

MEETING
WITH MY
MAKER

By
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Meeting with my Maker

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CHAPTER I

ANNORA

Held captive by the cobwebs of my past, clots of old memories jamming my blood vessels, I'm in constant fear of dying before my life begins. My heart might squeeze the last drops of blood from its spongy enclosure and come to a jittery halt before I have a chance to feel anything close to sexual pleasure. The thought of experiencing a morbid departure, alone and lonely, like a tree decomposing unnoticed in the woods grips my insides. These are what I fear the most--and where I'm sure I'm headed.

Drama much? I chide my morbid thinking, staring at the blank walls in my bedroom. It's like a cool, barren tomb in here but I don't care. It suits the way I feel most days.

That old seventies band, the Eagles, sings *Hotel California* from the front room stereo.

"Turn that crap off," I yell. I wish I had never moved back home into the pre-disco, before-I-was-ever-born era.

Mama sings along, ignoring me, replacing the lyrics with *Hotel Paranormal*.

Hotel Paranormal, huh? I'm not going to that stupid hotel. I'd rather stay safe here, in my room, with my few belongings around me for comfort. Mama's got it into her mind that we're going on a week-long "adventure" but I don't want to go. She informed me yesterday, dragging me from the safety of this room to invite me--more like order me--to go.

My mother and her warped mind, I think. We never go on adventures. I stay hidden in my room. She comes and goes. So why does she all of a sudden think it would be fun to do something, let alone do something together?

Mama jolts me out of my reflections, back to the twisted reality of her superstitious mind. “Annora? Are you almost ready to go to supernatural city?” she screeches from the front room.

“I told you,” I call back, reaching for the charcoal-gray hairbrush from my chipped wooden dresser. The dresser was a gift from my father long ago and I’ll never in a million years’ part with it, chipped or not. “I’m not going. I might die today.”

“Oh, please,” she calls. “This again?”

I hear her approaching the bedroom door from the long, narrow hallway and I cringe. The *tap, tap, tap* of her pumps echoes through our simple surroundings, as she bustles toward my door.

I’ve pictured my demise, ever since Pappy kicked the bucket, literally. We were outside the barn one fine summer day, and he simply died. Clouds obscured the sun, making me look up from watching Pappy’s fingers on the cow’s teats. Pappy let out a strange yell. His heart spasmed, his feet went out from underneath him, and he launched the pail of fresh milk out from under Santana, our doe-eyed, orange-red and white Guernsey milk cow. It trickled away in a white river before being soaked up by the golden straw and brown dirt lining the barn. And just like that, Pappy was dead, his eyes glazed in a forever kind of way, staring at the pale pink, thickly veined udder of our cow, as if it held all the secrets of the universe. And I stared at Pappy, confused, wondering why he needed to take an open-eyed nap.

“Mama?” I yelled, tapping the toe of my scuffed black sneaker at my dad’s fallen form. “Pappy’s taking

another one of those strange naps.”

Mama and Pappy used to fight a lot. Pappy would pour himself a couple swigs of amber liquid—he called it his jug juice—toss it down his throat, then get real mad at Mama. He’d take a couple swings at her, she’d take a couple swings at him, and then he’d fall asleep, hard, on the floor, just like he was doing under Santana—only his eyes would be closed.

Mama rushed him to the doctor’s, but she was too late. And, like a curtain falling across a stage, Pappy’s death obscured the joyous light and frivolity from our lives that existed before he passed...and before his and Mama’s marriage turned as sour as spoiled milk. Before that, Pappy sang to the cows. He sang to me. He sang to Mama. He danced his way to the barn each day, rocking me to and fro in his strong arms until my legs were sturdy enough to join him in the dance. And even though he and Mama fought, they loved with the same abandon. Something I’ll never do. I may not be able to control my heart’s termination, but I sure as hell plan on controlling it from love. Because if I ever love someone and they die...well...let’s just say no to that kind of heartbreak. I’ve watched Mama mourn bitterly, ever since.

Staring into the full length mirror behind the door to my bedroom, I tug the hairbrush through my hip length black mass of hair, trying to force it to submit.

A shadow flutters across the looking glass. I blink and wipe my hand across my eyes. The lighting in here sucks, what with the stupid florescent light flickering and buzzing overhead. I focus on my reflection in the mirror to distract myself. I read somewhere that you need to brush your hair at least a hundred times to force it to your will. I turn my attention back to my hair and begin counting.

“One, two, three, four...” Each morning, I yield to

the ritual and every day, after fifty-one strokes, I give up and twist the snarled mass into one long braid.

I retrieve my double ended Bamboo eyeliner brush from its place near the hairbrush on the dresser top, and artfully apply one slender line along the eyelid of my left eye. I add three, precise dots, just below the eyebrow. One squiggle gets applied next, as I immerse myself in the comfort and safety of art and design. Then, scrutinizing myself, I exclaim, "How stupid." I dab a cosmetic cleaner pad on my creativity and wipe it from existence.

Mama bursts through the door like a missionary hell bent on exorcising Satan from my soul.

I leap out of the way.

The door thwacks against the white wall.

"Annora Anetta Lachmann! You're not even dressed. Guidance has given us a mission. Get ready." Mama says my full name as if I'm ten again, the same geeky, gangly girl who watched her Pappy die. She lifts the gold cross around her neck, kisses it, and mutters, "Praise Jesus our Lord in heaven. Help me guide this girl to her salvation."

"Hermine Hazel Lachmann," I retort. "Nothing can save me. And you look like you're dressed for a parade, not this supernatural whatever it is you signed us up for." I roll my eyes.

She stands in the doorway, hands at her stout hips. She's wearing a blue denim, knee-length dress. In her left hand, she clutches a red patent leather purse, festooned with shiny white stars. Blue denim pumps with slick red buttons. A red and white belt is cinched around her waist, making her look like a poster girl for the Fourth of July. She glares at me with vicious, critical eyes, the same color of the dirt that lined our barn on the day that Pappy died.

I tug the sash of my floor-length white terry robe tighter. Coupled with my long black hair, it makes me

look like a ghost.

“That’s because I’m not going. You and your hunt for the paranormal.” I scoff, shaking my head, and settle on my cotton sheet covered bed. I run my hand along the cool, white wall, bare of any photos or paintings. Even though I have an artistic bent, I haven’t the energy to change it into anything better.

Mama’s been a fan of paranormal searches ever since Pappy left us. She swears she sees him, standing at the foot of her bed, when the moon is high and full, and the sky is bright with stars. She even asked me to participate in a séance or two. My answer? Hell to the no.

“Come on,” she whines. “I’ve got this brochure.” She reaches in her purse, retrieves it, and waves it about. Then, she fishes around for her reading glasses. “It says Hotel Paranormal is a unique experience, unlike any other. Be prepared to be pampered. Prepare for *anything*.” She removes her glasses and looks at me, blinking. Her face is as delighted as a child’s. Mama never looks this gleeful.

“Hotel Paranormal? Puh-lease. Ever heard of Hollywood? They’re whizzes at special effects,” I say, studying my reflection. I’ve got pale white skin, like a porcelain doll. Bowed red lips. Too big eyes that are the color of asters, those brilliant purple-blue flowers that sprout in the garden each year and promptly die from lack of care.

“Why are you such a skeptic? There are things in this world that can’t be explained.” Mama appears indignant.

“Right, like why you insist Pappy’s looking over you. He’s dead.” I stare at her, my lip curling.

“He watches out for you, too,” she says, pouting. “Please come with me. Maybe you’ll meet someone.”

“I don’t want to meet someone.” I shudder.

“Mr. Wonderful might appear when you least expect

him. Then you can move out.” She moves her hands to her hips, making bitch wings.

“He won’t be looking for me, that’s for certain. I thought you liked having me here.” My heart’s clenching. Even my own mother doesn’t want me here.

“We haven’t done anything fun together for a long, long time. All you do is gloom around.” Her arms fall listlessly at her sides, like the air’s draining from her.

“Have we *ever* done anything fun? All you do is pick at me.” I study her, glaring, and then sigh. She’s right. I’ve been mad at her for about twelve years, ever since I lost my dad, and our life together became one of toil, drudgery, and fighting to survive. And fighting with each other. I blame her for his death. She stopped trying to get along with him. She turned into a critical shrew, always judging him and picking at him. But mostly, I blame myself. I should have found a way for them to stay happy. Maybe I was a handful, or in the way, or...who knows? All I know is I wish he never left us. “Where did you say it is?”

She brightens. “On 55th and Kenmore, in Los Angeles.”

“I hate Los Angeles. And there’s your answer to the paranormal phenomena. It’s probably a tourist spot.”

“This will be fun, you’ll see.”

I saunter toward my laptop computer, resting on the bare wood floor at the foot of the bed. I stoop to pick it up, flipping open the lid. “Address?”

She glances at the brochure and reads me the coordinates.

I plug it into Google maps. There’s no hotel there. No such number. Images appear showing a wide swath of empty lot that seems to stretch for miles. “Look, Mama, there’s no such place. I think you’ve been had. Where did you say you got this brochure?”

“From the Ladies’ Auxiliary meeting. It was so exciting. We had our usual gathering. Then, we all sat around the Ouija board, asking for signs of paranormal activity in our region.”

“Los Angeles isn’t exactly our region,” I say. “It’s two states away. Or, do you consider the whole west coast our region?” I flash a smile at her.

She waves her hand over her head, continuing. “This place was *revealed* to us. We wrote it down. Then, when we adjourned, a stack of these brochures was found right outside the doorway. It was a sign as true as there ever was!” She looks giddy...or unhinged.

“It’s a sign you were being duped, big time. Probably some scammer’s been targeting your club. Let it go, Mama.” I traipse to my closet and retrieve a pair of jeans and a soft, cotton top. Shrugging into them, I prepare to get on with my day, doing whatever it is I’m supposed to be doing. Probably looking for a job.

“I already got the tickets.” She whines like a two-year-old. Then her eyes narrow and she gives me one of her righteous glares. “And I figure I’ve done enough to take care of you and your depressed ass, you owe me.”

I splutter. “I owe you?” My eyebrows launch high on my forehead. “I’m not your indentured servant. Take Una.”

“I want to take you, not a close friend.”

“And why, exactly, is that?” One of my eyebrows arches.

“Because,” she says, turning away from me. “None of them would understand why I want to go there.”

“And you think I do?” I’m ready to shoo her out of here and get on with my listless day.

When she turns to look at me, her eyes are moist.

I haven’t a clue what she hopes to achieve there, but I can tell it’s important to her. I let out a long sigh. “How

are we supposed to get there? Fly?"

"No, we take a bus. It's like one of those Green Tortoise adventure busses you take to get to one of those hostels."

A sharp laugh explodes from my throat. "A bus? From Seattle to Los Angeles? No way, Mama. That will take us days."

"It's supposed to be quick. It promises to get you there in a less than a day."

I chuckle. "What, is it a bus with a rocket engine?" I picture us zooming to a vacant lot in southern California. Picture my mom, standing desolate and disappointed on the cracked pavement...alone. Needing comfort. Needing a way to get back home.

"Please," she says again, in a high pitched voice.

"Mama..." I growl. "I don't want to go!"

Her face transforms into a mask of terror.

"What is it? What's wrong?" My body stiffens in response, fearing an intruder of some kind.

"I saw something. In the mirror. Look behind you!"

I whirl around, spying that same black shadowy thing in the polished glass. Just as quickly, it disappears. I've seen that shadow before. For a second, my heart beats at the rate of a locomotive, barreling down the tracks. For an instance, I sense an unfamiliar feeling of passionate joy, pushing through the walls of my cold heart.

This can't be joy. It's the sense of resignation you experience before you die a brutal death. This is it. This is the point at which my heartbeat ceases.

Then, I turn to Mama and shake my head. "Good one. You almost got me going. Okay, okay, I'll go with you. I'd hate for you to be by yourself when you find out nothing's there." Even worse, I'd hate to find out she's right.

CHAPTER 2

MAC BHRIAIN

The banshee-demon launches herself at me with the force of a hurricane, all fangs bared, scythe-swirling fury. “Mac Bhriain McCarrion! Satan’s shadow specter, I’m going to kill you!”

“Not again,” I growl. *Women. I’ll never understand them. A minute ago, she had her mouth around my cock.*

She hauls back the scythe in a double-handed grip and swings. “You’re dead, jackass.”

“Not if I kill you first,” I roar, side-stepping away from her as fast as I can.

“You can’t just fuck us females and discard us as if we’re trash!” She hurls her scythe like a javelin, and I duck to avoid losing a limb, or worse, my head.

Glass shatters as the scythe strikes a nearby hovercraft windshield.

“I never discard you like trash. Where’d you hear that?”

“No, you simply disappear in a stream of smoke.” Her hands ball into fists, causing lightning to shoot from her knuckles, giving an eerie glow to her face.

Whoa. How’d she do that? I don’t want to know. I shimmy between the vehicles—rockets, hovercars, mini-spaceships and jet-bikes--at the parking lot outside Club Death, and bolt toward the barren field beyond.

She shakes her flickering fists at me.

Sparks fly and nearly catch my long hair on fire. I try to pick up speed but I’m pretty fucked up.

“You might try feeling something sometime. You might ask yourself, ‘I wonder how it feels to be left behind.’ You might try caring for a change.” She rips the side mirror from a jet-bike and hurls it at me.

Feeling something? Where is this coming from? The only thing I want to feel right now is some chick’s tight flesh snug around my cock. Hers woulda been good enough.

Sprinting away from her, through a devilish landscape of crags, barren ground, and withered surroundings, I look for Min, my hell horse.

Fucker’s nowhere to be found. Probably found himself a filly and is currently busy burying his rod to the hilt.

Much as I meant to do with this demon until she got all bent out of shape.

She came on to me. I was making moves on someone else. She dragged me outside for what I thought was the beginning of a fine night. I sensed something off when she didn’t yield to my caresses...when her lips didn’t part for my tongue. Instead, she crouched and aggressively took my cock in her mouth, practically chewing on it. And then, a blade the size of Texas was thrust in my direction, barely missing my glorious erection.

And now, here I am, racing along the surface of Planet Nine, a recent discovery made by Earth scientists, if the galaxy newsfeeds can be believed. *Earthlings are stupid—if they only knew the vast array of worlds outside their solar system.*

This was *not* the kind of exercise I’d hoped to get tonight. I search around for something, anything, I can use to ward off her attack...and come up short when I reach the edge of a cliff. I manage to stop inches before plummeting to my death.

“How is it you can see me, anyway?” I ask, breathing

hard. My head swims. I blink, trying to get my vision to clear. I'd meant to assume my shadow self when she started getting all twitchy outside the club.

She lunges and, I twist to face her. Before I can dodge out of the way letting her sail to her doom, she manages to sink her wicked incisors into my calf. My back lands with a thud, my head banging against the ledge. "Fucking hell!" I lift my head, shoving her out of the way. I've got to sift into shadow, pronto. Usually, I simply think it and it's a done deal. Not this time.

"Because I can, you moron," she says, blood—*my* blood—dripping from her canines.

She tries to grab me but I move in a clumsy, inebriated manner and barely escape her claws. I'm more fucked up than I thought.

"You're not as special as you think you are. Or maybe it's all the shit in your blood system."

Does she know something I don't know? I frown, trying to remember what I ingested a while ago.

She cackles, then rears back like a snake for another strike.

I bellow as her teeth lance my tender flesh. Surely this wasn't a chance encounter. She must have done a scrying spell. She must have known when and where I'd escape...or where I'd head as soon as I got out. But why? I don't know this chick.

When I'm done with a job—or, in this case, freed from a prison of sorts—the first thing I want to do is get laid. That's my go-to release. Can't exactly do that as a shadow. I need the vices of whatever planet I'm on to assume a flesh and blood form. I'm not picky in the least. Hand me something, the stronger the better, and I'm good to go for a few hours or more of fucking. I'll enjoy the hell out of my body, until the substance leaves my bloodstream and I can resume my ghostly appearance.

Hence, the second I freed myself, I sifted, like smoke on the wind, to a club called Death. The place reeked of sin and substance, just the way I like it when I'm looking for release. The minute I entered, the thick narcotic atmosphere pulled me into my fleshy form. Someone shoved something at my face and I chugged a couple shots of some rot gut liquid to wash down the blue crystalline pills someone else handed me. I took the blunt thrust in my direction. Inhaling deeply, I thought I'd be anchored on this planet in my body, not my shadow self, long enough to get my fill of fucking. And then I ended up with *her*, the one with her canines in my thigh. And she's got some grievance up her craw...a grievance that has nothing to do with me.

"Goddamn it," I yell, prying her teeth from my skin. "How do you know my name?"

"There's a bounty on your head, spawn of Satan. Your mugshot is plastered everywhere in the solar system. I'm going to claim it."

Oh, no. Another bounty? And how can I have a mugshot? How could anyone obtain a likeness of me? Even I've forgotten what I look like. I usually appear as a shadow.

She jams her hand into the pocket of her skirt and pulls free a worn, crumpled image of some male, as if to prove her point.

Like I want to stand around and look at my image. "Yep, that's me. Not a very good likeness, don't you agree?" I say, not expecting an answer. I haven't seen what I look like lately. I seldom stare at myself in the mirror when I'm engaged in carnal lust. The rest of the time I'm in shadow form. Now, however, I study the photo. Rather dark for some tastes, I'm seriously handsome. I cock my head to the side, admiring the face staring back at me. Reddish gold eyes. Ochre skin, like

the sun's fading rays, draped along the horizon at day's end. Raven colored hair. A wicked, roguish smile. Whoever took that shot must have gotten it post-coitus.

I'm going to have to be more careful with whom I bed. Search their pockets first for holo-snaps, those devices that capture a male's image.

"Not after I get through with you," the demon says, cackling with glee. "You and your immortality will be the stuff of urban legends."

None of this makes any sense. This whole thing was never meant to go down this way. Imprisoned for a decade in a cursed jar meant for genies, jinn, and shadow specters, I'd been rescued by a demon buddy of mine only a day ago. I'd only meant to dip my wick, share a little mutual satisfaction, with her none the wiser as to who or what just entered her, and be on my way. I should have known better. When has sex not gotten me in a mess of trouble?

"So how is it there's a bounty on my head?" I ask, shaking my leg ineffectually, glancing at the deep canyon behind me. *Damn, she's got her chompers clamped around my muscles. Maybe I could kick her over the side and roll away before I join her in the abyss.* "And how did you know when I'd get out?"

I was supposed to be imprisoned for centuries. Who knew I'd be out so soon?

I make another lame attempt to loosen her grip on my leg. I don't want her to tear out my flesh with her teeth, nor do I want to slip and fall—not without assuming my shadowy-self first. But fuck it all, I'm still humming with substance. *Can I toss her over the cliff? Maybe. Then again, I'm pretty off my game—woozy. One minute lethargic, the next second high as a kite.*

She releases her teeth, rakes her claws down my calf, and bares her fangs. "Ask Aurkene. She's my sister."

“Fuck me! The chick who trapped me after I fucked her? You’ve got to be kidding. You’re her sister?” I tense, preparing for her next assault, glancing behind me. I’m right at the edge of this goddamned cliff.

“That’s right.” She wipes my blood from her face with the back of her hand.

“Wasn’t trapping me in a Jinn jar enough for her?” As she scrubs my blood from herself, I step to the side, avoiding the deathly maw of the canyon, hands poised to grab her and pitch her over the edge if she launches at me. *If I can only get around her, I can sprint toward the hellish rise.*

“Guess not. She told me you’d try to escape. Said she’d make life difficult for you if you got free. Said she’d make you a hunted demon.” A wicked smile appears on her face and she lunges toward me.

She’s fast and wily, but not fast enough. I quickly step out of her way.

She shrieks and grabs me to avoid falling into the canyon.

Then again, I’m not so speedy either, as I can’t get ahold of her arm and toss her to her maker. *Must be the drugs I took at Club Death.* “So she still carries a grudge? After all this time?” I start to race away but I trip, like a fucking, clumsy, inebriated oaf, chock full of drugs and drink.

“Ha! Ten years is a mere nanosecond for our kind. You know that.” The banshee arcs her head back, fangs bared, and strikes.

I roar from the pain, grabbing a hunk of her hair.

She rips her teeth free, some of my skin stuck between her incisors, shaking her head like a dog to get free of my grip. “You disemboweled her mate with your bare hands, you son of a bitch.”

“She said she was bored with him! Why else would

she be with me?" I twist the lock of hair in my hands yanking her head back until she winces.

"And then you licked the blood from your fingers, like you'd finished a tasty plate of ribs...while she watched." She digs at my hand with her knife-like, pointy nails.

"How was I to get my fingers clean? And what does it matter? She said she never liked him." I lurch to my feet, back away from her like a boxer, light on my feet, eager to make my retreat.

Again, she attacks like a lightning bolt, her razor sharp fangs striking bone.

I let out a snarl. "Shit! That hurts!"

She wrenches her mouth free. "Not as much as losing what was once yours. He made a lot of money. Since he never saved it, she's back to hustling tricks."

"Money," I scoff. "Money isn't everything. And she's good at her profession."

Aurkene had been a pro before she mated. She could suck cock like no one's business.

I make another attempt to sift.

Nothing.

Why can't I turn back into a shadow?

"Let's reason here, uh...what did you say your name is?" My head turns every which way, seeking escape.

"I didn't. It's Diomedé." Her hands curl into bony clubs.

"Pretty name you've got, Diomedé. So let's think things through for a minute. You want money? I can get you money. Lots and lots of moolah." I spy a dead tree. Maybe I can leap, grab the branch, whirl like an Earth-based monkey and knock her senseless, kicking her into oblivion.

She stoops down to retrieve a hefty stick, no doubt to take a swing at me.

“We’re not thinking or reasoning. I’m acting. I’m going to capture you, and then Aurkene and I will be rich again. That bounty’s massive.”

As well it should be. I’m renowned in countless galaxies.

“We want revenge.” Diomedé opens wide and prepares for another attack on my fine flesh.

“Stop that,” I bellow. I kick and shake my leg but she’s attached like an octopus. While I could easily pry her off me, I’m trying to do it without harming her. She did have her mouth around my cock a short time ago. Maybe I can convince her to go down on me again.

Or maybe I can turn into smoke and escape. Yet again, I try—and fail.

Why can’t I sift?

“Wondering why you can’t turn into your evil shadow self?” She swiftly picks up a stone and hurls it at me.

“Maybe,” I say, ducking, running backward. I crash into a boulder and fly backward, landing on my head. “Fuck!” I scramble to my feet. Little lights appear in my vision, like tiny fairies. I blink and swipe my eyes.

She lets out a shrieking laugh. “You know those blue crystalline pills you took at Club Death?”

“Yeah.” My forehead furrows trying to remember who gave them to me.

“That was Auntie Em.”

No, no, no, no, no! Not morphine! I thought I felt a little funny all night.

I glance at my arm, and, sure enough, I still have a faint blue glow surrounding my rich russet skin, giving me the appearance of an oxygen-infused flame. I’d been so busy, first, trying to get laid and second, escape this banshee bitch I hadn’t kept track of the fucking blur glow I noticed earlier.

“How did morphine end up in this dimension?”

“You know how it goes, shadow specter. All kinds of junk are exchanged through the galaxy.”

“Yeah, but morphine? From Earth? And how did you know...” I shake my head.

Most shit merely enhances my pleasure. It keeps me grounded in my human form enough to fuck until the substance leaves my system. But morphine is different. It’s like my kryptonite. It’s how I got caught before. I know it’s going to lodge in the walls of my bloodstream, like a time-release capsule. Whatever I eat or drink will kick it free, a little at a time. Depending on the purity, it will keep me jittery, sometimes for days. If I can manage not to imbibe in anything—wait it out—I could be back to great in a few days. In the meantime, I’ll only be able to shift and sift at random and when I least expect it.

Min! Where are you? I project my thoughts as loudly as I dare. Maybe he can help us both get the hell out of here.

I grab Diomedes’s bony arm and haul her to her feet. She’s not as pretty as I had thought. Maybe she’s a conjurer, a female who can make herself look good to get what she wants. If what I’m looking at is her true appearance, I’m in trouble. Long, wicked teeth, stained brown by whatever roots and bones she sucks on. Wild stringy hair. One pale white oculus like a frozen eyeball. One bloodshot blue peeper, glaring at me.

This can’t be good. I hold her at arms distance, my hands curled around her shoulders, coiled with ropey muscles, repulsed by what I see.

She arcs back and lets loose, her forehead colliding with mine.

I rocket to the ground, landing with enough force to send my breath shooting for the heavens. I’m left empty-chested, my mouth stuck open in an empty O.

Her leg lifts high, and I imagine she's going to either pee on me or stomp on my head, but I'm lost in an endless, breathless pause. As her pointy heel prepares to lance my face, I spy a streaky blur of flames heading in my direction.

Min.

He gallops at such a clip I wonder if he's managed to get himself into a sex-crazed pickle, too. A tornado-like force of oxygen rushes into my lungs and I roll out of the way, gasping, before being impaled.

Struggling to my feet, I watch, horrified, as the banshee reaches through this plane of existence and her hand comes back holding a screw top milk bottle...meant for me, no doubt.

"Oh, no. You're not going to shove me back into the flask." I take off at a full run, heading for Min.

"Oh, yes, I am," she screams.

Something catches my ankle and I fall, with a thud, on my belly. I twist around to see spidery filaments shooting from the palms of her hands, like a spinning spool of thread, binding my legs with the speed of light.

A spider banshee! Those are the worst! I force my legs to pump like an earthling athlete.

I will not go back into captivity. Will. Not. Go.

But damn it all to hell, whatever foul substance she spins, my flesh begins to melt, becoming wispy, insignificant vapor, sucked into the spell-cast milk bottle, like a Dyson sucking dust.

It's the fucking morphine.

I try to scramble to my feet, but I have no feet...no legs...no hips...no stomach now. Like a swirl of mist, I'm disappearing into that fucking container.

As thundering hooves approach me, I find I still have arms and hands left, and I reach---God, how I reach—for the fiery leg of my stallion as he blasts in my direction.

“You know where to go,” I yell. And, as mercy would have it, we’re both catapulted into the only sanctuary I have—the walls between the worlds of Hotel Paranormal. Since the last time I was there, this could be a good thing or a bad thing. I’m hoping for the former.

CHAPTER 3

ANNORA

There's danger in the unknown world of "Hotel I Don't Want to Go." With quivering legs, I exit the safety of my bedroom, as if stepping into a snarl of snakes.

In keeping with my rituals, my hand automatically reaches for the Bamboo haiku brush hanging from the door jam on a long, elegant piece of ribbon. With my tongue held in position at the corner of my mouth, I dip it in an ink well and carefully draw a single stroke. The wall is covered with small lines. Today's indicates three thousand, six hundred and sixty-six days I've successfully crossed this threshold since Pappy left us. The number would be larger save for my grand experiment at living on my own a couple years back.

The numerous individual lines form the partial outline of a woman's body. Sometimes I wonder if, by painting this elaborate design, day by day, month by month, year by year, I'm filling in the holes in my soul. I also wonder if they'll ever be filled. And then I think it doesn't matter what I do or don't do--my life will suck, no matter what.

I swirl the brush in the cup of water resting on the floor. Wiping the brush clean with a moist cloth, hung for this very purpose, I mutter, "Okay, I'm really going to do this."

At no time can I touch the broken tile with my left foot because then I'll have to head back into the bedroom and start over. I broke that tile on the morning Pappy died.

Dropped my favorite metal horse, the one I won at the fair. His tiny, pointy hoof shattered the corner of that tile, as if it was an omen. If I believed in such things, I'd think the tile is cursed. I also left my toothbrush out of the overnight case I packed to go to my friend Saffron's for the night.

After telling me Pappy had died, Mama still hauled me to Saffron's house, because she wanted me out of her hair, I think. When I found out my toothbrush was missing, I cried. Pappy always said, "Clean teeth leads to a bright smile. A bright smile leads to success."

I've wondered ever since if I hadn't broken the tile, if I hadn't forgotten my toothbrush—would I still have my smiling Pappy? As for success, I brush and floss twice a day but that part of life-- the achievement and accomplishment part--has eluded me.

Now, prepping to go on this foolhardy adventure with my mama, I'm clutching my A to Z packing list. I've packed, read the list, scoured the contents of my suitcase, re-read the list, removed the contents of my suitcase and replaced them in the bag one by one, and looked at my checklist again. I want to make sure I've forgotten nothing.

This will be a quick trip, though,

Mama and I will discover what I already know. There *is* no Hotel Paranormal. My mother has been scammed. I only hope she hasn't lost too much money in the process.

"This should be a real adventure," Mama says, when I step into the kitchen. "Maybe we'll see ghosts."

I see her Bible poking out from her tote. "Where do ghosts factor into your Bible beliefs?"

"Revelation 20:11-15 and Matthew 26:31-46 say, 'The soul may sleep or enter a holding place until Judgment Day.' Maybe we'll contact your father."

"Uh huh," I say, reaching for the coffee pot.

“We don’t have time for coffee, dear. You can get some on the way.”

“Uh huh,” I say again, pouring myself a cup.

Rituals must be followed to the letter in the morning, or there goes the day.

She taps her foot on the floor, holding her purse close to her chest. “We need to go. The bus leaves in half an hour. We don’t want to be late.”

“In a minute.”

Mama gives me one of her ice cold glares. It’s something she specializes in, those looks of disapproval.

Those looks burrow into my head like lice, burying themselves in my unconscious mind until I can’t tell whose thoughts they are--mine or hers.

“I’m telling you, you might meet someone special,” she says. “And then you can get out of my hair.”

“You’re the one who might meet someone special,” I say, savoring the dark java. “I’ll get out of your hair when I’m ready.” I inhale, drawing the caffeinated essence into my lungs. Sip. And inhale again.

Coffee is so good. I don’t know why it was left out of the four food groups. It’s a food unto itself.

Mama speaks with forced nonchalance. “I sure hope so.”

The cup shakes in my hand, spilling coffee over the rim.

Crap!

Reaching for a kitchen towel, I ask, “What did you say?” I stare at the brown blot on the bleached white cotton terrycloth. It looks like a Rorschach design. It’s disturbing. Almost terrifying, like a shadow hanging overhead, attached to no one.

Grimacing, I toss it in the trash.

“I said, I sure hope so. Pappy’s been sending me dreams. He says it’s time to move on. That’s why we’re

heading south.”

“How can you say that? He was the love of your life. You can’t just throw his memory away.”

“Listen to yourself. You’re the one who keeps telling me to let him go.”

The thought of my mama ever finding someone else again is abhorrent. “I don’t want a stepfather. No one will ever replace Pappy.”

“I don’t want to replace your father, dear. I only want a companion.”

“Get a dog,” I snap. “The neighbor’s dog had a batch of Golden Retrievers.” I pour the remains of my coffee down the drain, then I get out a fresh mug and start over. The ritual must be followed to the letter. Spillage is not a part of the process.

“I do *not* want a dog from Mr. Lindwall.” Mama bites out the words. “Besides, you’ll be moving out soon.”

“Right. When I get a job.” I scowl.

I should have moved out years ago, but I can’t seem to maintain employment. Actually, I did move out. I got a full scholarship to a fancy college out in Boston-- Massachusetts College of Art and Design, or MassArt. Pappy always said I was a bright star with a shiny bright-star future. After he left us, I pictured myself a lone star lighting a lonely planet. But then the scholarship came and a few flashbulbs of high school notoriety burst in my direction, and away I went.

“And then I’ll be all alone.” My heart clenches like the piece of coal it’s become.

“Well, get a roommate.”

Actually, scratch that. I had a roommate in Boston. *Noreen*. I wrinkle my nose. Bleached blond and double D, Noreen was as plastic as a Barbie doll. She bore a perma-smile and said things to me like, “Get real, get happy, stay strong,” and “Isn’t this ten kinds of fun?” like

she was rehearsing to write slogans for Hallmark. We were supposed to be embracing our studies, ensuring we'd be "poised to lead in organizational and social transformation, as design strategists and innovation leaders in corporations." Born poor to parents in the hills of Virginia, I think Noreen wanted to embrace a different lifestyle and her strategizing was focused on one thing--trapping a rich husband. Last I heard, she married a man from the Hamptons and now strategically designs her big, fancy house.

"I plan on it. Only he'll share my room."

"Mama!"

If the thought of having a stepfather shakes my senses, thinking of my mother having sex with a man, *any* man, is utterly repulsive. I've only had sex once. With Walter Gresham. In Boston. He was a MassArt student studying film and video. He was as plastic as Noreen, a Ken to her Barbie. Only, while the Ken doll sports a small plastic bulge where his genitals are supposed to be, Walter wielded a weapon of mass destruction. And it was awful. A complete disaster. He hammered into me like he was fracking for oil, determined to burst the rock of my soul. He secretly filmed us and put the video on YouStream. It went viral. Once I found out, when people began to point, stare and whisper, he stated it was part of a school project and that it was meant to be art. I wanted to punch him until his nose bled, screaming at him, telling him he was a complete skeevy perv who deserved to rot in hell. Instead, I stayed silent, mute, unable to voice my rage.

Mama shakes her head. "Are you finished with your morning ritual now? Let's go."

I slurp the last of my coffee, place the mug upside down in the far right corner of the dishwasher, and reluctantly follow her. Hotel Doesn't Exist, here we

come.

CHAPTER 4

MAC BURRAIN

The good news? Hotel Paranormal allowed us in here despite my long ago infraction which may or may not have included a staff member—and a lot of good fucking. The bad news? I don't actually occupy a room. And, I can't find my equine companion—*again*.

Trapped within the walls of Hotel Paranormal, I look everywhere for my god-damned hell horse, but he's nowhere to be found.

“Min! Min! Where are you, buddy?”

At least he got us here. Into the magical wonder of Hotel Paranormal. Away from that demon-banshee. Okay, so I'm not exactly *in* the hotel, per se. Not the place where guests go. I seem to be in the three-foot-wide secret corridor that weaves throughout the building, behind, underneath and on top of the guest rooms. It allows wizards, warlocks and witches to do the hotel's bidding from behind the scenes. I know because a couple centuries back, I had one fine weekend with a witch and she spilled the beans.

I have a love-hate kind of deal with Hotel Paranormal. In the past, when I needed distraction from my shadowy world and the satisfyingly destructive tasks which I crave and excel in doing, I'd enter underneath an ornate door, like wispy smoke, trailing through cracks, feathering across a marble floor. Even as a shadow specter, I'd be greeted like royalty. Fawned over. Every need, want, and desire seen to. I'd be guided, like metal

to a magnet, to a suite steeped in narcotic substance where I'd shift into my human form. Decanters of the finest liquor would be at the ready. Pills, smokes, whatever I needed to stay corporeal would line the bar. I'd feast and fuck with abandon. And the willing participants—be they human, fae, succubus, vampire or other paranormal—would leave happy, sated, blown away, and seldom remember what I look like or who I am. Because on this plane, everywhere, really, I seldom exist in the flesh. Not unless I've downed a few shots, a few pills, anything to keep me anchored. So the participants may or may not remember me. They'll only be left with extreme satisfaction of what we've done together.

But, as luck would have it--more like my lack of restraint--before I got captured, caught by that she-bitch, Aurkene, I got into trouble here. The kind of trouble involving sex, and a whole lot of it. In public. With an employee. Broadcast over a viewing-monitor to the utter delight of the onlookers, thanks to her jealous mate. And why wouldn't they be delighted? I'm a hot lover. Still, sex with the staff is a no-no and I knew-knew it, but did that stop me? Never did before. And now, perhaps the hotel is trying to teach me a lesson, because I'm stuck inside the walls. Where I can look. Watch. But not participate. It's my own kind of hell, but it's better than being trapped in a bottle.

As to what happened to my fine steed, I'm clueless. He got us here. I rode him through the galaxies like the demon I am, his blazing mane rippling through me, his fiery body giving me energy and strength. *Where the fuck is he?*

"Min!" I bellow. "Come on out!"

I'm forcefully sucked through the shadows, the see-through foundation of this fine establishment, at a breathtaking rate, even for me.

Must be the effects of Auntie Em.

I crash to a stop, dispersing forcefully behind a mirror. I instantly, erratically gel into my body, falling against the hard floor. *Fuck! I'm already bruised from that bitch Diomedes.*

Pushing to my feet, I survey the looking glass before me. It's a thick one-way or two-way mirror, revealing a room, with me standing in the walls behind it, next to the insulation, wires, electronics and other crap that keep this hotel functioning. Only the room I'm looking into possesses none of the opulence of Hotel Paranormal. It looks more like a prison cell.

My hands stroke the smooth, translucent surface before me. *I wonder if the occupant of the room will be able to see me?* Then, my gaze shifts to the bedside stand where my horse sits, as a metallic bronze toy statue. I know it's him because his eyes blaze, and he snorts fire and smoke from his tiny nostrils. I burst out laughing.

"Get back here with me, Min. What are you doing? Always fooling around."

His entire body glows, and I can tell he's pissed.

"Are you telling me you can't escape?"

One hoof paws along the expensive wood of the bedside stand.

Or, at least, that's what I think he does. The movement is such a strange one, since his body can only act as a single unit, it makes me laugh.

Then, he rocks back on his tiny back legs and crashes down, leaving small, half-circle dents in the wood.

"Come on, make an attempt. What happens if you try to get to me?"

He prances toward the edge of the wood, in a jittery side-to-side maneuver. An energy barrier forms, like a buzzing, humming, Hollywood force field, blocking his escape. He shivers back and forth, as if to say, "See? I'm

stuck here. As a toy. A ridiculous children's plaything."

That's got to grate on his ego. Min is a magnificent beast. As large as a Clydesdale on steroids, with flames for a mane and a brilliant, burning-ember body. Trapped as a trinket, cast in a spell I don't know how to break, I'll bet he's furious.

When his front hooves stamp the wood furiously, in a side-to-side maneuver, I imagine him telling me, "Fucking *do* something!"

I stroke my jaw. "I'm not really sure what to do. I have no idea why the hotel let me back here, within these secret corridors between the walls of the rooms, and confined *you* to a bedside stand *inside* a room. Did you do something to piss someone off?"

He shakes his head, or attempts a head shake, at least. The gesture makes his entire body quiver.

"Don't worry, I'll think of something. It must be my punishment you're paying for."

A clanging, clattering kind of sound bursts from the walls, complete with flashing lights, like I've just scored in an Earth-based pinball game.

I pause, glaring. *Of course*. This is some prank the hotel is playing on me in retribution. I shout at the walls. "Did you cast a spell on my horse to punish me?"

A gleeful whinny kind of response assaults my ears from every angle.

"Very funny." *Fucking Hotel Paranormal*. Every baseboard, screw, mirror, floorboard, curtain, electrical wire—*everything* in this place is alive, powered by the same mysterious consciousness. I've been coming here for decades. Over time I've learned this establishment, possessing its own mind, is always up to something.

"Why would you do that? Did you get a witch in on your prank?"

A wheezing laugh follows.

“Is she still here? Can I get her to change him back?”

No response.

“Are you telling me she’s checked out already?”

Silence.

I glance at Min as he continues to clatter about, obviously furious. I shake my fists in the air. “Why the hell do you have to punish Min? He’s innocent.”

Glowing words appear in the air, as if an invisible hand is writing them. *You aren’t.*

I groan, throwing back my head. “It was a long time ago! I’ve changed!”

Prove it.

The door to the room opens and Min freezes, looking every bit like a metallic miniature. I freeze, too, shifting back to shadow in a sudden, erratic surge, even though I’m behind the mirror and assume I can’t be seen.

A tall, slender young woman cautiously enters the room. She stiffens. Her eyes grow wide, as if she’s terrified. Her skin is as pale as a cloud, peppered with goosebumps like tiny stars. Her clothing is disheveled. Hair unkempt, like she’s wandered through a windstorm. In her trembling hand, she clutches what looks to be an orange prescription bottle.

“I must be dreaming. This must be a dream. It’s got to be. I stepped on a stupid bus about an hour ago and then...and then...and we...and we... Oh, good God, where am I?” With shaking fingers, she twists open the vial, pours two white pills into her palm, tosses them into her throat, and struggles to swallow.

She flings her suitcase across the room, puts her hands to her face, and whimpers. Then, her hands droop, like melting clay. She stares at her surroundings, aghast, as if she’s seeing ghosts.

I snicker, because an actual specter is behind the mirror. That would be me. I stare back at her, because,

quite frankly, she's stunning, even though she's a mess.

"A twin bed? I get a twin bed? I asked for a queen." She steps to the bed and pats it. "It's as hard as a stone. They must have put me in the wrong room. And this place looks like something a nun would live in. It's so plain. Plaster walls? No art. The brochure said every room was a reflection of your deepest desires. Opulent. Luxurious. I'm calling the front desk." She scans the room. "No phone. *Please*. This place is a joke. My mother was wrong about it." She swiftly turns and seizes the brass doorknob. She tugs. She jiggles. She hauls back her leg and kicks. "Locked? How can it be locked?" She makes fists and bangs on the door. Slaps the polished wood with her palms. Screams at the top of her lungs.

Her door abruptly opens and she stumbles, landing on the floor with a thud. She scrambles to her feet and launches into the hallway, out of sight.

In some sort of knee-jerk, out of control action, I sift back to partial shadow, like a see-through body. And, I can't see her now, but I can sure hear her.

"This place is ridiculous! My room looks like a monastery! I expect to be called to prayer any second now. Summoned to the pews by a tonsured priest."

Who's she talking to? I strain to see but I can only view the inside of her room, like a goddamned voyeur. I imagine she's speaking with David, the dwarf valet. David's a real stickler about his job here. If she managed to wrangle the suitcase from his hands and enter the room before he had a chance to unpack it and arrange her clothes in the drawers and closet, I'll bet he's the reason her doorknob wouldn't budge.

The door creaks open and David stands at the threshold, holding his four-foot-tall frame stiffly.

I crane to see the young woman standing behind him, trying to get past.

I know from personal experience, if David doesn't want you to get past, you won't. He's got some unique magical skills.

"This place is the finest establishment in the universe," he says crisply, bracing himself in the doorway. His gaze tracks the simple room, his face furrowed in a frown. He shakes his head as he looks about, as if in complete disapproval. "We aim to grant your every wish. We're known the world over for our adherence to detail, something you would know if you hadn't wrest the suitcase from my grasp."

"I can unpack my own suitcase, thank you very much."

"I can do it better." Even though he sounds polished, David's words hurl from his mouth like darts with precise aim.

"Right," she says. "You don't know my system."

"Want to bet?" He stalks into the room and slams the door behind him.

The woman bangs and kicks the door to get in, while David moves swiftly and efficiently around the room, unpacking her suitcase with precision. When finished, he steps toward my toy hell horse, adjusts his placement, and nods.

Min's eyes widen, appearing aghast at being handled.

David turns to the mirror and winks, as if we're in on a shared secret.

I frown, baffled.

And then, he disappears, literally.

The door whirls open, whacking against the wall, and the woman flies in the room. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. That was so rude. Please accept my apology. I'm a bit tense. I'm not usually like this. Where'd you go? Where are you?" She searches

everywhere for David. “There must be a secret door for staff,” she finally declares. “Asshole.” She claps her hand over her mouth. “Where are my manners?” she frets. She flings open the closet and gapes, her arms dropping to her sides. “How did that little man know what order my clothes go?” She hustles to the dresser and opens one drawer after another.

I can barely see inside, but it appears her underwear have been neatly folded and arranged by color, in order of the rainbow.

“Whoa. This is...this is...I don’t know what this is. The valet must be OCD, like me.” Her eyes lift toward the mirror. “What are you looking at, you miserable cur?” she says to her reflection.

“I’m looking at a beautiful, mixed up woman,” I say, wondering if she can hear me. The blank expression on her face indicates she can’t.

But her eyes...those eyes...they’re utterly spell-binding. They remind me of faraway galaxies. They sparkle with light and color and depth.

“You don’t look so good,” she says, tugging the skin around her eyes with her fingertips.

“You look fantastic,” I say. She still appears as if she’s oblivious to me. Her Cupid’s bow lips appear succulent and pouty. They invite further examination and exploration. Those lips were meant to be plundered.

“This was a mistake,” she says. She opens her mouth wide, sticks out her tongue, and examines it.

I have the sudden urge to suck on that tongue, the slippery pink flesh that waggles at me through the mirror. “I think it was a great idea to come here. We’re going to have some fun.”

She fingers her cheek the way I’ve seen my many lovers do when they’re looking for blemishes.

Her milky white skin looks as smooth as polished

glass. That skin is meant to be touched. Already, I can feel fingers forming from my wispy, shadowy being. I sense a large, resplendent erection stirring to life, as well. I do know what pleases a female, and have the right appendage to get the job done to complete satisfaction.

“I’m going to kill my mother.”

“Need help?” I mutter.

“What was she thinking? That I need discipline? That I needed a retreat?”

She grasps her long braid, unties it, and runs her fingers through the silken strands, in a manner that gives me quite a few ideas. I’m fully corporeal now, aroused like I haven’t had sex in a decade.

Wait a minute. I haven’t. I tried with the bitch banshee but never finished the deed.

“She might have had your best interests at heart,” I say. I press my palms against the glass and pound my forehead against it, wondering if she’ll hear.

She doesn’t, if her dispassionate expression is any indication.

This is hell. She’s close enough to touch, mere inches from my fingertips, but I can’t get to her.

She shakes her head and turns away from me. Moving toward the bed, she slowly sinks onto the unforgiving surface. And then she spies Min. Her eyes grow wide as two moons. Her heart begins to pound, the sound echoing in the space I occupy. “This looks just like the horse I dropped on the morning Pappy died.” The words emerge with wonder, laced together with pain.

She reaches out one, long finger and strokes the figurine. I let out a soft, low moan, because it feels like she’s touching me, one who has existed for eons, who’s fucked and sucked every manner of creatures...it’s as if she’s touching me in a manner I’ve never experienced.

Oh, we’re definitely going to have some fun.

My fiery stallion, eyes wide, isn't so sure.

CHAPTER 5

ANNORA

We left Seattle an hour ago...an *hour* ago, if memory serves. I tick through my memory at what I can recall. I got on the bus at the downtown terminal, check. There were other weird people who looked like they were in costume. One of them glowed like a nightstick. Some of them scared me. I wanted to laugh at others, especially the guy with the fangs. He looked like a buck-toothed idiot.

I vaguely remember pulling to a stop at a grand entrance of an even grander hotel. It was luxurious in a manner I've never seen before. Now I'm in Los Angeles? At the stupid Hotel Paranormal Mama gushed about in the bus? No way.

I must've been comatose when they showed me to my room. I've been lying on this stupid little bed for over an hour, in this austere prison cell of a room, occasionally nodding off, going over and over the journey we took to get here. Only I can't remember it. It's all vague and fuzzy, like my real life is a dream and this is the reality. And it's a stark reality. I don't like it. I'm still waiting to be called to prayer or alms or whatever nuns get to do. At least I've got a bathroom accompanying this lifeless shell of a room.

I don't want to leave the room, though. The hallway is dark, lined with small candles. I'm afraid to go out and explore. Paralyzed with fear, is more like it. I hope Mama is faring better than I am.

A pleasant-sounding chime rings through the room.

“What the...?” I say, sitting up. My back aches from this torturous bed. I’m going to have to have a talk with the front staff, if I can get the nerve up to venture out the door.

“Ms. Lachman?” The voice booms through the walls.
Crap. It sounds like that dwarf.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s David, your valet.”

I have a valet?

We haven’t gotten off to a great start, mostly thanks to me. My head twists and turns, looking for the speaker or the sound system or whatever is allowing noise to enter my simple surroundings.

“Lunch will be served in twenty-five minutes.”

Lunch? What time is it? I am hungry, though..

“Uh, okay.”

“I’ll be at your door in twenty. I’ll be showing you to the dining room.”

At my door? He’s going to walk me to the dining area?

That’s a relief, actually, because otherwise I’d hide in my room all day.

“All right. I’ll be here,” I say, grumbling. Of course I’ll be here. Where else would I be?

I wonder if I’m supposed to dress for lunch. Who dresses for lunch? Noreen, that’s who. At the MassArt dorm, Noreen made every meal a “dining experience.”

“Come on, girly-girl. If we don’t dress for success, why else get dressed at all?” she’d coo to me as she expertly applied her make-up.

That was Noreen. A well-dressed, slogan-a-minute kind of girl. She even took me shopping once, and I spent a month’s worth of tuition on a too-tight sweater and leather boots the softness of Santana’s udders. That’s

what I was wearing the night I met Walter.

He had oozed in my direction at a party, like an oil spill. Took a look at Noreen. Narrowed his eyes. Took a look at me. His eyebrows rose. Maybe he thought himself up for a good challenge. Or maybe he thought I would be perfect for what he had in mind, since I wouldn't press charges after he was through destroying my reputation.

"What can I get you, ladies?" He had inclined his head toward the bar. "I'm buying. What's your favorite?"

I honestly didn't know what I wanted to drink. I didn't have a favorite. I didn't even have a clue what my favorite might be. I didn't drink. Pappy always told me drink would get you drunk and drunk would get you disaster. It sure seemed to with him, if his last day was any indication. He started the day off by getting hammered. He and Mama had been fighting. After that, he grabbed me, pasted on a smile, and waltzed me to the barn to do chores. After he died, I vowed to never touch a drop. But that night, at that party, with music booming and me feeling all bold and sassy in my new boots and tight sweater, and Walter, a hip student in the film and video department...well, if he was buying, I was drinking. It was as simple as that.

"I'll have a Salty Chihuahua," Noreen said smoothly. "The coral color will match my lipstick." She smiled brightly as if sharing one of her top ten keys to success.

"Never heard of that one," Walter said, eyebrows lifted.

"Oh, it's so good," Noreen enthused. "Tequila, grapefruit and *Cointreau*." She whispered the word "Cointreau" as if that was a super classified, magic ingredient that would solve *everything*. "It's *French*," she said in that same whispery voice.

I liked grapefruit juice, so it sounded good to me.

"I'll have the same," I said, in a voice I hoped

sounded as sophisticated as Noreen's.

Walter cocked his head and studied me. The corners of his mouth turned up in a secretive sort of smile.

"Uh huh," he said, in a knowing manner, as if in on the fact I didn't drink. "Two Salty Chihuahua's coming up."

The grapefruit juice masked the liquor, and the drink went down smooth. I wondered if I'd stumbled upon my favorite drink. Two more followed, far too fast if Walter's amused commentary could be trusted. And then, I was trashed.

I shake my head free of that horrible memory and wander toward the mirror to assess my appearance. A dark, shadowy thing flits across the surface, same as in my bedroom earlier. I blink in surprise and look around the room to see what might have caused that.

"It's probably me," I decide. "It caught the gloom of my soul. Or maybe it's the double dose of Valium I took." I turn back to scrutinize myself.

I need to comb my hair, that's for sure. And I may as well put on that new dress I bought. The summery one. Maybe my mood will improve.

I saunter toward the closet, remove the summer dress from the hanger, and toss it on the bed. The metal horse catches my eye.

"You look like Petey. Did you know that? Did I already tell you?" I step to the side-stand and pick up the tiny stallion. It seems far too heavy for a cheap toy. When I try to move it past the edge of the stand, it grows so heavy I drop it, where it clatters upon the wood, leaving a mark. "Wow. It must be magnetic. Hope I don't have to pay for damages." I aright the figurine and stroke its back. It feels warm to the touch, almost hot.

How odd.

I place my palms on its flanks to check, caressing the

metal.

A deep, rumbling moan reverberates into the space--the kind that makes normal girls do sexy cartwheels towards men, landing with their legs splayed wide. I jerk back.

“Funny, David, really funny.”

The moan seems to hang in the air, draped around me like a hard, hot man.

Where did that thought come from?

I spin in a circle. Oh, I really shouldn't have taken that Valium. With the two I took earlier, I'm probably having hallucinations. My doctor warned me of that, last time I saw him. It didn't stop him from writing me the scrip, however.

Suddenly paranoid, I attempt to don my dress, my fingers shaking, adding the new leather flats Mama insisted I buy last time we went shopping.

“New clothes can change a girl's life,” she'd said to me. “As long as they're not revealing.”

“You got that right, Mama,” I'd retorted, thinking of Walter and Salty Chihuahuas and how my life changed forever on that night.

But now, standing here in my prison cell of a bedroom, I step into the soft cream-colored, leather shoes and grab the weird key David had left on the bed. It's the strangest hotel key I've ever seen. It's a brass rectangle, with a glistening ruby gem winking from the center. No number. Nothing indicating where I am or what floor I'm on.

Whatever. Maybe David will show me the way.

I pace back and forth before the mirror, waiting for David. I'm sure he'll be prompt. He seems a little anal about his job. I give a side-eye glance toward the mirror and catch sight of the handsomest man I have ever seen. I whirl, facing the looking glass.

Gone.

I turn to the side. Once more, I catch a glimpse of male perfection out of the corner of my eye. It looks like his nose is pressed to the glass, and he's leaving little moisture puffs where his nostrils are. When I spin to face him, he's not there.

"This place gives me the creeps," I say, the hairs on the back of my hand standing erect. "I'm going to go eat lunch and then I'm informing my mother that we're leaving this place, pronto."

CHAPTER 6

ANNORA

Exactly twenty-minutes after David said he would return to my room, he knocks on the door. When I open it, he gives me a crisp, assessing, none-too-friendly look. “Follow me,” he says.

His dark beard and mustache are so perfectly groomed they look fake. Dressed in a classic black bellhop uniform, he leads me down the short hallway to an elevator which has seen better days. We’re supposed to ride something that looks like a wooden crate suspended between the walls. I think we rode it up but, honestly, I was in a terrified, Valium haze and don’t remember getting here.

“Is this thing safe?” The skin beneath my eyebrow begins to tic. I blink rapidly—so rapidly I want to press my fingers against my eyelids to get them to stop. But then I couldn’t see what’s going on.

“Safe enough,” he says. “It meets your specifications.” He rolls his eyes.

I’m not sure what specifications he thinks I have but this one isn’t on my list. I’m a safety conscious woman. I grip the rickety door, bouncing my right foot up and down a little to test its hold. It seems sturdy enough so I commit to the ride, stepping gamely on the platform.

David grabs a rope that spools from the corner.

A frigging rope. Can this place be any more rundown?

I’m *so* going to get to the bottom of whoever set up

this scam on my unwilling mother.

He proceeds to pulley us down the shaft, hand over hand, grunting as we go. The lift creaks and lurches as we make our way.

I search for something to clutch but I don't trust anything, so I stand, stiff, certain the rope will snap and we'll hurtle to the floor, collapsing in a splintered pile of wood and broken bones, their fractured ends protruding from my flesh. This ride is three minutes of pure terror.

When we land on the floor with a clatter and a bang, David rolls his eyes. He opens the door, moves aside for me to exit, and I escape this strange elevator into a dark hallway.

"We can't allow the other visitors to see this contraption," he mutters.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Forgive me. Where are my manners?" He steps smartly toward a door a few steps away, and opens it for me. "This is the main hotel."

"The main hotel? What part am I in?"

"The part you requested," David says, yet again rolling his eyes.

If he does that again, I'm tempted to smack him. Too bad I don't smack people. Before I can say anything snappy to him, he clears his throat.

"Mademoiselle," he says. "Enter."

The space before me is so grand, I gasp. It's exactly like the brochure stated. No, wait. It's far grander. I'm lead along a richly decorated hallway, all gold, red, and opulent. Huge sconces line the corridor, lighting the walls with a luminescent glow. The walls are covered with ornate wallpaper, adorned with angels, flourishes, and goddesses languidly draped amid summer landscapes, or swinging through lush gardens. The carpet is a deep, bloody red, dotted with small black flowers. It yields to

my every step. It reminds me of my persistent fear of dying. I feel as if I'm stepping on my spongy heart resting inside my chest cavity. The heart that could burst, any day, shattered by fear or longing or maybe both.

Out of the blue, old feelings surface. Loss. Shame. Remorse. A sorrow so great it sometimes threatens to swallow me whole. It shackles me, hobbles my ankles, prevents me from moving past the pain. Abruptly, I can't breathe. My chest begins to squeeze like a boa constrictor bearing down on me, slowly, steadily tightening its grip. Tears prick my eyes.

Damn my father for leaving me. Damn Walter for shaming me. Damn me for being unable to move past tragedy.

As I wander through this hallway, I'm acutely aware how unhappy I am. How fear informs my every move. And how badly I want to change. And how I can't change. Not won't. Not unwilling. *Can't*. Simply put, *I can't. Let. Go.*

I falter, pressing my hand against the wall to keep from falling.

David stops and turns to face me.

"It's all right," he says to me, and he actually looks at me with gentle, deep brown eyes. His eyes remind me of Santana, our old cow. When she left us, I almost missed her as much as I miss my dad. "You're going to be all right."

He reaches his hand toward my lower back and guides me forward.

The sound of tinkling glassware and soft conversation lets me know we're nearing a dining area. When we round the corner, I stop, gaping at my surroundings. My eyes narrow into suspicion. This place looks like some glamorous 1950s movie set. I stare at a windowless dining area, even more richly appointed than

the hallway. The well-dressed people are unusual, many exotic, as if from faraway countries. I can't quite place it, but some of the patrons appear to be on their lunch break from some old movie set like *Sabrina*, with Audrey Hepburn, or *Funny Face*, another Hepburn classic, or even *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, starring Marilyn Monroe. Others appear, well, odd. Otherworldly, like they've just come from a Star Wars set. In my simple summer frock, I feel grossly under-dressed.

David trains his kind eyes on me once more. "You look fine," he says. "Come. Your mother is waiting."

My rapid blinking begins again. "How do you know what I'm thinking?"

He smirks, shakes his head and continues walking.

We track along the side of the room lined with mirrors. Strange, shadowy shapes accompany my movement, flitting through each looking glass as I pass it by. I shiver at these bizarre special effects. It pisses me off that I'm so easily affected by a few Hollywood tricks. By the time I see Mama, I'm ready to seize her hand and march her out of here. Only, she's with someone. She's actually sitting with an older man. Laughing. Chatting. Looking all high school girl flirtatious, as if hoping the guy will ask her to the prom.

"I'll leave you to it," David says, and then slips away.

I glance at his retreating form and turn back to my mother.

"Mama," I say, in an accusatory voice. I train my gaze on her companion.

He's an older gentleman, dressed in an expensive looking black, pin-striped suit. A blood red handkerchief peeks from his chest pocket. His salt-and-pepper hair is slicked back from his face and he's got one of those dramatic widow's peaks. His deeply veined skin gives him a macabre appearance. His eyes, the color of a

midnight sky draped over a graveyard, look a little bloodshot, making me wonder if he's hungover or suffers from intense allergies. When he trains those eyes on me, I take a step backwards. I don't like this guy. At all.

"Annora!" my mother says brightly. "Meet Storm. Storm Gruenauer."

Storm? The guy's name is Storm? With his long nose, and pronounced widow's peak hairline, it should be Count Chocula.

He has to be some kind of actor.

"*Enchanté*," he says, rising from his chair. He extends his hand to me, and when I tentatively reach out to take it, he brings it to his lips.

I snatch it away.

"Annora!" Mama says, her cheeks turning red. "Be polite. Storm has been a wonderful companion. He's been telling me all about his travels. He's a fascinating man."

"Your mother is the fascinating one," he says, turning an adoring gaze in her direction.

He's got to be kidding. Nothing about my mother is the least bit interesting. She has no hobbies. Few interests, other than the paranormal and the church, if that can be considered a hobby. Her work is mundane, performing secretarial skills at the Baptist church on 80th and Vine. She mostly stays home, finding fault with me, when she's not watching Ghost Hunter or reading scripture. I scoff and shake my head.

He looks at me, lifts his black eyebrow, and says, "Please. Join us. Sit."

He gestures to a chair, and I hesitate, then perch at the edge.

"He's going to show me the gardens after lunch," Mama gushes in the way she enthused in the bus on the way down.

My teeth grind together.

“Isn’t that wonderful? And then, tonight, he says I’m in for a treat. Something paranormal awaits us. Isn’t that terrific?”

“Sure, Mama. Terrific.” I don’t like this new Mama. Ever since she approached me with the idea of Hotel Nutcase, I’ve never seen my mother so gleeful. Like a fawn in the forest, protection nowhere to be found, she’s going to get hurt. She doesn’t know what she’s doing. For twelve years, Mama hasn’t dated. She’s worked. Gone to church services. Watched TV. She’s attended ladies’ auxiliary meetings. And now, suddenly, she’s going to look at gardens with a guy named Storm.

“How’s your room?” Mama asks me without looking at me. She’s staring at Storm.

“What? My room? It’s...”

“Mine is *wonderful*. It’s a dream room. It’s so old school Hollywood. I feel so glamorous.” She turns, pats my hand, then resumes her ga-ga, moon eyed stare at Storm. “Aren’t you glad we’re here? I told you it would be spectacular.”

Storm flashes me a knowing smile, revealing teeth a little too white, and a lot too pointy for my liking.

I open my mouth to retort, but I’ve already lost Mama to her companion.

Storm and my mother engage in conversation with one another, wandering along topical paths that lead far away from me. They laugh. They chat. They smile. A blanket of intimacy falls upon their shoulders, obscuring me.

I sit. I study my silverware. My mouth presses into a rigid line, feeling sixteen kinds of awkward. I wave my hand at her, but she gives no notice. Mama usually trains her attention on *me*. I wave my hand again, fluttering it directly in her line of sight.

Her head whips toward me. “What?” she snaps.

Blinking, all thought flees from my mind. “Um, I don’t...you usually...”

“I usually what?” She’s got her mean face on now. “Focus on your pathetic needs? It’s *me-time*, now.”

She says this like she’s the coach of a football team, going for the win of their lives.

I’m sure my face looks ashen. I want to slink under the table and disappear.

Mama gives a quick, satisfied nod and turns back to Storm, smiling sweetly.

I look around at the other diners. The mood is gay and lighthearted. I catch something that sounds like a porn flick. I squirm in my seat. Apparently there are all kinds of moods running amok in here. My face flames. I feel invisible. I’m the only person in this room not having a good time. I want to cry. I want to run.

A hand appears on my shoulder and I wince, startled.

“Ms. Lachman?”

It’s David and he’s bearing the softest, sweetest smile I’ve ever seen.

“Yes?”

“Perhaps you’d prefer to dine elsewhere,” he says. “I’ve got just the spot.”

CHAPTER 7

MAC BURIAIN

The hotel has cast quite a spell on my steed. I'm sure there's a witch around here somewhere who can cast a counter-spell but I've got other things on my mind.

My fucking stallion throws a complete tantrum. He rears on his hind legs, heaving his rigid, unyielding body backward. He twirls like he's practicing dressage. He prances, rocking stiffly side to side, stomps in the same manner, and makes every move a beast trapped as a trinket can muster. The wood bears the marks of his displeasure. Finally, he gives up and falls on his side, because, well, he can't exactly bend his little legs now, can he?

"I'm sorry, Min. I don't know what to do." I know what I'd *like* to do. I want to play with the young woman who's staying in this god awful room. I'd make her forget her surroundings, guaranteed. "I think our choices are obvious. We can either exit this plane and hope the demon-banshee isn't tracking us, or, we can stay here until we have a plan."

Fully flesh now, thanks to the god-damned morphine or the spells in the walls of this place, or maybe both, I bang my head against the glass until I see blood. I pound my fists against the mirror, hoping it will shatter. Instead, it yields to my touch, as if made of sponge. "Goddamn it," I roar.

A high pitched snicker, a whinny of sorts, emerges from the direction of the bedside stand. I glare at Min.

“Are you laughing at me?”

The horsey neigh bursts into the air again, louder this time. “Are you fucking laughing at me? Well, stop it.” I’ve got to do something. This is intolerable. “David!” I bellow. “David!”

The door to the hotel room opens and the dwarf enters, making his way to the mirror. “Calm down,” he says to me.

“Calm down?” I yell. “You want me to calm down? My hell horse is a metallic miniature, I’m trapped behind this mirror, surrounded by wires, insulation, and complete frustration. I can’t seem to go anywhere else...and you want me to calm down?”

He shrugs. “Guess you’ve got to learn some manners, don’t you?”

He says it like Diomedes did when she told me I needed to learn how to feel. He says it in that cool, knowing way he has about him. The way that lets me know in this place, Hotel Paranormal, there are rules to be followed. The only way I get to have a good time here is if I follow the rules. I do not. Follow. Rules.

Let’s be honest. I am *not* a nice being. I didn’t come into existence to make friends and win people over. Here, on planet Earth, as a shadow specter, I destroy things. I mess with people’s lives. I prey on human weakness. I feed on people’s pain. It’s my drug of choice. I freely move about, sifting under doors and into cracks, allowing only a glimpse of my shadowy form, because if the onlooker were to behold the real me...let’s just say it would be the last thing they ever see because their mind would simply explode, causing a grisly shower of blood and bone to splatter against the wall. When the mood suits, however, I assume corporeal form, allowing a fragment of the darkness of which I am made to assume whatever appearance I want, and have whatever fun I feel

like--not that it isn't fun to blow people's minds to bits.

David saunters to the bedside stand. He picks up Min and sets him on his legs. "There." He pats his head. "You're going to have to pay for damages, you know."

"Consider them paid." I shrug. Money is of no concern to me. I need some? I get it. Who's going to argue with a shadow?

"We didn't have to let you in." He strokes the stallion's metal mane.

"I know that."

"And yet here you are. You can leave at any time."

"Not an option at the moment." I chide myself for taking what was handed to me in the club known as Death.

"I wasn't saying it's a choice. *We* can kick you out."

"I hope you don't. I, uh...I came here to restore. Been in lock-down a while, you know?" I hedge my story, modifying it to suit.

David laughs.

"What?" I snarl.

"I get news feeds from everywhere. You know that. You're being hunted. By a jilted lover."

"Aurkene?"

"Her, too." He laughs harder. "Apparently, you left a long trail of unhappy females with that dick of yours. They banded together to place a bounty on your head."

"Diomedes told me it was her and her sister's doing."

The dwarf howls with laughter.

I glower. "A male has his needs."

"Right."

"And I left them very happy."

"Not when they found out about the others." He doubles over in laughter, and I want to reach through the glass and punch him into the next galaxy. But no, that's not allowed. Not here. Not in Hotel Paranormal. No

attacks, immoral incidents, compromising the integrity of another...I could go on and on.

"Tell you what," David says, a calculating look on his face. "She's in the atrium."

"Who is?" I ask.

"Your love interest. The girl whose room you're viewing. You can watch her there."

"What?" I stand a bit taller, like a begging dog being shown a bone. "Where? Where is it?"

"You'll find it. It's the only other place you'll be allowed to go."

I want to immediately sift to where she is, but I still have a few questions. "Will I be able to play with her? Fuck her? Feel her?"

"That depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on you." David shrugs, appearing bored. He drags a gloved hand over the side stand before scrutinizing his fingertip with narrowed eyes.

"On me what?"

He saunters to the mirror and glares, as if he can see me. "On you learning that, here at least, you do not get to bend the rules. You don't get to take without consequence. People get hurt by your actions. You having sex with staff..." His face reddens and he jabs the glass with his finger, emphasizing his point. "She was fired. Terminated. Never to be allowed here again. She was new here. But you..." His finger hammers against the smooth surface. "You *knew*."

His voice comes out sinister and cold, making me, a wicked male if ever one existed, actually cringe a little.

"You've come here for eons, and you *knew*. The *only* reason you've been allowed back here is Selena put in a good word for you."

"Aw, Selena! The best damn bartender in the

business.” I’ve always liked Selena. She’s got a saucy sense of humor, a sharp wit, and hair that begs to be caressed. She can speak in any language that exists, and well, if it wasn’t for that no staff rule...

David throws up his hands. “You never learn, you know that?”

“What?” I ask innocently.

“You were wondering what it would be like to have sex with Selena, weren’t you?”

“No!”

“Yes! You’re impossible. You should be on your knees in front of her right now, begging for mercy.”

“Let me out, and I’ll do it.”

“Not on your life. You’d enjoy it too much. You’d get ideas. I’m warning you, dark specter...”

Now I’m certain the glass is going to shatter. David’s literally shaking with rage.

I throw back my head and groan. “I already know I made a mistake. I had a lot of time in lock-down to think about my actions. I considered every foul deed I’ve ever done, not that it made me a better person. I’m not a good deeds kind of guy. But still. I’ve apologized to the hotel. Made sacrifices to various gods and deities in the hotel’s honor before I was caught and shoved in a Jinn jar. What else do you want me to do?”

“You’ll figure it out.” He turns as if to leave.

“Wait.”

He jerks to a stop. “Wait for? Another apology? It won’t help.”

I slam my fist into the looking glass. “Well, what then? How can I get my privileges back, you fucking imp?” The words roar from my mouth before I can restrain them.

“Not by unleashing that temper of yours.” His body is rigid, his back to me. “And I am not a *fucking* imp.”

“I know that,” I say quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not. That comment could set you back.”

“Please forgive me.”

He lifts his hand over his head dismissively and saunters toward the door.

“Wait. David, wait. Please! I’m sorry. I’ll do anything. I’ll learn, I promise.” But my words are too late, as the door snicks closed behind him.

CHAPTER 8

ANNORA

David escorts me from my prison-like room into a lovely atrium. Why I was given a bare cell when this hotel is so luxurious is beyond me.

The atrium is overflowing with flora and fauna, surrounding a rippling pool. It reminds me of a postcard Pappy sent me, when he and Mama went on vacation.

“Big smooches, girly girl,” he’d written in his flowing handwriting.

I’d missed him to the moon. I kept that card under my pillow until he and Mama came home.

Inside the atrium, a huge mirror makes the room look ginormous. An array of food and beverages rests enticingly on a tray in the corner. It looks like some of my favorite foods--quiche, abundant vegetables, like the kind we used to pick from the garden, and fresh milk, in a bottle. It’s the type of bottle we used to put Santana’s milk in, when Pappy wanted to help out our neighbor, Mrs. Lindwall.

Mrs. Lindwall was really pretty. Pappy would clean himself up and say, “Let’s bring the neighbor some of Santana’s fine milk. And don’t you tell your Mama about this. She’s got enough to worry about.”

Then we’d waltz across the field to Mrs. Lindwall’s and deliver the milk. She’d always blush when she saw us and usher us into her kitchen. She’d give me some freshly baked cookies and pour me some of the milk, and she and Pappy would talk and laugh while I ate. After

that, Pappy and I would jitterbug across the field home. The jitterbug was Pappy's favorite dance. It's the one he liked to do when he was the happiest.

I step closer, scrutinize the quiche and see broccoli and bell peppers, mixed with a golden brown egg mixture, sprinkled with Parmesan cheese, my all-time favorite. Pappy and I used to make broccoli and bell pepper quiche together. Wednesdays were the only time Pappy was allowed in the kitchen. Mama started going to the auxiliary club on Wednesdays. I think she felt guilty because she was taking time away from Pappy. She was taking time away from *us*. But Pappy didn't mind. We'd make the quiche, enjoy it until our tummies were bursting, and then he'd say, "Well, lookie here. There's only one piece left. You know how Mama hates leftovers. Why don't I run this over to Mrs. Lindwall while you watch TV. I'll be back before you know it. Deal?"

We'd shake hands, I'd watch TV and Pappy would return home after a few of my favorite shows. He'd sport a grin as wide as the Grand Canyon. Then, he'd tuck me into bed.

It occurs to me today is Wednesday. And it also occurs to me Mama decided to come here, to this bizarre hotel, rather than go to meet with her lady friends. For twelve years, Mama hasn't missed one of those meetings, not one. I cock my head and look at David.

He's studying me, expectantly.

What is this guy up to? And how does he know about the Wednesday quiche?

A pear tart sits to the side, complete with a dollop of whipped cream. I had pear tart once, in Boston, while Walter watched. And I swore right then and there, the gods of dining pleasure made pear tart for our supreme enjoyment.

After the night Walter made his hammer frack-attack

on my private parts with his drilling rig man tool, he took me out to dine at a fancy restaurant. I don't know why I went but I think I assumed I owed the guy who deflowered me a night out. I mean, isn't that what a girl's supposed to do?

The place was steeped in pretension. I'd dressed well enough but the second we entered the place, I knew well enough would never be good enough. Everyone was tricked out in the latest trend, the most current, fashion forward garment, that would be discarded the minute they returned home. By then, it would be old news. When I went by, people lifted their heads, lifted their eyebrows even higher, and then got back to their dining experience with lengthy, snooty sighs. Come to think of it, the Hotel Paranormal dining experience reminds me of that awful time.

Walter prepared to make it the most memorable meal ever by ordering pricey wine and an even pricier meal. By the time the meal arrived, I'd consumed copious amounts of Coche-Dury Corton-Charlemagne Grand Cru from the Cote de Beaune, France, a wine costing at least three thousand a bottle. Walter must have been a trust fund baby. Being a lush was apparently my new favorite occupation. We dined and drank some more. Then, dessert arrived. I savored mine while Walter studied me with something akin to acute longing. I stared at him with utter repulsion. As the last bite of tart entered my mouth, I decided I was done with Walter and his too big male parts. When he took me home, hoping to score more fracking for oil exploration, I politely begged off. The previous night's dredging had left me sore and raw. I did not want a repeat experience.

With a scowling peck on the lips and a surly retort, he swirled away. I never saw him again, not face to face, anyway--only on YouStream or at a distance. I guess I

asked for the whole YouStream experience. That's what he would have had me believe.

David clears his throat, reminding me he's still standing here while I waltz through my memories.

An urn of coffee sits next to the dessert. Total, top of the list favorites sitting here, in this room that stirs memories. I narrow my eyes. "How did you know what I like to eat?"

He shrugs. "Lucky guess. This place has been reserved for you. No one else can enter. Feel free to do whatever your heart desires."

He gives me a secretive, suggestive smile that makes me even more suspicious.

"The pool is the perfect temperature for a dip after you've dined. Leave the dishes when you're through. We'll take care of everything once you've departed."

"I don't have a swimming suit."

I swear his eyes start to roll but he catches himself before the follow-through. "There are soft towels over there." He indicates a small shelf. "No one will enter this room until you leave it. You have my word on that. Your dining repast shall be a completely private experience, suitable to your preferences."

"How do you know what my preferences are?" I ask.

"We guess a lot." This time he really does roll his eyes.

"Well, thank you. It beats watching my mom moon over a creepazoid."

David's eyebrows stitch together, but he makes no comment.

After he leaves, I perch at the edge of a chair, near a table set for one, and then pick up my fork and poke at the quiche. I take a nibble. And oh, my, God. I haven't tasted quiche as good as this since Pappy died. It dances upon my tongue, herbs and spices tickling my taste buds.

It rolls down my throat in a golden-crueted, buttery mass. It reminds me that I still, after twelve long years, miss my Pappy.

I never cried after he left us. I locked up every and anything resembling a feeling because Mama said my feelings weren't becoming to a lady. She said ladies don't cry. And we proceeded to live our life in a grim fashion, our feelings locked away, just like the field behind the barn. That field consisted of nothing but hardpan soil, impervious to water, and wouldn't grow anything.

Pappy used to walk hand in hand with me to that part of our land.

He'd put his palms on his hips and shake his head. "This field is my punishment."

I never knew why he thought he needed punishing.

Tears form in my eyes. I see Mama's face in my mind, giving me that stern look of disapproval whenever I start to cry. But she's not here, is she? She's off cavorting with Count Chocula. I let one lone tear trickle down my cheek. It's followed by another. And another. Then huge sobs batter my insides, making my lungs quake. I cry for what seems like hours, but might be only seconds.

And then I catch sight of the super handsome man in the corner of my eye. When I turn to face the image, it disappears. All I see is my reflection in the mirror, with some dark blurry shadow in the background, probably the result of the low lighting. I turn to the side and there he is again. I can barely make out his slack jawed scrutiny of me. He looks to be in agony. He also looks to be in ecstasy.

This has got to be an illusion. Either that, or there really is a creep behind some sort of one-way mirror.

CHAPTER 9

MAC BURRAIN

This girl's pain is enormous. I don't think I've ever witnessed such deep sorrow. And it's turning me on like you wouldn't believe. I can't fucking get to her. Can't touch her, can't feel her, can't plunge inside her and fuck the exquisite misery convulsing through her lungs. All I can do is watch like some god-damned voyeur. This is utter, pure torture.

"David!" I bellow. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry I called you a fucking imp."

I know he can hear me. I also know he doesn't care. A mere apology won't be enough for him, much less the hotel. It has a mind of its own. I've got to *do something*. I've got to find the right means of atonement. I haven't a clue what it is, though, because I never atone for my sins. My sins are like food. I get off on doing the wrong thing. I have no morals like humans. No guiding principles. Nothing to inform my actions except acting on my own behalf.

I'm so flesh and blood right now it hurts. I don't want to be in human form. I don't want to be feeling blood coursing through my body, focused on one part in particular. But it's like I'm stuck here. No doubt this is the dwarf's doing. Either that, or the substance humming through my veins. *Damn, long-lasting Kryptonite.*

"David!" I shout. "David!"

It's then I notice she's staring at me. Looking right at me through the glass that separates us. I stop my protests.

I don't think she can actually see me but I've got to keep her attention focused this way. Because the pain...sweet holy mothers, her agony is intense.

"Don't look away, honey. Don't look away." I might be able to connect with her mind if she holds still.

She starts to turn away.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, *wait*. Eyes back here. Come on, I won't hurt you...much."

Her head pivots in my direction. Her eyes narrow. But she's looking at me.

"That's it. That's it. Oh, yes."

As her eyes settle in line with mine, my cock throbs. Her eyes are exquisite. Filled with tears, liquid pools of longing and distress. I *need* her to keep crying. The more she cries, the harder I get.

"Yeah, baby. Give it to me. Give me your pain."

She presses her palms against the smooth surface. Drops her forehead against the reflective-coated substrate. And tears drip, drip, drip from her eyes like the sweet honeyed liquid from a woman's nether region, the kind that coats my turgid flesh.

Oh, God.

I moan, and press my hands along her palms, drop my forehead next to hers. She's wonderfully tall. She must be all of six feet. I rock my hips, imagining I'm plunging her silken shores. Drawing her agony, her tortured, anguished, fucked-up pain, into me. Let her broken heart reality bash against my chest, like ocean waves.

Her body quivers and shakes as she pours her sorrows out. And she's getting aroused, I can sense it. She's getting as turned on as I am.

I shiver and quake as my body prepares to let loose.

"Oh, sweet devil's soul," I groan. I'm close. So close. I'm about to have the best damn orgasm of my existence,

I can tell. I'm humping and pumping the wall, and she's crying, sobbing, wracked with pain. "Yeah, baby. Keep it coming. Give it all to me. All your glorious torment."

I don't think she's used to being aroused. Not like this. Not like her life depends on coming.

I inhale deeply, drawing in her waves of pain like pleasure. They crest and crash into me.

Her eyes widen. She lifts her head. She's absolutely terrified.

"No, no, no, no, *no*. Wait, honey, wait. This is the good part. This is where the two become the one in a glorious moment of mind-bending, electromagnetic discharge, like a thousand lightning bolts. Stay with me. You can do it."

She plucks her hands away from the glass as if it's scorching hot.

"Wait, honey, wait. We can slow it down, I promise." But then my flesh begins to dissolve. "Wait," I shout. "Not yet. Let me find release." My head pivots right and left. I expect to see David, standing with his arms high and a conjuring wand in his hand, conducting my flesh like it's his orchestra. "Wait!" I yell. My legs turn into flames. My arms become glowing embers. I'm assuming my flaming, scorching fire, shadow-self in a manner I've never experienced. "Come *on!* Not yet, David, *please*."

There's still hope, though. I can still find release, like an explosion of gasoline, tinder, and fury. I can manage in this state.

I turn my face to look at the girl. She's backing away from the mirror, shaking so hard I expect to see her disintegrate.

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God," she says. She starts slapping her thighs. "Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop," she screams. Her hands press to her beautiful face. One finger burrows between her teeth and she bites down,

hard.

Her terror is beautiful. It's exquisite. It makes me want to throw back my head and roar, sending ear-splitting thunder booming through this hotel. But I'm nothing but shadowy vapor right now, about to explode, and she wants to run from me. From *me*. The male who wants to give her pleasure. And I can't stop myself, can't stop getting off on her pain, on her terror, on her torture. I want her so bad. I want her more than existence itself. I want to die inside her, to come in one last flaming orgasm and melt her flesh and die. We would die together. I've never wanted anything so bad.

But she's so scared, she gasps for breath. Her mouth opens and closes like a fish. And then, when I think I might be about to squeeze out finish in some sort of fiery climax, she bolts from the room, taking my tormented, demented release with her.

CHAPTER 10

ANNORA

I sprint for my life, through this elegant hotel with its creepy illusions and its refined good looks and the way it stirs my memories and makes me feel things I'd rather not feel. I dig my key out of my pocket and clutch it like it's the only thing between me and death. I don't have a clue where my room is located. As I run, though, statues point in certain directions. My key glows through my clenched fist. I blindly follow the pointing fingers. The statues must communicate with the keys through some Wi-Fi signal. Finally, I burst into the dreary hall that leads to the ridiculous elevator.

David, perched in the wooden box, beckons me toward him.

"What are you doing here?" I say, furiously wiping my face.

"Waiting to give you a lift," he says.

I swipe my face even harder. Besides chiding me for having emotions, Mama told me to never, ever allow another human being to see my tears. She said it in hushed, angry tones, like it was the most shameful secret on the planet. She made me repeat it back to her, like a mantra. She made me write it down and then she showed me the Bible, where she'd fold my writing into thirds and place it next to Psalms 91. She'd hold the Bible out to me, and I'd take it. Then, like a stern Sister of Mercy, she'd point at the passage, and say, "Read," in her most disapproving voice.

“Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare,” I’d recite. “And from deadly pestilence.” Whatever that is. “You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.” I’d read without comprehension, only reciting the passage to keep Mama from further rage. And only then would she let me head back to my room to read, or draw, or simply curl into a ball on my bed, arms wrapped around my legs, and rock myself to numb, to comatose, back to life as I knew it.

“You didn’t like your quiche?” David says gently, as he tugs us up the lift. Sweat forms on his brow as he strains, one hand over the next.

I blink my eyes rapidly, trying to keep any more tears from escaping. “Oh. Yes. It was good. It was really good. Only it...and the milk...and the mirror...”

And then I can’t help myself; I’m sobbing again.

“There, there,” he says, binding the rope to a hook when we reach my floor. “It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t usually...I’m not supposed to...This isn’t...I can’t...I can’t seem to stop,” I wail.

“It’s okay,” he says again. He reaches into his pocket and retrieves a soft cotton handkerchief, which he holds in my direction.

I grab it and scrub my cheeks and my eyes.

“I’ll buy you a new one,” I say.

“I have plenty of handkerchiefs,” he says. He looks at me with his gentle brown eyes and I see Santana gazing back at me. This makes me cry even more.

“We used to have a cow,” I sob. “And she was a good cow. And you remind me of my cow.”

His eyebrows stitch together, and I realize that may have come out wrong.

“I’m not saying *you’re* a cow, only that her eyes were kind and your eyes are kind and...” I blubber, embarrassed and mortified by my behavior.

“I see,” he says, smiling. “Thank you.” He opens the door of the elevator contraption and steps aside. “Everything’s okay here,” he says. “As long as no one gets hurt. Everything’s allowed. Even crying.” He gives me a smile that’s so genuine, so kind, it supports my broken heart, like two gentle hands.

I stare at him, suspicious.

“You’re beautiful when you cry,” he says.

My eyes narrow to slits. “I’ll bet I look awful. I’ll bet I look a hot mess.”

“Well, that, too,” he says with a chuckle. “But your beauty shines through the mess.”

I don’t know what to say to that so I say nothing, standing awkwardly with my arms held stiffly at my side.

“Your room awaits,” he says, sweeping his hand in a grand gesture toward the dim hallway. And then, before I can think of anything to reply, he closes the rickety door and makes a hand-over-hand maneuver to propel him down the dank shaft.

I make my way to my convent cell, pressing the elegant key against the lock. It chimes, and the door glides open. Honestly, though, I don’t know why I need any kind of lock. This part of the hotel seems like a forgotten storage area. I doubt anyone comes to this wing.

I glumly enter the room, then stop and stare. Something is different. I can’t quite discern it but something has changed in here. I saunter toward the side stand and see a million tiny hoof prints dug into the wood. I laugh.

“What, you had a fight with a unicorn while I was gone?” I say to the metal horse. “It sure looks like it. I did, too. Well, not with a unicorn. More like a tantrum.

There, there,” I say, in what I hope is the same tone David used with me. “Everything’s okay. Everything’s allowed here.” I pat his strangely warm back, still chuckling.

Maybe a work man came in while I was gone. And he had a ball peen hammer and a temper.

I haven’t a clue how all those marks got there but at the moment, I don’t care. David’s right. Everything is okay, at least in this moment. I feel lighter. Brighter. Like a burden has been lifted from my soul.

I glance at my pillow and spy a small, foil-wrapped chocolate, tied with a teensy pink satin bow, nestled in the center of the pillowcase. I pick it up and read the wrapper. “Dandy’s Dark Delight,” it says, in an elegant script.

“Dandy’s?” I drop the sweet like it’s a glowing ember, my hands resuming their usual state of shake.

Pappy used to take me to Dandy’s Finest Chocolates after we’d done errands in town. He’d buy a box of milk chocolates with caramel centers for Mama. He’d purchase a box of dark chocolates with champagne cream for Mrs. Lindwall, telling me she was doing poorly since her husband was out of town.

“Sweet things always cheer a woman,” he’d say with a wink. “And don’t you tell your Mama about this. She’s got enough on her mind.” He’d walk me over to the display case and point at all the fancy confections lining the glass enclosed shelf. “Pick out your favorite. Heck, pick out two. Keep one on hand for when you need a little cheer.”

When I’d choose two—one with nuts and one with sugar sprinkles—Pappy would wink at the pretty woman behind the counter and say, “This girl’s my special girl. Wrap her chocolate up real pretty so she knows how much she means to me.”

Her cheeks red with blush and a goofy smile on her

face, the woman would turn away from us and fuss with my sweets. Women always smiled and blushed around my Pappy. When she whirled around, the chocolates would be resting in the palm of her hand, wrapped like two of the smallest gifts on the planet.

I'd take them, wondering how she managed to tie such tiny ribbons into such pretty bows, but I figured adults had special secret powers not bestowed on kids. I'd be afraid to unwrap them and mess up her precise work, but Pappy would insist, "as long as I saved one for when I needed cheer."

He'd look at me expectantly, his blue eyes wide and bright. I'd slowly untie the tiny ribbon with my fingernails. Peel back the foil. Pop that dark chocolate into my mouth and suck on it, savoring the taste until it melted in my mouth.

Then Pappy and the woman would clap their hands delightedly, like I'd just performed a Bolshoi ballet.

"She likes it, Louise!" he'd exclaim.

"I'm so glad," the cashier would say, her obsidian eyes sparkling.

I never knew how Pappy knew the names of so many women.

This hotel totally creeps me out. It's like it has plucked my darkest memories and my fondest dreams right from my life.

I pace back and forth, next to the bed. "How could they know? My mother put the hotel staff up to this, right? It's got to be her doing." I glare at the foil wrapped confection like it's evil. "What are you up to, Mama? And why would you make them give me Dandy's chocolate? Are you trying to punish me?"

Mama would always cry when Pappy brought her the gift. And they weren't happy tears. She'd eat them, when Pappy was out doing chores, but she'd cry when he gave

them to her.

“Don’t cry, Hermine,” Pappy would say. He’d take her face between his large, strong hands and kiss away her tears. “Please don’t cry.”

But Mama cried each and every time until one day when she told me she’d never cry again.

“Not over that man,” she said. “Never again. Nor will you.”

That’s when the Bible verses started and the mantra repeating began. And that was the end of our emotional expression.

CHAPTER II

MAC BURRAIN

I'm back behind the mirror, in this dank, fucking corridor, staring into this stunning young woman's room. Occupying a naked body once more, with balls as blue as fireflies on the Ichetucknee River in Florida, and swollen as big as basketballs. And, I'm in a foul mood. I've been watching her ever since we returned to this space. Her dark emotions are as arousing as hell and, as we recently learned, I scare the shit out of her.

She's in as bad a mood as me.

"I can fix that state of mind for you, honey, as sure as the night is black. All I need is another chance. I'll be happy, you'll be ecstatic and we can both get on with our day."

Except that I'll be stuck here, an opioid gushing through my bloodstream, and *maybe* still allowed in the atrium walls. And Min will remain a metal figurine until I can figure out how to make amends with this hotel. I let out a gusty sigh.

She picks up the chocolate, makes a fist with her other hand, and shakes it at me. "I'll bet this was your doing."

Me? What's she talking about? I stare at her, uncomprehending, my brilliant, compelling golden eyes shimmering back at me in the reflection. It's like I'm looking at me, watching her...*nice*. Very nice to see our two beautiful faces juxtaposed one on top of the other. Now if I could only...

“I know who you are.”

Really? This is interesting news.

“You’re my animus.”

Your what?

“You know, my animus. Everyone supposedly has an anima and an animus. The animus represents my repressed mind...my rejected inner male...the darkness and mistrust I feel around men. It’s also known as my shadow self.”

My eyebrows rise high on my forehead.

Your shadow self? I’ll be your shadow self, sure.

My mood begins to brighten.

“So every time I see you as a dark blip reflected on the mirror...”

Did you call me a blip?

My ego takes a slight hit.

“Yeah, every time I see you as a shadowy blip, and then, when I turn my head, I see a handsome man...well, I’m looking at a reflection of my inner self. Want to know how I know that?”

Sure. Lay it on me.

“My therapist told me. Yep, my mother forced me into therapy after I returned from Boston. *Forced*. You don’t argue with Mrs. Hermine Lachman, no, sir.”

So you’re Mrs. Lachman’s daughter. Why does that name ring a bell?

I scan my memory bank but come up empty.

At least I know your last name. Do you have a first? I’ll bet it’s a beautiful name.

“‘Stop moping,’ she’d tell me. ‘Go out and get a job,’ she’d insist. ‘You’re doing nothing to contribute to the household,’ she’d whine, knowing *nada* about what I’d been through. So she found me a shrink. And the guy prescribed Prozac, first thing. Do you want to know what it feels like to take Prozac?”

Not really, no.

“Well, I’ll tell you. It makes you all bright and tight inside like you’re stuck in a Disney cartoon. I hated it. I’d gush at strangers. Talk to cashiers, postmen, anyone, in this high pitched, crazy-as-a-lunatic voice. Then, when I’d taken the pills for a year and the shrink decided I showed no signs of improvement, I stopped taking them. Simply stopped. *Without* his consent. That was fun. *Not*. I’d swing back and forth between suicidal thoughts and complete, manic hysteria. I’ll bet you thought it was funny.”

Um, no. I didn’t know you then. Otherwise I might have.

“And, oh, boy, this doctor was *into* Carl Jung, let me tell you what, what with the anima and animus and all that.” She eyes the chocolate still clenched in her hand. “And you’re a clever animus, yes, you are. Mama probably had them leave me this chocolate so I’d remember how it made her cry. And then I’d feel bad. And I’d hate you all the more. Well, guess what?”

I’m listening.

“She’s somewhere with a freak named Storm, and she can rot in hell.”

Storm Gruenauer?

“Oh, honey,” I say. “Your mama’s with a vampire.” I chuckle. “He’s a real cad. I taught him nearly every freaky trick he knows.”

“I’m going to defy her, and I’m going to enjoy this chocolate. So there.”

“Go ahead,” I say, still chuckling. “One of us should get some pleasure out of something.” I drop my gaze to my resplendent stiff dick—the dick that’s shown females supreme pleasure for centuries—slipping back into my foul mood.

She saunters to her bed, her hips swishing back and

forth in the same manner I'd like to watch them roll back and forth over my groin.

I lick my lips, saliva pooling in my mouth.

She settles on the bed and frowns. "Did David get me a new mattress? This one feels soft and squishy." She pats her pillow. "And the pillow's fluffy. Wow. I guess they knew they made a mistake. I didn't have to say anything. I actually might get a good night sleep tonight." She scoots closer to Min, swings her legs on the bed, turns her head toward the mirror, and says defiantly, "Watch me."

Oh, I'm watching, trust me.

I wrap a hand around my throbbing dick and idly stroke, heedless of what it might do to her.

She positions the chocolate a few millimeters from her lips, reached out the tip of her pointy pink tongue, and laps at the sweet morsel.

Oh, my fucking God.

I stroke vigorously.

"Mmm, this is *so good*," she says. "Can't you feel how much I'm enjoying this piece of dark, dark chocolate?"

She says the word *dark* as if she's in the throes of ecstatic release. My cock jerks in my hand, begging to let go.

She trains her beautiful eyes on the treat like it's her lover. "And now I'm going to eat you."

"Yes, please."

Holy devil in hell. I could come in a heartbeat.

The chocolate disappears behind her luscious lips. And she sucks. And she savors.

My hand moves like a milking machine set to high.

Her hand reaches out to touch Min.

A deep, loud moan ejaculates from my throat as the sensation of her fingers lands on my skin, informed through the mind-bond with my hell horse.

She stiffens and stops caressing Min. She spits the gooey tidbit into her palm.

Damn.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry. Please don’t stop.”

Her eyes narrow and she glares at the mirror. “Oh, I know what this is. I get it.”

You do?

“This place is somehow wired to my psychological make-up. The sound effects come from me. Well, not *from* me because I’m not yet capable of expressing my emotions. That’s what Dr. Prozac told me. He said I’d need a lot of work to let go. He said whenever I heard or perceived something outside of me that made me feel something, it was me reflecting me to myself. What a piece of work, that shrink.” She cocks her head. “I wonder if he funded this experimental room. He had a lot of money and a lot of strange ideas.”

The chocolate. Min. Get back to sucking the chocolate and stroking my hell horse.

Her gaze drops to her confection-smearred hand. She puts her lips around the dark morsel and slurps it into her mouth. Once more she resumes caressing Min.

I chew on my lips to keep from crying out.

“Can you feel me sucking you?” she mumbles through a mouthful of sweet.

Oh, yeah, baby. I can feel you. I sure as hell can feel you.

Matter of fact, it’s like I’m inside her sweet, slippery cheeks, gliding in and out, and in and out, furiously seeking release.

“Mmm,” she moans.

Mmm, I mentally moan because as sure as shit I don’t want to scare her away again.

“So, good,” she utters. “Dark chocolate is the best. The darker the better.”

I chuckle because I'm as dark as the darkest sin one can imagine. I'm way worse than death, far more vile than decay, contemptible, appalling, nasty...

Her hand jerks away from the toy, distracting me from my self-appreciation, and my hand flies from my throbbing cock, as if its attached to her with a silver string.

"Oh," she says, her eyes widening and her mouth forming a delicious O shape, perfect for sliding over the silken head of my resplendent cock. "Oh, no, you don't," she says to the mirror.

"Honey, *please*. We were close to climax." I spread my palms against the glass, smash my nose onto the shiny surface, and groan.

"This is a trick, isn't it?"

"No trick, nuh-uh, no sir." My forehead drops to the glass and bangs against it.

"You wanted me to suck on this bit of sin and realize something." She bats her forehead with her palm. "I don't know why I didn't put two and two together. All this time, I've been in denial. Suddenly, I *know* why Pappy took quiche and chocolates over to Mrs. Lindwall's house. And why he returned with a big, fat smile, dancing the jitterbug. And why Mama cried when he brought her milk chocolates with creamy caramel centers. Now I hate you more than ever," she wails. "Pappy was having an affair!"

CHAPTER 12

ANNORA

I yell at my animus, pounding the mirror with my fist. “You probably think this is funny.”

The special effects in this place are so good, I see shadowy flames surrounding my reflection. Is that supposed to be coming from me? Is this a positive sign indicating I’m actually feeling something? Oh, I feel something, that’s for certain. I feel...I feel...

I pause, uncertain what I feel.

“I think I feel angry,” I say, as realization dawns. I actually feel mad. I’m acutely aware of the flush in my face, my heart pounding, and beads of sweat exploding on my skin. I don’t think I’ve been this aware of anything since Pappy died.

Dr. Prozac would be pleased. He’d pat his own fat back, certain my emotional expression came from all the hard work he did with me.

Hard work, my foot. All he did was yammer theories and try to get me to talk about my past.

I never wanted to talk about my past. Never wanted to “dive into the depths of my consciousness,” as he’d say. I never wanted to re-live what happened with Walter. The only thing I experienced after that event was numb, cold shame, even worse than usual. It settled around me like a reverse winter coat, trapping the chill inside my bones. I haven’t been warm since. This anger I feel now, however, is making me uncomfortably hot.

YouStream took the video down fairly quickly. But

it already had a gazillion views. Then, the clip of me being subjected to Walter's dredging tool surfaced on Tumblr, SxSoup, and other sites open to porn. I couldn't leave my dorm room without being subjected to stares and whispers.

Noreen wasn't any help. She'd prance into the room, chewing bubble gum, her blonde hair bobbing like a halo around her head.

She'd see me curled in a ball in the corner and ask, "What's the matter with you? You'll never walk the path to success with dirty hair and filthy clothes."

Clean hair and clothes would not help me walk anywhere, not in the mood I wallowed in. For the first few weeks, I hid. Ordered take-out from Chin Wong's Chinese and Papa Pietro's Pizza.

Pizza boxes filled with stale, golden crust, stained with blood-colored tomato sauce, surrounded my chair. White take-out containers, smeared with decaying remnants of ginger-infused chicken chow mein, and mu shu vegetables drowning in soy sauce, littered the floor.

"Ugh," Noreen would say. "Where's your sunshine? Let the light stream through your heart and your spirit will be lifted. And take out the trash while you're at it."

When I told her what happened, she said things like, "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger," or "Mistakes are proof you are trying." Sometimes she'd chirp, "If you're going through heck,"—She would grin.—"I won't use that other H word, the one where the devil lives." Then she'd continue. "If you're going through heck, keep going!"

I always stared at her when she spewed motivational quotes like our lives were perpetual workshops for success. In my depressed gloom, my eyelids became slits watching her scurry through the room, stuffing cartons and food scraps into a big black garbage bag, and then

flinging the curtains open wide. I retreated like sludge into the darkness of my bedroom.

I later learned she started dating Walter after my “big debut”--his words, not mine--and swore he was “nothing but a gentleman” with her. When I told her she might end up in a video, too, she said, “Oh, we don’t do that. I won’t do that until I have a ring on my finger. You know what Beyonce says.”

“If you like it then you shoulda put a ring on it, yeah, yeah, I got it,” I’d drone, as Noreen sang and danced through the room, like a cartoon hopped up on motivational cocaine.

Now, in this ridiculous nun’s cell, I hop around, mimicking Noreen’s dance moves. “I don’t want a ring on my finger, ever,” I yell, in a sing-song voice.

But Pappy. Pappy had an affair with the neighbor. And he used me as a cover up.

I don’t know what I feel about that. Betrayed. Confused. Sad. Angry. There are so many sensations buzzing around my body I can’t tell one from the other. I stomp around the room, hoping my pacing can push back the sensation of being out of control, the complete terror of losing grip on the numbness in which I’ve been encased for so long.

The mirror now appears like one of those holiday Christmas screens of perpetual, silent flames dancing on logs, the kind we sat our television to and hope it fills the room with cheer. All I can imagine is a screaming ghost, trapped in flaming shadow, like the famous painting called simply, *The Scream*. The scene terrifies me. It doesn’t bring me cheer. I frantically scan the room for a remote.

“David,” I yell. “Make it stop!”

This hotel is a nightmare. It should be called *Hotel Paranoia*. My hands are shaking like leaves in a

windstorm.

Where are my pills? My purse? Where is it?

I'm in such a state I can't even remember where I put my bag. This isn't like me. I *know* where my belongings are. I arrange them by color, by texture, and by style, in artful, anal formation, each time I enter my room.

I fling open the closet doors. "Aubergine, black, coral..." I recite, my finger pointing to the colorful array of clothes. "Purse, purse, purse...where is my purse?" I brought a gray purse. Matted gray. It would be under the G's, closest to the subset of M for muted. My fingers tremble so bad as I shove hangars to the side, I manage to pull a couple from the wooden bar, the clothes crumpling in disarray on the floor. And there it is, my matted gray leather purse.

A few of my clothes have fallen to the floor but I don't stop to pick them up. Number one priority right now is to find Valium. Open Valium. And get Valium in my bloodstream before my heart explodes and David has to scrape me off these pristine walls with a putty knife.

I fumble with the white cap. It clings to the orange, see-through bottle like a prison cell door. Finally, I fling the container on the floor and stomp on it, crushing a few precious pills in the process. Crouching, I scoop up a small handful, toss it in my throat, and swallow. The bitter powder sticks to my bone-dry cheeks while the chalky tablets lodge in my throat, making me gag with an exorcist-like violence. They threaten to hurl from my mouth but I tongue them back into position. I manage to swallow some relief. But when I lift my head the flames have been replaced with the most terrifying, darkest, sexiest man I have ever seen in my life. He appears to be on fire. And he's looking at me with unmistakable longing. I snatch my key from the bed and race from my

room, heading somewhere, anywhere but here.

As I enter the hallway, I spy a window. I don't remember seeing a window before. Maybe because the hallway was shrouded in darkness and a thick curtain covered the place where the window should be. Now, however, it beckons to me like a welcome escape and I decide to take matters into my own hands. Rather than run from death, I'm going to embrace it.

I sprint like an Olympic runner, leap like a hurdler, and fling myself through the glass. The window explodes all around me, my heart convulsing in one final brilliant blast.

CHAPTER 13

MAC BURIAIN

Nope, the word “funny” never crossed my mind when she glared at me a few moments ago. Arousing, more like it. Turned on. And, as much as I hate to admit it, I’m attracted to her humanness.

Humans are messy creatures, weighted with gooey, sticky emotions. I’ve never found one attractive, knowing it can lead to *this*. Wound up in spider web of something I can’t put my finger on. I want to feed on her pain, suck it into my soul, and transform it into ecstasy. I want to make her feel good. Really, really good. And then, go with her to her extinction in one, giant orgasm. One of us would survive, deliciously so. The other, well...she would go out in a literal explosion of passion. Not a bad way to go, if you ask me.

Even as she stressed and fumed around her hotel room, my arousal grew. I turned into my usual flaming-hot self, frustrated as hell at not being able to show her deep, satisfying pleasure. When she tossed back the medicinals, those mind-numbing crap tablets she seems to like, in total self-hatred, my cock and balls turned into blue-white flames, quickly consuming the rest of my body in fiery embrace.

Now, as she flies from the room, horrified, I want to find her and fuck her in mind-bending, glorious, beyond-this-world release for both of us. But she’s terrified. Of me. *Again*.

A shattering explosion echoes through the space

beyond the mirror, and I instantaneously dissolve into a trail of vaporous heat, streaming through the secret corridors, searching for the cause. I fly into pitch black vastness. It's probably a spell-cast dimension some wizard concocted. This space is filled with the vibration which accompanies immanent, untimely death-- *her* death.

Not yet! Not before I've had my fill of you.

I slam back to corporeal flesh, arms extended, and catch her, mid-flight. Then, like vapor in a vacuum tube, sucked through dimensions, I find myself, holding her, on her bed in her hotel room. In her room.

On. Her. *Bed.*

In. Her. *Hotel Room.*

Holy fucking hell. How did I manage this?

I furtively scan for David, certain this is some kind of trick. He's nowhere in sight. I gently scrape one of my black, crimson-tipped nails along her creamy whiteness, watching her skin yield in supple response. She's real. And, damn, she's silky smooth as satin.

Min jerks stiffly and whinnies. He clatters back and forth, vibrating like a jittery, wind-up toy. He snorts, and steam rolls from his nostrils. He's excited, too, only for different reasons, no doubt.

I'm sure he thinks he's about to be freed.

"I wouldn't get too excited, hell horse. Haven't a clue what I did to end up here. The hotel could be messing with me. The narcotics could be fucking with me. She's unconscious, in case you hadn't noticed. And, she took a hefty dose of something. Sex with the unconscious isn't something I get off on."

I prefer them alive and participatory. In consent, even if they're terrified at first. And right now, lying comatose, she's none of the above.

I'm not sure what to do. My dick is bloated, engorged

with blood and high octane sexual energy. She is in my lap, her sericeous skin pressed against me. I rock my hips a little. Just enough to get a taste of what it's going to be like to be inside her.

Oh, the devil in all his wickedness. Let me have my way with her.

I shudder.

The fingers of one hand find their way through her shimmering black hair, while the other hand cradles her neck. It's like holding the dawn in my arms, that moment of hope humans experience, when yesterday's wrongs can all be erased. I stroke the wisps of gossamer. I caress. I finger her scrapes and scratches, the tears left by jagged glass, and my flesh quivers with longing. I lift her head to my lips and lick the red smears from her cheeks. I'm so turned on, I could come on the spot. But not while she's unconscious. Never while she's unconscious. I want her eyes to be open. Wide. Looking at me adoringly. Knowing I'm the one who made her feel this way. Me. In all my black, dark, wicked-as-sin majesty.

She lets out a moan, and I tense.

"Don't move a muscle, Min," I say, momentarily forgetting he's incapable of any muscle movement.

Her eyelids flutter, opening like a sunrise through a stormy sky. Her eyes are like fog, clouded with a drug-induced haze. She stares at me, and I scan my mind for options. I don't want her to bolt.

"It's you," she says simply.

Who does she think I am?

"Uh, yes," I say, with equal simplicity.

Her eyelids flutter, then close.

"You have a blue glow," she slurs. "I took way too much Valium."

I can't stop looking at her. Even in her confusion, even though her sight is revealed through tormented

agony, she's breathtaking. My hands relax, supporting her weight, conforming to her skin, like two large cats.

"I won't let you break me," she says.

My eyebrows stitch together. "I'm fully capable of breaking you. Far worse, I'm afraid." *Ask Aurkene.*

"Not this time. No." Her eyes look at me as if from far, far away. Her delicate, translucent, eyelids drift closed, heavy, lethargic, as if the weight of the world has settled upon her face. A sigh leaves her soft lips. "Don't you want to kiss me?"

Her eyes remain closed.

What? Where did this come from?

"Very much so."

"Well, then..." Her slender hand skitters to her lips like a tiny bird. She softly taps the plump, inviting flesh, then lets her hand fall.

I lift her face closer, letting our lips touch.

She whimpers.

I deepen the kiss. Something hot and wet drops on my naked shoulder. And again. And once more. She's crying and her pain fuels my arousal. I want to consume her pain. I want to sink into her misery, sliding against its edges with relentless fury.

Not yet. She mustn't flee.

She moans into my mouth, the warm wind of her life essence flowing down my throat. Her whimpers become sobs, more of the heartbreak she felt earlier. She sucks my tongue between her cheeks. She bites my lips, drawing blood. She's furious and incredibly aroused. Her eyes fly open as she claws against my skin, droplets of blood forming bold patterns against my sunset bronze skin. And then she pushes away, her gaze once more wild and uncomprehending.

I groan. Not again.

"Where are you going?" A strange echo of

desperation flies from my mouth. This isn't like me. I'm the ruler of darkness. The only time I experience desperation is when I'm caught, trapped in some ensorcelled container. Never with a female. Not like this. Not until I met this young woman.

"I don't know. Away. Away from you."

"Please, don't leave. Please." Again with the desperation. I don't like who I'm becoming with this girl.

"I'll never love you."

Love? You said anything about love? Honey, I'm not a hearts and flowers kind of guy. I'm not even a guy, per se.

A largely human emotion, I'm scarcely capable of comprehending, let alone experiencing, love. Love would get in the way of my darkness. I couldn't torture or maim. Kill or terrify.

"Uh," I say, unsure where this conversation is leading. "I think we're heading in the wrong direction."

I glance at Min for answers. Can't tell if he shrugs or not.

"You want to destroy me." She says it with conviction. "That's what men do."

Can't argue with that. I drop my gaze. "Maybe. In a manner of speaking. But you'll feel really good when it happens."

"You don't get it."

My eyes lift to meet hers. "What don't I get?"

"I'm already dead." She lets out a lamenting cry that's so filled with sorrow, I'm pierced by its tragic beauty.

My cock jerks. This is exquisite. She evokes my dark, delicious arousal like none other. "You seem very much alive to me."

"No," she says. "I died the day after my Pappy died. Then again after Walter. A few minutes ago, I gave up on

even trying.”

“Then, come, and let me fill you with life.”

She tilts her head and studies me, her tears sliding silently along her cheeks like a moonlit stream.

“You’re so beautiful.” I say it like I’ve never said it before. Maybe I haven’t.

Her head slowly turns side to side. She sidles toward the bed and crawls on it like a small puppy. Curling on her side, one arm wraps around my thigh. Her hand rests, seemingly unaware, against my burning erection, like a sigh of innocence.

I’m baffled. I don’t know what to do. So I simply stroke her back through the blood-streaked shirt, as she lets the drugs have their way with her. But I can’t stop my mind from conjuring ideas. I want this woman. And I intend to have her.

CHAPTER 14

ANNORA

When I launched myself from that window, I said goodbye to all my fears, while falling, scared out of my wits. Well, except for my new fear of falling, not all of them, but quite a few. Then, again, maybe it was only a “See ya in a while” kind of statement. Still, I did that. Me. I fell, terrified, only to be caught by the arms of darkness. Then, I found myself in bed with him. I stared in his brilliant golden eyes without flinching. Let him kiss me and kissed him back. His scorching bronze and blue skin burned some of the numbness from my soul.

Now I’m cradled by him. Held in his embrace. Safe, inside a searing shadow creature. Dozing in and out.

The door to my room opens. Footfalls trek to my bed. I can’t open my eyes at the moment. I took a boatload of Valium. Hence, I’m woozy behind the delicate wall of flesh in the “depths of my unconscious mind.” Dr. Prozac would be so pleased he’d have a hard-on, trapped beneath his bulging belly.

“That’s enough, dark specter. Out with you. Back behind the mirror you go.” The words come from my right. It must be David.

A deep, sensuous voice, emerging from the one who supports me, answers. “Come *on*. We haven’t done anything.”

Who knew death could sound so sexy? And a little bit petulant.

“Nor shall you yet. This one’s complex. She carries

a lot of darkness. We've never seen anything like it and we thought we'd seen it all, what with our clientele. Even the hotel is bewildered. Give her time to process," the dwarf says.

I want to groan but it comes out more like a mumble.

"Can't I continue to hold her?" the male holding me says.

"No. Out with you. Shoo, shoo. You're too tempted to play with her," David says in a stern manner.

"No I'm not. I terrify her. I'm practicing restraint," the sexy voice of death says.

"Please. Spare me the wild lies. You're not known for kindness or truthfulness. *Or* restraint. She's been through a lot already." David lets out a deep sigh. "This hotel...it's a place of luxury. Debauchery. Unbridled passion and indulgence beyond your wildest dreams. This...this...*space*..."

He says the word like it hurts.

I frown, confused. *Why, then, was I given a monastery cell of a room?*

"This space is of her design. She could have anything here. She could have anything, anything at all. And this is what she chose." He sounds disappointed, worse than Mama.

Silence falls, and I drift further away.

"Why was I allowed in here at all? What did I do? Tell me so I can do it again." The dark sexy voice seems to almost whimper, while his arms cling to me.

The pleading words draw me back, like a hook in a trout's mouth.

Since when did death sound whiny?

"Your fate is tied to hers, I'm afraid," David says. He must be smoothing and brushing the linens from the sound of it. Then, the room falls silent.

I squint, trying to open my heavy lids, and see David,

standing with arms akimbo glaring at the giant holding me. My eyelids are tugged closed by the Benzodiazepine humming through my bloodstream.

“I don’t believe in fate.” The male holding me, sounds perturbed, his words punching through the room.

I let out a soft whimper.

“She does. Now go.” David sounds intense.

For a little man, he’s got some huge balls.

The warmth of death’s embrace is ripped from me, accompanied by a loud whoosh. Smaller warm hands stroke my hair, pat my pillow, and tuck the covers around me.

That must be David? Where’s death’s embrace?

A scrape of metal on wood follows, like the toy horse is being rearranged. And then, utter quiet envelopes me and I’m lulled like a baby in a basket. This facing fears, hurtling from windows, and kissing the grim reaper has worn me out.

I awaken in what feels like lifetimes later, bewildered. Am I dead or alive? There’s something plastered to my face. Apparently, lip locking with death brought me back to life, to this sorry nun’s cell. Groggy, I lift my head from the pillow, peel the damp paper from my cheek and open my sludge-filled eyes.

“Oh, no,” I groan. “This place has it in for me. More damn chocolate. Dandy’s Dark Delight.”

The wrapper has split apart from the weight of my head, allowing dark chocolate to ooze from the foil-lined paper. I groan. David must have left it for me. I pick it up and hurl it across the room. I glare at the mirror. There’s no cheer-filled fire. No handsome, terrifying face. Only a reflection of the plain white walls, marred by a dab of Dandy’s chocolate.

A month after Pappy left us, Mama grabbed my hand and told me we were going to Dandy’s Finest Chocolate

to “pay a visit.” She dressed in her finest church-going clothes. She was known as a “real looker.” That’s what Pappy always said.

He’d whistle at her when she entered the room. Smack his lips and let out a gusty exclamation, something like, “Hot damn.” He’d take her hand and whirl her in a pirouette. Come to think of it, though, during the last year of his existence, she refused to twirl around the room. Her face would darken when he’d enter the kitchen. Still, he never gave up trying.

“Let’s see if we can turn her frown upside down,” he said to me one day in a conspiratorial voice. He tugged me out to the barn, dancing the samba, and we schemed.

“Maybe we can get her a kitten,” I suggested, filled with hope.

Pappy stroked his whiskers with his fingertips, thoughtfully considering. “That’s a good idea, but then she’d have another mouth to feed. We don’t want her to wonder how she’s going to feed it.”

“Dandy’s chocolates?” I said.

“Nope, she’s off her chocolates. I think we can do her one better. Let’s you and me bake her a cake on Wednesday night.”

So we baked her a vanilla-lemon cake, iced with cream cheese frosting.

When she walked in the kitchen later that night, she squinted at the baked treat. She dragged her finger through the frosting and licked it from her fingertip.

“This is good,” she said. Then, she picked up the entire thing and threw it in the trash.

I’d never seen my Pappy so crestfallen.

I cried a little. We’d worked so hard on that cake. Waltzed around the kitchen, making a complete mess of flour and sugar.

Later, when Pappy had put me to bed, he said, “Don’t

worry, cupcake. I guess your mama doesn't like vanilla-lemon. We'll think of something."

I found him on the kitchen floor the next day, taking one of his strange, sudden naps. His clothes were dusted with flour. Dried blood covered his cheek. Brownish goo, a mash-up of liquid, flour and sugar, lay near his tipped over glass, the one he always filled with "jug juice."

When I kissed his cheeks to wake him, his skin smelled sour, like jug juice and sorrow.

"Hello, sunshine," he said to me, with less his usual joy. He wiped his face and struggled to sit up. "What do you say we fish that cake free from the trash and see if we can salvage a piece for Mrs. Lindwall. Maybe it will cheer her up. I hear she's been missing her man real bad."

So when Mama dragged me to Dandy's finest, a month after Pappy died, I thought she must be "back on her chocolates."

The woman named Louise stood behind the counter. "Can I help you?" she said.

"Yes, I'd like a box of dark chocolates with champagne filling. Get her whatever she normally gets." Mama waved her hand at me, like shooing away a fly. She bore a cold smile, like someone had carved it into her frozen face.

After we got home, Mama said, "Go get cleaned up. Go on now. When you come back I want you to run these chocolates over to Mrs. Lindwall's house. Will you do that for me, dear?"

When Mrs. Lindwall opened the door and saw the chocolates, she started to cry. She handed me a fresh baked cookie and thanked me for the treats. Then, she told me to go back to my house.

I later learned she died a violent death. Something about poison and tremors and a lot of thrashing.

Mama read me the news clipping and shook her head.

“Can you believe it?” she said to me. “In this day and age?”

“She was always nice to me,” I said sadly.

“Mm-hmm,” Mama said, distractedly. “Let’s fetch us the Bible and read some scripture. Go on now. You know where I keep it.”

Now, laying here, in this strange room, it’s as if the missing key to the old storage locker in the attic has been found. The key inserts into the lock. The lid lifts, revealing understanding.

“I killed Mrs. Lindwall,” I cry. “I’m an accomplice to my mother’s evil scheme!”

I don’t know who I’m madder at: my Pappy for having an affair, or Mama, for being a bitch and a hypocrite. We poisoned in the name of the Lord. That, in itself, is a sin.

Determined to confront her, even if she’s doing the mambo with Count What’s-his-bucket, I launch from the bed, grab my room key, and race out the door.

CHAPTER 15

MAC BURIAIN

I roar from behind the mirror, bashing my fists against the surface.

“Min!” I pound until my hands are raw. “Look at me! Turn yourself around!”

My toy hell horse quivers and shakes in a circle to face me.

I know there’s not a god-damned thing he can do about our predicament. Neither, apparently, can I.

I thought I’d made some sort of progress, but nope, I’m back behind the wall, and she’s gone and I can’t watch her, wherever she’s going. This is as fucked up as being in a genie jar. Made worse by the strange sensations in my chest.

“Do you think we should get out of here and take our chances the banshee-demon has cooled off? Do you think she’s forgotten about the bounty on my head?” I say.

Min lets out a snort of smoke.

“Yeah, me neither. Crummy idea. This damn hotel always spits you out at the place you entered. She’ll be waiting, no doubt.” In human form again, I sink to the floor, once more behind this blasted looking glass. I rest my arms over my knees, my hands hanging limp and defeated, just like my cock. “I give up. It was a bad choice to come here.”

Min snorts again in agreement.

“So, what are our options? Stay or go?”

The horse clatters about on the wooden surface.

“Pacing won’t help. We need ideas.” I sigh and rake my hand through my hair. “A decade of solitude and now

this...what did I do to end up here?"

I chuckle. What didn't I do? I have a long list of "crimes" against me. I move in rather dark circles.

Before I got vacuumed into a bottle, thanks to Aurkene's jealous bitch-quest, I was assigned to possess a man's body until his mind snapped and he either broke, mentally, ending up in an insane asylum, or confessed his infractions to his enemy. That was an easy gig, inside a half-wit brain, but I'd been paid a nice sum of money.

Before that, I had to haunt a family's home until they moved. I chose to paralyze my victims in a half-state between dreaming and awake and make them watch me masturbate as my shadow self, night after night. Hell, it kept boredom at bay. Scared the shit out of the woman. Frustrated the fuck out of the man. He probably thought I was a projection of his unfulfilled sexual self. They probably divorced after they "sold" the house to the person who hired me--more like gave it away at half its value. Whatever.

Prior to that gig, I was assigned to be one of the demons in the Seven Gates to Hell in Pennsylvania. That myth involves walking through seven so-called gates in the woods on Trout Run Road, heading for an insane asylum. One of those ridiculous reality TV shows like Survivor had decided on this as one of the challenges. Somehow they'd procured real demons, like my buddy Yenaldooshi, a skin walker. I was assigned to the last gate, the most awful of them all. I was supposed to appear as flames and send them to the "depths of hell." No one made it that far. They all freaked out and quit the show, leaving the producers in debt. I was bored out of my mind, waiting, and made my employer pay me overtime. Stupid shit.

After that, I terrified entire towns just to get the snot out of my system. Rode Min at a flaming gallop, him at

his hell horse finest, screaming and neighing in an unearthly manner, night after night, through the neighborhoods and main streets of Wilkinsburg, Monroeville, and Duquesne, Pennsylvania and beyond. Made vicious attacks on some of the occupants, simply because I wanted to. No good reason. Sometimes no good reason is the best reason.

And then I got stuffed in a bottle, after seeking some frisky fun between the legs of a female-- Aurkene, that jealous, conniving bitch. When I got out of the bottle, I sought more of the same with the demon-banshee. We could have had some fun and been all the better for it. But no. Neither Aurkene, nor the bitch banshee was down with my plan. Aurkene said she cared about me, so much so that she trapped me in a genie jar to teach me a lesson. A lesson--right. Like I ever learn. The demon-banshee said she cared about me but she only lusted after the bounty. I only cared about the need between my legs. So why do I give a hoot about the girl in this room? Why do I care at all? I'm not used to caring. Matter of fact, I've got this strange sensation stirring at heart level. It disturbs me. I want to excise it, stab it free with a fork or a butcher's blade.

"I hate this," I yell, and Min jumps. "She's a human, for Satan's sake. A *human!* Since when do I play with mere mortals? This hotel is *filled* with supernaturals. Why a human? I fucking hate this. Do you think I'm having a heart attack?"

Min snorts fire.

"I know, right? I *have no heart!* So, what the hell is happening to me? My chest feels like roadkill."

Min rocks back on his hind legs and crashes to the polished mahogany, leaving another tiny hoof-print.

"So that's your best answer? See if she's in the atrium? Why the hell not? Being back here isn't

improving my mood.”

I sift to the atrium, peering into the room, but Mrs. Lachman’s daughter isn’t here. Only one fucked up vampire, Storm Gruenauer, munching the shit out of an older, unconscious woman’s neck.

“Storm!” I bellow. My voice shakes every surface in the room. Vases full of flowers, placed artfully throughout the space, tinkle and shiver across the tops of the stands.

His head lifts from his blood lust, and his red-veined gaze swings wildly about the room. Crimson drips from his fangs.

I find, in this moment, at least, I can sift through the reflective surface and enter the atrium. It looks different than it did when Mrs. Lachman’s daughter sat here, but that’s not surprising. This place conforms to the minds of its occupants. It looks, well, cheap. At least the girl has some style, even if it’s simple.

“You can’t harm people at this hotel. You can have your fun, but you can’t break the rules.” Listen to me. I’m now the poster child for rule-following? It outrages me to be acting like I care. Furious, I grab him by the neck and haul him to his feet. “Is she dead?”

“I...I don’t know,” he says, his eyes crazed and unhinged. His gaze pinwheels toward his victim. “She’s got a dirty mind and a soul full of sin. Her blood has a bitter tang to it. I’ve never tasted anything quite like it. I...I couldn’t help myself. I lost control.”

I shake him like a rag doll. “You’d better hope she wakes up and doesn’t go to meet her maker or you’re in big trouble.” Matter of fact, I’m surprised the hotel hasn’t already intervened.

But wait...here they come.

Footfalls grow louder outside the door. Shouts can be heard. The vamp and I both swivel our heads. I’m

prepared to hold him up as a prize and tell the staff I've got the perp. Maybe I'll get some points. Only, he sifts from the room right as the door bursts open, and I'm left with my hand in the air like a greeting.

David stares at me, fire in his eyes.

Max, the seven-foot-tall front desk guy, follows him and pins me with a similar glare. Both of them huff and puff.

The last to enter is *her*. *Mrs. Lachman's daughter*. When she sees me, her beautiful eyes fill with accusation and betrayal. Rage and disgust.

Normally, I'm the last to care what someone thinks. How could I do my job if I let people's feelings about me get in the way? Most of the time, I think it's funny the way they react. But her looking at me like I'm Satan's wingman doesn't feel good. That strange sensation in my chest starts to twist, like someone worse than me has his hand on my heart and is bearing down, hard.

"What did you do to her?" Her words erupt with venom and pain. "Did you kill my mother?"

CHAPTER 16

ANNORA

I launch myself in an extremely uncharacteristic manner at the man from behind the mirror...the man who I thought to be death and whom I kissed a short time ago.

He's standing over my mother, wearing nothing but strange, shimmering pants hanging low from his hips. I claw at his naked chest and beautiful face.

What's wrong with me? Why am I so out of control?

His skin is the color of burning coals. I expect flames to appear any second, giving me third degree burns.

"You're horrible! Awful! I let you kiss me thinking you're death or some fanciful projection of my mind and, all you are is a sick, sick man." I'm not usually this bold.

He pushes me away like he's brushing a gnat from his skin. "I...I'm nothing of the sort."

"Pick her up, Max. Let's get her to medical," David says. "And you..." He jabs a finger at the man. "There had better be a good explanation for this, or we're hauling you in for questioning."

"You're hauling *me* in? Good luck with that. You, of all people, *know* I didn't do this. And you also know the only thing you're capable of doing to me is keeping me locked in the secret corridors behind each room," the man roars. He grabs a vase full of beautiful flowers—roses and lilies—and hurls it across the room. "I know, I know, I'm paying for the damage," he shouts.

"Keep your voice down, Mac Bhriain, or you'll disturb the other guests," David says, rushing toward the

glass fragments. He lifts his wrist watch to his face and says, "Housekeeping to the atrium, pronto."

So he has a name...Mac Bhriain. I let it sink in for a second while staring at David.

How a man so small can boss around a male so large is beyond me. The guy before me must be seven feet tall, same as the guy called Max who's hefting Mama in his arms. He didn't appear this big when I lay in his embrace on my twin bed. But then, well...Valium and all. I gawk at his magnificence for a second before turning my attention to my mother.

"Is she dead?" I ask, surprised to discover I'm both horrified and hopeful.

"She still has a pulse. She's weak, but..." David shakes his head.

"What happened to her?" I stare at her neck. It looks like she's been ravaged by a wolverine. I turn back to the guy known as Mac Bhriain, my limbs quivering. "You're a vicious son of a bitch, you know that?" I want to punch him in the throat.

"Yes," he says, his vehemence matching mine. From the looks of him, he's probably dialing his back. "I know that full well. But I did *not* do this."

His gaze shimmers a hypnotic gold. I've never seen eyes like his.

"Well, then who did? I don't see anyone else here," I say, flinging my arms in the air.

"Storm Gruenauer."

My mouth falls open and my eyebrows rise. "That asshole! Where is he?" I scan the room, searching for him.

"He slipped out before you got here," this Mac Bhriain fellow says.

My eyes narrow into slits. I'm shaking with emotion mixed with confusion. "Right. Liar." My hands are on my

hips.

“We’ll find him,” David says. “We’ll get the bottom of this, I guarantee it. One of you will pay. No one harms guests at Hotel Paranormal.”

He gives Mac Bhriain a strange knowing look.

The male rolls his eyes.

“Coming here was the worst thing I’ve ever done!” I cry.

“I can say the same,” Mac Bhriain yells. He stalks in a circle, appearing like an animal in a cage. “We’re both in the same mind about Hotel Paranormal at the moment.”

When his arms go up, I cringe, shrinking back a little. His arms are huge, muscular, and powerful, nearly the size of trees.

“I’ll leave you two to sort this out,” David says. “I’m warning you.” He shakes his fingers at Mac Bhriain menacingly.

“You’re warning me, what, exactly? I saved her life.” He leans toward David, looking every bit his seven feet height.

This Mac Bhriain guy looks so intense when he’s mad, I’d listen to him if I were David. But no, the dwarf simply flashes Mac Bhriain a wink, then follows Max and slips from the room, appearing unconcerned. Maybe he’s good at masking his fear.

I turn to Mac Bhriain. “What’s going on here? That was fake, right? Fake blood and Hollywood make-up. Someone slipped my mom some Ambien, squirted catsup on her neck, and made you stand here, right?”

“I’m afraid not,” he says, scowling. “Your mother was most certainly ravaged.”

“And you would know since you did it.” I place my hands on my hips and glare at him. I’m liking expressing anger. It makes me feel rather powerful.

“I didn’t do it. That was the work of an amateur.”

“Oh, right, because you’re a big, bad killer.” When he doesn’t say anything, I shiver. “Are you a big, bad killer?”

His gaze flicks away from me. He crosses his arms over his massive chest and says, “I’m a lot of things.”

“Is being a killer one of them?”

He lets out a huffy sigh.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” I eye the blood spattering the marble floor. The pattern looks familiar. I crouch down to get a closer look. “That reminds me of something I did in my last semester at MassArt,” I say to the giant, like he’d actually care.

“What’s MassArt?”

“You don’t know what MassArt is?” I turn to look at his stunning face.

One of his huge shoulders rises and falls. “I’m not from around here. I’ve, um, traveled a bit but only for work.”

“Where are you from?”

“Not here.”

“Not Los Angeles? Me neither.”

His lips—those succulent lips that kissed me when I was in the throes of a Valium haze—press flat.

“So, I take it you’re not going to tell me.” I scoff. “Okay, then. Massachusetts College of Art and Design is a fantastic college of design in Massachusetts. You do know where Massachusetts is, right?”

“Of course I know where Massachusetts is.” He glowers, and his golden eyes shimmer like the sun.

“Your eyes are really something,” I say.

“Your eyes are exquisite,” he says, his tone gentling.

I’m disquieted by the abrupt change of his voice. And by the way he’s looking at me. It makes Walter’s lust for me seem like a school boy’s attraction. It makes quivers in my belly and between my legs. It stirs a longing in me

I've never experienced, which can't be good. Pappy always told me when an attraction was real, I'd know. I doubt he had this humongous, blue-bronze fellow in mind, though. I swiftly turn back to the crimson design on the floor.

I frame it with my fingers and study it. It's a nice pattern, even though it comes from the blood of Mama.

The last class I ever attended was a 3D Fine Arts course called simply, "Metals, Fibers and Other Materials." I fashioned hundreds of bronze and copper nails, heating the metal to liquid and pouring it into small molds. Dipped their hardened heads in ruby-red ink, giving them a translucent crimson brilliance when light shone on them. Then, after the materials had been created, I set to work on the design.

I purchased a series of soft, cut rubber printing blocks, each four feet by three feet. Spreading them on the floor, I carefully tapped small, soft nails into the blocks, following a design I'd drawn. I'd tap and the nail would bend. Tap and pound my thumb. Hammer away and the nail would fly, pinging on the floor somewhere I couldn't see.

Painstakingly difficult, I lost several nails until I got the tapping pressure just right. I worked on it day and night.

When I'd drag my exhausted body home, Noreen would chirp, "It's good to see you so focused. A river cuts through a rock, not because of its power, but because of its persistence." She might follow with, "Work hard, dream big, girlfriend!"

I'd roll my eyes at her, drag my ass into the bedroom, and fall in a heap on the bed. Then, I'd wake up the next day for more of the same.

When I'd finished the piece, attaching copper wire between each panel, my instructor, Mr. Mirschel, a wiry

man with stringy gray and brown hair, hustled into the workroom to look at it.

“Splendid, Annora! This is utterly splendid!” he said. “I’d like to feature it in the Up and Comer artists show in the spring. I think you have a real contender for the prize, a summer scholarship to an Italian art school.”

“Isn’t the Up and Comer show the place elder donors attend?” I said, mortified.

“It is. It’s a great opportunity, however.”

Getting away from the United States sounded wonderful. I’d be free of all the stares and whispers. But, as it turned out, Walter found out about the event. He staged a competing show for “radical” artists, called “Anti-Trends,” to be held in the building next door. All the cool kids and hipsters went to Walter’s show. When I walked past the Anti-Trends show to get to the Up and Comers, a gaggle of girls stood outside the radical art show building.

“Look. It’s that tall girl from Walt’s movie. His movie is *so* good. It’s *so* art noir. He’s going to go *so* far. He actually made her look pretty with the lighting he used. She looked like she was in pain when he made love to her. Can you believe it? With *him*? And look at her. She’s as pale as a ghost! Her skin...ugh...no one should be that pasty white.”

I turned right around and ran home. Packed my bags and left Boston, heading to Seattle to live with my murdering mother. I never knew if I won or not. I deleted any messages on my phone and all my mail landed in the trash. Only elderly, stuffy donors attended the Up and Comer art show, I heard later, as I suspected.

“What are you staring at so intently?”

“Huh?” The deep voice jostles me out of my mental meanderings.

Mac Bhriain crouches beside me.

“It’s only blood. Does it disturb you?” he says gently, without judgment or reproach. He pushes a long lock of hair out of my face.

I shiver and pull away. “I’m, um...no. I wasn’t looking at it. Not really. Merely seeing something that reminded me of a design I once did at that college I mentioned, like I said...MassArt. I thought I’d win a ticket out of this country. Instead, I ended up back with *her*.” I stab my finger at the spatters.

“Why did you want to leave?”

I turn my head to look at him.

Can I trust him with my story? Would he even care?

“I, um...I had sex with a man. He videoed it without telling me, then it went viral all over the Internet. I’m a porn star,” I say, giving a sheepish shrug.

He lets out a laugh.

My face burns with heat. I like being laughed at less than being whispered about and pointed at. “What’s so funny? It ruined my life.”

“Then, I’m a porn star, too. And I wouldn’t say it ruined mine, it simply made things more difficult here.”

“Difficult in this hotel? I don’t understand.” My face crumples in confusion.

He reaches out his hand and tugs me to my feet.

I let go of his warm palm and brush my hands together to get the floor dust off. “This place has rules. I got caught doing something that isn’t allowed here. Having sex with one of the staff.”

“I see. How does that make you a porn star?”

“The hotel decided to film it without my knowledge. It ended up on one of the channels in guests’ rooms. I heard it stirred quite a bit of controversy. And I got in trouble. I’m lucky to be allowed back.”

“How did that make you feel?” I say, curious. “Betrayed?”

He scoffs. “Not in the least. I’m pissed my actions are restricted here, but I did know the rules before I broke them. I’m not a rule-following kind of male.” He beams at me, and his teeth flash brilliant bright against his glistening bronze skin. “Here, let me show you.”

And without preamble, without any warning, he lowers his lips, those sensuous, luscious lips, and draws me into the most intoxicating kiss I’ve ever experienced. For one, long sweet moment I yield to the kiss. I yield to the hunger inside my soul that says, yes, please, more. My insides liquefy..

But then I remember he’s a man, and men betray. They have affairs and they leave you without notice and they video you without your consent and even think it’s cool to be filmed in coitus. I may not be as big as him, but I bite his lips and shove him hard.

He stumbles back, confusion and hurt all over his drop-dead gorgeous face. “What the...?” He wipes the blood from his lips. “You little... This is a complete mistake. What was I thinking? I can’t be with you. Fucking human.”

“Yeah? Well, I don’t want to be with you. Stupid giant.”

“Good because we’re done. I’m done.”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” he says. He storms toward the door, his hand extended to fling it open. But then, an actual wind begins blowing through the atrium, and the giant appears to melt into some shadowy essence.

“No, no, no,” he yells. “Not again! God damned opiates!”

I scream as this apparition, or whatever it is, wisps and curls through the mirror, like smoke, and disappears from sight.

CHAPTER 17

MAC BURIAIN

This is getting old. I'm back behind the mirror...again, in the secret corridors. Thanks to the drug in my system, I have no god-damned control of my body or shadow spirit whatsoever.

"Fuck!" I yell. Once more, I pound the mirror with my fists, noting the faint blue glow outlining my pyrrhous skin. When that blue glow's gone and the opiate has left my bloodstream, so am I. Away from here. Away from Hotel Paranormal.

"Give me a fucking break. Fucking humans and their fucking complex emotions. We're so out of here, hell horse, get ready. We're going. I don't care who's waiting for us."

Min clatters about on the mahogany in assent.

"So go! Let's do this!"

Min stiffly rears back and his front hooves bang on the wood. He loses his footing and falls to his side.

"What are you doing? Let's go!"

His prone body shakes, vibrating in a circle like a bee, but he can't right himself.

"Okay, I'll initiate our departure. Ready?"

He lets out a puff of fire.

I try to assume my shadowy self. Nothing. I remain caught in this fucking, unfulfilled, narcotic-infused body. I still lack control of my abilities, thanks to Auntie Em.

Min blows steam from his nostrils.

"Oh, you think this is hilarious. Well, look who's still

trapped in a toy. I'll head out first and send for you later."

His metallic body glows. Smoke curls from the wood.

"Calm down, calm down. You know I can't go without you. We're a team!"

I bash my forehead against the looking glass. The pain calms me somewhat. The blood dripping down my face brings a bit of joy. This is where I live. In a world of delightful pain and tragedy. Doing things better left unsaid.

I'm ready to slump to the floor again in defeat over this whole "getting my needs met with a human," when the door opens and Mrs. Lachman's daughter drags her feet into the room. She makes her way to the bed and plops on it, apparently in as bad a mood as I am. She turns her beautiful face in my direction.

"This sucks," she says.

"I agree," I say to my image, shimmering between me and her.

"That was some special effect back there. This place is a hoot. For a second, I thought he turned into a shadow and got sucked into the mirror."

This woman's refusal to acknowledge what's right before her eyes is unreal. It makes me shake my head, perplexed.

You saw me turn into a shadow and disappear.

She swings her legs from the bed and stands. Hands on her hips, she glares at the mirror. "Or did he? Is he a...?" She shakes her head. "No. I'm having Valium hallucinations." She studies her reflection, a sad, wistful expression on her face. "I'm not that bad looking."

No, you're beautiful.

I place my palms against the mirror, wishing I could touch her...tease her...fuck her agony and pain, sending it straight to hell and us right to bliss. That wretched place

in my chest aches.

She squints and wrinkles up her nose. “Are you back there? Do they let you wander around behind rooms, like a creeper? Are you, like, part of the entertainment crew?” She chuckles, then tilts her head back and forth, regarding her face. “I let everyone around me influence the way I feel about myself, but, honestly, I’m not horrible to look at. A little tall, but...” She cocks her head and purses her lips. “Mama’s the worst. She’s always harping on me about how I dress. ‘You’re slumping,’ ‘stand up,’ ‘wear better clothes.’ But now she might be dead. I should probably kiss you right now, in thanks.” She laughs and places her palms against the glass. “See how bad I am, wishing my mother dead?”

No. I don’t see at all.

I lower hands until they match hers. Flames lick my fingers at the connection.

She jerks and starts to pull away, then catches herself, letting her hands relax into the connection. “It’s only a mirror. You’re not back there, right? I’m merely talking to myself.” Her eyes are brilliant and clear, like a vista of violet-blue, cloudless skies. “But, if you are...thank you,” she says simply. “I guess.”

My fucking chest seems to throb.

“Here’s that kiss.” She leans forward and places her luscious lips against the smooth, hard surface.

There’s an inch or less between us. I lower my face, letting my mouth land on my side of the cool mirror, directly opposite hers. Lightning sparks from my lips toward hers.

Her mouth parts slightly, still pressed against the looking glass. She stays silent, unmoving, breathing against the barrier that separates us.

Little does she know, she’s breathing into me. Each time she exhales, searing fire dances along my tongue and

enters my throat. My cock engorges, stiff and ready... for her. There's a slow, steady *pump, pump, pump* driving the opiate-laced blood through my veins. Pleasure surges. I rock my hips into the temperate silicate.

The delicate tip of her tongue touches the mirror and moves in a slow circle, like an exploration.

I match mine to hers. The effect is ecstatic. Electric bliss cascades through my opiated blood vessels.

She remains pressed against the glass for one long moment of torment, driving me crazy with desire. Then, she slowly backs away. She stares at her reflection, breathing hard, wonder and fear dancing in her eyes.

"I feel so...I..." She swallows. Her tongue flicks along her mouth. She bites her lips. Then, she makes her way to the bed. "Be a gentleman and don't watch me, okay?" she says, her back to me.

I'm no gentleman and there's no way I'm not going to watch. I'm mesmerized. Rock hard. Wanting. Trapped outside the room of the beautiful woman I only know as Mrs. Lachman's daughter. A ravenous voyeur.

She slowly lifts the dress over her head, revealing her long, porcelain back, somewhat obscured by her mane of silky black hair. A gossamer scrap of fabric cups her ass, the same way I'd like to.

I softly stroke the mirror with my fingertips, making slow, small circles, wishing I was touching her. I swallow, hard.

She folds the dress, taking her time, smoothing her handiwork and placing it at the end of the bed. She remains stock still for a few seconds, keeping her beautiful back to me, as if considering her next move. Her gaze turns to Min. Her hands fly to her breasts protectively.

"You can't watch either." She picks him up, causing electricity to surge through my loins. She stares at him

with narrowed eyes. “You’re not his, are you? You two wouldn’t be in cahoots, would you?” She cocks her head and studies him. Finally, she says, “Nah. Couldn’t be.”

I groan in a whisper, not wanting to frighten her.

She positions him so his eyes point at me. Her arms seek her breasts once more, one hand crossed over the other like armor.

Min huffs.

What does she think? I like to watch humans?

His thoughts ring loud and clear in my mind.

Shut up. Keep your commentary to yourself, I mentally hiss. No distractions, got it?

He answers with a snort of flame. The wood turns brown, scorched by his sign of protest.

Her head whips around. She spies the darkened wood and sniffs the air. “What the...? This place...” She shakes her head. Her arms relax, melting against her skin in a caress.

I can’t see what you’re doing, woman! Let me see!

Whatever it is, it seems to make her feel good because her head tips back a little, making her hair appear like a black waterfall. One arm remains wrapped around her breasts. The other drops lower, to belly level.

I grab my cock and stroke.

Her hand drops lower still.

Sweet fucking mercy.

That hand is between her legs.

She widens her stance and rocks.

“My goodness,” she says. “I’m so...this is...”

I’m so turned on by her, I could come in a second.

Her fingers appear to move frantically between her legs. She reaches her free hand out to steady herself, smacking Min as she fumbles for the table.

My horse falls to his side, silently shrieking at me.

She clutches him, grinding his body into the wood.

“Oh, fuck, oh, fuck,” I moan. Fire shoots through my body. I begin to vibrate. I’m going to come...strike that...*we’re* going to come in milliseconds.

Mrs. Lachman’s daughter...you’re destroying me.

Her pace quickens.

My movement matches hers.

And then, without warning, she snatches her hand from between her legs and drops to her knees on the wood floor.

My palm flies from my cock, bashing against the mirror. I grind my teeth together in agony, then throw back my head and howl.

“I can’t do this,” she sobs. “It’s a sin. I always pay for my sins. That’s what Mama says.”

Humans and their ridiculous judgments.

The only sin she’s experiencing at the moment is not completing this beautiful act of communion. I join her, falling to my knees, panting, bashing my head against the wall in utter frustration.

“Min!” I bellow. “This ends now!”

But then she begins to cry.

CHAPTER 18

ANNORA

I haven't cried since before Pappy died. Now I can't seem to stop. Not only that, but I *almost* made myself orgasm. I *almost* let go into some wonderful and unusual new kind of pleasure. Oh, sure, I gave myself an orgasm before, furtively, in my bedroom, when no one else was about. But not like this. My body seems like a lit fuse since I started emoting. Everything seems raw and vulnerable and...*wrong*.

Knock, knock, knock.

I jerk. Who could be at my door? David, with food? I haven't eaten for hours. A report on Mama? I don't want anyone to see me crying. Or, half-naked. I grab my dress and throw it over my head, smoothing it into place before I open the door.

Whoa.

The tall guy. Death. My animus. My mother's attacker. Whoever he is, he now stands in the dingy hallway. Only...I poke my head out and look around for a second. The hallway is lit by the same sconces as the rest of the hotel. A lush, burgundy and gold carpet now lines the previously unfinished wood floor. I blink non-stop for a few seconds. How could this have happened since I entered my room a short time ago?

"Ahem. Ms. Lachman?"

His voice emerges like velvet, drawing me out of my confusion. My eyes linger on his massive, muscular chest. "What's that red glow on your chest? Another

special effect?”

He glances down. “Fuck.” Alarm flashes across his face. “Forgive my coarse language. Yes. That’s it. It’s a special effect.”

He’s wearing those same shimmering pants. Bare feet. His long, lustrous hair is pushed back from his face.

I turn to face his golden gaze. “What are you doing out here dressed in pajamas?”

“I, uh...I don’t quite know. Waiting for an invitation to enter, I suppose.”

“You don’t know why you’re standing in front of my hotel room?”

A swirl of emotions seems to cross his face. Something like confusion, bewilderment, amusement...followed by searing lust, if the strange sensation in my lower body can be trusted.

His gaze enters me, beseeching me to do...what, exactly?

I force a glower. “So, what do you want? Am I next on your hit list?”

“I didn’t attack your mother.” His blue-bronze face grows even darker.

“Right. Storm. The guy who wasn’t anywhere in the room. He did it.”

“I told you, he disappeared.”

“Uh huh. Like I believe you.”

He scowls and turns to leave.

“Wait!” I grab his arm. The guy’s rocking some serious heat. It almost makes me pull away. Instead, my hand lingers and I stare at it.

He stares, too, as if perplexed.

A curious connection seems to form between us. It’s as if my skin is fusing to his. An erotic sensation crawls sensuously up my arm and begins to roll along my shoulder, like smoke curling through air. I pluck my hand

away, my cheeks heating to steaming.

Uncharacteristically bold, I say, "Um. Would you like to come in?"

I move out of the doorway and sweep my arm toward my room...which now has a window. For a moment, I'm transported back in time, to a place where nothing existed but me, Pappy and the innocence of childhood.

I rush to the window and stare, my eyes so wide I fear my eyeballs will pop out and roll around like marbles. "What the...where did this...I don't..."

A view of a beautiful flower garden bathed in a sunset, just like the one Pappy and I planted and tended, appears below. Butterflies dance from flower to flower. Birds sing.

Tears flood my eyes, spilling over in a gush. "I *hate* this hotel. It reminds me of all the awful things that ever happened to me."

"That's hardly what I'd call awful."

Heat radiates into my back. Mac Bhariain is standing way too close.

I'm torn between shrinking away from his warmth or backing closer to his skin, so I choose to stare outside. "It doesn't exist anymore! It died when my Pappy died! That was the last time I was ever happy!"

"Shh. Happiness is over-rated," he murmurs.

"What are you talking about? No, it isn't."

"Of course. My apologies. It does exist. Both the garden and your happiness. It lives right here," he says, touching my head. "It lives inside your mind."

"Apparently it lives outside this window. You know, the window that didn't exist five minutes ago." I'm so confused. I shake my head back and forth like a weather-vane.

Two strong arms wrap around my collarbones, crushing me against his chest, his belly and his...his...his

extremely rigid erection. I stiffen.

“Easy,” he soothes. “I won’t do anything without your permission.”

Walter did. He did everything without my permission.

I sob, covering my face with my hands. “You can’t see me like this.”

“Like what?” he asks tenderly.

“Like *this*. Crying. Angry to be crying. I’m a mess of uncontrolled misery.”

“You’re a beautiful mess of rage and sorrow. Your expression of pain is beautiful.” He kisses the top of my head, while his hips gently rock into me.

“You’re an odd man,” I say, wracked with heartache.

“And you’re a beautiful woman, whose agony is exquisite.”

Is this guy for real? Most guys don’t appreciate a woman’s emotion. Mama drilled that into me after Pappy died. Walter ground it into me, literally, with his dredging tool of a penis. When I protested and told him it hurt, he pushed his palm against my mouth and told me to shut up and be quiet...he swore what we were doing was art and I was apparently sullyng his art with my emotions.

“You can’t mean that,” I wail, unable to repress myself. There’s too much pain to stuff away anymore.

“I can, and I do. Give me all your pain—and I mean all of it. Give me your rage, your regret, your sorrow.” He actually shudders.

“No!”

“Look at me.”

“No!” I grab the windowsill, wishing I could fly into the garden below.

“*Look* at me!”

He spins me around, but my hands fly to my face as if attached to my cheeks by strings.

“Stop it! Stop staring at me! I’m a horrible mess!” I want to run. I want to hide. I want to squash all these sensations running through me.

He pries my hands from my face. “Why do you want me to stop?” His thumbs brush away my tears.

“Because you’re seeing me feel. Because you’re seeing me imperfect. Because...because, you’re a *man* and men don’t like emotions and men betray.”

“Shh,” he soothes again. “Men betray. Women betray. Some people are dead inside and can’t allow others to express their emotions, if they can’t do it themselves. It’s what people do. Don’t let it stop your beauty from being revealed.”

My forehead furrows. “What are you talking about? Aren’t you supposed to tell me to shut up? Aren’t you supposed to assure me people are good and kind and I’ve merely chosen the wrong kind of man?”

“Some people are good and kind, I guess.” He lets out a deep, low chuckle. “How long have you been alive?”

“Long enough to know no one’s to be trusted.”

“So trust yourself. Shouldn’t you be able to do that much?”

“I...I guess so. But I can’t seem to stop crying,” I say, as a fresh wave of tears assaults my eyes.

“So keep crying. I won’t stop you.”

I lean against his solid chest and sob, while he sways us to and fro. My tears land on his skin and turn to sizzling steam until it’s a virtual sauna in here.

“You’ve got some crazy kind of metabolism,” I mumble.

“I do.”

“You might want to get that checked. Could be a thyroid condition.”

“Could be.” He lets out a low rumbling laugh that

vibrates against my cheek.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Now what? I can’t let anyone else see me like this.”
I wipe at my sodden cheeks.

“You go freshen up in the bathroom. I’ll get it,” he says, suspicion evident on his handsome face as he eyes the door.

I shuffle into the bathroom and grab one of the soft washcloths from the shelf. Clutching the polished brass faucet handle, I twist the water on to a slow trickle, keeping the door ajar so I can hear.

“Selena,” Mac Bhriain says, in his deep, velvety voice.

“Mac Bhriain,” a female answers.

I peek through the crack in the door to see a drop-dead gorgeous woman. Her hair, as black as mine, is piled atop her head and sprinkled with gemstones. She wears a long, satiny emerald green gown with a slit up the side. Her feet are adorned with sparkly heels. A chain surrounds her slender ankle. It glints with the same gems as in her hair.

I knew my little sun dress wasn’t good enough for this place.

“Aren’t you supposed to be tending bar?” Mac Bhriain says.

“I came to check on you. David told me you’d be here.”

“Did he now?” Mac Bhriain mumbles. He leans out the door and appears to look up and down the hallway. “Where is he?” he says.

“He has other things to do besides tend to your needs.” She lets out a light laugh.

“You’re looking well. How nice to see you at our fine hotel again.” She speaks with sophistication and grace.

“Uh...thank you. Seriously, thank you.” He glances

toward the bathroom and back to Selena.

Yeah, I see you. Is she one of your conquests? Is she the one you made a movie with?

“We’ve prepared a private table for you in the dining area, as you requested.”

“Uh...I did?”

She lets out a lovely, tinkling laugh. “Why, yes, don’t you remember? You were rather discombobulated when you arrived.”

“You could say that. I don’t exactly have any clothes to dine in.” He gestures toward his shimmering pants.

“Oh, you,” she says. “David will bring your clothes to your room.”

“I have a room?”

Wow, he seems as clueless about this place as I do.

He steps out into the hall, following the woman, and closes the door behind him.

I fill the clean white basin with water and wash my face. After drying, I peer at myself in the small mirror over the sink. My eyes are a little puffy, but I actually look surprisingly good. There’s an absence of harsh lines and rigidity on my face. And, if I think about it, I feel much lighter inside. Maybe crying isn’t as bad as I thought.

When I step back into the room, I stare, stunned. An elegant indigo blue gown has been draped on the bed. High heels are placed on the floor. Jewelry rests in a small box next to the dress. A card sits next to the exquisite necklace and earrings.

I reach out to pick it up with a trembling hand. Someone with a fine hand has written, *Ms. Lachman. Please do me the honor of joining me for dinner. I shall pick you up at eight. Yours, Mac Bhriain McCarrion.*

“McCarrion? That’s a curious last name.” Hands on my hips, I study the gown. Then I stare at the card. I

contemplate my options, hoping I still have some Valium.

I glance at the tiny metal horse, still facing the wall, then step toward him.

“You can look now,” I say to the metallic stallion. “It seems I’ve got a date. Perhaps, my date and I can plan our next murder together. You know, evil consorting with evil.” I roll my eyes and saunter toward the bathroom. A shower might be the answer to my confusion. “And no more Valium, Annora. You need to get your hallucinations under control.”

CHAPTER 19

MAC BURIAIN

I don't date. *Ever*. I tell this to Selena as she guides me to my "room." More like a closet than a room, down the hall from Ms. Lachman.

I stand in the doorway, surveying the small suite. A twin bed, of all things, sits in the middle of decently appointed surroundings.

"What, that's to be my bed? It's a shoe box," I grumble.

"Would you rather continue to stay in the secret corridors?"

"No," I grouse, and shake my head. This place is sort of like one of those hotels residents of Earth favor, like the Marriott. I *never* stay at a hotel as tawdry as the Marriott.

"It will get better. You're coming along nicely. You'll have the luxury to which you are accustomed before you know it." She pats my cheek.

"What do I have to do to get said luxury? I'm going out of my mind. It's like being stuck in a pinball game."

"You'll figure it out."

"What, this is some kind of guessing game? I hate games."

Her hand swishes through the air. "You know how the hotel gets?"

"The hotel is like a cranky old man sometimes."

"It can hear you, you know. I'd assume a little bit of humility if I were you."

“I know, I know. I’m sorry,” I say to the walls. “Please forgive me.”

The walls vibrate and shudder, causing flakes of plaster to shake from the ceiling.

“I said I’m sorry. I never offend you on purpose,” I grumble. “If I do, it’s because of who I am.”

Apparently, the hotel is satisfied, as the entire room seems to settle in a sigh.

“I had to *beg* it to let you back in.” Her hands land on her hips and her lips purse.

“Thank you. Thank you for interceding on my behalf. But I’m getting a little tired of being a voyeur.” I glance sidelong at the wallpaper. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“I can imagine.” She looks at me approvingly. “A big stud like you not getting your way with women.” She rolls her eyes. “How tragic.”

“So, what, exactly, am I to do on this so-called date?”

“Escort Annora to the dining room. The statues will point the way.” She brushes unseen lint off the fine dinner jacket hanging in the closet.

“Annora? Her name is Annora?” Uttering her names sends chills through me.

“Yes. She’s part of your destiny.”

“I don’t believe in destiny any more than I believe in fate. You know that. David knows that. Why keep trying to shove it on me?”

“She believes. That’s all that’s important.”

“What, I’m dispensable? A mere pawn to whatever game I’m playing?”

“Not in the least. You’re essential. Now, why don’t you relax? I think you’ll appreciate this.” She sweeps into the room and opens a panel in the wall, revealing a fully loaded bar and Cuban cigars. My dick gets hard.

“I don’t know, Selena. I’m already humming with a narcotic.”

She lets out her beautiful, musical laugh. “Don’t be coy, dark specter. Your appreciation is evident.” Her eyes drop to the bulge in my pants.

“Yes,” I say, swallowing hard. Forgetting about getting out of this hotel, I eye the vices, wondering which I should partake first.

“Here, allow me.” She reaches for a decanter of amber liquid and pours some into a crystal glass. She adds a splash into her glass, hands me mine, and lifts hers in front of her face. “Here’s to evolution.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Even a demon can grow,” she says, mirth in her eyes.

“Uh-huh,” I say, lifting the glass to my lips. The smoky scotch that fills my mouth is exquisite. One thing I love about planet Earth is the scotch they produce. As the fiery liquid burns a pathway down my throat, I’m reminded of eons of pleasure, all begun with a sip of this fine liquid. Indulgence. Sin. Partaking of substance. It grounds me in this body. It pushes me to find pleasure and then some. Thinking of Annora, my cock grows as stiff as if I’ve never fucked in my life and a roomful of virgins awaits me.

And then, a wave of narcotic languor pushes through my body.

Oh, hell, yeah.

Some of the morphine’s kicked loose in my system. Nice. The combined effect of the alcohol and drugs I took earlier is...fucked.

Now I’m going to be more erratic than ever. Why did I think this a good idea, jackass?

“Why don’t you,” Selena coos, “make your way onto the balcony and relax until it’s time to prepare for your date?”

“I have a balcony?”

“Yes.” She steps across the room and, as she does so, double French doors shimmer into sight. She opens them with a flourish and moves aside for me.

“Nice.” Unlike Mrs. Lachman’s daughter, nothing this place does surprises me. I swagger onto the balcony and settle into a large leather chair, the perfect size for my largess. A starlit sky hangs above me, like a swath of possibility.

“Be right back,” Selena says.

When she returns, she extends one of the Cubans, now lit.

My eyes glow, causing soft gold light to reflect on the cigar.

Fuck me but I’m an addict to pleasure.

I puff, and now, between the scotch, the cigar, the thought of Annora, the god-damned Auntie Em still humming in my system, I’m beyond hard. I could come right here, right now, but I know I won’t be satisfied until I’m inside Annora.

Selena laughs, as if in on my good mood. She sips her scotch, looking at me mischievously. “You’re thinking of her, aren’t you? Her name means grace, in Hebrew and honor, in English, by the way. Treat her thusly and, well...” Her musical laugh fills the air.

I glance at her with suspicion. “I don’t do grace. I *honor* my contracts when I have a job. That’s it. What, exactly, are you getting at?”

“Oh, my shadow specter friend. I’ve known you for a long, long time. This is going to be good.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. I don’t like her knowing something I don’t know. “And what’s the point of the date? You know I don’t do mating rituals. If I want a female, I simply indicate my desires and we do them.”

“Have you indicated your desires with feeling?”

I groan. “Oh, here we go with the feelings talk. What

is it with you females? You know what I am, right? I'm a *demon*," I growl through gritted teeth. "I do what others consider evil. Reprehensible deeds are my forte. I feel things, all right, but they're not what you'd call soft and fuzzy. I like pain. Misery. Agony."

"Think of this as atonement, then. Consider it however you like." She saunters to where I sit, puts one arm on the armrests on either side of me, and looks me dead in the eye.

Her two perfect scoops of creamy deliciousness dangle like suckable globes, inches from my chest. I know if I even breathe on her perfection, I'll be sucked from this hotel like debris.

"However you consider it, ponder this--if your actions don't meet with the approval of the hotel, you're *never, ever, not in a million years* coming here again. All my pleading will have gone to waste. I'll be pissed, and I'll find ways to let you know my displeasure. And, you'll be immediately discharged into the venomous web of Diomedea and her sister, Aurkene. Understood?"

"Understood," I mutter. I picture that unpleasant scenario and consider my so-called date. Puff thoughtfully on this fine cigar before sipping the scotch. All of which lets me know the choice is obvious. I want to score with Annora Lachman. I want to devour her sweet pain. I want to plow into her agony until she begs me to keep going.

"So, we've made our decision?" Selena asks, plucking my thoughts from wherever she plucks thoughts.

"Yes," I say with a glower.

She stands, removing her untouchable temptation. "Then, please, enjoy the view. Take notes. You might need them." With a wave of her hand, the scene below me comes into focus, as if candles are being softly lit

throughout. Then she drifts from the balcony, out of sight.

Below me, couples tease and taunt. They whisper in one another's ear. Their eyes linger on luscious body parts. They nibble and kiss. They engage in all manner of this ritual humans seem to adore. The one vampires, angels, succubus, skinwalkers, and fae seem to have mastered--the art of seduction. And, one by one, they take the hand or tails or tendrils of their intended, and make their way to rooms more fitting to what they have in mind.

I scoff and shake my head. It seems pointless. It seems stupid. It all seems...

Selena pokes her lovely head through the doorway. "And you might want to think about how you know the Lachmans. It might have bearing on how this whole thing plays out."

CHAPTER 20

ANNORA

I'm going on a date.

Me? A date? I stare at my unrecognizable appearance in the mirror. *Who is this person staring back at me? And why is she even considering going out?*

The dress fits perfectly, making me look decent, if not a little bit pretty...for this evening I'm ambivalent about.

My first and last date with Walter ended in disaster. Then, back at home, licking my wounds in Seattle, I signed onto Once Burned, a dating site for the disillusioned. I'd been moping for months and Dr. Prozac said maybe if I went out more, I'd snap out of my funk. He said the word "funk" as if it were a zit that needed the right amount of pressure and "Sha-zam!" I'd be cured. I think he secretly wanted to get rid of me. He had a high success rate, and I didn't add to his accomplishments.

On Once Burned, I met Haden Hanselman. We chatted for a bit online, and I kept my identity a secret. He got me to crack a few smiles, so I got up the courage to talk on the phone. When we actually spoke on the phone, he joked around with me, eliciting a rare laugh from my lips, so I thought it fitting to meet. I chose a very public coffee shop near Pike's Place Market so if he tried anything, I'd have lots of witnesses.

Seeing him in person, he looked exactly like his profile photo, which seemed to be a good sign. With his blond hair and bronze skin, he was cute if you like

California surfer types. I can't stand surfer types. Too much fresh air and sunshine leads to rosy burns. I prefer to keep things pale.

When I met him, his eyebrows launched skyward. I kept wanting to put my hand on his forehead to keep them from floating free.

"Dude, you look familiar," he said to me.

He actually called me dude.

"I probably look like someone. We've never met," I said. "I'm certain."

"No. I *know* you." He kept snapping his fingers, as if it would shake his memory free.

Just as we were seated, he snapped his fingers again. "I've got it! Dude! You're the chick in that Walt Gresham artsy porn flick that went viral on YouStream and then on SxSoup. Man, was that *hot*. I loved the way Walt added commentary and instruction and numbers and shit on each new move. Me and my crew had a few circle jerks to that flick."

My face wrinkled in disgust while my cheeks burned with red-hot shame. "Ew. What is that? Like playing 'caveman beast penis?' I thought only pre-teens did that in their dreams. That's disgusting."

Undaunted, he said, "Show me position number twenty-five when we're done eating, cool? That position looked hot. Oh, this is so cool," he continued, oblivious to my horrified face. "Wait until I tell Mica. Here...let's take a selfie so I can post it to Twitter." He fumbled for his phone, but I was so out of there.

I mumbled something about going to the bathroom but actually I ran, a sob jammed in my throat like a stuffed sock. I don't think that sob got free until today.

Tonight, I sure don't want a repeat performance. I wonder if I should bail. Plead a migraine or an upset stomach. I pace back and forth in my room, feeling like

the stallion's eyes track my every move.

At seven-fifty, footsteps sound in the hall. They stop. I wait for a knock on the door but none comes. I press my ear to the door, listening, eyes glued to the simple clock on the wall. At the instant the second hand sweeps past the eight, a knock blasts in my ear, startling me. My hand shakes when I reach for the door knob.

"Hi," I say, a little too brightly.

"Hi," Mac Bhriain says, in his deep rumbling voice. "You look beautiful." His eyes leisurely track my gown-clad body. My tummy twists.

"Thank you. You look good, also," I say, noting the perfect fit of his charcoal gray suit. He smells fantastic, like shower, cigar, and Pappy's jug juice. Instantly, I long for simpler times. For childhood sweetness and happiness with my dad. For something, anything, other than the misery I've wallowed in for all these years.

"Thank you," he says, his tongue flicking along his upper lip.

I chew on mine, biting them into submission. His rich, warm skin still sparkles with blue. I don't know how he does it, but it's actually kind of exotic looking.

"Ready?" he says, proffering his elbow.

We saunter along the instantly remodeled hallway, heading toward the rickety elevator.

The one that's been replaced with a sleek gold and silver elevator.

My head jerks and my eyelids once again threaten to eject my eyeballs, shooting them onto the floor. I turn my head to look toward my room. Maybe I should dash back and try to scrape some Valium off the floor. Lap it up with my tongue.

"Something amiss?" Mac Bhriain says.

"Wow. I don't get it. Earlier today, this was a pile of nuts and rust. This place has some crazy methods of

construction. I...maybe I should...I don't know if I..." My head whips back and forth. This place is bewildering.

"Yes," he says. He positions his fingers on my chin and guides my fearful face in his direction. "This place does have some crazy methods. Of everything. Don't let it bother you."

"But it's not normal. It's freakishly strange."

"Maybe it's you, love."

"What?" When he says the word *love*, it snakes into my chest like his hand just crawled right in there. Crawls in and begins to massage, loosening the tissues and ligaments that keep mine so tightly bound. "Right."

His hand strokes my hair.

"Could be. Could be you're *evolving*." His lips press tight like the word "evolving" took some effort to get out.

My eyes narrow. I survey the hall, this elevator, and this shiny, perfectly fitting dress.

"Could be." I let out a sigh, too weary to freak out for long. "Anyway...I'm starving."

"Me, too."

My wild-eyed gaze flies to his face. All kinds of meaning can be heard in that simple statement.

He licks his lips and swallows. His irises are so dilated, his golden eyes are nearly black. His lips part. He tips my chin up, and says, "Forgive me for fast-tracking the ritual," and lowers his mouth to mine.

As we kiss, I'm slammed with sensation. It's so strong it frightens me. We don't need to take off any clothes because it feels like he's already entered me and I've already given permission to be entered. My core throbs with desire. This is what Noreen used to call mouth fucking.

"Some guys," she'd say with a sneer. "Will want to *mouth fuck* you, girly girl. Uhh, I hate to say that word. Even the word is evil. Walt tried that with me, and I bit

his tongue. That's the devil trying to sign you up. Don't let the devil have his way with you."

I realize she didn't know what she was talking about. Throw me the pen. Where do I sign? The devil is not only welcome in my mouth, I'm preparing him a bed in the center of the house. He can assume a place of residence here.

When Mac Bhriain finally pulls free, we're both breathless. Panting. Longing for more. The elevator door opens at that moment, like it's been waiting for us to stop kissing.

"Should we tell it to go away?" I say, pretending it's alive.

Mac Bhriain gives me a tormented look. "I'd like nothing more but...we have to follow the ritual."

"The what?"

He shakes his head. "Never mind."

My eyes drop to the front of Mac Bhriain's tailored pants. If Walter possessed a fracking tool, I have no idea what to call Mac Bhriain's. An excavator, perhaps. It's ginormous. I can even see it pulse with excitement. This guy wants me. He *wants* to enter me. It looks to be as much as I want to be entered. This is nuts. It's wrong. Nothing good can come of so much desire.

"A meal awaits us," he says. "There will be plenty of time for what I have in mind for dessert." He sweeps his hand toward the elegant lift.

I step inside, comprehension beginning to allow, in this place, this Hotel Paranormal, anything can happen and anything is possible. Maybe I should let go a little and see what fate has in store.

CHAPTER 21

MAC BHRIAIN

Mating rituals suck. This whole thing makes me extremely uncomfortable, incredibly ill at ease. Me, the demon. Older than the wood, stone, marble, and metal used to make this place. *Fuck*. As I look at Annora, across the table from me in this elegant, private dining room, I want to pounce, literally, on her splendid body. Have my way with her. Not play a silly game to get to the gold.

“Mac Bhriain.”

Her lovely voice pops my sour mood bubble.

“Excuse me?” Maybe I shouldn’t have had that scotch. Or that cigar. I mean, come on. Me, lost in thought?

Fucking Auntie Em.

“I asked you what you do for a living,” she says. “Besides killing people.”

She gives me the most innocent, inviting smile I’ve ever seen.

Fuck me. What the hell is happening to me?

I actually want her to like me. I want to impress her. Since when is who I am not enough for any female? I seem to have contracted something on planet Earth. Some strange mutant virus. An illness of some kind.

“I’m waiting for an answer. Don’t want to tell me?” She bats her eyes sweetly. “Make something up.”

“I’m a consultant,” I say.

Sure, I’m consulted with to determine what level of torture to apply to the victim.

I smile.

“Uhhuh,” she says. She arranges her silverware before moving her crystal wine glass, squinting at it until satisfied. Straightens her plate.

I have watched staff at the palace of King James II of Scotland arrange place settings in a similar manner while I waited to end him. I sifted through the palace as a shadow, surveying my post-assignment fucking options. I kind of had my eye on his wife, Mary of Guelders.

The help, wearing starched and pressed attire, meticulously measured and arranged, using rulers and pieces of string and blocks of wood. Everyone who passed by the dining area nodded their heads, certain that through the act of ordering cutlery and plates, all was well in their world.

Meanwhile, the world around them was in utter chaos. Wars were constant. Famine and the Black Death had killed entire cities. Peasant uprisings, fueled by hunger, disease, and the demands of feudal lords happened with regularity. Citizens fucked to forget and died from their folly, from having contracted syphilis. People *expected* to die. They *struggled* to live. As I’m sitting across from this gorgeous young woman, I find I want her to learn how to live. I’ll do *anything* to make it so.

The walls give a small shiver, like shaking into position. Inwardly, I groan.

Did they just hear my thoughts?

No doubt. I’m in trouble.

I sink back into thought. In old Europe, I was often hired to kill, torture, or haunt and my actions would turn into local mythology because who can explain a shadow specter rolling into town? My kills would be credited to people like Abel Goodwin. “You never could trust that man. He’s a dark one.” Or merely ascribed to Satan. And

yet, the people clung to customs and rituals, like ordering fucking silverware or sweeping the dirt in front of the door.

That particular assignment was an easy gig. The Brits claimed Roxburgh Castle during the War of Roses. King James II wanted it back. Brits said “no go” and hired me. Historians wrote, “The king stood near a piece of artillery. His thigh bone was dug in two with a piece of misframed gun. He was stricken to the ground and died hastily.” I actually reached my shadowy fingers into his thigh and tugged, until I’d snapped the bone like a bloody twig. Then, I threw his writhing body to the ground. *Wham!* Insta-death. I got paid a lot of gold.

“This is going well,” Annora says. “I love being listened to and heard.”

“What?” I swallow, regarding her double vanilla ice cream scoops of deliciousness peeking out from her gown. Creamy skin that begs to be licked, sucked, and caressed.

Can we please cut to the chase?

“You’re not listening to me. Love that.” She rolls her pretty eyes.

“I’m sorry. This isn’t natural for me.”

“What isn’t? Sitting with someone without thoughts of murdering her?” Again, the lovely smile appears on her face.

A laugh escapes my throat. “You’re a very interesting woman, Annora.”

“How do you know my name?” Her eyebrows stitch together.

“Selena informed me.”

“I see,” she says, pressing her luscious lips into a prim little slit.

I could soften that slit in a heartbeat if I didn’t have to follow these stupid ritual steps. Entice it open with my

tongue and make it part, wet, wanting. The corners of my mouth lift.

“Do you see? Would you like to see more?” My eyelids lower. This part of the ritual, the seduction part, is easy.

Her face reddens, and she turns away. She removes her napkin from her lap and folds it in two, then in two again. Her hand smooths the soft cloth.

“It won’t help, you know.”

Her head lifts like a balloon on a string. “What won’t help?”

“Organizing the world around you. Trying to control it. It only gives you the perception of safety.”

Her beautiful violet eyes narrow. “Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“Yes,” I say bluntly. No sense dicking around with niceties and socially acceptable politeness. I’m done with the rules of dating.

“What makes you so smart?”

I love it when she gets challenging. “Experience.”

“Right. Like you’re *so* old.”

“What if I am?” I’m certain my eyes glint gold, as I see a soft warm light on the silverware.

“You look to be late twenties.”

I laugh. *More like immortal.* “Works for me.”

“What? You’re not going to tell me?” Now her mouth forms a sexy pout.

I’m actually enjoying this exchange. “Let’s say you’re close.”

“Want to know how old I am?” She bats her eyelashes at me.

“Sure.”

“I’m ancient.”

I scoff. “No, you’re not.”

“I feel old.”

“You’re not. Trust me. You’re barely a blip in time’s left eye.”

“But in his right eye, I’m old and withered.”

She perplexes me. “Now why would you say such a thing?”

A waiter peeks his head around the corner. I lift a hand to beckon him.

“I’ve had a horrible life.” She starts to vibrate with angst and sorrow.

I grow hard, sensing her beautiful distress. “What’s so horrible? Tell me.”

The waiter interrupts. “Would you like a cocktail? Appetizers?”

“Annora?”

“I’ll have a Salty Chihuahua,” she says defiantly. She squints at me and squares her jaw, as if daring me to protest.

“Never heard of that one.” I chuckle.

“It makes the one imbibing lose control.” She fiddles with the sterling silver napkin ring shaped like an elegant O.

Perfect. After losing control, I’d like her mouth to be in that shape, snug around my cock.

“Then we can see what kind of man you are,” she says. “Are you a gentleman or a mere beast?”

What the hell is she talking about?

First off, I’m no man. I lean in the beast direction. And it’s not *merely* anything. Being a beast is beyond awesome.

“Sir?” The waiter taps his pen against his order form. I lick my lips. “A Țuică, please.”

Annora scoffs.

“What? It’s a good drink.” The tip of my tongue makes a slow sweep along my upper lip. “It’s strong. Rugged. Manly. Traditional Romanian moonshine

prepared from plums. Private reserve.”

“We’ll see,” she says, primly, but the corners of her mouth twitch.

After the waiter departs, I ask again, “So, what is it that made your life so horrible?”

I’m eager to feel her pain.

She cocks her head to study me. Her shimmering black hair cascades to the side. “It’s complicated.”

“I’m a complicated man. Nothing you say will shock me.”

“I lost my father at an early age.”

“I see.” *And what, exactly, is the big deal with that? People die every second.*

“I loved my Pappy.”

“Uh-huh. Go on.” I lean forward, eager to hear what she has to say.

“He made me complicit in his affair. I only put two and two together this weekend. I don’t know whether to love him or hate him.”

“He’s dead. Do whatever. You’re only dealing with a memory.”

“Seriously? That’s the best you can do to console? Don’t you get it? He *cheated* on my mother. Had sex with another woman.” Her hands flick into the air, as if batting the memory away.

I nod. “People do things to get their needs met.”

“Yes, but they don’t cheat on their wives!” Her chin trembles.

“Is your mom someone worth being faithful to?”

“Of course she is! Isn’t everybody?”

“Debatable.”

“Okay, she’s a judgmental bitch. But still. That didn’t give my dad license to cheat on her. Pappy was a charmer. Women loved my dad.”

I shrug, scanning my brain for local customs relating

to fidelity, none of which is ever pertinent at Hotel Paranormal. “He might have tried. He might have tried to get his needs met, to meet hers...but she might have refused to be content. It happens.”

She shakes her head. “You’re weird. You seem so...so...so Zen or something.”

I laugh. “Hardly Zen, Annora.”

“Oh. Speaking of Mama, I checked on her. She’s surprisingly well. It really *was* an attack but they confirmed it was Storm. This place...” She waves a hand in the air dismissively. “He’ll never be allowed here again. David told me. They’ve given his name to the authorities. So at least you didn’t do *that* attack.” Her beautiful eyes roll once more.

I fiddle with a fork. This girl is so naive. So of this world. She can’t comprehend the fact she’s surrounded by every imaginable creature there is, here in this hallowed establishment. Witches and warlocks. Fae. You name it, it’s here. Her mother has been claimed by a vampire. No authorities have been or ever will be contacted. What people do within these walls is their own business. Guests who commit crimes such as Storm did are never allowed to return, ever. Somehow, thanks to Selena, I was allowed back here, although I’m still paying for it, learning meaningless rituals and having no control over my body or where I’m allowed to roam. I’m actually grateful--fucking grateful--to be allowed to be out from between the walls. I’ve never been grateful in my entire existence. I shake my head, both in disgust with my behavior and in an attempt to focus and be present.

“It’s just so weird,” she continues. “Her neck is...well, it’s remarkably healed. And she barely looked at me. She moaned a lot, uttering that clown’s name. ‘Oh, Storm. Come to me, my love.’ Disgusting to hear her fawning over a man she barely knows.”

“Uh-huh. Storm’s got a way about him. I doubt your mother is done with him.”

He’ll continue feeding from her darkness. Her sin will be like a drug to him, same Annora’s pain and rage is to me. Then, he’ll either kill her or turn her. And, strangely, I care about what it’s going to do to Annora to have her mother affected this way. I sure hope there’s a cure for whatever afflicts me, what with me acting like a love-sick idiot over here. Maybe I can find something off-planet.

“Seriously? So I’m going to have to see this guy *again*? The guy who nearly killed her? I tell you what, if he shows up at our door, I’m going to have the police on speed dial. That man is *so* dead.” Her hands press on the table and she leans into them, as if preparing to launch into attack.

I choke on the laugh that escapes my mouth. “Yeah. I’m sure you’re right, love.”

She stops talking and stares at me.

“What?”

“When you use that word...it does something to me. I mean, I told you I’ll never love you. I think I’m incapable of loving. Since Pappy died, I doubt if I’ll ever love again. But still...it *affects* me when you say that word.”

She continues to chatter while I consider what she said. That’s the second time I’ve used that word *ever*. In my entire existence. It makes me feel quite strange to have said it, like I have a serious case of indigestion or my heart’s about to croak or...

“And there you go again. Not listening. Am I that boring?” Her eyes fill with tears.

“What? No, love, I’m sorry.”

Sorry? Me? Since when am I ever sorry?

The waiter--I think his name is Paolo--carries a tray

in our direction.

Thank fuck. I'm strangely thoughtful. Distracted. Disturbed, more like it.

"Your drinks, sir." He places the Salty Chihuahua in front of Annora, and the Țuică in front of me.

I hold the glass high in a toast, something I learned a couple hours ago. Normally, I simply toss it back and get down to business.

"To your exquisite beauty," I say.

"To not becoming dead tonight by your hand," she says, lifting hers.

We clink and drink.

She glugs hers like it's a hot day and it's ice tea. Her eyes widen, and then she blinks.

It's going to be an interesting night.

I toss mine back in the manner to which I'm accustomed. The intense liquid burns a fiery path down my throat.

This is excellent. This will anchor me here for quite some time. I can have my fill of this beautiful woman.

But, like any addict, the morphine has completely slipped my mind, as has the earlier cigar and the scotch. More of the opiate breaks free of my blood vessel walls, letting a rush of pleasure pump through my veins.

Fuck me, this feels good.

"And then he simply fell underneath our cow, Santana. Boom. Kicked the milk bucket. That was that. Dead. Eyes vacant. Staring at his maker."

"Excuse me?" I'm unaware of how the drugs, the cigar, and the drink are affecting me. I'm here, but not here, lost in thought. Alarmed, I grip the table. "Forgive me, it's been a long time since I've had liquor this fine and company even finer."

She bats her pretty eyes at me. "Forgiven. So, I was saying that my Pappy simply died, mid-milking. His hand

slipped from Santana's udders and *wham!* Pappy no more."

I frown.

Mr. Lachman died below a bovine. Why does that ring a bell?

"When did you say this happened?"

"And that confirms it. You're not listening. I said it about ten minutes ago. I said it very clearly. 'My father died twelve years ago.' Ring any memory chimes in that brain of yours? You seem so distracted. What's going on?" She huffs.

"A lot's gone on in twelve years. I've been, uh, incarcerated."

"What? I didn't ask you about your past."

Oh, fuck. I'm getting confused.

"I was merely thinking about the past. Like I said, a lot's gone on. I was in lock down."

Did I take a truth serum or what?

I stare at the empty glass before me. I need a sock stuffed in my mouth. Either that, or one of her beautiful breasts.

"Oh, great, I'm attracted to a criminal."

"I was wrongly accused."

"Uh-huh. So some liberal social organization freed killer Mac Bhriain. Go on."

"No, I escaped."

Mr. Lachman. A cow. A bucket.

"Oh, super. I'm strongly attracted to an escaped criminal. I must be really evil."

I stare at my right hand as it melts into a shimmery smoke. The morphine and the cigar and scotch are making me lose control again, big time. Quickly, I whip my arm--what's left of it--away from the table. I don't want to freak this girl out.

"I miss my dad." Annora's eyes tear up again.

She says it like it happened yesterday. That's what occurs when people don't give themselves permission to emote.

"I want him back," she says.

The walls shudder. This can't be good. When the walls vibrate, the hotel is paying attention.

"What's happening?" Her eyes dart about like a frightened deer. Or one of my victims.

"Are we having an earthquake? Is this place alive?" Her hands tremble.

Great. Her sorrow and fear arouse me, but I can't control anything. My other hand is starting to go. The morphine is making me so stoned, I want to grab Annora and melt into her velvet, right here, right now. But no, in my state of fucked up, with the drink and the tobacco and the drugs making me all kinds of strange, memories start to burn through my brain.

Mr. Lachman and a cow named Santana.

"I want to find out what it's like to be happy," Annora cries. "For once."

Happy. I remember a child telling her parent how happy she was. And then, the parent...and I...

Then it hits me. It all comes back in a flood. Abruptly, I stand, and my chair falls with a clatter.

Annora says, "What is it? What's the matter? What's happening to you?" Her eyes widen until they look like colorful dots in a sea of cream.

"I'm a demon, Annora. An honest to god demon. I kill, maim, torture, do despicable things. I don't want you to see me this way, but there you have it."

The walls shudder again, as if this fucking hotel is laughing at me.

So much for the fine date. So much for the mating ritual.

I'm dissolving into my shadowy form.

Her eyes grow huge. Her hand flies to her mouth. She screams as I become a shadow. “I’ve seen you before! You...you’re...you killed my Pappy, didn’t you?”

I caught the last statement she made as I’m sucked back behind the walls, back to staring at her empty room, in utter, desolate frustration and rage. And, worse yet, worried what she now thinks of me. I’m certain she hates me now, and no doubt wishes me dead.

CHAPTER 22

ANNORA

My chair flies to the floor as I leap to my feet. I'm consorting with a demon. A real demon. I know this to be true.

I remember the day Pappy died. I said, "I'm so happy, Pappy." I twirled in a circle. I placed daisies on Santana's head. Pappy laughed.

He said, "After I'm done milking the cow, we're going to jitterbug back to the house and take your mama out for ice cream." Then, his eyes got as large as saucers.

I got a sudden, horrible chill, like an icy wind blew away summer's heat. A strange shadow cast its darkness over the both of us. I might have screamed. Pappy might have yelled. Whatever we did in that moment, it was the result of Mac Bhriain appearing from whatever shadowy gloom he lives in.

And then everything got so weird with Mama's hysteria and anger, I forgot about the shivery shadow. It seemed like she blamed Pappy for dying. Cast aspersions at him for leaving us in such a manner. She became bitter and meaner than ever. The scripture readings came nightly, instead of just on Sundays.

After that, I refused to even acknowledge the existence of supernatural beings. I shut down my magical child brain. Everything shut down, like a fallen tower of blocks. I became truly, deeply, miserably mortal, finding nothing to be joyful about.

I wish to God I could rewind everything, go

backward in time and start over. I could find a way to get Mama and Pappy happy and connected again. I'd make Pappy let go of Mrs. Lindwall and see how an affair didn't solve a thing. I'd force Mama to treat Pappy with kindness, not criticism. Then, none of this would have happened. Pappy would still be alive. That idiot shadow demon wouldn't have needed to haunt us.

The walls tremble and shiver again, as if they're listening to my thoughts.

Sobbing, my movements jerky and erratic, I stumble from the room, not caring who sees me cry. Statues light up, indicating I go this way and that. I round a corner and *wham!* I slam into a couple kissing.

"I'm so sorry. Forgive my clumsiness."

"Annora? Is that you?" The woman peels herself from the arms of the man.

"Whoa," the man says.

It's Noreen. Macking on Walter's face. Some shimmering ghostly thing is wrapped around her, humping her like a see-through dog.

My heart hammers. I thought she was married. I hoped Walter had died tragically. As for the see-through thing, I don't know what to think.

"What are you doing here?" I say, blinking rapidly. My eyelid starts its twitchy tic.

Noreen looks much older than she is. Her hair's dingy and hangs lifeless. Dark circles line her eyes. It seems life has sucked the motivational quotes from her system.

"We, uh." She slides her hand into her pocket, shielding her wedding band clad finger from sight. Her other hand clasps the pocketed hand. When she pulls her hand free a few seconds later, there's no ring. "We ran into one another here. Isn't that super? What a surprise! Opportunity is where you find it," she chirps.

There's the quote a minute gal I remember. "I guess

so. I thought you were married.”

“Well, I...” She tosses a lie in the air. “We broke up. It’s over. I, uh...I ran into Walter, and we were merely catching up. I haven’t seen him in a long time. A long, long, *long* time.”

I turn to Walter who’s staring at me, slack-jawed. If she looks old and tired, he looks to be about ninety. His face is deeply lined with wrinkles, like he’s a ten pack a day smoker.

I laugh. “What happened to your budding career as a film director? Looks like life hasn’t treated you so well.”

“You,” he mutters. “You destroyed me.”

“*I* destroyed *you*? Nuh-uh. *You* destroyed *me*. You ruined me. How on Earth could I destroy you?” My hands fly in the air, as if shooing him away.

“Females for Justice, that’s how.”

“Whoa.” They’re a huge feminist group. When they sink their claws into a cause, they’re relentless. “What did they do to you?”

“What didn’t they do? They got hold of the video I shot of you and me and lambasted me. I’ve been in court battles ever since. I can’t escape them. They keep finding me. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re here, and they’re really banshees.

“What?”

“You know this place is full of supernaturals, right?”

“What are you talking about? It’s all Hollywood special effects.”

Noreen knocks the side of my head. “Why do you think it’s called Hotel Paranormal? I come here to escape. And who should I run into to?” She shakes her head disapprovingly, stabbing her thumb at Walter.

So Mama was right?

None of this makes any sense. “You know there’s something see-through humping your leg?”

“Ew. Again? It’s a fairy. I thought I got rid of it in the dining room.” She bats at her thigh.

“I love it when the fae fuck you, baby. It turns me on.” Walter makes the same drippy, horny face he made when he fucked me. It makes him look ugly.

“I thought you guys haven’t seen one another for a long time? Keep your stories straight.” I feel as if Stanley Kubrick is directing us in a schizoid movie.

“Tell ’em, babe. This is the only place we can see one another. This hotel doesn’t care. Life’s been harsh.” Walter rubs against Noreen. “Where’s that fairy? I can never see them, only feel them.”

“I thought the viral movie was turning you into a big deal,” I say. “And me a pathetic loser.”

Walter’s head drops. “Where you been, girl? Didn’t you know? You’re like the poster child for a victim of wrong doings.” His eyes turn conniving. “Maybe you can talk to them. Tell them what we did was all in fun. That you agreed to it beforehand. My life’s been *hell*.”

“No way. You’re getting what you deserve. I hope you *rot* in hell. But you, Noreen.” I turn to her and shake my head. “You could’ve had the world.”

“Oh, you know,” she says, waving her hand in the air. “What goes around comes around. You look fantastic, by the way. You look like you’re doing okay for yourself.”

“Do I? Did it? I don’t think so.” I shake my head and back away from them, skittering along the lush hall, guided by statues.

“Wow,” Walter said to Noreen. “She looks terrific. I wonder what happened to her. Maybe I should have given her more of a chance.”

Still backing away, I ram into another person. “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” I say, whirling around.

“Annora? Is that you, baby girl?”

I whirl around and come face to face with a guy who looks like Pappy. Sure, he's older, but there's no mistaking that handsome face. Except all the joy has drained from him. He's stooped and haggard.

"Pappy? This can't be. You died, twelve years ago."

"In a manner of speaking, I guess I did." His eyes moisten. "Your mother divorced me. Took everything I had. She took you away from me. Broke my heart to bits. Lied about me. Filed a restraining order on me. I can't go near her or you. She crushed the soul from me. I've been adrift ever since."

I stare at him horrified.

How could this be? How could this happen? How could life turn out so wrong?

I'm losing it. I must be going through Valium withdrawal. I can't tell truth from fiction. I feel like Alice in Wonderland, stumbling down roads lined with Cheshire cats and Mad Hatters. Seeing demons that aren't really there.

Pappy holds his skinny arms out to me. The flesh seems to drip from his bones.

"No. You're not my father. You can't be my Pappy."

"Honey girl, I've waited so long to hold you. Don't break my heart again."

My heart practically fractures at seeing him, desperation evident in his eyes. I throw my arms around him, but he disappears. It's like he's a ghost. He *is* a ghost. He *did* die. At least I think he did. I glance down the hall. There's no Noreen. No Walter. No Pappy.

I hike up my indigo skirt and do a sparkly high-heeled sprint, guided by pointing statues that light up like slot machines as I get near. They guide me to the elevator to my floor.

David waits inside.

"Going up?" he says pleasantly.

“Going out of my mind.” I smile.

He grins like this is normal. “How did your date go?”

“My date? It was awful. This whole stay has been a nightmare from start to finish.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He frowns. “We go out of our way to cater to our guests’ needs. Is there anything I can do to improve your stay?”

“Erase it from my memory.”

His frown deepens. “Are you sure nothing of benefit has happened? Your complexion has improved since you arrived.”

“My complexion?” I stare at him. “Are you nuts?”

“We’re all a little nuts when you think about it. Life is what you make of it. The world is a wonderful and terrible place. Here you have control. Your whim, our desire. Our hotel serves as an oasis. A place of renewal and restoration. A place to heal from life’s hardships. Escapism at its finest.” He presses the up button.

“Is that what you call it?”

He shrugs. “It can be whatever you need it to be. I guess this is what you needed.”

“I don’t think so.” I frown at him, confused.

The ride to my floor seems to take forever. It feels like we drift on a soft, fluffy cloud. I sink into my mind, trying to organize my scattered thoughts. *Maybe what I saw in the hallway was a possibility. Maybe that’s the way things would have rolled for Mama and Pappy. Just because I think I’ve been wronged, have I? One of Noreen’s stupid quotes springs to mind. “It’s called karma and it’s pronounced ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.”*

I smile. *Maybe I’ve been hiding from my life, hiding from everything.* Another chilling thought snakes through my consciousness. *Maybe, just maybe, I need to fuck a demon. Perhaps that’s how I’ll put my fears to rest.* Chilling but true--now that I know what he is, I’m more

turned on than ever.

When the elevator stops, I squeeze through the doors before they've had a chance to fully open.

"Hope you enjoy your stay," David says.

"Yeah, yeah," I call, in breathless pursuit of my room.

The door bursts open before I have a chance to retrieve the key. I skid to an abrupt stop. My monastery room is now a suite. It's huge. It's opulent. It's beyond gorgeous, draped in velvet and gold and burgundy. The stallion toy now stands on his hind feet. He's burning like a candle, flames licking every square inch. The showpiece in the center of the room happens to be a bed. It's still a twin, but there's a difference. There's now a naked, blue-tinged, bronze-skinned demon lying on my bed, chained from every limb.

CHAPTER 21

MAC BURIAIN

Annora bursts in the room as if she's been struck by lightning. Her hair is tousled. There's a wildness to her eyes as if she's seen a specter.

I chuckle, knowing she has--*me*.

I stare at her, hungry as hell to be inside her. "Guess this hotel wants you to have your way with me. This is where I landed."

"I see. What happened to this place?" She whirls around, her eyes wide.

"You happened. It's been restored because of you."

Her eyes form angry slits. "Don't play with me. I've been through enough."

"I'd love to play with you."

"Right. And how did this toy stallion turn into a flaming torch?"

I shrug.

"What did you do?"

I huff. "All I did was land here. The hotel took care of the rest."

She glowers.

Her anger is as sexy as fuck. If I could reach it, I'd be stroking it.

"I thought you were a badass demon. How are mere chains going to hold you?"

I let out a bitter laugh. "What this hotel wants, this hotel gets. I ain't going nowhere."

"I'm going to make you pay for what you did,

asshole.”

My erection jerks. “Oh, yes. Please. Make me pay.” I’ve never seen her look so fierce.

“Don’t look so excited. I’m not going to be nice,” she growls.

Nice. The last thing I want is for you to be nice.

“I’d expect no less,” I say. “Have your way with me.”

“Where do I begin?”

“Your call. I’m sure the hotel left you things to use to torture me.”

Her eyebrows draw together. “Like what?”

“How should I know? It’s creative.” I sigh.

Her gaze drifts toward the nightstand. She frowns.

I turn my head to see what’s she looking at. Sure enough, the hotel has provided some clothespins. I love clothespins. I’ve used them to do all sorts of naughty kink on females.

“I wasn’t thinking of doing laundry,” she says. “Doesn’t this place have a service to wash clothes?”

The mirror shimmers and hums and several still-shot images display, of women wielding the wooden devices, like a YouStream page. Yeah, I’ve seen YouStream before.

“What’s this? So this mirror really *is* a television. I knew it,” she says. “Let’s see if it’s a touchscreen.” She glances at me. “Wait. You can’t watch.”

I groan. “Why not?”

“It could be porn and you might like it. I don’t want you to enjoy yourself.” She steps over to the bed, yanks the pillow from beneath my head, and places it over my face. “There.” She adds something weighty and heavy. Her suitcase? Can’t tell as I can’t fucking see...*or* breathe.

Tinny music plays, like some old porn movie music. Someone is doing something naughty, from the sound of

it.

“Oh, my God,” Annora says “People actually like that? No, to that one.”

Another tune plays. This one is slow and *boom chicka wah wah* stupid.

She lets out a little shriek. “Wow. It must take a disturbed individual who gets off on such things. I’ll bet you’re such an individual.”

“Try me and see,” I mumble into the pillow. It’s making my face unbearably hot. I shake my head to get free of the downy feathers encased in silk. It stays glued to my eyes, weighted by the whatever. I sigh, sensing her nearness. Trembling fingers land on my thigh. It’s as if she’s getting up the guts to do something she considers reprehensible.

The sharp pinch of spring-loaded wood on tender skin lands on my inner thigh. I gasp.

Oh, yes. The pain. More, more.

“Did I hurt you?” she says. “I didn’t mean to. I only...the people in the video looked like...”

“Don’t stop.”

She huffs out a determined sigh.

Another pinch lands on my other leg. And another. And another. She continues until the inside of my legs probably looks like a zipper. I writhe. The pain is exquisite.

“You like that, huh? Well, what about this?” she says in an angry tone.

A clothespin separates my balls. I wince and growl into the pillow, suffocating from the heavy object jammed against my nose. Since I can’t sift, I have no idea how it will affect this body to be unable to breathe.

Shaking my head, I roar, “Get this fucking thing off of me.”

Something clatters to the floor, and Annora plucks

the pillow from my face. “Are you okay? You’re not smothering, are you?”

“Of course, I’m smothering. What did you think?” I snap at her.

She cringes and steps back.

Oh, no. You can’t stop now. We’ve only begun.

“Thank you, mistress. Thank you for freeing my face.”

“What did you call me?”

“I called you mistress. I’m your slave.”

Her beautiful eyes narrow. “Yes. That’s it. You’re my slave.” Her head cocks to the side. “I still don’t want you to watch me, though,” she says, her voice growing hesitant. “This is all new to me.”

The drawer in the bed stand slides open. I can’t see what she sees, but Annora’s eyes grow huge. She rearranges whatever is in there, frowning as she does so. She retrieves a soft blindfold, complete with elastic strap, and turns to me.

I grin. “You’re going to have a time of it, getting that thing on my head.”

“Which one of us is restrained,” she says, returning the grin.

“Which one of us has sharp teeth?” I retort.

“Oh, please. You’re tied up, Mac Bhriain.” Her hand reaches for my head.

I snap, nipping her wrist, like a well-placed wolf bite.

“Ouch.” Instinctively, she slaps me, her palm stinging my cheek. Then, the same hand flies to her mouth. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” she mutters. “Are you okay?”

“Is that the best you can do? You hit like a girl,” I say, taunting her. My inner thighs and balls are numb from the clothespins. She either needs to take them off, add more, or...*whack!* Her left palm lands on my other cheek. It seems she’s nicely ambidextrous.

“Don’t you ever speak to me like that again,” she scolds.

“No, mistress,” I say, loving the hell out of this newly emerging persona. “Mistress Annora, I won’t speak to you like that again.”

She smiles, looking pleased. “That’s better. Now, lift your head.”

“No.”

Her eyebrows knit together, like she didn’t expect resistance. “I said, lift your head.”

“And I said, no.”

Another slap, this one more forceful, collides with my face.

“Lift your god-damned head.”

“No!”

She steps away, grabs one of the clothespins, and twists it.

“Oh, mercy, yes!” I cry, as stab of pain shoots through my inner leg.

“Are you going to lift your head so I can put this blindfold on your eyes?”

“Not yet,” I growl through clenched teeth.

She deftly flattens her hands on either side of the clothespins and yanks them free from my skin. She repeats the process on the other side. Glaring at me, she plucks the one between my balls when she’s finished with the thighs. Hot pain shoots through my legs and genitals. I roar with pleased agony, grinding against my metal restraints, endorphins skyrocketing through my bloodstream. She’s a natural sadist. And me? Well, I’m a demon, what can I say?

“Are you going to lift your head now?”

“Yes, mistress,” I pant, lifting my head like a contrite schoolboy.

She places the blindfold over my eyes, positions the

elastic, and pats my head. "There. Now I can do as I please."

The *boom chicka wah wah* video plays again, followed by a tinkling sound. Ice lands on the fiery inside of my legs.

"Shit," I hiss.

"Feel better?"

"Yes, mistress. Much better." The contrast between the hot pain and the icy cold is fantastic.

"Well, we'll have to put an end to that, won't we?"

"Oh, come on," I groan.

She clips a clothespin on the bulging vein lining my stiff erection, followed by another...and another...and another, until I'm beside myself with pain.

"Don't. Stop," I say through gritted teeth.

"Why's that, dark demon?" Her breath tickles my ear. "You get off on pain?"

"Yes," I say. Sweat pours from my forehead, my neck, my pits. Even my groin is damp..

"You're enjoying yourself far too much," she whispers. Her lips land on mine.

Yes, yes, yes, I think. Give me more. I want to devour her lips. I inhale, suck, nibble. Plunge my tongue into her willing mouth.

As she kisses me, her hand reaches for the clothespins and deftly yanks them free, one by one.

I moan into her, shocked by the painful arousal making my cock jerk.

She pulls away, gasping.

"What's the matter, mistress?" I say. "Please come back and kiss me."

"No! I can't." She blinks rapidly.

"Why can't you?"

Am I actually pleading?

"This feels too good. I can't. I don't deserve it. You

don't deserve it." Her head shakes side to side.

A rustling sound comes from the side of the bed, like she's rummaging in the drawer. The zing of a whip slices through the air, followed by the sting of leather on flesh.

"Oh, God," I cry. I tear against my restraints. Another lash follows the first, whipping across my legs, then another and another.

"I hate you. I hate what you did to my life, to my father. I'll never forgive you." Her voice cracks as she speaks.

The strikes come fast and furious, and this is no longer pleasurable fun. I'm certain my flesh is about to give way and part in pools of blood. I doubt if I'll be able to heal in the quick manner to which I'm accustomed, thanks to god-damned Auntie Em. I wish that drug was never conceived. Yet, Annora's agony still seduces me. I want nothing more than to take away her pain.

"Annora, stop," I growl.

"I can't. I won't," she says between strikes. "You destroyed my life!"

"It was collateral damage." I strain against the restraints. "Your father wasn't my intended hit."

"What do you mean?" she wails.

"I mean, I was after someone else, in another dimension," I bellow, panting. "A parallel dimension. You and your father somehow caught sight of me. I was sent to kill someone else."

Another stinging blow lands on my belly, and I'm sure this one has split the skin.

"I still hate you," she screams. "I hate you."

"I can take your pain. I can take your hatred."

"I don't want you to have it!" Her voice ricochets around the room. "All I want is to be loved. The only thing I want is to have just one loving experience from one loving individual before I die. Just one. Please."

Her hot, wet tears sizzle upon my skin.

She collapses on me in a heap, sobbing.

“I can’t love you in the way you want.”

“Why not?” Her words come out desperate, filled with longing.

“I’m a demon. Incapable of the kind of love you crave. But please, Annora, please. Let me perform the only act of love I’m capable of...let me devour your agony.”

CHAPTER 24

ANNORA

I'm sobbing into this demon's skin. I've hurt him with the same intensity I feel inside. I'm completely broken. I don't know what came over me to inflict pain on him. It's not my way to do harm. But I can't stop crying. A lifetime of grief is released through my tears. It's slamming through me like ocean waves in a windstorm, crashing and battering things that once seemed solid. I feel as if I'm dissolving into an ocean current, like clay dropped into the sea.

Suddenly, I'm aware of hot hands stroking my skin. I jerk, then yield to the touch. *How did his hands get free?*

Overcome with shame, I press my face into his sweaty muscles.

"Please, Annora, please," he pleads. "Give me your pain."

"I don't know how," I howl.

"I do," he says.

I lift my head. He's blindfold free. The restraints have all dissolved from his wrists and ankles, leaving gray streaks on the linens. He's looking at me with an incomprehensible gaze. I can't look away from him. I take a deep, shuddering breath.

"What do I have to do?" I whisper.

"You have to let me inside you."

I narrow my eyes. "Is this some kind of trick, like, 'Oh, hey, I can take away your pain if I screw you because I'm that good in the fucking department?'"

“It’s no trick,” he says. “It’s the strangest, sincerest offer I’ve ever made.” His fingertips stroke my back. Caress my hair. Play along my arms. “You’ve got my blood on your face. Let me clean it off of you.”

I shake my head. “Leave it. I deserve it. I didn’t mean to hurt you so bad. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he says, as his thumb brushes across my face.

I sit up and glance at my gown. It’s draped along my body in bloody, wrinkled disarray. I dare to take a look in the mirror. I’m a mess...a wild, soft, hot mess. I stand and slip the gown from my body, biting my lip to keep the self-consciousness at bay.

Mac Bhriain hisses. His bronze, luminescent blue erection jumps for joy.

“Don’t watch me.” My arm crosses along my lacy bra.

“I have to watch you,” he says, reverently. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“Well,” I say, my self-consciousness winning. “Close your eyes for a minute.”

He complies.

I slip my panties free from my hips, unhook my bra, and climb on the bed, straddling him. “You can open your eyes now.”

As his golden orbs are revealed, he murmurs, “Oh, sweet mercy. You’re exquisite.”

“I...so, let’s...you’re really big, Mac Bhriain. Your...this,” I say, reaching behind me and closing my fingers around his stiff, throbbing heat. My fingertips don’t even touch.

“I am.”

“I don’t want it to hurt.”

“Don’t worry. Unless Auntie Em’s totally having her way with me, I’ll be able to conform to your body in a

perfect fit.” He smiles.

I frown. “Who’s Auntie Em?”

“Long story,” he says.

“No one I need to worry about? It’s not a vampire about to come after me, right?”

“Right,” he says with a chuckle. “It’s not a paranormal being.”

I nod, distracted by this throbbing thing between my legs. “You can really do that? Conform to my size? That’s one of your demon skills?”

“It is, indeed. Total satisfaction, right here, at your service.” He reaches for my breasts, caressing them with the warmest hands I’ve ever experienced. “Are you done crying?”

One lone tear trails down my face. “I guess not.”

“Let it out. All of it. I can take it.”

I slowly shake my head.

“I can’t,” I whisper.

“You can,” he says, in an equally gentle tone.

The little horse burns brightly.

“Does he have to watch?” I smile.

“Min, turn around,” Mac Bhriain says.

The toy horse clatters in a half circle, away from me.

“Oh! I was kidding. Is he yours?” I cock my head and study him, smiling slightly.

“In a manner of speaking,” Mac Bhriain says, twirling my nipples between his fingers. “We belong together. He’s my hell horse.”

“What’s a hell horse do?” I ask, barely able to speak, distracted by the pleasure coursing through my breasts.

“Guides me through hell and back, what else?” Mac Bhriain says, in his rich velvety voice.

“He’s kind of small.”

“He’s actually immense. Like a Clydesdale on steroids. The hotel is having its way with us. Some witch

cast a spell on him, I suspect.”

“I see.” Only I don’t really see because I don’t believe in witchcraft, but I don’t care. The pleasure is intense. My eyes drift close.

I picture my Pappy, standing broken in the hall downstairs. The tears begin to fall again. I imagine my mother belittling him, nagging him, criticizing him. Keeping us apart. If he really were alive, I have no doubt she’d do just that. Rage boils inside.

“Yeah,” Mac Bhriain murmurs. “Like that. Let it out, woman, and let me in.”

I lift up and position him at my opening. I sink down on him slightly, wincing a little.

Wowie, zowie, am I wet for him.

His eyes close in a half-lidded stupor. His succulent mouth parts.

I lean my body forward, letting my long hair fall to the side, brushing his chest like a paintbrush of pleasure, hungry for those lips. My mouth connects with his. I can’t get enough of his lips.

He moans and bucks his hips, impaling me.

I gasp. But he’s right. He feels perfect inside of me. Like we were made to be together.

I think of my father, my mother, Walter, all the pain I’ve carried. I cry, big, huge sopping tears that fall like hard rain and dissolve on Mac Bhriain’s ultra-heated skin. My hips seem to move of their own volition, grinding against his. I’m furious, pissed at my mother, at my father for leaving me, at Walter, at Noreen, at Haden Hanselman the surfer dude from Once Burned, at the world. Even at Mac Bhriain.

He’s vibrating between my legs, literally vibrating. His fingers grab my hips so hard, it hurts.

I haul back my arm and slap him, viciously. “That’s for scaring my Pappy.”

He doesn't miss a beat. "Yes, mistress."

I slap him again, harder. "And that's for scaring me."

He bucks faster. "Yes, mistress."

I take his nipples between my fingertips and tweak them, hard.

He cries out from the pain.

"And that's for spying on me in my room."

"Yes, mistress, I deserve that."

I reach behind me and grab his balls, yanking them.

He roars.

"That's for not finishing my mother off when you had the chance," I say. Horrified with myself, I say, "I didn't mean that, honest, I didn't."

"I don't care, Annora. Anything you say in this room is safe with me. The more despicable, the better." He lets out a low, sultry laugh.

I feel wild and a bit unhinged. An incredible orgasm is building inside me.

"Yes, woman, yes. Feel everything. All of it," Mac Bhriain growls.

His eyes blaze as he looks at me.

"Look," I say, laughing a little. "Your chest. It's got a rosy glow." My fingertips trace a stupid, cheesy Hallmark heart over his left pectorals.

He lifts his head and looks. "Fuck me."

"You care about me, don't you?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny said statement."

"That's such a guy thing to say." I smile sweetly, then haul back my hand and slap him. "Say it."

"No!"

My palm collides with his flesh again. "Say it." I'm digging having some power. And I sure hope he says something because I'm on the verge of the best orgasm ever.

"No!"

I claw his chest like a dog burying a bone. "Say it."

"All right," he roars. "I care for you. I care what happens to you."

The rosy glow in his chest becomes bonfire bright. "Don't tell, all right?"

"Your secret's safe with me." I resume rocking, sliding along his heat. I'm peaking. Out of control. "Mac Bhriain! Sweet mercy, here I come."

And I come harder than I ever imagined. It slams through me with the intensity of a raging river.

Mac Bhriain lets out an unearthly roar, the hairs on my head and neck standing out straight. He appears see-through, like I'm screwing a ghost.

The toy horse bursts from his tiny metal encasement, like a ginormous winged creature exploding from a cocoon. The bed table collapses into splintered bits. In its place stands a magnificent flaming stallion, rearing on his hind legs, screaming so loud my eardrums might burst.

Mac Bhriain goes in and out of focus, one second pumping furiously inside me, the next second wisping away.

My heart beats erratically, like it can't keep up with blood output.

Wild-eyed, I scream.

"What's happening to me?" I'm melting into the demon. I'm turning into a wispy being, like him. I'm swirling into him. We're like two streams of smoke, indistinguishable from one another. "Oh my God. I'm dying, aren't I?" I whisper.

"Yes, Annora, you are," Mac Bhriain murmurs.

The world as I know it ceases to exist. I'm catapulted somewhere, away from planet Earth, gone to meet my maker. I have no body. Only awareness. I exist because I think I exist. "Mac Bhriain?" The words drift lazily through the wherever and then echoes in slow motion

Calinda B

from far, far away. And I'm utterly, truly alone.

CHAPTER 25

ANNORA

I don't know where to go. What to do. I seem to be standing, but I have no body in which to stand. Is this what it's like to be dead? Sort of a shift in perception, nothing more? If so, it's really not so bad. A bit lonely, perhaps, but I'm used to that.

Emptiness swirls around me in creeping shadows.

"Is that you, Mac Bhriain?" I ask. The words echo hollowly through the air.

No reply.

I drag my feet, moving forward, but it seems like a useless endeavor. There's nothing here but churning, agitated mist. No one around me.

Distant street sounds emerge. I pause, cock my head, and listen. I move forward. The whirling mist parts.

I squint and blink. "Pappy? Is that you?"

He sits on a bench in front of Cowbell's Ice Cream. It's the ice cream store he used to take me to. He looks good. Happy. Relaxed. Ready to jitterbug if the need arises.

He extends an ice cream cone to me. "Mint chocolate chip. Your favorite."

I take it and sit next to him. "So, we're both dead, huh?" I lick the iced confection. "Mmm."

Ice cream has never tasted so good.

"More or less. It's all relative."

"You had an affair with Mrs. Lindwall," I say, more sad than accusatory.

“I did.” His eyes well with tears. “I’m not proud. Your mama...well, that girl has quite a swing on her.”

“She beat you?”

“Hit me senseless. Knocked me out cold time and time again. I probably deserved it.”

“No one deserves to be hit, Pappy.”

“Maybe.” He gives me a sidelong glance. “I tried to make her happy. We had a good thing going for a while. We made you, didn’t we?” He reaches out his hand and ruffles my hair. “That was an act of love, girly girl.” He licks the chocolate dripping from his cone. “So, I weakened. Mrs. Lindwall, well, she was really pretty. And nice. And her marriage was in trouble, too. We consoled one another.”

I imagine pressing my hands to my ears, but I still don’t seem to have a body. Except I’m eating. And sitting. Is a body merely a perception?

“That’s enough. I don’t need to hear any more.” I put my mouth over the top of the cone, wondering what it would have felt like to put my mouth over Mac Bhriain’s huge power tool. I blush, or I think I blush. “You know she’s dead, right? Me and Mama poisoned her.”

“I know. We’ve been spending time together. Your Mama...she’s got a mean streak, that’s for certain. And it wasn’t your fault. You delivered the chocolates, same as you always did. Forgive yourself, honey.” He wraps his free arm around me, pulling me close.

This is what I missed when I was alive. Pappy always listened to me. He comforted me. So he had a few flaws. Don’t we all?

“Pappy...” I begin.

“What is it?”

“I met someone.”

“Did you, now? Is he kind?”

“In a manner of speaking.” I bite my lip. “No, I wouldn’t call him kind. But he loved the pain right out of me. He let me feel and deal and even got off on it.”

Pappy’s eyebrows rise. He studies me. “Well, girl, you seem happy. That’s all that counts. Don’t let him harm you.”

I shake my head. “I doubt if I’ll ever see him again. But we shared a wonderful moment. I needed a wonderful moment. I needed to remember what it’s like to be happy.”

“It’s good to be happy. When I occupied a body on Earth, I got up every day with cheer in my heart, no matter how bad things were.”

“Yeah. You were always good that way.” I reach for his hand and squeeze it. “But you might not be so cheerful when I tell you it might have been him who killed you.”

His forehead furrows. “Him, who?”

“The guy I just told you about. He’s not really a guy. He’s a demon. He was sent to kill someone, and we both saw his shadowy form and got afraid.”

Gosh, death seems to make an honest, bold woman out of me.

Pappy gives me another squeeze and nods, like that’s the most natural thing to hear. “Fear doesn’t kill a person, honey. My heart...it must have been ready to go. It was fairly broken at that time.”

“Yeah, but I missed you.” Those blasted tears form again. I guess I can even cry if I’m dead. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too, honey. I didn’t get to watch you grow up. But I wouldn’t have anyway. Your Mama...well, she threatened me shortly before I departed. Told me she was going to take everything away from me, especially you. She didn’t want me to be happy if she couldn’t be. She broke my heart. She’s just as

responsible as your demon friend, if you think about it. He simply gave me a nudge. I would never have lasted without being able to see you.” One lone tear trickles down Pappy’s face.

A blast of rage surges through me. “I hate my mom. Hate her!”

“Now, now,” Pappy soothes. “Hermine has her own demons to dance with. But really, I cast my own grave. I should’ve filed for divorce or insisted on counseling or something.” He pops the last of his cone in his mouth and smiles. “But that’s old news. The past. We need to grieve and move on, staying in the now. Can you do that, honey? Did your demon teach you how to feel? Your mama...she wasn’t big on feelings.”

“Actually, it was a hotel. Ever heard of Hotel Paranormal?”

He shakes his head. “Nope, haven’t heard of that one.”

“Mama actually took me. So at least I can thank her for that. I still hate her. I hate what she did to you.”

“Hate’s a strong emotion, girly girl. Maybe you can find a way to forgive her.”

“Now that I’m with you, maybe I can.” I give him my biggest, brightest, warmest smile.

The look he returns me is confusing. Kind of sad. Kind of knowing. Kind of resolved. He gets to his feet. “I need to get on.”

“Can I come with?” I scramble to my feet.

“Only for a minute, I’m afraid.” He reaches out his hand to me.

I chomp the last of my cone and reach for him. We saunter, hand in hand, along the road with Cowbell’s Ice Cream and Dandy’s Finest Chocolates and the store where Mama bought all her dresses and I’m happy. I like being dead.

A wind kicks up, stirring papers and trash along the street. It blows harder, turning into wicked gusts. It's difficult to keep moving forward. I stoop and try to take a step but I'm pushed backward. I put my arm in front of my face to keep the dirt and debris out of it. I turn to look at Pappy. Dust, paper and trash blow right through him. I look at myself. It's blowing right through me, as well. I'm dissolving into the same wispy smoke I disappeared into when I died.

"Mac Bhriain?" I yell. "Pappy?"

I whirl around. Everything's disintegrating, blown away by this horrible wind.

"Again!" someone shouts.

A jolt of electricity shoots into my chest. My body arches and slams back on the bed. I gasp.

"Okay, we got her. She's back," David says. "Good work everyone."

I blink, groan, and then open my eyes. "Where am I?"

I try to focus and see David, that huge man known as Max who carried Mama out of the atrium, and a couple strange looking paramedics with golden-green eyes like cats.

"Your room, mistress." David smiles warmly.

"How long was I dead?"

"Only a second or two. The hotel alerted us that a cardiac arrest was happening. We arrived in an instant."

"I see." I want to ask about Mac Bhriain but find myself overcome by sudden shyness. "Thanks for bringing me back."

David pats my hand. "This hotel--we've never lost a guest and don't plan on starting now. You've really given the hotel a run for its money."

I smile, wanly.

"Actually, it was in need of some entertainment. It

was getting a little bored. You brought some real excitement.” He grins at me.

“You’re welcome, I guess.” I’m so tired. Exhausted. This death business really wears me out. “Can I go to sleep? Is it safe? I can’t keep my eyes open.”

“You’re perfectly safe. We’ve given you some restorative drugs that will snap you right back to good health. And the hotel is aware of your every move.”

“That’s kind of creepy, you know.”

“Think of it as a benevolent friend. Aware if you need it, oblivious when you need privacy.”

“Uh, okay.” Unable to hold back, I blurt, “Will I ever get to see Mac Bhrian again?”

“That depends,” David says.

The paramedics and Max pack up the defibrillator.

“Depends on what?”

David gives me a strange, sad smile. Again, he pats my hand. “Let us know if you need anything.”

“That’s it? You’re not going to answer me?”

He smiles and prepares to depart.

“David, please.”

He follows the other men from the room, lifts his hand over his head, and shuts the door behind me.

Again, I’m alone, flooded with more feeling than I ever deemed possible. But sadly, no one to share them with. Oh, sure, I might meet a new guy. I won’t let him take advantage of me. But how will that guy compete with memories of Mac Bhriain?

CHAPTER 26

ANNORA

After orgasming, dying, chatting with my father and being defibbed back to life, I fell asleep for a long time. When I wake up, the room is still empty. Still lush. Still opulent. And I still have a twin bed. No signs of the tools I wielded with Mac Bhriain. No signs anything unusual happened in this room, save for the complete, instantaneous restoration. Whatever. It was strange enough to have been a dream.

My pussy throbs. *Nope, it was real.*

I yawn and sit up.

“What time is it?” I search around for my phone. I find it under the bed. “Six in the evening! I slept an entire day, at least I hope it was only one day. I’m famished.” I get up to perform my daily ablutions, glancing in the mirror. Same face. Same long hair. But something is different. I’ve been transformed. Healed. By an evil demon, no less, or maybe by my vivid imagination, I have no way of knowing. Or, maybe by seeing my Pappy once more. I smile. “You’re not so bad,” I tell my reflection.

I imagine Mac Bhriain behind the mirror saying, “Neither are you.”

I chuckle.

After showering and dressing in one of my better dresses--a red and black number that hugs my curves--I head down the corridor to the elevator. There are now other occupants wandering the hall, dressed splendidly. Curious now that I know what this place really is, I

surreptitiously study them. Some of them have glimmering skin. Others sport glistening fangs.

Stay away from that kind.

Others appear strangely exotic, like they're not of this world. Maybe they aren't. Either that or the special effects of this hotel are really good.

I enter the lift, remembering the kiss Mac Bhriain gave me, right here. The mere memory makes me weak in the knees. I miss him. I miss my horrible, wonderful lover. After what we shared, I'm lonely without him. Will I ever see him again?

Downstairs, I step out of the lift with two other couples, entering a corridor bustling with hotel guests.

"How are you enjoying your stay, mademoiselle?"

I turn my head for the source of the voice. Looking down, I see David.

"Well," I begin. "It's turning out to be quite an adventure."

"A good adventure, I hope." He gives me a warm smile. "You have several days left in your stay."

A lonely pang plucks at my heart strings.

Several days without Mac Bhriain.

I consider for a moment. "Yes, I'd say it's a pretty good adventure, all things considered. I'm going to have to replace some water in my system, though. I lost bucket loads from crying."

"Right this way." He gestures toward the hallway. "We've prepared a meal for you with every beverage you might desire."

"Please tell me it isn't quiche again."

"No, no quiche. Follow me."

For a short man, he moves quickly. I have to race to catch up with him. He leads me to the atrium. I cringe, not wanting to remember what went on in there...my mother, her neck ravaged. Seeing Mac Bhriain assume his

specter form. Both terrifying moments.

David looks at me, his eyes once again kind. “It will be all right, Mistress Lachman.”

“What did you call me?”

He winks, opening the door.

I take a deep breath, readying myself to enter. The room has been transformed. It was wonderful, yet tragic before; it’s beautifully uplifting now. Like nothing I’ve ever seen. Water cascades into pools. Birds and butterflies flutter from tree to tree. Twinkling lights float about the dimly lit room.

“Those look like fairy lights. How pretty!” I clap my hands together.

“They’re not just lights, they’re actual fairies.”

I scowl. “None of them will try to hump my leg, will they?”

He chuckles. “No, the little ones are the behaving kind. We hire them for moments such as this.”

“I see.”

Elegant velvet drapes hang in the corner.

David makes his way toward them and separates the heavy fabric.

As the drapes part, I see half of a dining table, lined with crystal and porcelain. Candles glow. The curtains are pushed back farther and...

Mac Bhriain leaps to his feet, dressed in another perfect fitting bluish charcoal gray suit--probably a Bespoke or another high end custom suit, that costs more than I make in a decade. His long, thick hair is tied back from his handsome face.

“Mistress Annora,” he says, a wicked, golden gleam in his eye.

“Mac Bhriain!” I exclaim. “I thought you were gone for good. I thought I made you up. I thought...” I practically leap into his embrace.

He shushes me with a kiss so hot, I wonder if I'm going to melt.

David clears his throat.

We pull away from one another and turn to see what he wants.

"A waiter will see to your dining. As to your other needs, well..." He grins. "Welcome back to Hotel Paranormal, Mac Bhriain. All rights fully restored, as of six pm this evening."

Mac Bhriain bows. "Thank you. I am indebted to you."

"Please, shadow specter. I had nothing to do with it. This was all your doing. With a little help from Selena. You're the one who grew."

Mac Bhriain scoffs, scowls, then recovers. "Give her my regards, then."

"I'm sure she'll want them in person," David says. "Not that way, mistress," he says to me. "You don't need to worry about Mac Bhriain having anything to do with Selena except friendship."

I nod and smile, my tummy relaxing. I didn't even realize it was tight.

"And now...carry on with what you were doing." He flashes an impish smile and disappears from the room.

"Where were we?" Mac Bhriain asks.

"Right here." I tap my lips.

He indulges me. Boy, oh, boy does he indulge me. I'm beginning to think sex isn't so bad. Before, I chose a lesser man. I didn't know any better. I came from a weaker place. I might still make a stupid choice in the future, but if I have the good sense to compare it against the way this demon is making me feel, whoever I end up with had better step up to the plate, big time.

What am I thinking? Panic swirls in my heart.

I push him away. "Will I ever see you again? After I

leave, I mean. Will that be the end of us?”

“Shh, Annora, shh.”

He plants feathery little kisses on my cheeks.

“Don’t fret over the future. Let’s enjoy our evening. And the next one, and the next. And, if you’re asking if I want to see you again, I’d love to. I’m a changed demon, thanks to you.”

I melt against him, thankful. “How have I changed you?”

“Mm,” he says, rocking me to and fro. “I *can* love--sort of. In my own way. I’ll never stop being a demon. Never stop torturing, haunting, or killing. But if you ever need the pain sucked from your soul, I’m your guy. At your service.” He laughs, the sound vibrating through me.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Humans,” I say. “We can get ourselves into painful situations. I might need assistance again.”

“I hope you’ll need some later this evening,” he says, his huge bulge digging into my belly.

“I’m sure I will. I can think of a few things I left unsaid last night.”

“Good.” He releases me and holds out a chair for me to sit.

“I died by the way.” I settle into the plush seat.

He pushes me and the chair into position at the table. “So, I heard. I may have had something to do with that.”

“How so?”

“I wanted to give you the ultimate experience. I wanted to have that experience with you. So...” He shrugs.

He takes his own seat across from me.

I frown. “I don’t have to die to have an orgasm with you, do I?”

He casts his gaze up and to the left. “No. I don’t think so. We might have a few kinks to work out, but I’m

willing if you're willing."

"What kind of kinks?"

"Intensity kinks. Sex with you is very, very intense." His voice growls and rumbles. "I want to find out all the ways we can pleasure one another."

"Because you care, right?" I give him my sweetest, most innocent smile.

He scoffs and rolls his eyes. "Maybe."

I pick up my fork and rake the top of his hand. "How maybe?"

He practically purrs. "Yes, Annora. I care what happens. I care about outcomes. I can at least give you that."

"Did it hurt to say?"

He shrugs. "You tell me something. Are you looking forward to having sex with me, or does it still scare you? Do I still scare you?"

"A little. But yes, I'm still looking forward to it." I boldly hold his gaze. "A lot."

He lets out a low, deep laugh. "Excellent. But first..." With a tortured face, he says, "The hotel made me learn a few things while you were napping."

"Like what?" I pick up my water glass and drink.

"Like, what do you say, after we dine, we go dancing?"

"You know how to dance?"

"I do now. Let's waltz. Do the mambo. The salsa. And then, let's top off the night with the jitterbug." He flashes me an amused smile.

I sit up, gleeful. "You'll do all those dances for me? With me?"

"I am at your service, mistress. And then, I hope you'll do me the pleasure of making me pay for my crimes. I have many, many crimes to pay for." His grin grows wide and wicked. "Centuries..."

“I’ll be happy to oblige. I hope that room TV has some more tips for me, though. I told you, this is all new to me.”

“You’re a natural,” he says. “You’ll be fine.”

“Oh! What about Min? Is he okay?”

“He’s back to his ornery, frisky self. He’s cavorting about somewhere nearby, no doubt searching for a filly or three. His seed is renowned. He wants to repopulate the equine nation.”

“The equine nation?”

“Yes, it’s a galaxy run organization. The main offices are on KELB-1b,” he says.

I don’t fully track what he’s saying, I’m so happy. *I’m happy*. Me! All that emoting I did, letting go into expressing myself in a way that would make Mama whip out the scripture...it was good for me. It was *great* for me. I’m happy again. And I got my wish to have a loving experience with a strangely loving man, er, demon.

He’s talking about places that don’t exist to me. I want to learn about where he’s been and what he’s up to. I’m simply happy. He could be talking about the moon or the stars or some far off galaxy. The only thing that matters is I’m in lust with a demon. And he’s in lust with me.

END

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Calinda B is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author who crafts paranormal, sci-fi and contemporary romance novels. An avid adventurer and outdoor enthusiast with a quirky sense of humor, she's always finding ways to torture her characters, and to entertain her long time love, her two cats or her kids and friends. She lives in the breathtaking Pacific Northwest, a place that soothes her soul and gives her plenty of time to write, scuba dive, work, write, bike ride, write, kayak, write and write some more.

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