

A stylized graphic in teal and white. It features a large, curved teal shape at the top left, a white shape resembling a succubus shadow or a winged figure in the center, and several parallel teal lines extending from the right side of the white shape. A large teal arc is at the bottom of the cover.

SUCCUBUS SHADOWS

RICHELLE MEAD

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

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About the Book

Georgina Kincaid has formidable powers. Immortality, seduction, shape-shifting – child’s play to a succubus like her.

Helping to plan her ex-boyfriend’s wedding is a different story. Georgina isn’t sure which is worse – that he’s marrying another woman or that she’s having to run around trying on bridesmaid dresses. Still, there are distractions. There’s a new succubus in town who seems intent on corrupting Georgina’s soon-to-be-wed ex.

But the *real* danger lies in the mysterious force that’s taken to visiting Georgina’s thoughts. Soon she’s going to discover who she can trust, who she can’t – and that there are far worse places than Hell in which to spend eternity ...

Succubus Shadows

Richelle Mead

For my brother Scott, who always let his little sister watch
Flash Gordon and *Star Wars* with him

Chapter 1

I WAS DRUNK.

I wasn't entirely sure when it had happened, but I suspected it had occurred around the time my friend Doug had bet me I couldn't take down three vodka gimlets faster than he could. He'd promised to take my weekend shift at work if I won, and I was going to do his stock duty for a week if he won.

When we'd finished, it looked like I wasn't going to be working next weekend.

"How did you out-drink him?" my friend Hugh wanted to know. "He's twice your size."

Through the crowd of people crammed into my condo, I peered at the closed bathroom door, behind which Doug had disappeared. "He had stomach flu this week. I'm guessing that doesn't go so well with vodka."

Hugh raised an eyebrow. "Why the fuck would anyone take a bet like that after having the flu?"

I shrugged. "Because he's Doug."

Hoping Doug would be okay, I scanned the rest of my party with the pleased air of a queen sizing up her kingdom. I'd moved into this place back in July and had been long overdue for a housewarming party. When Halloween had finally rolled around, combining the two events had seemed like a pretty reasonable solution. Consequently, my guests tonight were clad in an array of costumes, everything from elaborate Renaissance fair quality garb to the slackers who'd simply thrown on a witch's hat.

Me, I was dressed as Little Bo Peep—well, that is, I was dressed the way Little Bo Peep would if she was a stripper and/or a shameless strumpet. My frilly blue skirt stopped just above the halfway point on my thighs, and my puff-sleeved white blouse was so low-cut that I had to be careful when leaning over. The crowning achievement—literally—was my curly mane of flaxen blond hair, neatly arranged into two pigtails tied with little blue bows. It looked perfect, absolutely indistinguishable from the real thing because ... well, it *was* real.

Shape-shifting always came in handy as a succubus, but for Halloween, it was golden. I always had the best costumes because I really could turn into anything I wanted. Of course, I had to keep it within reason. Too much of a change would raise the suspicions of the humans around me. But for a hair change? Yeah. Shape-shifting was pretty convenient.

Someone touched my elbow. I turned, and my smug enthusiasm dimmed a little when I saw who it was: Roman, my sociopathic roommate.

"I think someone's getting sick in the bathroom," he told me. Roman was a nephilim, half-angel and half-human, with soft black hair and sea-green eyes. If not for the fact he occasionally went on immortal killing sprees and had me on his hit list, he would have been a pretty good catch.

"Yeah," I said. "It's Doug. He lost a vodka challenge."

Roman grimaced. He wore devil horns and a red cape. The irony wasn't lost on me. "Hope he's got good aim. I don't want to clean that up."

"What, you don't do housework either?" asked Hugh. He'd recently learned Roman wasn't paying me rent because he was "between jobs." "Seems like you should pull your weight around here somehow."

Roman gave Hugh a warning look. "Stay out of this, Spiro Agnew."

"I'm Calvin Coolidge!" exclaimed Hugh, highly offended. "This is the same suit he wore at his inauguration."

I sighed. "Hugh, nobody here remembers that." That was one of the downsides of being immortal. Our memories became obsolete as more time passed. Hugh, an imp who bought souls for Hell, was much younger than Roman and me, but he had a lot more years than any human here.

Slipping away from Roman and Hugh's argument, I headed across the room to mingle with my guests. Some of my coworkers from the bookstore Doug and I worked at were huddled around the punch bowl, and I stopped to chat. Immediately, I was bombarded with compliments.

"Your hair is amazing!"

"Did you dye it?"

"It doesn't even look like a wig!"

I assured them it was a very good wig and dealt out praise for them in return. One person, however, earned a rueful headshake from me.

"You have more creativity than all of us put together, and that's the best you could do?" I asked.

Best-selling author Seth Mortensen turned to look at me with one of his trademark, slightly scattered smiles. Even when I was dizzy with vodka, that smile never failed to make my heart speed up. Seth and I had dated for a while, plunging me into the depths of a love I'd never imagined possible. Part of being a succubus was an eternity of seducing men and stealing the energy of their souls—a real relationship had seemed out of the question. And in the end, it had been. Seth and I had broken up—twice—and while I usually accepted that he had moved on, I knew that I would love him forever. For me, forever was a serious matter.

"I can't waste it on a costume," he said. His amber-brown eyes regarded me fondly. I no longer knew if he loved me too; I only knew for sure that he still cared about me as a

friend. I kept trying to portray the same image. “Gotta save it for the next book.”

“Lame excuse,” I said. His shirt depicted Freddy Krueger, which might have been acceptable if not for the fact I suspected he had owned it long before Halloween.

Seth shook his head. “Nobody cares what guys wear at Halloween anyway. It’s all about the women. Look around.” I did and saw that he was right. All the elaborate, sexy costumes were on my female guests. With a few exceptions, the men’s dulled by comparison.

“Peter’s dressed up,” I pointed out. Seth followed my gaze to another of my immortal friends. Peter was a vampire, a very fastidious and obsessive-compulsive one. He was clad in pre-Revolutionary French garb, complete with brocade coat and a powdered wig over what was normally thin brown hair.

“Peter doesn’t count,” said Seth.

Recalling how Peter had painstakingly stenciled swans around his bathroom’s baseboards last week, I couldn’t help but agree. “Fair point.”

“What’s Hugh supposed to be? Jimmy Carter?”

“Calvin Coolidge.”

“How can you tell?”

I was saved from answering when Seth’s fiancée—and one of my best friends—Maddie Sato appeared. She was dressed as a fairy, complete with wings and a gauzy dress nowhere near as slutty as mine. Fake flowers wreathed black hair that had been pulled into a bun. Her being with Seth was something else I’d more or less come to accept, though I suspected the sting of it would never leave. Maddie didn’t know Seth and I had dated and had no clue about the discomfiture I felt over their whole relationship.

I expected her to slip her arm around Seth, but it was me she grabbed hold of and jerked away. I stumbled a bit. Five-inch heels weren’t normally a problem for me, but the vodka complicated things a bit.

“Georgina,” she exclaimed, once we were far enough away from Seth. “I need your help.” Reaching into her purse, she pulled out two pages torn from magazines.

“With wha—oh.” My stomach twisted uncomfortably, and I hoped I wouldn’t be joining Doug in the bathroom. The pages showed photos of wedding dresses.

“I’ve almost narrowed it down,” she explained. “What do you think?”

Grudgingly accepting the man I loved was going to marry one of my best friends was one thing. Helping them plan their wedding was an entirely different matter. I swallowed.

“Oh, gee, Maddie. I’m not very good at this stuff.”

Her dark eyes widened. “Are you kidding? You’re the one who taught me how to dress right in the first place.”

She apparently hadn’t taken the lessons to heart. The dresses, while beautiful on the anorexic models wearing them, would look terrible on Maddie. “I don’t know,” I said lamely, dragging my eyes away. The dresses were conjuring mental images of Maddie and Seth walking down the aisle together.

“Come *on*,” she entreated. “I know you have an opinion.”

I did. A bad one. And honestly, if I were a good servant of Hell, I would have told her they both looked great. Or I would have endorsed the worst one. What she wore was no concern of mine, and maybe if she showed up at her wedding looking subpar, Seth would realize what he’d lost when we broke up.

And yet ... I couldn’t. Even after everything that had happened, I just couldn’t let Maddie do it. She’d been a good friend, never suspecting what had occurred between Seth and me before *and* during their relationship. And as much as that petty, selfish part of me wanted it, I couldn’t let her go forward in a bad dress.

“Neither are good,” I said at last. “The full skirt on that one will make you look short. The flowers on top of that one will make you look fat.”

She was taken aback. "Really? I never ..." She studied the pictures, face falling. "Damn. I thought I had this stuff down now."

I can only assume my next words came from the liquor. "If you want, I'll go with you to some places this week. You can try some stuff on, and I'll tell you what works."

Maddie lit up. She wasn't gorgeous in the popular, magazine sort of way, but when she smiled, she was beautiful. "Really? Oh, thank you. And you can look for your dress too."

"My what?"

"Well ..." Her smile turned sly. "You're going to be a bridesmaid, aren't you?"

At that moment, I reconsidered my earlier thoughts about nothing being more painful than helping plan her wedding. Being her bridesmaid pretty much blew that out of the water. Those who believed we made our own hells on earth must have had something like this in mind.

"Oh, well, I don't know ..."

"You have to! There's no one else I'd rather have."

"I'm not really the bridesmaid type."

"Of course you are." Maddie's eyes suddenly looked at something beyond me. "Oh, hey. Doug's back. I'm going to go check on him. We'll talk about this later. You'll give in." Maddie scurried off to her brother, leaving me numb and speechless. I decided then it was worth risking illness to go get another drink. This party had taken a definite U-turn.

Yet, when I turned around, it wasn't toward the bar. It was toward my patio. One of the best features of this condo was its expansive balcony, one that looked out over Puget Sound and the Seattle skyline beyond. As I stood there, though, it wasn't the view that captivated me. It was ... something else. Something I couldn't explain. But it was warm and wonderful and spoke to all my senses. I imagined I could see colored light on my balcony, kind of like the waves of an aurora. I could also hear a type of music that

defied all human words and had nothing to do with the Pink Floyd blasting from my stereo.

The party faded into the background as I slowly moved toward the balcony. The door was open to air out the hot room, and my two cats, Aubrey and Godiva, lay near it to look outside. I stepped past them, drawn toward that which had no explanation or description. Warm autumn air engulfed me as I groped for what called me. It was all around me and yet out of my reach. It was summoning me, drawing me toward something right on the balcony's edge. I almost considered climbing on the ledge in my heels and looking over. I *had* to reach that beauty.

"Hey, Georgina."

Peter's voice jerked me out of the trance. I stared around, startled. There was no music, no color, no beckoning embrace. Only the night and the view and the patio furniture on my balcony. I turned around, meeting his eyes.

"We have a problem," he said.

"We have a lot of problems," I said, thinking of Maddie's wedding dress and the fact that I'd nearly walked off my own balcony. I shivered. I definitely was *not* going back for that next drink. Sick was one thing. Hallucinations were another. "What's wrong?"

Peter led me inside and pointed. "Cody's in love."

I looked over at our friend Cody, another vampire and Peter's apprentice. Cody was a young immortal, optimistic and endearing. He was dressed as an alien, with green antennae sticking out of his shaggy blond hair. The perfection of his silvery space suit made me think Peter had played a role. Right now, Cody was staring across the room, mouth open as he gazed at someone. He looked like I had felt just moments ago.

Her name was Gabrielle, and she'd just started working at the bookstore. She was tiny, almost pixie like, and wore black fishnets and a ripped black dress. Her spiky hair was also black, as was her lipstick. Easy coordination. Cody was

staring at her like she was the most beautiful creature on earth.

"Huh," I said. Hugh dated all the time, but I'd never really thought of the vampires—particularly Peter—having any sort of romantic interactions.

"I think he likes that she's dressed as a vampire," said Peter.

I shook my head. "Actually, that's how she always dresses."

We walked over to Cody, and it took him several moments to notice us. He seemed excited to see me. "What's her name?" he breathed.

I tried to hide my smile. Cody being smitten was one of the cutest things I'd ever seen and a welcome distraction from the other drama tonight. "Gabrielle. She works at the store."

"Is she single?"

I looked back at her as she laughed at something Maddie had said. "I don't know. Want me to find out?"

Cody blushed—in as much as a pale vampire could. "No! I mean ... unless you think it wouldn't be too obvious? I don't want you to go to any trouble."

"No trouble for me," I said, just as Doug walked by. "Hey." I caught hold of his sleeve. "Do me a favor, and I'll take my shift back."

Doug, whose Japanese-American skin was normally golden tan, could have also currently passed for an alien with his green hue. "I'd rather have my stomach back, Kincaid."

"Go investigate Gabrielle's romantic status. Cody's interested."

"Georgina!" exclaimed Cody, mortified.

Sick or not, Doug couldn't resist a little intrigue. "Sure thing."

He headed off across the room and pulled Gabrielle to him, leaning down so she could hear. At one point, he

glanced over toward us, and Gabrielle looked as well. Cody nearly died.

"Oh God."

Doug returned five minutes later and shook his head. "Sorry, kid. She's single, but she doesn't think you're her type. She's into the Goth and vampire scene. You're too mainstream for her." I was sipping a glass of water and nearly choked on it.

"That," said Peter, as soon as Doug was gone, "is what we call irony."

"How is that possible?" exclaimed Cody. "I *am* a vampire. I should be exactly what she wants."

"Yeah, but you don't look like one," I said. If Gabrielle had been a Trekkie, he might have had a shot tonight.

"I look exactly like a vampire because I am one! What should I dress up as? Count Chocula?"

The party continued in force for another couple hours, and finally, people began trickling out. Roman and I, playing good hosts, smiled and bade each of them farewell. By the time everyone left, I was weary and more than happy for it all to be over. I'd refused to drink after the balcony incident and now had a headache as a pleasant reminder of my indulgences. Roman looked as exhausted as me as he scanned the messy condo.

"Funny, huh? You throw a housewarming party to show the place off, and then people trash it."

"It'll clean up fast," I said, studying all the bottles and paper plates with remnants of food. Aubrey was licking frosting off a half-eaten cupcake, and I hastily took it away from her. "But not tonight. Help me take care of the perishables, and we'll do the rest tomorrow."

"There's no 'we' in 'clean,'" Roman said.

"That doesn't even make sense," I said, covering up some salsa. "And Peter's right, you know. You really should do more around here."

"I provide good company. Besides, how can you get rid of me?"

"I'll get Jerome to," I warned, referring to his demon father, who also happened to be my boss.

"Sure. Run off and tell on me." Roman stifled a yawn, demonstrating just how worried he was about his father's wrath. The annoying part was, he had a point. I couldn't get rid of him on my own, and I doubted Jerome would really help. Still, I could hardly believe it when Roman did wander off to bed and leave me alone with the cleanup. I hadn't thought he'd go that far.

"Asshole!" I yelled after him, getting only a slammed door in response. He really wasn't that bad of a roommate, but our troubled past often made him want to annoy me. It worked.

Fuming, I finished the necessary tidying and dropped into bed a half-hour later. Aubrey and Godiva followed me, lying side by side at the end of the bed. They were a contrast in colors, like some piece of modern art. Aubrey was white with black specks on her head; Godiva was a riot of orange, brown, and black patches. All three of us drifted off to sleep immediately.

Sometime later, I woke to the sound of singing ... or, well, that was the closest I could come to describing it. It was the same thing I'd felt earlier, an alluring, haunting pull that spoke to every part of me. Warm and bright and beautiful. It was everywhere and everything, and I longed to have more of it, to walk toward the light that shone with indescribable colors. It felt so, so good—like something I could melt into, if only I could reach it. I had the impression of an entrance, a door I simply had to push open and step through and—

Rough hands gripped my shoulders and jerked me around. "Wake up!"

Like before, the sensory overload vanished. I was left alone in a quiet, empty world. No more siren song. Roman

stood in front of me, hands shaking me as his face stared down at me with worry. I looked around. We were in the kitchen. I had no memory of getting there.

"How—what happened?" I stammered.

The face that had taunted me earlier was now filled with concern, something that troubled a small part of me. Why should someone who wanted to kill me be worried about me?

"You tell me," he said, releasing his grip.

I rubbed my eyes, willing myself to recall what had happened. "I ... I don't know. I must have sleepwalked...."

His face was still drawn and anxious. "No ... there was something here...."

I shook my head. "No, it was a dream. Or a hallucination. I had it happen earlier.... I just drank too much."

"Didn't you just hear me?" There it was again, fear for me underneath the anger. "There was *something* here, some ... force. I felt it. It woke me up. Don't you remember anything at all?"

I stared off, trying to summon up the light and haunting melody. I couldn't. "It was ... it was exquisite. I wanted ... I wanted to go to it ... to be part of it ..." There was a dreamy, wistful note in my voice.

Roman's expression grew dark. As a succubus, I was a lesser immortal, one who had once been human. Greater immortals, like angels and demons, had been created at the universe's beginning. Nephilim were born and fell somewhere in the middle. As such, their powers and senses were greater than mine. Roman could detect things I couldn't.

"Don't," he said. "You feel it again, you pull away. Don't let it draw you in. Under no circumstances should you go to it."

I looked back at him with a frown. "Why? Do you know what it is?"

"No," he said grimly. "And that's the problem."

Chapter 2

I TOSSED AND turned the rest of the night. Being visited by a weird supernatural force will do that to you. Besides, I had never fully recovered from the time an über-powerful entity of chaos had merged with me in my sleep and sucked away my energy. Her name was Nyx, and last I'd heard, she was imprisoned. Still, what she'd done to me—and what she'd shown me—had left a lasting impression. The fact that Roman couldn't identify what had happened tonight was a little un-nerving.

So, I woke up bleary-eyed, sporting a massive headache that was probably equal parts hangover and sleep deprivation. Succubi had the rapid healing that all immortals possessed, which meant I must have seriously screwed myself up to have these lingering effects. I knew the headache would pass soon, but I took some ibuprofen to help the process.

The condo was quiet when I shuffled into the kitchen, and despite my efforts to clean up the food last night, I was still surrounded in the tattered and worn-out feel that followed most parties. Godiva, curled up on the back of the couch, lifted her head at my arrival, but Aubrey continued sleeping undisturbed in her spot on an armchair. I started some coffee and then wandered over to my patio, staring out at the sunny day and the Seattle skyline on the other side of the gray-blue water stretching off before me.

A familiar sensation suddenly swept me, like brimstone and red-hot needles. I sighed.

"Kind of early for you, isn't it?" I asked, not needing to turn around to know Jerome, archdemon of the greater

Seattle area and my hellish boss, stood behind me.

"It's noon, Georgie," he replied dryly. "The rest of the world is up and around."

"It's Saturday. The laws of time and space are different today. Noon qualifies as early."

I turned around at last, largely because I'd heard the coffeemaker finish. Jerome was leaning against my kitchen wall, immaculately dressed as always in a black designer suit. Also, like always, the demon looked exactly like a circa 1990s version of John Cusack. He could appear as anything or anyone he wanted in this world, but for reasons he kept vague, Mr. Cusack was his preferred shape. I'd gotten so used to it that whenever *Say Anything* or *Grosse Pointe Blank* came on TV, I always had to pause and ask myself, "What's Jerome doing in this movie?"

I poured a cup of coffee and held up the pot by way of invitation. Jerome shook his head. "I suppose," he said, "your roommate is also being a sloth and isn't actually out running errands?"

"That'd be my guess." I doused my coffee liberally with vanilla creamer. "I used to kind of hope that when he wasn't around, it meant he was out looking for a job. Turns out I was just setting myself up for disappointment."

Honestly, I was glad it was Roman that Jerome had come to see. When Jerome was looking for me, no good ever came of it. It always tended to result in some traumatic, world-threatening event in the immortal underground.

I trudged back across the living room, noting that the cats had disappeared upon Jerome's arrival. Coffee still in hand, I headed to Roman's room, knocking once before opening the door. I figured as landlady, I had that right. Also, I'd found Roman had a remarkable ability to ignore knocking for large amounts of time.

He was sprawled across his bed, wearing only a pair of navy blue boxers that gave me pause. As I'd noted before, he was terribly good-looking, despite the prickly attitude

he'd had since moving in. Seeing him half-dressed always gave me a weird flashback to the one time we'd slept together. Then, I'd have to remind myself that he was probably plotting how to kill me. It went a long way to stifle any residual lust.

Roman's arm covered his eyes against the sunlight streaming through his window. He shifted, moving the arm slightly, and peered at me with one eye. "It's early," he said.

"Not according to your exalted sire."

A few seconds passed, and then he grimaced as he too sensed Jerome's immortal signature. With a sigh, Roman sat up, pausing to rub his eyes. He looked about as exhausted as I felt, but if there was one force in this world that could drag him out of bed after a late night, it was my boss—no matter Roman's bold claims from last night. He staggered to his feet and moved past me in the doorway.

"Aren't you going to get dressed?" I exclaimed.

Roman's only answer was a disinterested wave of his hand as he headed down the hall. I followed him back and discovered Jerome pouring himself a mug of some vodka leftover from last night. Well, it was five o'clock somewhere. He arched an eyebrow when he saw Roman's scantily clad state.

"Nice of you to dress up."

Roman made a beeline for the coffee. "Only the best for you, Pop. Besides, Georgina likes it."

A moment of heavy silence followed as Jerome's dark eyes studied Roman. I knew nothing about Roman's mother, but Jerome was the demon who had fathered him thousands of years ago. Technically, Jerome had been an angel at the time, but making the moves on a human had got him fired from Heaven and sent off to work for those down below. No severance package.

Roman occasionally made snide comments about their familial relationship, but Jerome never acknowledged it. In fact, according to both Heaven and Hell's rules, Jerome

should have blasted Roman from the earth ages ago. Angels and demons considered nephilim unnatural and wrong and continually attempted to hunt them to extinction. It was kind of harsh, even with the sociopathic tendencies nephilim tended to have. Roman had been instrumental in saving Jerome recently, however, and the two had struck a deal that allowed Roman to live peacefully in Seattle—for now. If any of Jerome's colleagues found out about this illicit arrangement, there would literally be hell to pay—for all of us. A good succubus would have told on her rule-breaking boss.

"So what brings you here?" asked Roman, pulling up a chair. "Want to toss the old football around?"

Jerome's face remained impassive. "I have a job for you."

"Like one that pays the rent?" I asked hopefully.

"Like one that ensures I'll continue to allow him to live in the lifestyle he's accustomed to," replied Jerome.

Roman had an amused, devil-may-care smile on his face that was typical of him, but I wasn't fooled. He knew the threat Jerome represented and also knew that part of their deal involved Roman doing errands for his father. Still, Roman made a good show of acting like he was the one doing Jerome a favor. The nephilim gave an unconcerned shrug.

"Sure. I've got nothing else going on today. What's up?"

"We have a new immortal visitor in town," said Jerome. If Roman's attitude annoyed him, the demon was just as good at masking his feelings. "A succubus."

My removed, psychological study of father and son dynamics came to a screeching halt. "What?" I exclaimed, straightening up so quickly that I nearly spilled my coffee. "I thought we were set after Tawny."

I'd worked the succubus scene solo around here for years until Jerome had acquired another one several months ago. Her name was Tawny, and while she was annoying and pretty inept as succubi went, there was still something

rather endearing about her. Fortunately, Jerome had sent her off to Bellingham, keeping her a comfortable hour-and-a-half drive from me.

“Not that it’s any of your business, Georgie, but this one’s not here to work. She’s here ... as a visitor. On vacation.” Jerome’s lips twisted with bitter amusement.

Roman and I exchanged looks. Immortals could certainly take personal vacations, but clearly, there was more to this.

“And?” asked Roman. “She’s really here because ...?”

“Because I’m sure my superiors want to check up on me after the recent ... incident.”

His words were delicate, with a very subtle warning not to elaborate on said incident. It was the one Roman and I had rescued him from—a summoning that had imprisoned Jerome as part of a demonic power play. Letting yourself get summoned was embarrassing for a demon and could call his territorial control into question. Hell sending someone to survey the situation wasn’t that crazy.

“You think she’s spying to see if you can still run things?” asked Roman.

“I’m certain of it. I want you to follow her around and see who she reports back to. I’d do it myself, but it’s better if I don’t appear suspicious. So I need to stay visible.”

“Lovely,” said Roman, voice as dry as his father’s.

“There’s nothing I want to do more than trail a succubus around.”

“From what I hear, you’re pretty good at it,” I piped in. It was true. Roman had stalked me invisibly a number of times. Lesser immortals like me couldn’t hide the telltale signature that wreathed all of us, but Roman had inherited that ability from Jerome, making him the perfect spy.

Roman shot me a wry look, then turned back to Jerome.

“When do I start?”

“Immediately. Her name is Simone, and she’s staying down at the Four Seasons. Go there and see what she does.

Mei will relieve you off and on.” Mei was Jerome’s second-in-command demon.

“The Four Seasons?” I asked. “Is Hell paying for that? I mean, we’re in a recession.”

Jerome sighed. “Hell’s *never* in a recession. And I didn’t think your droll commentary started until after you’d finished your coffee.”

I showed him my cup. It was empty.

Jerome sighed again and then vanished without warning. He apparently had no doubts that Roman would follow his orders.

Roman and I stood there for several quiet seconds, during which both cats resurfaced. Aubrey rubbed against Roman’s bare leg, and he scratched her head.

“Guess I should shower and get dressed,” he said at last, rising to his feet.

“Don’t trouble yourself,” I said. “And won’t you be invisible anyway?”

He turned his back to me and walked off down the hallway. “I was thinking of dropping off some job applications when Mei gives me a break.”

“Liar,” I said. I don’t think he heard.

It wasn’t until the shower kicked on that I realized I should have asked Jerome about that weird sensation last night. It was so odd; I didn’t even know how to describe it. The more I pondered it, the more I wondered if it had been alcohol-induced. Admittedly, Roman claimed he’d sensed something, but he’d drank as much as me.

And speaking of jobs ... my kitchen clock was telling me I needed to head off to mine. One thing about this condo was that the skyline view had come at the cost of work convenience. My old apartment had been in Queen Anne, the same neighborhood that Emerald City Books and Café resided in. I used to be able to walk to work, but that was impossible from West Seattle, meaning I had to allow commuting time.

Unlike Roman, I had no need to physically shower and change—not that I wouldn't have liked to. I found human routines comforting. A brief burst of succubus shape-shifting cleaned me up, putting me in a work-appropriate peach sundress and arranging my light brown hair into a loose bun. Roman didn't surface before I had to leave, so I grabbed another cup of coffee and left him a note asking if it would kill him to take out the garbage before he went off to play secret agent.

My headache and the last effects of the hangover were gone by the time I walked into the store. It was abuzz with late afternoon shoppers, people out running Saturday errands and tourists who had wandered over from the Space Needle and Seattle Center down the street. I dropped my purse off in my office and then did a managerial sweep of the store, satisfied that everything was running smoothly—until I noticed we had a line of eight people and only one cashier.

"Why are you alone?" I asked Beth. She was a long-time employee and a good one, answering my question without even looking up from her customer's order.

"Gabrielle's on break, and Doug isn't ... feeling well."

Memories of the vodka competition came back to me. I grimaced, feeling both guilty and smug. "Where is he?"

"Over in erotica."

I felt my eyebrows rise but said nothing as I turned away and walked across the store. Our small erotica section was bizarrely stuffed in between automotive and animals (amphibians, to be precise). And crammed in between the two shelves of the erotica section was Doug, sitting on the floor with his head resting facedown on his knees. I knelt beside him.

"Hair of the dog time?" I asked.

He lifted his head and brushed black hair out of his face. His expression was miserable. "You cheated. You're like half my size. How are you not in a coma?"

“Older and wiser,” I said. If only he knew just how old. I took hold of his arm and tugged it. “Come on. Let’s go to the café and get you some water.”

For a moment, he looked like he’d resist, but a valiant effort soon followed. He even managed not to stagger too much as I led him to the store’s second floor, which was half books and half coffee shop.

I grabbed a bottle of water, told the barista I’d pay for it later, and started to drag Doug to a chair. As I scanned around, I nearly came to a halt, causing poor Doug to stumble. Seth was sitting at a table, laptop spread open in front of him. This was his favorite place to write, which had been nice when we dated and now was ... awkward. Maddie sat with him, purse in hand and light coat on. I recalled that we started at the same time today. She must have just arrived.

They waved us over, and she gave her brother a chastising look. “Serves you right.”

Doug took a long gulp of water. “Whatever happened to sisterly love?”

“I still haven’t forgiven you for the time you shaved my dachshund.”

“That was like twenty years ago. And that little bastard had it coming.”

I smiled out of habit. Doug and Maddie’s bantering was usually must-see TV for me. Today, Seth held my attention. It had been easier to ignore him last night while in the throes of alcohol, easy to pretend I’d grudgingly accepted him moving on to Maddie. But now, in the cold light of sobriety, I felt that old ache stir within my chest. I swore I could smell the scent of his skin, his sweat mingled with the woody apple soap he used. Sunlight from the café’s large windows infused his messy brown hair with copper, and I could perfectly recall what it had been like to stroke the lines of his face, the smooth skin of his upper cheek and stubble on his chin.

Looking up to his eyes, I was surprised to see his attention on me as the siblings continued their playful bickering. I'd almost convinced myself last night that he only thought of me as a friend, but now ... now I wasn't so sure. There was something warm there, something considering. Something I knew shouldn't be there. I suddenly had a sneaking suspicion that he might be remembering the handful of times we'd had sex. I was thinking of it too. My powers had been shut off when Jerome disappeared, and Seth and I had been able to have "safe"—by which I meant, no succubus side effects—sex.

Except for one. He'd still been dating Maddie at the time, and cheating on her had tainted his soul with sin. That was worse than if I'd sucked his energy away. As of this moment, Seth was a Hell-bound soul. He didn't realize that, but regret for betraying her was part of what had spurred him to a hasty engagement. He felt he owed her.

The guilt forced me to look away from him, and I noticed then that Maddie and Doug had stopped their arguing. Maddie was glancing over at the coffee counter, but Doug's eyes were on me. They were bloodshot and weary, with heavy dark circles. But in the midst of that miserable, hungover look ... there was a glint of something puzzled and surprised.

"Work time," said Maddie cheerfully, standing up. She poked her brother's shoulder, making him wince and turn his attention from me. I was glad. "You going to survive your last couple hours?"

"Yeah," he muttered, drinking more water.

"Go count inventory in the back," I told him, standing as well. "I don't want customers thinking our staff can't hold their liquor. They'd be over at the chain stores so fast, it wouldn't even be funny."

Maddie's lips quirked into a smile as her brother wearily rose to his feet. "Hey, Georgina. Do you mind if Doug and I

switch shifts on Tuesday? I need to go run some wedding errands during business hours.”

Doug cut her a look. “When were you going to ask if I minded?”

“Sure,” I said, trying not to wince at the word “wedding.” “You can work the night shift with me.”

“You want to come along?” she asked. “You said you would.”

“I did?”

“Last night.”

I frowned. God only knew how many promises I’d made and had now forgotten, thanks to vodka and weird magical forces. Vaguely, I recalled her showing me wedding pictures. “I think I have some errands of my own to run.”

“One of the places is right around the corner from you,” she urged.

“Maddie,” said Seth hastily, clearly as uncomfortable with this change of topic as I was. “If she’s busy—”

“You can’t be busy all day,” Maddie begged. “Please?”

I knew it was disastrous, knew it would be courting heartache and trouble. But Maddie was my friend, and the pleading look in her eyes did something to my insides. It was guilt, I realized. Guilt over how Seth and I had betrayed her. Her expression now was full of such faith and hope in me—me, the best friend she had in Seattle and the only one she believed could help her plan this wedding.

Which is why I found myself agreeing, just as I had last night. Only this time, I had no alcohol to blame. “Okay.”

Guilt was probably the worst culprit of all when it came to stupid behavior.

Chapter 3

I WORKED UNTIL closing that night and didn't get home until around ten. To my surprise, I found Roman on the couch eating a bowl of cereal while the cats competed for who could take up the most attention on his lap. Honestly, they seemed to love him more than me lately. It was a betrayal of Caesarean proportions.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, sitting on the armchair opposite him. I noticed then that the last of the party untidiness had been cleaned. Somehow, I suspected mentioning that would result in him never cleaning again. "I figured you'd be out chasing Jerome's succubus."

Roman stifled a yawn and set the empty bowl on the coffee table. Immediately, both cats sprang off his lap to get to the residual milk. "I'm on break. Been following her all day, though."

"And?" My natural curiosity aside, I was uneasy about the idea of Jerome's authority being called into question. The archdemon might annoy me sometimes, but I had no desire for a new boss. We'd come dangerously close to a leadership change when he'd been summoned, and I hadn't been impressed with any of the candidates.

"And it was incredibly boring. You're much more fun to stalk. She went shopping for most of the day. I didn't even know stores would let you take that much shit into dressing rooms. Then, she picked up a guy at a bar, and, well, you can figure out the rest."

I rather liked the idea of Roman suffering while Simone had sex. "Figured your voyeuristic tendencies would be into that kind of pornographic display."

He made a face. "It wasn't good porn. It was like the nasty, kinky porn they keep in the back of the store. The kind of stuff that only really sick people go after."

"So no clandestine meetings to report to Jerome?"

"Nope."

"Makes sense, I guess." I stretched out and put my feet out on the table. With Doug incapacitated, I'd spent a rare day on registers, standing more than I usually did anymore. Unless I was mistaken, Roman's eyes lingered on my legs before returning to my face. "If she didn't see any immortal action today, she'd have nothing to tell on."

"Not until tonight, at least."

"Tonight?"

"How scattered are you? Peter and Cody are having one of their things tonight."

"Oh, man. I forgot." Peter loved to throw dinners and gettogethers and seemed unconcerned that I'd just had a major party of my own. As a nocturnal creature, his soirees always took place late at night. "And Simone's going?"

"Yup. Mei's with her now, and I'll relieve her at Peter's."

"So you'll be there in spirit, if not in person."

"Something like that." He smiled at my joke, and for the first time since he'd returned to town, I saw a genuinely amused sparkle in those teal eyes. It reminded me a bit of the witty, gallant guy I used to date. It also occurred to me that this was a rare non-antagonistic conversation for us. It was almost ... normal. Misunderstanding my silence, he gave me a wary look. "You aren't thinking of wussing out, are you? Your day couldn't have been that hard."

I actually *had* been thinking of wussing out. After yesterday's drama and now my regret over yielding to Maddie, I wasn't sure I was up for my immortal friends' zany hijinks.

"Come on," Roman said. "Simone is *so* boring. And I don't even mean her activities. She's just bland. If you're not there to entertain me, I don't know what I'll do."

“Are you saying the rest of my friends aren’t entertaining?”

“They pale in comparison.”

I finally agreed to go. Although, it wouldn’t have surprised me if his interest in me making an appearance was just to bum a ride. Nonetheless, I was in a good mood as I headed over to Capitol Hill. It was a little weird having Roman with me and not with me. To continue his spying, he’d gone invisible and without signature. It was like having a ghost in my car.

As usual, I was one of the last to arrive. The Three Amigos—Peter, Cody, and Hugh—were there, dressed in their usual attire now, rather than historically accurate costumes. That meant a perfectly coordinated sweater vest and slacks for Peter, jeans and a T-shirt for Cody, and business casual for Hugh. I held the door open a little longer than usual, to facilitate Roman sweeping in after me. From there, I took it on faith that he was hanging out. As soon as he let us in, Peter scurried back to his kitchen without a word.

Simone was there too. She sat on the loveseat, long legs perfectly crossed and hands resting on her knees. Her body was slim with respectably sized breasts, clad in a black skirt and silvery silk blouse. Her hair was—unsurprisingly—long and blond. Most succubi seemed to think blond was a sure-fire way to get guys in bed. I considered that attitude a sign of inexperience. I’d been a brunette—albeit one with gold highlights—for a while and never had trouble scoring action.

Hugh sat next to her, wearing the flirtatious face that was standard for him when it came to wooing women into bed. Simone regarded him with a polite smile, one she turned on me when I entered. She stood up and held out her hand. Her immortal signature smelled like violets and put me in mind of moonlight and cello music.

“You must be Georgina,” she said. “Nice to meet you.”