him so much. Her pussy spasmed as she felt herself being opened by him, bit by bit, the hard press of his flesh spreading hers. The way he stayed there and kissed her before he started pulling out, the throbbing feel of the tip buried deep inside of her making her close her eyes and clutch at him. He used

that deliciously fat, bulbous head to collect all her juices, pulling it along her hot, tight passage toward the light—wetting the way.

He hesitated for a moment and then...oh, god, he started to fuck her so hard—so hard and fast and breathless and sweaty in the heat of the sun. The light? Where was the light coming from? She was aware of the ground beneath her now as they rocked. There was the sound of water coming from somewhere, but her eyes didn't search it out. Instead, Annie opened her eyes and saw him—the most beautiful man she had ever encountered. She gloried in the sight of him, and knew he was hers. She could feel it in the way his thighs pressed against her, see it in the way his dark hair curled behind his ear, and knew it in the outline of his mouth, drawn tight, as he drove even deeper inside of her.

“Eric, look at me!” Annie urged, wrapping her legs around his waist.
“Please, look at me.”

She felt his smile against her cheek. “I don't need to.”

And she knew it was true. He knew her in ways she didn't even know herself.

They sank into blackness again, floating on a mattress like a soft cloud in the darkness. He fucked her with all of his strength, his muscles straining, his breath hot on her face. She met him, crazy with her own lust, bucking under him until her body screamed for release. She moaned and gasped in his ear, calling his name, begging him for more. The words didn't matter, she just had to release her breath, or die. And he gave her what she wanted, left and right and sideways and upside-fucking-down.

He was relentless. He pinned her legs back practically to her ears, driving into her with a force that didn't seem possible. His fingers rubbed her clit, just the way she loved, using the hood to tease the little bud underneath. She felt her climax swelling like something about to burst. He seemed to know it, too, because he gave her even more, grinding his pelvis into hers, forcing her pussy to its edge and beyond. She came all over his cock in great, shuddering waves that made her clench around him in sweet desperation.

But he didn't stop. He wouldn't stop. He spread her out onto her belly, his cock shoving so far up inside of her that she thought she could taste it. She just let him take her, going along for the ride. The weight of him was crushing the breath out of her, leaving her panting and clawing at the mattress.

He quickly sent her out into orbit again, and she couldn't remember how to get back. Eric bit at her neck and shoulder as she came again, his cock impaling her, and still, he didn't stop. She tried to crawl away, almost frightened by the intensity of his lust, but his tongue changed her mind. He rolled her onto her back and licked her. She was a dripping mess and he licked her clean, moving around so he could shove his hard cock down her throat.

She could barely stand that position. He used her throat like another pussy, just driving into her. Annie gasped and pushed against his hips. Just when she thought she couldn't do it anymore, his tongue and fingers working between her legs inched her up another notch, to a place where she could ride with it again, lost in the sensation. It was as if he knew every threshold and pushed her eagerly just to that edge.

Annie's fingers were pressing between her legs, and she moaned softly. The wet throb of her clit moved closer toward physical release.

There was no warning, no build-up. One minute he was licking her, and she was struggling to handle the length of his cock down her throat, and the next minute, he had his hand in her hair and he was turning her over onto her hands and knees and shoving into her from behind. There were no words between them, just sounds, like animals grunting and gasping.

Annie whimpered, twisting in her chair. Her head lolled back as her fingers pressed the wet crotch of her panties.

She didn't think her pussy could take any more of his cock, but when he turned her around and pressed into her flesh, it was like sinking a post on a muddy day—she had no resistance left. He could have done anything to her. She was his. She had always been his.

There were no words between them, just sounds. She sucked and licked and bit at the buttons on the mattress. She didn't know what had happened to the sheet. They rocked together, hard, and she grabbed onto the edges to keep from falling over, pushing back into him like she was riding some incredible force pressing deep within. Her pussy felt stretched to its limit.

He grabbed her hips and squeezed, driving his cock so far into her that she was thrown forward, half off the mattress, hissing and clawing at the shock of the tile floor underneath. He was filling her, coming hard, his growl rumbling through her body. She was so tight around him—or he was so huge inside of

her—that she could actually feel the pulse of his shaft, waves of him spurting upward along the underside of his cock.

Annie gasped and shuddered, her body jerking alive in the wake of her orgasm. Consciousness came slowly as she blinked and stared up at the ceiling, shaking her head as if to clear it. She swore she could feel him, still hard, sliding out of her pussy. Eric?! Don't leave me! It made her want to cry. She didn't want him to go. But he was gone. The air around her was still, and the light in her eyes was blinding. You promised. Why didn't you keep your word? That's when she realized she was really awake. Her watch was beeping, chiming the time for her next client. She started, still disoriented and groggy. She slipped her shoes back on and rushed to open her door. No one had shown up yet.

She stumbled back to her chair, straightening her skirt, smoothing her hair. Eric. Where are you? God, I need you. She had never thought that about any man, but there it was. She could feel it like the ache between her legs.

The message light on her phone was blinking. I didn't hear it ring? With a frown, she picked up the receiver and pushed the play button.

"Hello, Annie, this is Dita, Eric's mother, returning your call. I'm swamped today. Why don't you meet me at The Demi-Café on West Fourth Street tomorrow morning at seven? See you then!"

Annie stared at the phone receiver with her jaw dropped. She had just decided to call back to clarify her need for only a number when the phone rang. It was the client who was supposed to be in her office now, calling to cancel. She

spoke briefly, rearranging her schedule to fit him in later in the week, but her mind couldn't seem to focus on anything except the message from Eric's mother.

Then, she listened to the message again, writing down the café and street name before erasing it. She was feeling dizzy and sleepy and didn't feel brave enough to call again. Recalling Eric's little eccentricities, she decided to give his mother the benefit of the doubt. Okay, Mom. Let's see where this goes. She packed up her briefcase, making sure to tuck in the notebook with the numbers on it before turning off the lights and locking up for the night.

* * * *

Annie circled the block three times before finally seeing the little coffee shop tucked away between two larger restaurants. Damn! She was twenty minutes late by her watch. Slinging her purse over her shoulder, her eyes swept the building as she clicked the button to automatically lock her car door. There was only a hand-made sign propped in the corner of the dirty glass in calligraphied letters: Demi-Café. She had worried on the way over how she was going to recognize Eric's mother in a crowd, but now Annie didn't think that was going to be a problem.

She swung the door open to the sound of tinkling bells and took a step back at the powerful smell of the place. It was an exotic blend of darkness—coffee, chocolate and spice. Her sense of smell was keen these days. The tables appeared empty. There was a man behind the counter, working the cappuccino machine from the sounds of it.

Annie stood for a moment, chewing her lip and fingering her keys. What am I doing here? Maybe Chloe's right, she thought, remembering her sister's sarcastic comment, "When it comes to Annie's Eric-quest, Obsession isn't just a new scent from Calvin Klein."

"Annie! Yes? My, you are lovely. Come! Sit!"

Annie whirled at the sound of the voice to her left. Beyond the window, tucked away in a cornered nook table was a woman of indeterminable age. Her blonde hair was piled up onto her head in a mass of swoops and swirls, and her mouth was smiling, but her eyes were not. She's had work done. She held a hand out, beckoning, her fingers long and slender and decorated with rings. Annie moved into the seat across from her, taking the extended hand in the delicate squeeze of a feminine handshake. Her skin was like cream.

"Mrs—uh...Eric's mother?" Annie doubted it even as she spoke the words. This is someone's mother?

The woman laughed, and in it, Annie heard Eric's laugh. Only it was lighter, like silver tinged with lavender, instead of his deep golden tone. "That's me, darling. You can call me Dita. Only my best friends do." She smiled then, as if she were sharing a secret. Annie settled her purse, shrugged off her light jacket and glanced toward the counter. She couldn't drink coffee, but something wet would be good. Her throat was dry.

"So tell me, how do you know my wandering son?" Dita asked.

“I—” Annie averted her eyes, trying to remember the lie she had told, and noticed that the man behind the counter was moving to bring a tray over to their table.

“Oh, don’t bother with that reunion thing, sweetie. I know better. Girls still call daily for my boy.” She laughed again, and Annie was transfixed by the sound.

“Dita.” The man bent to put a steaming cup and saucer in front of her. “Your special.” The accent was thick and probably Latino, Annie judged. He also placed two large, over-full paper bags of beans on the center of the table.

“Can I get a diet Sprite or...something without caffeine?” Annie asked.

“Oh, don’t drink that hideous syrup! Bring her a chocolate, Joss.”

Annie raised her eyebrows, but didn’t say anything as Joss nodded his head in assent and left them. “You grind your own?” she asked, indicating the bags and she peered around them to see the older woman.

“I roast my own,” Dita corrected, pointing out the lighter colored beans. “These are raw coffee beans. Quite a powerful stimulant.” She lifted one of the darker beans, holding it out in her hand for Annie to take. “These...smell...” she urged.

Annie drew in a deep breath, the aroma deliciously soothing. “Wow!”

“Yes.” Dita nodded. “Pure cocoa beans. They are a very strong aphrodisiac.”

Annie flushed as Dita studied her face. “So, about Eric—”

“Yes, Eric. You were about to tell me how you know him.”

Annie sighed and cleared her throat. "I met him at a Valentine's party three months ago. He was hiding in the dark under my sister's kitchen table. We spent the night talking."

Dita sipped her drink, her eyes on Annie's face. "Go on."

Annie knew it sounded crazy, but Dita seemed unfazed. "Well, he wouldn't let me turn on the light. He didn't want me to see him. So we stayed under the table, and we...talked." Annie felt warm and pressed her hand to her cheek to cool it. "When we left, I promised him I wouldn't turn on the light. He didn't want me to see his face in the light."

Joss returned with a large mug of hot chocolate. Dita thanked him and he nodded, his eyes warm. Annie busied herself with the drink, not wanting to tell the rest of the story. Dita sipped and waited.

"I broke my promise to him," Annie admitted, rubbing the rim of the mug and sucking the sweetness of cream off her finger to chase the bitter taste of the words from her mouth. "I listened to my sisters, and I turned on the light. I haven't seen him since."

Dita wiped her mouth with her napkin. "Yes. I know."

"You know?" Annie met her eyes, feeling like someone had punched her in the stomach.

"Yes." Dita tucked her napkin under her saucer. "He told me about you. Do you think I invite every girl who calls looking for him out to coffee?"

Annie gripped her mug, her eyes wide. "How did you know it was me? The story about the reunion...I only gave you my first name..."

“Caller I.D., dear.” This time Dita’s eyes were smiling, but her mouth was not. “Isn’t the modern world a wonderful thing?”

Annie sat back in her chair, feeling warm and woozy. “So can you tell me where he is?”

Dita shrugged one shoulder. “In a manner of speaking. I can tell you where he will most likely be.”

Annie’s mouth tightened. “Now I know where Eric got all his mysterious bullshit from.”

Dita laughed, and this time it was like silver heat. “Perhaps.”

Annie rose, snatching for her purse. “Excuse me a moment.”

“Of course, dear.”

Annie’s purse strap snagged and pulled the chair, bumping the table edge as she tugged. She gasped as she watched the two paper bags totter and tip. She moved to catch them, but the rich, glossy beans spilled onto the floor. She stood stooped, transfixed, her hands still out to catch the impossible flood, her eyes wide and mouth agape.

Dita’s eyes met hers. “Well...that’s a mess.”

“I’m so sorry!” Annie swept the beans up with a fist and began to put them back into one of the bags. “I’m sure he has more. I’ll pay for them. It was my fault.”

“Please, don’t mix them,” Dita cautioned her, shaking her head.

“I’m sorry.” Annie dropped the bag, her whole body feeling like a bright red apology as she crouched on the tile floor.

“These are still usable,” Dita explained. “He only gets a shipment once every three months.”

Annie surveyed the scattered disarray of mixed beans. “I’ll pick them up, then.”

“That would be kind of you. I’ll be back to help you in a moment.” Dita smiled down at her as she stepped carefully through the widespread litter of beans. “And please, cocoa in one, coffee in another. Yes?”

Annie nodded, her head pounding. It will take forever to sort all these! She sighed, lining the two bags up on the floor and squatting down. She glanced at her watch. She was supposed to meet a client in half an hour. There wasn’t anything else to do but begin putting the raw, light-colored beans in one bag and the dark, aromatic beans in the other. After a few moments, her back began to hurt and she carefully cleared a spot to sit, cross-legged on the floor as she sorted.

The tile felt cool under her bare legs. Good thing it isn’t winter anymore. She remembered how cold the tile was in her sister’s kitchen that night. She could see Eric’s hands, and she could feel his mouth, burning against her neck. Annie looked toward the alcove where Dita had disappeared. They’re probably both back there laughing at me. Her face reddened at the thought.

At least no one is likely to come in! She glanced at the front door. She hadn’t even seen anyone pass by the window. She began sorting one bean at a time—light, dark, light, dark—into the bags. This seemed to be taking too long, and she reconsidered, making a pile of each on the floor first, sliding her hand

through the mixed beans like a divider, light over here, dark over there. Although it was still tedious, the chore moved along faster.

Aside from her embarrassment, Annie found herself starting to enjoy the task. It was hypnotic, and even pleasant, creating order out of chaos. The monotonous routine became a gentle rhythm as she sorted. Her mind began to wander, randomly focusing on her past. Memories of her sisters flooded in, their love for her, their protection. Nothing was ever good enough for “our Annie.” She was too beautiful, too perfect.

Annie recalled the last man she was involved with, flushing at the memory. Craig was a great guy with a truly generous heart. They’d met during one of her sisters’ many attempts to find her the perfect man, this one a “speed dating” routine. It was once again her sisters’ influence that had convinced her that Craig wasn’t “the one.” She had broken up with him two years ago on their advice—all because he was “just an elementary school teacher” and, as Chloe had put it, “financially limited.”

Had she really been so shallow? Her mind wandered back to that night, under the table with Eric. She couldn’t remember any point in her life when she’d felt so immediately connected to someone else. He had seen through her, into her, and she had let him. It was like nothing she had ever known before, and she longed for him. Even when she believed he might be disfigured, it hadn’t mattered to her. It was just her sisters and their damned opinions again that had sent him fleeing into the night.

No. It was my choice. The realization startled her, and she frowned as she separated the beans into piles then scooped them into the correct bags. It bothered her that she had entered the kitchen and turned on the light. It wasn't even so much that she had done what Eric asked her not to, but more that she had done—once again—what her sisters had wanted. It was that thought that made her stomach churn and her cheeks hot. Why couldn't she ever make a decision on her own, without the influence of her family?

I am. I'm searching for Eric. Annie closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. Everyone wanted her to forget about him and move on. She could hear Chloe's voice in her head: "It was one night under the kitchen table, not the romance of the century!" Maybe even Eric himself wanted her to forget him—he certainly hadn't contacted her since that night. But she wasn't going to stop looking until she found him and told him.

What? What are you going to tell him? Annie sighed and peered into one of the bags. It wasn't even half full! The other was only just as full with light-colored beans. Frowning, she stared at them scattered on the tile floor. The pile didn't seem smaller to her at all. How is that possible? She rubbed her eyes, straightened her sore back and looked up for the first time in what felt like ages.

Joss was standing behind the counter again and she smiled over at him and waved. I must look ridiculous, sitting on the floor and sorting beans, she realized, but she found she didn't care. He smiled back, his eyes warm, and gave her a nod.

“Tough task.” He leaned over the counter and surveyed the mass of strewn beans. “Need some help?”

Annie brightened. “I’d love some!” She expected him to come and get down on the floor with her, but he didn’t. Instead, he reached under the counter and pulled out a large scoop attached at the handle to a wooden box.

“Use this.” He put the scoop down onto the counter and turned back to putting coffee cups into stacks. She winced as she stood, her bottom tingling from sitting on the floor so long in the same position, and retrieved the strange looking contraption.

“Thanks.” Annie tried to catch his eye, but he just nodded. He hummed as he worked, but he didn’t look at her. The box was square, and the handle of the scoop was hollow, she saw, so the beans would fall into the wooden container. But how will it help me to sort them?

“Cocoa beans are heavier than coffee beans.” Joss’s voice startled her as she sat back down in front of the impossible, never-ending pile of legumes. “Try it and see.”

She used her hand to push a large hill of beans onto the scoop and tipped it up. There was a gentle sound, almost like rain, as the beans funneled down through the hollow handle and into the wooden container in her hand. Glancing back at Joss, she questioned him with her eyes, and he smiled.

“Now, open the bottom, one side at a time.” He waved her toward the bags. Annie saw that there were two sliding doors at the base of the box, one on each side. Tilting the box flat so nothing would spill out, she carefully edged open

one of the wooden doors and glimpsed a heap of dark-colored beans. There wasn't a light-colored one to be found among them! Excited, she closed that door and slid open the other to find all of the light-colored beans sorted into the other side.

"Th—" The words of gratitude were on her lips, but Joss was nowhere to be found. Annie shook her head, smiling, and opened one side of the box over the correct bag, and then the other, spilling sorted beans in. She hummed to herself as she continued to scoop and pour, the pile diminishing more quickly this time.

She didn't know how long it was before she looked up again, but the light had shifted across the floor, and most of the beans were back into the bags. She had placed the amazing sorting contraption back on the counter, and was picking up the last few strays by hand. It was the sound of Dita's heels on the tile that brought her out of her trance.

Dita's voice came from behind her and Annie glanced over her shoulder. "Goodness! Look at you! What an effort!"

"I'm really sorry," Annie told her, unfolding her legs and wincing.

Annie swept the rest of the beans into separate bags as quickly as she could. Dita made no effort to help, but rather sat in the chair and watched. Annie knew that without Joss's help, she never would have gotten through the monumental task. She placed both bags back on the table, making sure they were stable, at least for the moment.

"Virgil," Dita said, as if it meant something to Annie.

“Excuse me?”

“Virgil Yadira,” she expounded. “I can give you his address. Eric stays there, I believe, most of the time. At least, he was the last time I heard from him.”

Relief flooded Annie’s chest. “Oh, thank you. I really need to speak to him. Thank you so much.”

Dita unfolded her small bag and took out a white business-sized card and a pen. She wrote something on the back. “Here, my address is on the front.”

Dita held the card fast when Annie reached for it, waiting until their eyes met. “Virgil keeps bees.”

Annie’s mouth opened but nothing came out. Finally, she just nodded. Dita released the card and Annie looked at the address. It was in the city.

“He keeps them on the roof of their apartment complex. If you wouldn’t mind, could you ask him for a jar of honey?”

“A jar of honey?” Annie repeated, wrinkling her nose.

Now both Dita’s mouth and her eyes were smiling at the same time. “Yes, just ask for Dita’s special honey. He’ll know.”

Annie nodded, putting a hand to her forehead. “Sure.”

Dita smiled again as she stood, and for the first time Annie looked at her fully. She was wearing a beautifully patterned sarong wrapped around her waist, a thin band of material over her breasts, covered with a sheer silvery top with flowing sleeves and edges. Her body moved like music as she swept the large bags of beans up in her arms and walked toward the back of the café.

Over her shoulder, Dita sang, “Thank you, dear. Good luck!”

Annie watched her go, fingering the thick card. She glanced at her watch and stared in disbelief. It was after noon! She had missed three clients already! She rushed to her car, digging her cell phone out as she fumbled with her keys. She was so distracted by the time that it didn't occur to her until later that Dita's airy sendoff was a strange thing for her to say.

Chapter Four

“Come...look!”

Afraid of heights, Annie refused to walk over to the edge where Virgil was trying to show her the view. He gave up, coming to stand beside her. Crossing his enormous arms over his chest, he nodded, surveying the rooftop with a smile. His own personal Bee-Kingdom? She shook her head and sighed.

“So where is this honey?” Annie queried, straining her neck to look up at him. She shaded her eyes against the warm May sun glaring off his bald, dark head. According to Virgil, Eric hadn’t been here in a month and now she wanted to get out of here as soon as she could. Perhaps if she returned the jar of honey to his mother, Dita could give her another clue as to her son’s actual whereabouts.

“The honey is still in the combs. I haven’t harvested this year,” he explained, pointing to the large white boxes lining the roof. There have to be at least fifty of them. As a city dweller, she had never seen a beehive before and hadn’t given much thought to bees except at picnics.

“How...how many bees are in each, uh...?”

“Hive?” Virgil smiled down at her, his teeth a gleaming contrast to his dark skin. “In the peak of summer, there are probably thirty-five thousand, but it’s early yet. I’d say probably ten thousand.”

Annie did the math. She was standing on a roof in the midst of half a million bees.

“Okay, well,” she said, taking a step back. “Let’s just get this jar of Dita’s special honey, and I’ll be on my way.”

“There’s no reason to be afraid,” he assured her, his voice a soothing timbre. “These bees aren’t aggressive. Unless you’re allergic?”

“I’ve never been stung.” She took another cautious step, backing away from the large white boxes. “I suppose I could be. Just how do they survive up here in the winter?”

“They stay inside and wait for spring.” He nodded toward the closest hive. “They have been active lately, since the weather has really started to warm.”

Annie bent to look more closely at the hive nearest to them. There were a few bees buzzing around the outside, and some crawling on the surface. She frowned, tucking her hair behind her ear as she stood. “There are really ten thousand bees in each of these things?”

“Yes.” He moved around her. “Let me show you.”

“No!”

“You don’t need to be afraid.” His smile was an invitation. “You just need to be smart and careful. These bees won’t sting you. Trust me.”

Annie swallowed hard. “Okay.”

Virgil moved toward one of the hives, his words flowing like poetry. “You should always approach a hive slowly, with your arms out in front of you. Bees will be frightened by sudden movement. Everything should be slow, fluid. Think of how honey drips. That is how you move.”

“Shouldn’t we have some protection?”

Virgil chuckled, the sound seeming to vibrate in his chest. Annie was surprised the bees didn't feel it. "Some beekeepers do. I don't. You, however, should put on a pair of those goggles over there."

He nodded toward a pair of swimmer's goggles hanging on a nail. Annie situated a pair on her face, feeling silly. The world took on a plastic haze.

Virgil stood fixed before one of the boxes, taking deep breaths through his nose. When he spoke to her, he only turned his head. "I am going to open the hive and show you one of the supers—that's these things that look like trays. The top ones will have just a few bees and be mostly honey. Go a few rows down, and we will find all our bees."

Annie gulped, feeling faint. "Okay."

He smiled that welcoming smile again. "You can come look. But never breathe right onto the bees. They will take off and may sting if you do."

Virgil pulled one of the middle trays from the hive. His movements were slow, easy, and practiced. Supers! I don't know what's so super about them! Annie watched, amazed. A low drone she had just assumed was the buzz of the electric wires on the roof grew louder. It was the bees humming!

He was graceful, his movements as smooth and lithe as any ballet dancer. The sun was bright and shone onto the golden combs as he tilted the tray up and Annie gasped. There were hundreds of bees working in the waxy substance, the tray dripping honey in slow drops at Virgil's feet. Curious, she leaned in, remembering what he had said about breath, keeping hers confined to her nose. Virgil, turning his head away from the hive as he spoke, whispered, "Taste."

Annie moved her hand in slow motion, watching as bees crawled over the frame, over Virgil's big, dark fingers, a few buzzing upward and settling on his arm. Annie touched her finger to a wet part of the comb and just as slowly brought it back to her mouth. It was the sweetest substance that had ever touched her tongue, and she looked up at Virgil in wonder, moving just her eyes to meet his. He smiled.

Lost in the moment, Annie finally noticed a bee sitting on her arm. She froze. Her first instinct was to blow at it, or shake it off, or worse, run!

"Be still. Wait."

She followed his instructions, holding her breath as she felt the bees crooked legs, so soft they tickled, working their way toward her elbow. Then there was a little buzz and the bee took flight, heading back to the comb.

Virgil replaced the tray with the same deft care he'd used to remove it. Annie's heart was pounding and her ears were ringing. She felt charged, exhilarated, like she did after waking up from dreams of flying.

"Wow," she breathed, her eyes shining up at him.

"Food of the gods," he said with a wink.

Annie grinned back at him. "I'll say!"

"I find beekeeping to be quite a meditation," he remarked. "You have to move slowly up here." He pointed at the floor. "Unlike down there."

Annie nodded in understanding. "Thank you for showing me."

Virgil shrugged, changing the subject. "Well, about Dita's honey. We'll have to go into the greenhouse."

“In there?” Annie pointed to the small glass building at the other end of the roof.

He nodded and then motioned for her to follow him.

“So, Virgil, how did you get permission to do all of this?”

Virgil walked and Annie mimicked his fluid steps. “I own the building.”

Annie stared at him as they stopped outside the door, bemused. “You do?”

He ignored her question. “The bees in here are different.” His smile was gone. “These are a strain of bees derived from African honeybees. Have you heard of them?”

Her eyes widened, remembering some news story she once saw. “Aren’t those killer bees?”

“Yes,” Virgil nodded. “They are not so named because one sting can kill you, but because they are much more aggressive than their European cousins out here.”

Annie peered into the greenhouse and could see bees buzzing about. “How much more aggressive?”

Virgil shrugged. “They can sense a threat fifty feet or more from a nest. They respond quickly. They sting in large numbers, and they will pursue a perceived enemy for a quarter mile or more.”

Annie’s hand went to her throat as she looked up at him.

“These are actually assassin bees,” he continued. “They have killed off another hive in order to take over this one. I harvested them from the wild. It is believed the nastiest bees actually make the sweetest honey.”

Annie frowned. “Is that true?”

“Partially true.” His eyes moved over her face. “They are harder workers and produce more, but honey is like wine. It picks up the flavors of the nectars in the local environment, so its sweetness depends on the flowers.”

Annie shaded her eyes again, looking into the greenhouse. “Is that what makes this honey special?”

“Yes.” Virgil nodded. “Honey was once called the soul of flowers. This honey is the soul of the passionflower. They are highly fragrant, and their nectar is very potent. It makes honey that tastes...well, you’ll see.”

Annie breathed in the smell of the flowers as they entered. “Isn’t keeping killer bees illegal?”

“Not yet. Just walk behind me.”

It was like walking into Eden. The scent permeated everything. There were flowers blooming, crawling on vines toward the ceiling, like exotic, fragrant sunbursts. It was warm and humid inside.

“The bees have free reign in here, all year round,” he explained. “Step carefully.”

She followed, trying to tuck herself behind his large, muscled frame as he walked, as if then the bees wouldn’t notice her.

Virgil led her toward the other end of the greenhouse. “Bees eat honey. The goal of beekeeping is to harvest honey while still leaving the bees enough to survive. One of the reasons African strains developed was because bees adapted to people cleaning their hives out entirely. It’s called bee-robbing. Now all African strains seem to believe they are going to be robbed.”

Annie nearly ran into him as he stopped. She considered his words, thinking of some of her clients’ ingrained behaviors. “I can see how that could happen.”

Virgil moved to pick up a box-shaped hood that looked like it would fit over one of the hives that lined the end of the greenhouse. Annie counted ten of them and did the math. One hundred thousand assassin killer bees.

“What is that?” Annie asked, watching him turn the hood over and apply liquid to the inside top.

“It’s a fume board.” Virgil put the cover over one of the hives and then glanced at his watch.

“These bees are so aggressive, we have to outsmart them. Instead of taking the supers out, like we did outside, we drive them deeper into their colony so we can safely remove the upper trays full of honey.”

In spite of her fear, Annie couldn’t help her curiosity. “What’s that stuff you put on it?”

“Benzaldehyde.”

She laughed. “God bless you!”

He smiled back. “It’s just oil of almonds. Bees hate the stuff.”

“Huh!” She peered at the next closest hive. To her untrained eye, they looked just like the bees outside. “Now what?”

He shrugged. “We wait.”

Annie was aware of the gentle hum of the bees around her flitting from flower to flower. She wondered with a shiver what it would be like to die from a hundred thousand bee stings. She had a strange impulse as she watched the bees crawling over the hives to knock them all over, just to see what would happen.

She hugged her arms over her chest, turning toward the wall to look at some of the flowers climbing a vine toward the ceiling. She had never seen a passionflower before. They were exotic and strange, and they reminded her of sea urchins. She touched an orange and yellow one, leaning in to breathe in the scent. It was divine and dispelled any unpleasant thoughts of bee-tipping.

She noticed that Virgil was watching her. She smiled at him. “So when did you see Eric last, again?”

He cleared his throat before speaking. “As I said, about a month ago. But that’s not unusual. He paid his rent in one lump sum for the year, and he comes and goes. For all I know, he could show up tomorrow.”

Annie cocked her head at him. “He doesn’t tell you where he’s going? Leave you any number?”

He shook his head, looking puzzled. “None of my tenants do.”

“Oh!” Annie knitted her brow. “He isn’t your roommate?”

“No.” Virgil laughed. “Eric has his own apartment in the building. I do believe he has a roommate, but I don’t see either of them much. Those guys keep odd hours.”

Annie tried to remember exactly what Dita had said. “Oh. I thought—”

“We should be about ready,” he said, turning toward the hive. “I’d really like to veil you, just in case, if you don’t mind.”

Annie felt like a blushing bride as he slipped the hooded gauze over her head and his fingers lingered over her as he adjusted it. She watched through the film as Virgil turned and removed the fume board. He pulled off the top super and replaced the hooded fume board over the hive.

“There it is.” He sounded satisfied. “Hand me that knife.”

Annie handed him a large, sharp, serrated knife from the table next to her as she leaned closer to study the comb, noticing each little hole was covered with wax. Virgil began removing those caps with his knife.

“A lot of beekeepers will smoke the bees, to make them more lethargic, but it affects the flavor of the honey.”

Annie looked up at him. “Now what?”

“Now we spin the honey out.” Virgil slipped the comb into what looked like a large pot. He put a lid with a crank on top. “Turn it.”

Annie did, once. Virgil laughed. “Keep going!”

Annie turned the crank, again and again, until her arm grew sore. When Virgil lifted the lid and removed the comb, it was mostly empty, and the honey

remained on the inside walls of the container. Virgil pulled a tiny jar out of a box on the floor and set it on the table with a funnel.

“I’ll put this back.” He nodded toward the hive. “You pour the honey.”

Annie took off her veiled hood and poured, watching the thick, golden syrup fill the small jar. Virgil helped her scrape the sides of the container and funnel with a little rubber spatula. As she put a lid on it, she realized the jar was only half-filled. She estimated that it was an ounce or two of honey at most.

“It’s a lot of work for a little bit of honey,” she remarked, feeling the stickiness of honey on her hands.

Virgil nodded. “One bee makes about a twelfth of a teaspoon of honey in his lifetime. It takes a lot of bees.”

“Wow! That’s teamwork!”

Virgil swept some honey off the spatula and held his finger out to her. “Taste.”

Annie hesitated, realizing the intimacy of the act. Looking at him, she realized he did too. His eyes were dark, inviting. She extended her tongue, licking the sticky liquid off the tip of his finger. She groaned, instantly reaching her tongue out for more and sucking it off.

Virgil smiled, nodding. “Worth the risk, isn’t it?” He put his own finger into his mouth to taste and Annie watched, flushing.

She licked her own sticky fingers. “I can’t believe how good that is!”

He gave her a moist towel for her hands. “Nothing like the honey you buy in stores, is it?”

“I’ve never tasted anything like it!”

Annie glanced at Virgil and saw a warm, intense look in his eyes, one she often received from men. She swallowed hard.

“Ah,” he said. “I have one more thing to share with you before you go. Come down to my apartment.”

Annie left the veil and goggles and followed him outside where the bees were buzzing busily and the breeze felt cool compared to the air of the greenhouse. They took the stairs down one flight, and he led her into his apartment, which consisted of the entire top floor of the building. Annie stopped in the doorway, aghast at the view of the city from his windows.

Intent on sending a clear message, Annie stayed near the door and waited while he went to the kitchen.

“Honey cake,” he said when he returned with a wrapped confection. “If you think raw honey is good, wait until you try this.”

“Virgil.” His name felt like velvet in her mouth. She found herself thinking of Eric, and wishing he were with her to share the experience she’d had today. “Thank you for everything. I appreciate you taking the time to do this.”

He smiled, his face a little sad. “Eric is a lucky man to have a woman like you looking for him. If I see him, I will give him the card you gave me.”

“Thank you.”

In her car, she slipped the honey jar into one jacket pocket and the honey cake into the other. Annie wondered what to do next. In spite of Virgil’s apparent

interest, she couldn't think of anyone but Eric. She wouldn't stop looking for him, although part of her felt she was being led on some wild goose chase.

She glanced at her watch. It was getting late on a Friday night, and she had no clients. She searched for the card Dita had written Virgil's address on. When she found it in the zippered pocket of her purse, she turned it over to locate the woman's number. Grabbing her cell phone, she dialed and waited.

"Hello, darling!" It was Dita's voice, bright and full of laughter. "You didn't get stung, did you?"

Annie rolled her eyes at the phone. Damn Caller I.D. "No. Listen, I have your honey, but I want—"

"I'm on my way out, dear." Dita's voice changed. She immediately sounded colder, more distant. Disappointed? Annie frowned at the phone as the woman spoke. "But if you want to talk, meet me at The Styx tonight at ten. Bring my honey!"

"The... Styx?" Annie's lips felt numb, like she could barely get the words out. "Listen, lady, I can't keep—"

"It's an after-hours club, very posh." Dita went on as if Annie hadn't spoken at all. "Fourth and Rochester, right on the corner. You can't miss it. See you tonight!"

Annie blinked as the phone went dead in her hand. Is this worth it? she wondered, flipping the lid closed and tossing the phone onto the seat beside her.

Closing her eyes, she rested her forehead against the steering wheel, remembering Eric's smile in the darkness. The recollection flooded her with

warmth, and she sighed. I'll find you, Eric. I promise. No matter what it takes.

Chapter Five

The night was cool for May, and Annie stood shivering in the long line. She wished she'd worn more than just the sheer black blouse with a lacy black bra underneath and a black mini-skirt. It had been ages since she'd gone clubbing, and she had no idea what they wore anymore. Can't go wrong with black—that was what she'd thought when she pulled on the same soft, knee-high boots she'd worn the night she met Eric. Now that her teeth were chattering and the crowd stretched around the corner of the building, she wasn't so sure about that. She remembered his hands and mouth on her thighs—how they had shivered for other reasons that night. Not tonight, babe. It's so damned cold out here, if you licked my thigh, your tongue would stick! She wished she had at least worn a pair of tights!

"Would you like my coat?" The smooth voice behind Annie startled her and she glanced back to see a tall man with a goatee shrugging off the long leather duster he was wearing.

"Oh, no, that's—" Annie's protest was met with a wink as he slipped his coat over her shoulders. It was a nice length and covered her to the tops of her boots.

"I insist." He pulled the collar together under her chin. "You're shivering like a church mouse, and I don't really get cold until temperatures drop into single digits."

The coat cut the chill of the wind instantly and Annie hugged it gratefully around her shoulders. "Thank you. I wasn't prepared for such a long line."

He nodded, rolling his eyes. "I think Styx wants to be the Club 54 for the new millennium."

"Styx..." She looked up at the purple neon sign displayed prominently on the side of the building. "If I remember right, I think my high school graduating class chose 'Come Sail Away' as our class song."

He laughed. "No, no...not that Styx..."

"Oh." Annie flushed. "So much for Kilroy."

"I think the band named themselves after the original, though." He chuckled. "You know...the mythical Greek river of death?"

"How festive." Annie wrinkled her nose and glanced up at the stark letters again.

He winked at her. "Oh, but so very chic and goth and all that stuff."

"Of course." She smiled back at him.

"I'm Herman, by the way." He held out a warm, strong hand at the end of a very well-developed arm Annie couldn't help admiring as she shook hands with him. He was wearing just a black t-shirt, but didn't appear cold at all. She met his eyes, which were bright even in the dim light of the streetlamps.

"Herman? As in Munster?" she teased, introducing herself. "I'm Annie."

"As in Melville, actually. My mother was an English major. At least she didn't name me Moby...or Dick." He grinned and she couldn't help laughing.

"Annie, like the curly redheaded waif?"

She snorted. "My mother would have died before she named me after either a comic strip or a musical. Anne is a family name. All our names are

snobbish that way. Chloe and Rebecca, my sisters—those are family names, too.”

“It’s better than Herman.” He nudged her a little as the lined moved up. Annie shifted nervously, glancing toward the door. “So is this your first time to Styx?”

“Yes.” She admitted it with a shrug. “I really don’t do the club scene. I’m meeting someone here.”

“Boyfriend?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“No.” She shook her head.

“Girlfriend?” Now it was both eyebrows.

She smiled. “No. I’m meeting my boyfriend’s mother. Well, sort of. It’s complicated.”

“Ah, going to dish about him behind his back and all that catty girl stuff, huh?”

Annie snorted. “Not exactly. Although I am trying to get information, I suppose. Dita doesn’t make it easy.”

“Dita?” The look on Herman’s face showed genuine surprise.

“Do you know her?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I think everyone knows her.”

“I’m beginning to believe that.” Annie rolled her eyes. “How do you know her?” It was a long shot, but maybe if he knew Dita, he would know Eric, too.

“I would say we’re just casual acquaintances. So Dita invited you to the Styx...” Herman leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms, and she could

see the faint edge of a black tattoo under the sleeve of his shirt. He tilted his head at her and smiled. "Styx is a little more exclusive than other clubs, you know."

She frowned. "How do you mean?"

"Well, for starters, not everyone gets in."

His words made her heart drop and she swallowed. "Really?"

They edged forward and Annie saw several people being turned away at the front of the line as Herman went on telling her about the club. "It used to be by invitation only. Now it's by list. Of course, you can get in if you're well-known, or with someone well-known."

Now she had to be on some list to get in? Great. Annie hoped Dita had put her name down on it. "If it's so popular, why have I never heard of it?"

"Ah, but it's not popular." He corrected her with a wag of his finger. "It's exclusive. There's a big difference. Even this location's history is a bit of a secret, you know."

Annie tilted her head curiously at him. "How so?"

"Well, I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you..." He grinned, his bright eyes glittering with humor. She shook her head but laughed anyway. "Just kidding. Believe it or not, this place used to be a monastery."

"From monastery to nightclub?" She wrinkled her nose at the long, warehouse-like side of the brick building. "That's a stretch."

"Well, not so far as you'd think," he countered. "The monks who worked here made beer and wine and other various alcoholic beverages."

Annie raised her eyebrows. “Isn’t that sort of a conflict of interests for monks?”

“Nah.” Herman waved her question away. “Alcohol has rarely been off-limits in religion. Sex? Yes. Getting drunk? Not so much. Most religions throughout history have used alcohol, actually, in their rituals. You know, the whole bread and wine routine? The Greeks had Dionysus—one whole god devoted entirely to alcohol! Besides, haven’t you ever met an Irish Catholic priest?”

“Okay. I guess you have a point,” she admitted with a smile. “So these monks made booze and got ritually sloshed? Not a bad setup, when you think about it. What happened to them?”

“This place was a monastery and a distillery back before the Revolutionary War,” he explained. “But I think the Order of Gabriel went underground some time in the eighteen-hundreds.”

“The Order of Gabriel.” She repeated the words as they moved up together in line. Standing next to him was actually more effective in keeping her warm than his coat was. And she was grateful for his presence. “I’ve never heard of it. Wasn’t Gabriel the Angel of Death?”

“Yes.” Herman nodded, smiling as she edged a little closer to him in the chilly night air. “In some Christian doctrine, he was so called. He was also known as the Spirit of Truth.”

“Interesting...what happened to them? The monks, I mean?” Annie was curious, although she was a little incredulous at the turn their conversation had taken.

Herman shrugged. “The monastery closed down. During prohibition, the distillery became a factory. Styx bought it ten years ago and turned it into an after-hours club. As for the Order of Gabriel, they never disbanded. Rumor has it that they continue to protect the secret of life and death to this day, although no one knows where the sect is located anymore.”

“The secret of life and death?” Annie blinked up at him. “They protected the secret of life and death?”

He nodded, smiling at the stunned look on her face. “What else would the Order of Gabriel protect?”

“Why do I feel like I’ve just been plopped down into the middle of the Da Vinci Code?” she murmured, shaking her head and glancing toward the ever-nearing door with a little laugh. She spoke mostly to herself. “First bees and now secret monastic sects...I can’t imagine what’s next.”

“Bees?” He cocked his head at her, his smile bemused.

“Never mind.” It was Annie’s turn to wave his question away. “It’s a long story. So tell me, Herman...what is the secret of life and death?”

“Do you really want to know?” His question was casual, but his eyes were very serious and she found herself transfixed by his steady gaze.

Finally, she nodded. “I think I need to know.”

Leaning in to her, his whisper warmed her ear. “The secret is...death is not the end.”

Annie let his words sink in, trying to comprehend the fullness of them, and found that she couldn't. Instead, she turned and asked him, “How do you know all of this?”

“Let's just say I'm a bit of a trivia buff.” He winked and crossed his arms and Annie again glimpsed a fuller view of the black tattoo on his upper arm. She lifted the sleeve of his shirt slightly to reveal several strange characters that wrapped around his upper arm: Γαβρηλ.

Annie raised her eyebrows. “Why don't I believe you?”

“I bet you want to know what it says?”

She nodded, studying the tattoo. “Is it Greek?”

“It's all Greek to me.” He winked. Leaning close, he whispered, “It says...Gabriel.”

“Why am I not surprised?” She smiled up at him. “Just a bit of a history buff, huh?”

“Hey, would you look at that! A lucky penny!” Herman stooped to pick it up off the ground. “What's that old saying?”

Annie murmured it, a rhyme right out of childhood. “See a penny, pick it up, and all the day, you'll have good luck?”

“That's it!” He held the penny up to the light. It gleamed as he turned it from side to side. “Did you know there's more to that saying?”

“No.” Annie shook her head and smiled. “But I bet you know it.”

He beamed. “I do! ‘See a penny, let it lay, and bad luck you’ll have all day.’”

“Good thing I’m not superstitious.” She pulled his coat around her, shivering and still somehow feeling cold, even though her body was warm enough now. “I don’t believe in black cats or broken mirrors or lucky pennies...or boozehound monks who protect the secret of life and death, for that matter.”

Herman gave her a lop-sided smile. “My mother used to have another saying.”

“What’s that?”

“Better safe than sorry.” He winked and pressed the penny into her hand, folding her fingers carefully over it. “I think you’ll be glad we picked this one up.”

Annie was surprised the coin felt warm. She would have opened her hand to look at it, but they had reached the front of the line and a voice distracted her.

“Who are you?” The doorman’s eyes swept over her and Annie felt herself shrinking.

“A—Annie Thanos.” She stumbled over her own name as he glanced down at the clipboard he was holding.

“You’re not on my list.”

Damn Dita. Of course, she would end up waiting out here this whole time and not be on the list to get in! After the coffee bean fiasco and the bizarre honey bee pursuit, Annie wouldn’t put anything past the woman.

“She’s on my list, Doc.” Herman winked as he slipped his coat off her shoulders. The sudden change in temperature made Annie shiver as she glanced over her shoulder at him. “Let her in.”

“All right.” The doorman gave Herman a nod and stepped aside.

“Aren’t you coming?” Annie stared back, incredulous, as she started through the door.

“Nope.” Herman waved her on. “I like it better in line...between Scylla and Charybdis!” She shook her head at the obscure reference to Greek mythology—the origin of the phrase “between a rock and a hard place.” He winked and disappeared back into the line as she made her way into the club, and she didn’t have any more time to wonder at his strange allusion.

The club was dark and loud and sought to swallow her whole. There were so many people it was hard to move. So much for exclusive. She shaded her eyes against the pulsing colored lights and looked for Dita. How was she ever going to find her? The club was huge, laid out in several levels, very like a warehouse with steel railings and stairways. The place was hazed with a thick blue light that seemed to come from everywhere at once. Annie noted the lights located high above, placed sporadically on the warehouse ceiling.

Looking up, she spotted a crowd of people on the second level, all grouped together. Then she heard a high, familiar laugh, floating over the pounding of the music coming through the dance floor speakers that were taller than she was. She knew she had found Dita.

Annie's boot heels clicked against the metal as she made her way through the couples dancing together on the stairs. Edging her way against the railing, Annie made her way toward the throng of people that surrounded Dita as if she were some modern day Scarlett O'Hara entertaining a crowd of would-be suitors. Dita's eyes met hers through the crowd and Annie reached into her skirt pocket to pull out the jar of honey she had put there on her way out the door that night. She waved the honey back and forth and heard Dita squeal in delight as she stood and beckoned to Annie.

"Oh, yes!" The woman's voice was unmistakable. The crowd parted like the Red Sea as Dita moved toward her. The woman snatched the jar of honey from Annie's hand and held it up to the light as if she were looking at gold.

"Perfect! Lovely! Thank you, dear."

Annie pursed her lips and put a hand on each hip. She had to speak loudly to be heard over the music. "Eric doesn't live with Virgil!"

Dita raised her eyebrows. "I never said he did. Would you like a drink?"

"No...thanks." Annie shook her head, eyeing the older woman. "Why didn't you just give me Eric's address?"

"I didn't know if he wanted you to have it," Dita confessed with a smile. "Would you mind running down to the bar to get me a drink? I'm simply parched!"

Annie rolled her eyes. "I'm sure one of your...followers...would be happy to do it." She glanced around at the throng of onlookers, who were quietly watching them both. "I just want to know where Eric is. Tell me and I'll go."

“Now dearest...” Dita put her arm around Annie’s shoulders and steered her toward the stairwell. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know. Just be a love and run down to the bar and ask the white-haired gentleman back there for a Black Death.”

“A...what?” Annie frowned at the older woman. If that was a drink, it was one she had never heard of.

“A Black Death,” Dita repeated clearly. “And if he tries to make it with vodka, be sure to tell him you want the real thing.”

Annie shook her head and sighed as she tromped her way back down the stairs. She found herself standing dutifully at the bar, waiting in line for a drink. Just like a good little girl. Her face burned and she looked down at the glass in the bartender’s hand, her mood darkening as she moved to the front of the line.

“Can I have a Black Death, please?” Annie asked the white-haired bartender. She had made sure she was in his line, just like Dita had directed. He lifted the hood covering his snowy head and raised his eyebrows at her. All the bartenders were dressed in black robes with hoods, probably to accentuate the whole River Styx theme, she mused, as the old man stood and blinked at her.

“Sure thing.” A martini glass was up on the bar before Annie could even blink and she saw him take the cap off a dark-colored bottle of vodka.

“Oh, wait—” She smiled apologetically and placed her hand over the rim of the glass. “Dita told me to tell you, if you started to make it with vodka, that she wanted the real thing. I’m sorry. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Dita?” His eyebrows rose further and he put the cap back onto the bottle.
“Indeed. Does it mean anything to you?”

Annie shook her head, giving him a puzzled look as he lifted the gate at the end of the bar and stepped out from behind.

“If you want the real thing, you must pay your passage.”

“Passage?” Annie sighed. Of course she would end up getting stuck with the bill. “I don’t suppose Dita has a tab running here?”

The old man smiled, easing his hood back slightly. “Those unlucky souls who come without coin are denied, I’m afraid.”

Unlucky souls? See a penny, pick it up, and all the day, you’ll have good luck. Annie opened her hand, still closed around the penny Herman had placed there. She had forgotten about it entirely.

“Ah...yes.” The man plucked the coin from her palm and Annie only saw a brief glimpse, but it didn’t look like a penny to her. No longer a small copper thing, it seemed to glimmer gold in the blue light from above as he held it up to briefly inspect it before putting it into a pocket in his robe. “Follow me,” he directed, waving her toward a door next to the bar that swung on its hinges as they walked through. The corridor was dimly lit, and Annie took a few hesitant steps and then stopped.

“Excuse me,” Annie called. “Where exactly are we going? All I wanted was a mixed drink...”

The old man stopped and took something off a hook on the wall, handing it to her. “Put this on.” It was a black robe, like his.

“Look...” Annie frowned at the material filling her hands. “I’ve had a really weird day, and it just seems to be getting weirder. All I want—”

“Do you seek the Black Death?” His voice seemed deeper back here. Was there an echo? Glancing back toward the door, Annie could hear the pounding sound of the music and remembered Dita’s request. I’ll tell you everything you want to know. That’s what she had said. Okay, Eric, whatever I need to do to find you.

“I...guess so.”

He gave her a curt nod. “Then you must come as the others, hooded and veiled. Only death knows the secret of eternal beauty.”

Annie frowned, shrugging on the robe and pulling it together in front of her. The hood was large and fell into her eyes, and she had to push it back.

“Follow me.” They were traveling down the corridor again, and she followed when he made a sharp left and took her down a steep flight of cement stairs that turned halfway down to the right again. Great, I’m following some guy into the basement of a bar, and I’m probably going to end up on the front page of the newspaper tomorrow as the victim of some grisly axe murder.

Annie checked her intuition and discovered that she wasn’t afraid of the old man. There was definitely something strange about all of this, but she didn’t think he was going to hurt her. The door at the bottom of the stairs led into another long, dimly lit corridor. This passageway was much wider than the one upstairs.

She remembered Herman telling her this was once a distillery as they passed the rows of barrels lining the basement walls. When the hooded man stopped at the door and turned to her, Annie gasped and took a step back, her heart pounding. He didn't look at her. Instead, he reached for something around his neck and pulled a skeleton key hanging on a leather thong over his head.

He looked at her, and asked, "Who are we?"

Stunned, Annie stared back at him, not sure what to say. He repeated the question. His tone wasn't threatening. It was just a simple question. "Who are we?"

She was about to say she didn't know when she saw the characters carved over the door: Γαβριελ.

"The Order of Gabriel," Annie breathed, her eyes wide. The old man gave a nod, turned, and put the key into the lock. She stumbled after him, amazed at how quickly he was walking now. The dark hood kept falling into her eyes, and she had to push it back to see where they were going. They weren't alone down here, she was sure of it. She could hear the sounds of people talking and faint laughter. Was it an echo from upstairs? On her left was a doorway and she caught a shadowy glimpse of two figures locked together in an embrace. They were kissing—were they kissing? Are you sure?

"What do we protect?" the old man asked, turning to face her again as they came to another locked door.

Annie glanced over her shoulder, her head still filled with the shadowy vision of the couple. What were they doing—really?

“What do we protect?” He repeated the question and Annie turned to him, glancing over the door. There was the symbol again, the same one Herman had tattooed on his upper arm.

“The Order of Gabriel...” She swallowed as she met his rheumy eyes. They were sunk deep into his skull. She remembered Herman’s words, and continued. “The Order of Gabriel protected...the secret of life and death.”

The old man gave another nod and unlocked the second door with his skeleton key. This corridor stretched longer than the last, and now Annie was sure she could hear people. There were moans of pleasure—or pain—she wasn’t sure which, coming from the rooms on either side of the hallway, and the high sound of laughter. She strained to catch a glimpse as they passed, but with her hood falling over her eyes and the pace the old man had set, she couldn’t see much. Each image was just a brief impression—a shadowy, hooded figure bending over the writhing, nude body of a woman; a man bound and gagged, hanging from the ceiling, his fingertips brushing the floor. A pulsing red glow emanated from one room along with a smell of something sickly sweet, like garlic gone sour.

“What is the secret?” The old man turned and asked her the question, the key poised at the lock. He assumed she knew the answer, since she had known all the others. Thanks, Herman. The coincidence was too eerie and Annie shivered.

“Death is not the end.” Annie’s words were lost as someone down the hall screamed.

Her eyes widened as she followed the hooded figure through the door and into a small, sparse room. The light here didn't come from dim bulbs, as in the corridor, but rather from a fire burning low in the corner of the little room. The man added wood to the stove and then turned to a cabinet that looked to Annie as if it had been carved out of ivory. It was a gleaming, bone white, and the skull and crossbones carved into the front seemed to grin at her as he used the same key to unlock it.

Pushing his hood back off his head so he could work, the old man pulled open the black-velvet-lined cabinet. In the center, like a dull jewel, was a vial of thick, black liquid. If it weren't encased in glass, it would have been camouflaged entirely by its dark surroundings. Annie watched as the man opened the vial to reveal an eyedropper fastened in its lid. He worked quickly, but carefully, retrieving a corked tube from several laying on one of the wooden counters. He put one drop of the viscous black fluid into the empty glass tube before corking it and putting it into his pocket. When he had replaced the vial and locked the cabinet, he turned to Annie.

"What is that?" she asked, nodding at the tube he had slipped it into his pocket.

"Black Death." He opened the door, expecting her to follow, and she did, as quickly as she could. This time, she kept her hood on and didn't look to either side as they made their way through the doors. He took her robe and hung it on a hook before they headed back up the cement stairs. The noise of the bar

seemed to vibrate under her feet as they emerged into the blue, hazy light of the Styx.

The old man didn't speak as he filled a martini glass with something clear from a nozzle. Tonic water? Annie wondered. When he slipped the tube from his pocket and uncorked it, she thought she could smell that too-sweet odor from the basement again. In the little room downstairs, she had thought the liquid in the vial was thick and sticky, like molasses. But now it ran down the side of the tube as quick as black mercury, falling into the martini glass without leaving any residue on the side of the vial.

"The Black Death..." Annie stared as the entire drink turned dark before her eyes.

"Yes." The old man held the glass out to her and gave her a nod. "You sought the secret and it was revealed to you."

She didn't feel as if anything had been revealed. As a matter of fact, she was more confused than ever. Annie took the glass from him and was surprised at how cold even the stem of it was in her hand. "Well...thank you."

"Only death knows the secret to eternal beauty." The voice in her ear belonged to Eric, she was sure of it, and she whirled toward it, nearly spilling the hard-won drink in her hand. There was no one there at all. She glanced back at the old man and he winked at her, moving to serve another customer.

What does that mean? She stared into the black depths of the drink in her hand. Only death knows the secret to eternal beauty. The old man had said that to her, too, before she had put on the dark robe and hood.

Annie stared into the glass, seeing a dark reflection of herself. There was an image shimmering there, and she recognized it as she did when looking at pictures of herself as a child. In this vision, she was an old woman, her face careworn, her smile lost in laugh lines, the familiar high cheekbones making her cheeks look slightly sunken. She was looking at her own face, years into the future, her physical beauty having faded long before.

“You’re still beautiful.” It was Eric again, and it startled her out of her vision. He wasn’t there, and yet she could have sworn the voice was real. She could almost feel the heat of his lips pressed right to her ear!

Only death knows the secret to eternal beauty.

Annie understood, suddenly, and the realization brought tears to her eyes. Her physical beauty would fade, over time, but the light burning in her that had caught Eric’s attention that night in the kitchen would never fade. He had seen her, fully, without ever even looking at her physical form. He had seen the woman inside of her, the woman she was becoming, the woman she wanted to be, the one beyond her physical body.

I want to grow old with Eric, she thought, blinking back her tears. He’s the man I want to be with when my hair is white, when we have grandchildren coming to visit and stories to tell about the old days. The feeling was so strong in her that it was an ache, and she found herself even more determined to do whatever it took to find him again.

Annie found Dita sitting on a soft, oversized chair, still surrounded by admirers. When Annie handed her the drink, Dita’s eyes widened slightly, but she

motioned her to sit. The crowd of people moved away the moment Dita waved her hand, leaving the two of them in relative privacy.

“Well, dear, I didn’t expect you back...so soon...” Dita sipped the drink and her eyebrows rose in surprise. “And this is exactly what I asked you for!”

“I hope so.” Annie sank into a chair with a defeated sigh. “You have no idea what I had to do to get it. Or maybe you do. I don’t know. I’m so tired of this runaround. Do you really know where Eric is? I need to find him.”

Dita set her glass on the little table between them and leaned toward her. “Actually, I got a call from him just a few hours ago.”

“Oh please.” Annie rolled her eyes. “Do you think I was born yesterday?”

“He’s back in town.” Dita picked imaginary lint off the chair. Annie marveled again at how incredible she looked for being a grown man’s mother.

“Then why wasn’t he at his place today?” Annie crossed her arms.

Dita shrugged. “How should I know?”

“Why don’t I believe you?” Annie shook her head.

Dita gave her a cool, grim smile. “You can believe what you like, darling. He doesn’t tell me everything. What I can do is give you the address to The Elysian Fields. He will be seeing a client there between two and four tomorrow.”

“What in the heck is The Elysian Fields?” Annie cocked her head and frowned.

Dita raised her eyebrows at her and then winked. “It’s a mystery school.”

“A...what?” Annie asked, shaking her head as if to clear it. Eric’s mother looked as if she were enjoying Annie’s suspense.

Dita crossed one knee over the other. "I guess the best way to describe it...it's a kind of new age school, for people like intuitives and psychics."

Annie put her head in her hands for a moment. It was beginning to hurt. "You're sure he's going to be there?"

"It's what he told me," she replied with that one-shoulder shrug.

Resigned, Annie said, "Okay, give me the number."

Dita bit her lip and then sighed. "They don't have phones."

Annie laughed, incredulous. "Oh, come on!"

"It's true!" she protested. "Something about vibrations? They have a lot of...alternative ideas. But I can give you the address. It's about an hour's drive out of town."

Annie sat still for a moment, pondering. "What the hell. Why not? This couldn't get any stranger. Give me the address."

Dita reached into her purse and pulled out a black book. She flipped the pages and Annie watched as she wrote an address in large, looping letters on a slip of paper before handing it to her.

"Thanks." Annie stood. "Enjoy your honey...and your drink. Virgil and that old guy were both quite an experience."

Dita caught Annie's arm as she passed. "Would you mind doing me another favor?"

"Are you kidding me?" Annie sighed. "What? What could you possibly want now?"

Dita's smile was kind and Annie felt herself relenting. "Can you pick up something for me while you're there?"

"Is it anything illegal?"

"Goodness, no!" Her laugh was like silver crystals falling. "It's just a beauty cream. Inquire at the office and ask for Kora. She's holding it for me."

"I guess I could," Annie replied, feeling gently bullied again, but not knowing how to refuse.

"Thank you, dear." Dita stood and leaned over, surprising Annie by giving her a brief kiss on the cheek and leaving behind the smell of lavender and roses. It should have been a kind act, but Annie fought the urge to wipe at the spot. As Annie tucked the slip of paper into her purse, she headed down the metal staircase and heard Dita call out that odd parting phrase again, "Good luck!"

* * * *

This is crazy. Annie made her way down the steep, narrow steps into the darkness, feeling her way. The only light in the stairwell flickered on above her head for a brief hopeful moment and then went out again. Dita had been right. It took her an hour to find the place, but it wasn't in the country like she'd assumed it would be. It was in the middle of a place that looked like a small version of Chinatown—complete with signs in strange languages. She found the brick building next to an open marketplace selling everything from candles to crystals.

Her feet hurt. She had to park two blocks away and walk in heels. A block or so before she found the building, she had seen two boys sitting on the sidewalk playing some sort of game. Annie recognized it as she passed. Pick-Up Sticks. She stood for a moment and watched them. Kids still play that game?

She was surprised they weren't inside playing video games. When Annie stepped over the flood of their sticks, they just looked up at her and smiled.

Edging her way down into the darkness, she felt dizzy and nauseous. She reached into her jacket pocket, remembering she still had the honey cake Virgil had given her the day before. She broke off a small piece. The taste surprised her. It was like honeyed coffee— rich and thick.

How far down does this go? She peered into the darkness and couldn't see anything.

Behind her, she could see the faint glow of daylight, where she had passed a bar called The Boatman and had met a grizzled old panhandler sprawled at the entrance marked "The Elysian Fields" in scrolling letters. Annie frowned, still shaking off that half-creepy, half-sad feeling she got whenever she met the homeless.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he had asked, his voice rasping through what was left of his teeth.

"You're gonna give me a penny for my thoughts?" Annie had smiled in spite of herself.

"You give me a penny," he had corrected. "And I'll tell you your thoughts."

She had given him a penny, but had hurried past him before he could speak again. Maybe she didn't want to know what she was thinking.

Annie couldn't resist another small bite of the honey cake as she moved down the stairwell. The stairs ended and a deep red light at the bottom illuminated a sign indicating that the store was to the right and classes to the left.

The woman in the office upstairs had said she could find Kora in the store, so Annie turned right. At least the passageway was lit, even if it was with hazy red lights.

As she neared the end of the hallway, Annie was paralyzed by a deep growl in the darkness ahead of her. The sound came closer and she took a step back, her hand reaching out to steady herself against the cinderblock wall. A large black dog came into view under one of the red lights, and Annie gasped, stepping further back.

“Kirby!” The faint voice came from somewhere on the other side of the wall.

The dog turned its head in the direction of the voice and whined. Annie thought the dog might be friendlier now, having been admonished, and reached a tentative hand out, but the dog growled again, baring its teeth. She straightened, putting her hands in her pockets and considered the stairway behind her. The moist honey cake gave her an idea. Squatting down again, she made a kissing noise, holding out a bit of the cake. The dog came forward, tentative, his nose working. He took the offering from her fingers. His tail was wagging now and Annie sighed, relieved, and stood up again.

“Bark worse than your bite, huh, pal?” She moved past him toward the end of the corridor. He followed her, nosing her hand to see if she had more for him. Around the corner, the passage ended and Annie found herself under one of those caged red light bulbs at a door marked with a strange symbol and the word

Apollyon. She frowned. There were no other doors and the corridor had come to a dead-end.

Annie shrugged. This must be the place! End of the line! She opened the door and it swung easily. The room was all basement—cinderblock walls and pipes that ran across the ceiling. The fluorescent light over her head flickered. It was clearly a book store, filled with shelves, but there were all sorts of other strange, occult novelties, tarot cards and glass fairy baubles and statues of various gods and goddesses. Annie stared at a huge red Buddha on the floor that had a sign near his faded belly that read, Rub Me.

She could smell incense and located the source on a desk that held an ancient cash register. The incense burner was in the carved out top of a human skull replica that glowed with the light of a candle inside. Annie made a face. Lovely. Gotta remember to put that one on my Christmas list. There were no customers milling about.

“Hello?” Annie called, looking for the source of the voice that had called the dog. Annie thought she saw movement behind one of the book shelves and called out again. “Kora?”

The dog beside her barked and the door behind her swung shut, the force of it making the skull light flicker and go out. Annie started, gasping, and her hand went to her throat. The dog licked her other hand as if in apology and trotted off behind the desk where wisps of smoke were coming out of the skull’s eye sockets.

“I heard you!” came a muffled voice.

Annie turned at the sound of a door, and a girl entered the room looking like she should be going to a funeral. Annie understood the whole goth-girl rebellion thing, but she had never found it attractive. I guess that's the point? The girl was wearing the requisite black lipstick, heavy make-up, dark eye shadow. Her long hair was dyed a deep black with red streaks. Annie eyed her combat boots and Beetlejuice-striped thigh highs and suppressed a smile.

As the girl stepped under a glowing black light that Annie hadn't noticed on the ceiling, her black t-shirt glowed with a purple ghoulish image of a skull. Annie took a step back in surprise as the girl advanced. The skull disappeared as she moved to stand under the fluorescents.

The girl smiled at her and extended a tiny, almost childlike hand in greeting. Annie noticed her nails were long and painted like some bizarre reverse French manicure, black on the bottom and white on the tips. "I'm Kora. You were looking for me?"

Annie looked down at the girl, whose head barely came to her shoulder. She wasn't as young as she looked, Annie judged. The tattoo and the belly ring and the eyebrow stud make her look younger somehow.

"Yes. I'm here to pick up something for Dita—" Annie stopped, realizing that she didn't even know Dita's last name. Not that mattered. People seemed to know who she was, regardless.

"Ah, Dita! She said you were coming." Kora smiled and Annie saw the flicker of a tongue stud. "You want the beauty box. Stay right here!"

Annie waiting, wondering how Kora had known she was coming if they had no phones. In fact, how did one run a business without a phone, exactly?

Kirby came trotting back around the corner in her direction. He stopped for a moment to be petted before going to sit by the entrance, as if waiting for something.

Kora returned holding a wooden box about half a foot square. It was carved with an intricate pattern, something that seemed familiar to Annie, although she couldn't say why. It was unrecognizable as any concrete image, and she thought perhaps it was something Celtic. She reached out her hand to touch it.

Kora offered her the box. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes." Annie took it and tucked it under her arm. "Thanks."

"Oh, she told me to tell you not to open it." Kora headed toward the desk, her boots treading hard on the basement floor.

Annie closed her eyes and threw her head back toward the ceiling, slapping her forehead. "Like mother, like son?" she muttered. Unbelievable!

"You mean Eric?" Kora asked, lifting the skull on the desk and re-lighting the candle.

Annie moved toward her. "You know Eric?"

"Oh, yes!" Kora watched the flame, a small, secret smile on her lips. "We all know Eric."

"Is he here?" Annie leaned over the counter as Kora knelt behind it to pick something up off the floor.

Kora put some papers back on the desk, using the edge of the skull as a paperweight. "I thought he was supposed to have clients here today. Check in the office upstairs. Do you know where that is?"

Annie nodded, already heading for the door. Her heart was racing.
"Thanks for your help!"

* * * *

Annie glanced up as the door opened, half rising to meet him. It was a stocky bearded man with glasses and a goatee. He glanced at her, his eyes moving over her blouse and skirt and heels. She felt out of place here. This guy was the most average-looking person she had seen walk through the door yet. The tattooed, long-haired biker guy just before him had eyed her, too, and then asked a lot of questions at the window about a Reiki class. This stocky guy wanted an application for something he called the "Medical Intuitive Program." He sat in the chair across from Annie with a clipboard and filled it out while he hummed. Annie glanced at the clock again and sighed. The woman at the window, a patient redhead named Polly, had told her he was due in any minute. That was almost an hour ago.

The box was heavy in her lap and she wondered what was in it. Her mind wandered as she traced the pattern on the box again, like some grooved finger labyrinth. The trials of the week had exhausted her: meeting Dita, the spilling of the beans, Virgil and the killer bees, Herman and the secret monastic sect, the old man and the Black Death, and now this strange odyssey into The Elysian Fields. The thought of seeing Eric again, the object of every action she had taken

lately, made her stomach clench. What would he say? Would he welcome her? Would he want her?

Annie swallowed hard as she recalled Kora's smile when she spoke of Eric. Had he been with that little goth-girl? She wouldn't doubt it, at least not from the impression she got from his mother. Do you believe her? Annie felt dizzy and looked at the clock again. She hadn't eaten since the honey cake. She couldn't imagine eating now, anyway. She was nauseous at the thought of facing Eric.

Dita. The image of Eric's mother laughing made Annie cringe. There's a woman who needs therapy. She smiled at the thought. The box seemed to grow heavier in her lap and she shifted. She wondered again what was in it. Dita had said beauty cream. This didn't look like a box for lotion. It looked like a box for jewelry.

The stocky guy carried his clipboard to the window. Annie listened, still tracing the pattern, as Polly and the man talked, their voices just a distant murmur. Don't open the box. Kora's words made Annie's face burn. What was she going to find—snakes? Annie glanced around. The room was empty again. No one was at the window.

Why not? She lifted the latch, using it to pull the lid up. Nothing. Just a red velvet inlay and a little mirror on the inside of the lid. Frowning, Annie felt along the bottom to be sure. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and then did a double take.

As a beautiful woman, she had always been praised for her appearance, but today Annie didn't recognize the reflection that stared back at her. It was the

same face, the wide, dark eyes, the pale skin, the long dark hair. Annie lifted the box closer, incredulous. Her cheeks were rosy, her hair slightly disheveled from the day's wanderings, but it was more than that.

She looked soft and open. Her lips parted in wonder. All the places where she had been cool, sharp, or angular, seemed to have melted, softened, smoothed. She touched her cheek, feeling the heat of the radiant flush there. Is this what they mean by rosy glow?

Something had changed in her as she had continued her search for Eric. The shallow beauty of her physical form had somehow been transformed into something deeper. There was a radiant light that seemed to come from within, and it wasn't just the secret she was holding fast in her belly. There was a spark in her eyes, some fire lit and growing there, that went beyond her physical appearance. Annie was looking at herself, ageless, timeless, and could finally see the deep beauty that radiated outward from deep within.

She felt unsteady and closed her eyes for a moment, fighting another wave of nausea. Her urgent search, the pain of her own denial, the sudden gravity and weight of her life, all hit Annie with such force that she went reeling, the world spinning around her as she dropped the box and slid to the floor into darkness.

Chapter Six

“Annie.” His voice was calling her and she came out of the darkness into heaven with her head lying in his lap, his fingers massaging her hair. She snuggled instinctively closer.

“Eric! I found you!”

“Yeah. You did.” His hand moved down her neck and shoulder, massaging. “How’s your head?”

“Deja vu,” she murmured, opening her eyes to look up at him. She was lying on a low cot, with her head in his lap. The nurse’s office? He was leaning back against the wall.

“I know.” He grinned. “I remember.”

“Do you?” She struggled to sit and he helped her.

He brushed her hair out of her eyes. “Yeah. I’ve only thought about it every day since.”

“Eric, I’m sorry. I know I promised—” she started, but his fingers and eyes went to her lips, and then his mouth went there, too, and it was like he had moved into her, set up house, and decided to stay. “Mmm...oh, god, Eric...are we alone?” she gasped, glancing toward the door and sliding her hand up his thigh.

“Here?” He grinned, glancing down to the V of her blouse. “No, we can’t...not here. You’re incorrigible.”

“I missed you,” she breathed, rubbing his lower lip with her finger. “And I’m so, so sorry...”

“Annie, don’t. I’m the one who’s sorry,” he apologized against her neck, pulling her into his lap. “Asking you to promise something like that...”

She smiled and breathed into his ear, “It doesn’t matter. We’re together now.”

Her mouth met his and he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in tight. I can’t believe I found him! After months of searching, and the runaround of the past few days, it felt like a dream. Eric’s mouth was real, though, his tongue sending electric shivers down her spine, his hands kneading her hip and lower back.

“I looked for you,” she whispered against his cheek as they both gasped for breath. “From the minute you disappeared. I was so afraid you would never want to see me again, after I promised, and then...”

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you.” Eric sighed, nuzzling her neck. “I know it was foolish, crazy, even...asking you to make that promise. But when you broke it—”

“I should never have listened to my sisters.” Annie shook her head. “I was the foolish one.”

“Listen to me,” he said, cupping her face in his hands. “I need you to understand.”

Annie searched his eyes and found that connection they’d had since the moment she met him. She nodded, waiting for him to speak.

“That night at the party.” Eric swallowed hard. “The reason I was in the kitchen, under the table, in the first place...there was a woman there I’d been involved with. She made a promise to me once, and she broke it...”

She touched her forehead to his, shaking her head. “I don’t need an explanation, Eric...”

“I know it was silly.” He sighed, pulling her lips to his for a brief kiss. “But it was on my mind...someone said something earlier that night...”

Annie captured his lips again, wanting to feel his warmth, to reassure him. “What did they say?”

“That it’s a woman’s nature to break a promise.”

She smiled. “Who told you that?”

“My mother.” Eric gave her a sheepish grin.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Annie laughed and wiggled in his lap. “Let’s make a pact...no more listening to family, ever.”

“It’s a deal,” he agreed, kissing his way over her cheek, down her ear. His hand had pulled her blouse up in the back, so he could stroke the creamy skin of her lower back. “How should we seal it? With a kiss?”

His mouth found hers again, and Annie groaned as his tongue probed between her lips.

“I’ve got a better idea,” she murmured, sliding a hand between them. She cupped the bulge in his jeans, surprised to find him hard and ready. Rubbing her palm there, eager, she whispered, “Let’s live dangerously.”

He groaned as her hand created friction between them. "Annie!" His voice sounded pained.

She lifted her eyes to his, biting her lip. "Yes, Eric?" She continued to rub her hand over his erection, watching the change on his face.

"Remember what I said before?" He swallowed hard, licking his lips and staring at the front of her blouse, the exposed tops of her breasts. "About not having sex...here?"

"Mmm-hmm," she murmured, working his zipper down.

"I take it back." He pressed her down onto the cot with his mouth, the weight of him like a relief. Annie gasped and then moaned, feeling how hard he was against her thigh, pressing through his jeans. Eric pulled her blouse fully out of her skirt, groping underneath it as his tongue met hers.

"Wait," she gasped as he thrust against her, rocking her body against the cot. "Maybe we should check? Lock the door?"

"Now you're worried?" he chuckled, tugging her skirt up with one hand, seeking her heat. "What happened to living dangerously?"

When his fingers moved her panties aside and probed her wetness, she forgot about everything and gave in to exactly what she had wanted in the first place. He was wild, like an animal, biting at her neck, growling, moving his hand between her legs. His eagerness and intensity were making her crazy with lust.

Annie wiggled out from under him and sank to her knees beside the cot. Eric rolled and lifted his hips for her as she unzipped his jeans and pulled at them, freeing his cock. It was red and swollen and the tip was already wet. He

didn't give her a minute to consider—he forced himself into her mouth with a groan, grabbing a handful of her hair and thrusting. She was just as eager to be used as he was to use her. She gagged and sucked him by turns, letting him fuck her mouth again and again as she reached under her skirt, thrusting her panties aside to play with herself.

Annie saw him glancing at the door, knowing that at any moment, anyone could walk through and discover them. She knew she should care—she just simply didn't. Being with Eric was the only thing she could think about, and that wasn't so much thinking as it was some primal instinct. There didn't seem to be much thinking going on in her brain anymore at all.

“Hey, hey,” he warned, and she slowed a little, looking up and meeting his eyes.

He pulled her to him and kissed her, sucking at her tongue. His hands moved over her as if he were inspecting her for ripeness. He tugged and twisted at her nipples as he kissed her, making her gasp and writhe in his grip. His fingers explored the soft curves of her body, like he was trying to remember her with his hands. Sliding her skirt up her thighs, he cupped and kneaded the flesh of her ass, and his cock pressed between her legs, demanding its due. His hands were on her, all over her, shoving her skirt up high around her waist. He yanked at her black, mesh panties, moving only to slide them off and then seeking her wetness again.

Annie arched her back, rocking against his probing fingers as they kissed. Her hands ran through his hair, her tongue meeting his. She could hear

someone's voice on the other side of the door and she realized anyone could walk in and find them here. The thought was blackly exciting. Annie watched with glazed eyes as he slid down between her legs.

"God, I've missed this," he whispered as his tongue slipped between her lips to find her clit, working the fleshy folds back until it was revealed to him. His arms slipped easily under her thighs, lifting her more fully to his mouth. She slid her hands over her breasts, cupping, squeezing. She slowly rubbed her nipples through her blouse with her palms, feeling the sensation intensify.

"Yes!" Annie could feel that gentle tug beginning in her lower belly. "Yes, yes!" Her words made him moan against her pussy, the sound reverberating through her whole body as his tongue quickened. His finger slid down her slit and then in, his tongue concentrating just where she wanted it, where she needed it. The slow movement of his fingers—one, then two, then three, pumping inside of her—s—ent her teetering closer to the edge. His rhythm followed her breathing, faster and faster still, his other hand slipping between her bottom and the cot. His palm pressed against her lower back, steadying and guiding her.

"I'm so close!" Annie cried. "Oh god, yes, make me come!" She knew it was imminent. She could feel it beginning, and she let the first pulsing heat fill her core. "Now! Now!" She lifted her hips and squeezed her nipples hard, feeling the cascade of her juices running down her behind. He grunted, holding her tight, his mouth steady and still licking. His fingers were buried so deep that she could feel her muscles tightening around them as the sensation swelled, crested, and

then broke, rippling outward through her entire body. He held her close, rubbing his wet face against her thighs, kissing, licking, nibbling.

His tongue sought to find her clit again, but she covered it with her hand.

“Ohhh wait,” she gasped. “Too sensitive.”

He chuckled and they stayed that way for a moment as Annie’s breath slowed, her fingers in his hair. His tongue continued to tease her as her whimpers began to turn to moans. She gasped as he parted her flesh with his fingers, easing his way up and down her folds with his soft, wet tongue, feeling herself giving in to him again.

He teased her, probing around the tender hole of her pussy, sinking his tongue in and scooping out more of her juices. He lapped at her, burying his whole face against her mound as her lips parted and gave way to pink, slick flesh.

“Ohhh yes!” Annie reached between her thighs and parted her lips, showing him, pointing the way. He nudged her fingers aside with his tongue, beginning to lick her clit back and forth, round and round. His mouth was fastened over her pussy, licking and sucking her tiny clit as her thighs trembled in his hands. The muscles there were taut and quivering, and Annie arched against him.

“So close,” she murmured, her body just beginning to tense as it sailed over that delicious edge. “Oh god, baby, make me come again!” Eric licked faster as Annie found her release, the soft shudder and shake of her making him moan

against her mound. Her juices flowed like water down his chin and cheeks and he swallowed her greedily.

Annie gasped as she pulled his head back and leaned forward to kiss him, tasting herself in his mouth as their tongues touched. Her hand reached down to find him, thick and hard. He groaned against her mouth when she squeezed, teasing the head with her thumb.

“I want you in my mouth,” she murmured, jerking insistently on his cock.

“Again?” he gasped as she tugged him to stand in front of her. She fondled his balls and kissed the tip of him. Annie leaned back on the cot, grasping and squeezing his slick length.

“Come up here,” she insisted. She pulled her shirt off, unhooking her bra to expose her breasts to him. He straddled her belly and Annie bit her lip, looking up at him. Just seeing him sitting up there, his balls resting on her ribcage, his cock rising up out of a thick patch of hair, pre-cum trailing down the shaft in tiny rivulets, made her clit, still hiding in its sheath, begin to pulse again. He had a beautiful cock that tilted slightly and endearingly to the right when it was this hard, making her want to follow it and capture it with her mouth.

She licked her palm, letting her saliva and his pre-cum mix as she slid her hand down the shaft. She could see and feel every swell along his cock, every vein, the leaking tip, the throbbing shaft. She could feel more than hear the deep sounds he made in his throat as she slowly stroked him, easing the skin over the tip and using her fingers in a circle to tease the ridge. His head fell back, his eyes

closed, his arms simply hung limp at his side, as if he were nothing but his cock in that moment.

“Oh Annie!” he moaned. She rewarded the sound of her name in his mouth with deeper, longer strokes. His eyes flew open and he looked down at her. She cupped his balls lightly, rubbing them in her hands, and he gasped, “Yes!” His hands found her breasts, thumbing her nipples. His eyes were closed as he squeezed and massaged her breasts, making her moan softly.

“Up here.” She pulled gently on his cock, urging him higher. “I want your cock between my breasts.”

He groaned, his eyes darkening. She licked her palm again, getting him wetter still, and pressed him between her breasts. Her pale flesh wrapped around his red, swollen cock was mouth watering, just the tip of him appearing through her cleavage. He started moving between them and she reached her tongue out for the head with every thrust.

“Ah, god!” He groaned as she stretched for more of his pre-cum on her tongue.

“Pinch my nipples,” she urged. He did, hard, squeezing her breasts together around his cock. Suddenly, he slowed, biting his lip and shaking his head. Annie could tell that he was getting close and she reached her tongue for his cock again.

“Not yet,” he murmured, his cock in his hand now, squeezing and breathing hard.

“But I want it in my mouth,” Annie begged, licking her lips and looking up at him. He brought it close to her mouth, rubbing the tip gently over her lips, still squeezing it hard. She could feel a hot spurt of pre-cum as she let it go with a quiver. Opening her mouth, she made her tongue flat, so he could press it there.

“You want it?” He teased her tongue with it, rubbing her lips, smacking her cheeks a little, making her moan. Annie nodded, unable to speak, filled simply with lust for the feel of him again in her mouth. “Then take it, baby.” He offered it to her, easing it past her lips, letting the swollen length graze the roof of her mouth, all the way to the back of her throat. He moaned as he pulled the length back out and Annie sucked eagerly on the tip. She swallowed it gladly, hungry for him, as he slid back into her mouth. He slipped his hand behind her head and eased himself in and out of her warm, wet mouth. She let him do it, at his own pace, watching the pleasure on his face. She felt the throbbing response against her tongue and roof of her mouth that remained simply open to receive him.

His pace slowed as his breath began to quicken and she sucked a little harder, moving her own head now, working his cock with her lips and tongue. He gasped, shuddering, and quickly withdrew, again grabbing and squeezing hard.

“That was close,” he murmured after a tight-lipped moment, leaving a little more pre-cum on Annie’s breasts. “I want to be inside of you, Annie. Don’t make me come yet.” He reached behind him to find her heat, cupping her whole wet mound in his hand. She lifted her hips, moaning.

“I want you inside me, too.” Annie’s eyes closed, delighting in the feel of his fingers playing through her flesh. He moved down her body, his hand never

leaving her pussy, to spread her thighs open with his knees. She sighed, loving the feel of the tip of him against her clit when he found it. She pulled her knees up and back, exposing herself entirely to him. He gasped at the sight, making his cock even slicker with her juices as he eased the head between her folds of flesh.

“Don’t tease me,” she begged. “I want you, Eric. Please.” Annie shivered and bit his shoulder to keep from crying out when Eric slid his cock between her swollen pussy lips, driving himself deep inside of her flesh. She heard him grunt, but that was the only sound he made as he started to fuck her.

He felt huge as his flesh began to pummel her, his hips smacking into hers. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she clutched him. The incredible lust that drove them both felt like an itch that just wouldn’t be scratched. Her pussy was a sweet, wet tunnel of heat, engulfing and squeezing his aching cock.

Annie, wanting more, slipped her fingers between her swollen lips and found her throbbing clit. Her body was responding with great enthusiasm, and she knew it wouldn’t take much stimulation to bring her to completion. She gasped as she rubbed her clit in little circles while Eric pounded her so hard that the little cot was moving, bit by bit, across the slippery linoleum.

She felt her climax coming and bit her lip. Shuddering waves crashed over her again and again. Her pussy quivered around him, the little fluttering spasms threatening to take him over the edge, but not quite following through on their delicious promise. Eric groaned, grabbing her hips and pressing in, using the

deep recesses of her pussy to massage the head of his cock, the sensitive tip exploring her deepest, softest parts.

“Annie,” he whispered, and it was his warning again. He pulled out quickly, still throbbing and aching hard.

“I don’t want it to end,” he whispered, looking down at his cock resting between her wet lips.

Annie looked up at him, her eyes glazed. She saw his cock, like a steadfast soldier reporting for duty, and she grasped it. He hissed through his teeth, shaking his head, but the more she tugged, the more he gave in. She loved teasing him, making him give, inch by inch, into the endless aching agony of pleasure that was steering them onward.

“But I want you,” she insisted, sliding him back inside. He couldn’t seem to help himself—his tongue and lips went immediately to her nipples, sucking and licking, back and forth between them.

Annie’s breath came quicker as she worked her hips under him. Eric was thrusting into her, helpless to stop, and she felt another building. She moved faster against him, twisting and rolling underneath his body as she felt the sensation swelling between her thighs. Her climax caught up with her and she shuddered, digging her nails into his back and biting his shoulder as she came.

Eric winced, but he didn’t slow. She pulled him close, and he let her, his hips still rocking, moving in and out of her hot flesh.

“I can’t stop it,” Eric whispered into her hair against her ear.

“Don’t stop,” Annie whispered back.

He was huge inside of her, thick and swollen and insistent. His cock was taking her places she never knew existed. Annie rocked with him, their motion slower now, a more gentle rhythm, but it was incessant, an endless dance. She never wanted it to end. They could do this until the world ended in a brilliant flash of light.

“Oh god,” Eric murmured. “I can’t stand it.” Annie ran her hands down his back, up under his sweat dampened shirt. She slipped her hands down over his ass, feeling the muscles there working as he moved inside of her.

“Don’t stop,” Annie begged him, meeting his easy thrusts with more eager ones, forcing him to sink deeper into her willing, wet flesh. “Don’t ever stop, Eric,” she whispered again, meeting his thrusts with her own, feeling another orgasm waiting in the recesses of her belly. “Please, make me come again...”

He groaned, ramming his cock into her. The linoleum made little squeaking sounds under the legs of the cot as they rocked. They had already slid partway across the floor in their lust. He pushed himself up on his arms and rolled his hips, shoving himself deep into her. Annie nodded, her eyes half-closed, grabbing his biceps and digging her nails in, her thighs gripping him tight.

“Yes,” she whispered, reaching her pinnacle and feeling herself being pushed off the edge. She was falling into it, her body quivering and shivering as she went, the world fading to black around the edges. There’s nothing better than this.

Eric’s shaft throbbed with delicious release, and she felt him filling her, white hot waves of pleasure flooding her insides. Her body curled around him,

wanting to keep him close. His breath was ragged in her ear as he kissed her cheek, her throat, and she gave a soft, shaky sigh.

The sound of a door made them both jump and glance up in a panic.

“Uh oh,” Annie whispered, and then giggled.

Thankfully, it was the outer door, not the one to the room they occupied. Eric grinned and kissed the tip of her nose, rolling off her with a groan. They both started fumbling with their clothes, buttoning and straightening as quickly as they could.

“Hey...” Eric’s eyes searched her face as he stood, tucking in his shirt.

“That whole fainting thing...are you really okay?”

She smiled, standing to tuck her blouse into her skirt. “Don’t I look okay?”

“You look...” He pulled her to him, his eyes moving over her.

“Fantastic...downright edible, actually...hmm, now there’s something I could do again...” His fingers were edging the hemline of her skirt back up.

“Now who’s incorrigible?” Annie laughed, slapping his hand away and sitting down on the cot.

“All right, don’t make me get all serious,” he said with a wink.

She smoothed her hair, finally meeting his eyes. “Do I look different to you?”

He frowned, studying her face, and then nodded. “Now that you mention it...”

“I’m pregnant, Eric.” She bit her lip, waiting for his reaction.

He blinked, staring at her, and then sank down onto the cot beside her.

“Well...I guess that explains the fainting!”

“Is that all you have to say?” she pouted.

He grinned. “Is it mine?”

“You ass!” She shoved at him, but couldn’t help grinning back. “Why do you think I was looking for you?”

Eric shrugged, trying to hide his smile. “My mother said it was because you wanted my money.”

“Your mother—?!” Annie shook her head, looking for words. “Your mother is a piece of work! Do you have any idea?”

He nodded, laughing. “Why do you think I don’t tell her where I am?”

Annie snorted. “Well, I don’t blame you.”

“You know,” Eric fingered the top button of her blouse, “as a psychologist you’ve probably heard what they say...about men marrying women like their mothers...”

Annie’s jaw dropped. “Very funny. I am nothing like your mother!”

“No?” He winked, fingering her top button. “God, I can’t resist you...”

“No!” she protested. “What if someone comes in?”

“You weren’t worried about that five minutes ago.” He smiled. “Besides, I can turn out the light.”

Annie stuck her tongue out. “I think I’d like to do everything with the lights on from now on.”

“Sounds good to me.” He slid his hand over her blouse and cupped her breast. “My, you’ve really grown! I knew there was something different...”

Annie flushed. “Eric!”

He caressed her nipple, looking into her eyes. “So, does this mean I get to keep you?”

“Do you want to keep me?” she whispered, shivering at his touch.

“Yeah, sure, why not?” He smiled. “Well, wait a minute...do you cook? My roommate can make gourmet meals. If I’m gonna trade him in for you...”

She laughed. “Sorry, babe, with me you only get boxed macaroni and cheese and hot dogs.”

Polly opened the door and peered in at them. “Hey, good, you’re okay! Listen, I have to lock up for the day.”

Eric nodded and waved to Polly as she poked her head back out the door. He made a face at Annie. “What about chicken pot pies? Can you make those?”

“If you have a microwave,” Annie quipped. “Roommate? What’s this about a roommate?”

Eric grinned. “I’m guess I’m gonna have to tell Herman you’re moving in.”

“I’m moving in?” Annie was so stunned by that news that it took her a moment to realize what name he had spoken. When she made the connection, her eyes widened and something tightened in her belly. “Herman? Your roommate’s name is Herman?”

“Yeah. He’s a great guy, you’ll love him.”

Annie gulped. "Does he have a tattoo on his upper arm? Funny looking Greek characters?"

Eric's eyes widened. "Yeah...why, have you met?"

"I think we have," she smiled, shaking her head in disbelief. "It sure is a small world."

Eric helped her to stand. "Come on, beautiful, let's go home."

"Are you really okay with the whole baby thing?" she asked, grabbing for his hand as they headed out the door and down the stairs.

"Yes." He pulled her to him, kissing her hard enough to bruise her flesh. His eyes were serious when he said, "I'm so glad you found me."

She gasped, holding onto him, and murmured into his neck. "I'm glad I looked."

"So...now we have to tell my mother." He sounded amused.

"And my sisters," she added, following him down the stairs.

He groaned. "Okay, that's it, me and you under a dark table for the rest of our lives!"

"I could live with that."

Annie felt a flutter in her belly as she pressed herself against him and kissed him fully in the daylight. They stood together like a beginning, the warm spring sun a gentle blessing on them both as they merged together in the doorway, ignoring the people passing by, lost in their finding of one another.

The End

ABOUT SELENA KITT



Like any feline, Selena Kitt loves the things that make her purr—and wants nothing more than to make others purr right along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short cat nap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out—this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she's not pawing away at her keyboard, Selena runs an innovative publishing company (www.excessica.com) and in her spare time, she worships her devoted husband, corrals four kids and a dozen chickens, all while growing an organic garden. She also loves bellydancing and photography.

Her story, *Connections*, was one of the runners-up for the [2006 Rauxa Prize](#), given annually to an erotic short story of “exceptional literary quality,” out of over 1,000 nominees, where awards are judged by a select jury and all entries are read “blind” (without author's name available.) She has also been an EPIC Award Finalist two years in a row (2008 and 2009) with [EcoErotica](#) and [The Real Mother Goose](#).

She can be reached on her website at www.selenakitt.com.

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PAPERBACK ROMANCE

Maya's heart yearns for romance and adventure, so that's what she writes about--but James Reardon, her college creative writing professor, insists she's wasting both time and talent. Determined to prove him wrong, Maya stumbles onto the fact that her professor's been keeping secrets--not the least of which is his attraction to her. Faced with a choice, she will have to decide whether or not to reveal his secret to the world--and her own desire for a man nearly twice her age.

Warnings: This title contains graphic language and really hot sex.

EXCERPT from PAPERBACK ROMANCE:

She heard him come in, and she found herself hesitating to go back out, staring at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, and her whole body tingling, like a limb that had gone to sleep and was just waking up.

What was happening seemed so out of character for both of them—it seemed too fantastic to be real. Was she really sitting in her Ancient History class right now,

looking out the window, chewing on a pen cap, and dreaming all of this? Part of her thought that must be the case. When she opened the door, he was standing by the open window, looking out at the lake. He smiled at her and held out a hand. She took it, still marveling at his touch, and joined him. The sun was brilliant on the water as it rippled toward shore.

“Look.” He pointed toward the mallards that were paddling toward the reeds. As she watched, she saw a mother duck leading her little downy ducklings all in a row for a swim out on the lake.

She watched them in wonder, all too aware of James’ body, his hip against her hip, his hand moving around her waist. “I wonder which one is going to grow up to be a swan?”

He smiled down at her, his attention shifting, his eyes falling to her mouth. “This one.” He tilted her chin up and kissed her. This wasn’t like the tentative kiss in the car. This one was full of passion and an eager longing that matched her own. She whimpered against his lips, seeking his center with her tongue.

He breathed her in—she could feel the expanding of his chest as he pulled her in tight, his hands seeking the bare skin of her back under her t-shirt. The bed seemed miles away as they kissed and touched their way towards it, peeling off clothes and exploring each other as they went. His mouth seemed to want to devour her and she met him like a lifetime of pent-up breath until they were gasping, collapsed, his body pressing her to the floor still five feet short of the bed.

Her t-shirt was pulled up, his jacket off, shirt unbuttoned, and they were pressed belly to belly, but it made the thickness of her jeans too much—she couldn’t feel the

heat of him like she wanted. Her fingers fumbled with the snap and zipper, wiggling out, and the writhing of her under him as she exposed her panties and bare thighs brought a growl from his throat that sent a shiver through her.

She toed her jeans the rest of the way off, wrapping her legs around him when they were free, digging her heels into his lower back and arching. He fumbled with the front hook of her bra and she brushed his hands away, impatient, rolling on top of him and sitting. His eyes were full of lust as he looked up at her peeling off her t-shirt, unhooking her bra and letting her breasts spill out into his hands as she leaned forward to kiss him, her mouth hungry.

She rocked her hips, her thin panties rubbing against the material of his trousers, the bite of his belt a shock as he grabbed her sides and slid her up so he could lick and suck at her nipples like a man who had never tasted flesh before. The eagerness of his mouth made her hips rock hard and she wanted more still. She slid up his belly and sat on his chest, pulling her panties aside to show him the red fuzz between her legs. The groan that elicited was so gratifying that she gave him a little more pink, spreading her lips open so she could rub her clit...

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