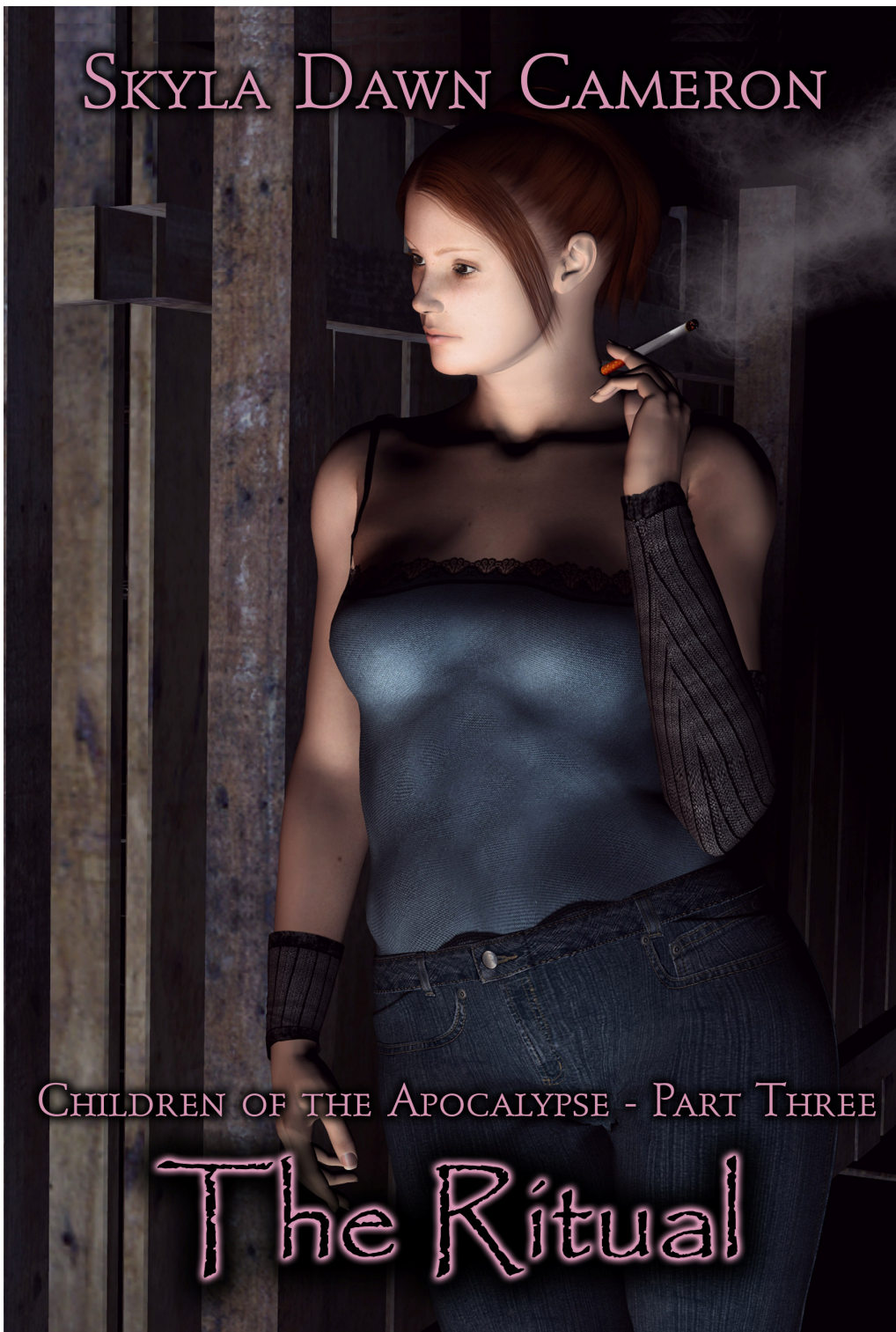


SKYLA DAWN CAMERON



CHILDREN OF THE APOCALYPSE - PART THREE

The Ritual

Updated monthly at www.ApocalypseNovel.com

Part Three: *The Ritual*

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SEVEN

Thad walked along the mall hallway slightly ahead of Genevieve, pausing every few moments and then rushing to another store window to point something out to her.

Gen had agreed to help him find something for Merri for Christmas. They'd been together over a year—it had to be special, according to him.

But special shouldn't take... She looked at her watch. ...*four hours on a Saturday afternoon.*

He stopped at the window of a jewellery store, which was packed full of people. "Necklace? Earrings maybe? Or...a ring?"

Gen sighed as she joined him. "Aren't you poor, like all students?"

Thad frowned, and she felt a little bad for bringing him back down to earth. "Yeah. I wish I was one of those trust fund kids. Maybe they have an instalment plan?"

"Maybe. But this is Merri. She's not into flashy stuff, remember."

"I know..." He turned and rested his back against the storefront. "I just...I want to do something awesome. I can't just give her a teddy bear or something lame like that."

"Yeah, you'd better not—what do you think I got her?"

"It's just...I love her." He shrugged and smiled slightly. "And you know that commercials always say a girl knows you love her by the size of the diamonds you give her."

"I *still* can't convince her to shop anywhere other than a thrift store for clothes," Gen said. "I can't see her wearing diamonds. Like I said—she's not into flashy things."

"Really? 'Cause I think she has a flashy laptop, and cell phone, and—"

"That's crap Michael bought her."

Thad rolled his eyes and started walking again. "Yeah. Right. Michael."

"And it was...uh...work related. And it's not jewellery. So it doesn't count. Michael's not her boyfriend."

"He's still competition."

Gen elbowed him in the side. "Stop being a dummy-head."

"Hey, I like getting jealous. It makes me feel all manly."

"Being manly is overrated."

"Says the lesbian."

Gen elbowed him again. She pointed to a shop a few stores down. “How about something from the gallery? Art is always awesome.”

“I’ve taken two years of Art History. It’s not awesome, Gen.”

“You could do a finger painting and send it in to be framed? Something with little hearts and ‘Merri plus Thad forever.’”

He didn’t seem to be listening. “You know, she’s getting Michael a bottle of Scotch for Christmas. Or, rather, she’s getting me to buy it because I have photo ID that puts me over nineteen.”

God, I’m getting sick of talking about Michael. It was bad enough they were supposed to head to his house for some reason in twenty minutes or so—now she had to talk about him constantly too?

“You shouldn’t worry about Merri and Michael. Now, *Sage* and Michael...that’s another story. She spends way too much time with him.” Gen shuddered. “It’s such a gross thought.”

“I thought she wasn’t supposed to go there for training anymore?”

Oh, great, apparently Merri hadn’t told him...well, it wasn’t like Thad would do any harm and run to tell Cade. “Well, not supposed to. But I think they mostly just bond over dead people they loved. But no matter what’s going on, it’s all gross—you shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“I don’t think Merri would cheat on me. It’s just...Christmas has me stressed out.”

“I’ll finish my shopping Christmas Eve, as usual,” Gen said. “I’m looking to get Michael a copy of, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* if I can find one at the second hand store. I think he needs help with the former part of the title.”

Thad looked at his watch. “I guess we can try again tomorrow. Since we have to go.”

“Yeah. What’s with the secret meeting? All he told me that it was about me, *Sage*, and Merri, and important. Michael’s not supposed to have a say in this stuff anymore.”

Thad didn’t comment, but instead walked in silence for a moment. Gen was about to ask him what his problem was, and then her eyes settled on the gallery window again and she stopped.

“Hey, they’re hiring.”

“Uh...” Thad studied her face for a moment. “And you think I need a job so I can buy Merri a diamond ring?”

“No, I think *I* need a job. Duh. I’m totally broke. The gallery would be better than a fast food place.”

“But—”

“But the meeting can wait two minutes—I just want to run in and fill out an application.”

Gen’s quick job application turned into an impromptu twenty minute interview that came about when she remarked on the techniques used on one of the paintings. After that, she was given a quick tour of the back room and

told she could come by for training on Monday afternoon. With the Christmas rush, they were in need of a new employee, but they'd been hesitant to take a potentially irresponsible student although they couldn't afford to pay more than minimum wage.

"I have a job," she said in a singsong voice as she and Thad got out of his car and walked up to Michael's house. "I can get employee discounts on having my stuff framed!"

"You're such an art nerd."

"An art nerd with a job."

Thad opened the front door and they stepped inside out of the cold December air. Gen opened her mouth to speak about her good news, but stopped when she saw Merri, Sage, and Michael sitting in the living room staring at her. Michael, of course, looked livid, but there was no surprise there.

"Okay, okay, I know," she said as she slipped off her coat and left it on the kitchen island. "We're late, but—"

"We're supposed to be having a meeting," Michael said.

"Uh, yeah, and I'm sorry. We got held up."

"Shopping?" He said the word with such contempt, it felt like she'd committed one of the seven deadly sins by just going to the mall.

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Are you incapable of taking anything seriously?" he stood from the couch and stalked towards her.

She prickled at the accusation. She'd been out getting a job, after all, which was more than she could say for him. "And what's serious? That's you're finally sober again? Should we praise you and give you a cookie?"

"Gen, come on," Merri said as she rose. She paced closer to them, ready to mediate. "We've just been waiting for you and Thad for an hour—"

"And I'm truly sorry, but who the hell cares if we're late?" Gen's gaze went to Michael again. "*You* don't get to call the shots anymore. You were fired, remember? You don't get to order us around and call for meetings. Are you *that* lonely now that you have to relive your glory days and be bossy? God, get a fucking job."

For several long, silent seconds, she thought for sure he was going to hit her. She almost wished he would—Sage would kick his ass in a heartbeat, and that's *if* Gen didn't have a little "defensive" spell cooked up for him.

She braced herself as he stormed toward her, but instead of laying a hand on her, he just kept walking. He grabbed his coat on the way out and let the door slam behind him.

"And running for the crown of Evil Hell Bitch would be..." Sage gave Gen a glare.

"You realize you have no idea what he was going to tell us?" Merri said. "It could be really important."

"Oh, he'll be back," Gen said with a roll of her eyes. "He probably went to brood at a bar. Besides, he yelled at me. That wasn't nice."

"You were late," Sage said.

“Yeah, ‘cause I was getting a job.”

“Can we get back to the part where he had something important to tell us about, well, us, and he didn’t get a chance to?” Merri said. “I honestly have *no* clue what. Now he’s gone. This is bad.”

“Uh...”

Their eyes all went to Thad.

“I kinda sorta...know.”

Merri stepped toward him slowly, frowning. “What are you talking about?”

His face shaded red and his eyes got wide. “I...know.” He looked quickly at each of them. “He told me not to say anything.”

“Say anything about what?” Gen asked.

“I’ve...kinda been helping him...with investigating something.”

“What?” Sage asked.

“Cade. Well, specifically who hired that girl to kill him.”

Sage rose and walked towards him, her arms crossed at her chest. “That was The Brethren.” Her voice betrayed a touch of doubt.

Thad shook his head. “Not according to Michael.”

“How long have you know?” Merri asked.

Somehow his eyes managed to get even wider. “I—”

“How long?”

“Since...September. A few days after it happened. He didn’t want to tell you yet. But he said the woman—Gardner or Dobakova—wasn’t a member of The Brethren. They wouldn’t have hired her either.”

“Dobakova?” Sage said.

“That was her real name. Remember when she possessed Priya a week ago...they clearly knew each other. And, I mean, he said that, back when he first asked me to help him. When he found out Alex Gardner as the hit...uh...woman...he started investigating. But he talked to her when she was Priya, and she didn’t know who hired her. Definitely not The Brethren.”

“So someone wants Cade dead.”

“Is it Michael?” Gen asked.

“Apparently not,” Thad said with a sigh.

“Why did he tell you?”

“I...well, he didn’t want to get you involved.” His eyes continued to shoot to Merri, but she barely looked at him.

“And what did you find out?” Sage asked.

“Not a whole lot. I kept snooping around and asking Cade questions. Nothing so far.”

“So why was he going to tell us?” Gen frowned. “Sharing knowledge wasn’t one of Michael’s strong points.”

“If Cade has enemies who want him dead besides The Brethren, you could all be in trouble. Michael thought you should know.”

And I feel like an idiot. So he was finally doing something helpful, and human, and she freaked out and insulted him.

Gen pulled out her cell phone. “I’ll call him.” Her call went straight to voicemail and she felt even worse. “So...I think I fucked up.”

“Yup,” Sage said.

Gen was going to snap back until she saw Merri staring at Thad. The tension in the room grew heavy.

“You lied to me,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry.” The look on his face was heartbreaking and Gen felt awful for him. He reached for Merri. “I didn’t mean—”

“This...is important. This affects us. I get secrets—you know I do—but Cade’s enemies are *our* enemies. You should have told me.”

“You didn’t tell me that you nearly got killed!” he said. His eyes reddened and his voice broke.

“You didn’t need to worry. I can take care of myself.”

“Merri—”

“Get out.”

“Mer—”

“Get the hell out of my house!”

Gen wanted to intervene, but knew well enough not to. She could talk to Merri later. This was her boyfriend, her betrayal...Gen had to stay out.

Thad looked like he wanted to say more, but stopped short of pleading. With a silent nod, he turned and left the house.

“Well then...should we ask Cade?” Gen asked. “Find out if he knows who would want to kill him?”

“And tell him that both Michael and Thad have been poking into his private life?” Sage said. “Right.”

Merri shook her head. “We don’t tell him. Not until I talk to Michael.”

“He’ll be back, right?” Sage asked. “He always comes back.”

“I hope so.”

“Tell him I’m sorry, when he does?” Gen said. “‘Cause I’d very much like him to not revoke permission to let me stay here for Christmas in a few weeks.”

“I live here too,” Merri said. “He won’t revoke your permission. I promise.”

~~*

Krysta writhed beneath him, head thrown back and saying something that he hadn’t really been listening to. The movements of sex were merely going through the motions now, and after she clawed his shoulders and screamed her release, he finally admitted any desire to continue had faded. Michael rolled off of her and lay flat on his back, flaccid and depressed.

“Saving your energy for later?” she said. She moved onto her side and traced a line of sweat along his bare chest.

He didn’t answer. His gaze fixed on the ceiling, he tried to untangle the mix of feelings within him. He could identify them all, but realization became clearer and clearer as the minutes ticked by.

Days had passed since he'd arrived. He hadn't left. He probably should have gone to a hotel, but...Christ, he didn't know what the fuck he expected. Solace? Distraction? Whatever he'd been looking for, he hadn't found it yet.

Krysta prattled on about going out that night, or dining the following day, or something. He wasn't listening. Something about Christmas Eve in a few weeks.

"...so I'm thinking that—"

"I can't do this anymore."

She pulled herself onto her elbow. "What?"

"I can't do this anymore," Michael repeated.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

He sat up in bed. "I don't want to be here."

"Like hell you don't." She ran her hand along his arm and back. "You haven't left my bed for nearly five days now."

She was right. Four and a half days of fucking and drinking. The latter had made the former more bearable. But he couldn't do it anymore.

"I have to go." He reached for his jeans, dropped not far from the bed, and slipped them on.

"Where?"

No idea. Just away. Away from her. Away from her place. Away from trying to forget his problems with Krysta and her bed.

He stood and slipped on his pants, and then his shirt.

"Where are you going?"

"I can't...be here. With you."

"*Five days, Michael,*" Krysta said, irritation rising in her voice. "You can't just show up here, stay for five days, and then just...leave."

"That's what I'm doing."

"What *the hell* is going on with you?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her. The sheet had slipped as she sat up, and she sat there naked in bed, staring at him. Danger flashed in her eyes. He knew he'd do well to get the hell away from her as soon as possible.

"I think I've been pretty clear about what I'm doing. I'm leaving."

"Which is absurd. *Why* do you think you're allowed to leave?"

"I don't want to be here."

"Yes, you do," she said coldly. She stood and sauntered over to him, rage simmering in her eyes. "You love me."

He almost laughed. "You really think that's what this is? *Love?*"

She lifted her chin defiantly and gave him a smile. "Again, you don't spend five days in the bed of someone you don't love."

This time he did laugh. The woman was fucking nuts.

"Is there someone else? Because..." She slid her fingertip down his arm and looked up at him from beneath long dark lashes. "You could always bring her along too. I can play nice with others."

Another's face flashed in his mind for an instant. "There will always someone else. And you're not her. You'll never be her."

"Michael—"

“I don’t love you,” he said. “I’m never going to love you.”

“Try harder,” she said in a low voice. “And maybe I won’t kill you.”

“This is waste of time and isn’t going to work.”

She cursed at him as he left the room, and then eventually her apartment. This time, he knew he wouldn’t be back.

~~*

Merri and Gen had picked up a few sets of LED Christmas lights in various colours at a discount store on Christmas Eve, and spent time stringing them around the doorways of Michael’s house.

They hadn’t seen their host in over two weeks. Worry settled in Merri, and grew worse day after day. He’d never taken off for more than a day before.

She didn’t raise these concerns to Gen, who no doubt felt bad herself. *And right she should, since it’s her damn fault.* Merri immediately regretted the internal outburst. Gen made stupid choices. All of them did, all the time. Michael could have given her time to explain why she and Thad had been late, rather than assume the worst.

Thad. After a week of ignored phone calls and email, he’d seemed to have stopped bothering. Gen tried, a few times, to talk Merri into seeing him. She’d refused.

People had all sorts of reasons to lie, and she’d always believed that everyone was entitled to personal secrets. But this wasn’t a secret about Thad’s past, or about some old trauma. This was about *her*. This was about Gen and Sage. Their lives, their futures. If he knew something about Cade they didn’t—like that multiple people wanted him dead—he should have said something and not waited three months.

“It’s around seven-thirty,” Merri said as she stapled the last of the lights at the bottom of the doorway to her room. “Place is pretty festive—why don’t you go see if Levi is on?”

“Oh! Right!” Gen slipped into Merri’s room to webcam with Levi, who had gone with his mom to visit a relative over Christmas in Thunder Bay. “Mer, I think I’m going to order pizza while I’m on here, okay? Place nearby is doing free delivery.”

“Okay,” Merri called back. She collected the boxes the lights had come in and broke them down for the recycling bin.

Michael always had cash stuffed in one of the kitchen drawers in case Merri was ever in need of groceries and he wasn’t around, so she fished out a couple of twenties for pizza. Just as she closed the drawer again, there was a knock at the door.

That was quick. Gen probably just went for some kind of plain cheese pizza...

Merri opened the door to see Thad standing in the snow.

Her lips pursed and she didn’t say anything at first. And then she glanced over her shoulder to see Gen peering around her bedroom door.

“So I didn’t really order pizza,” Gen said.

Conspiracies abounded. With a heavy sigh, Merri pulled on her boots and took her coat from behind the door, then stepped outside into the cold.

“Can we go for a drive?” he asked.

“Where? Your apartment to spend time with your roommates on fucking Christmas Eve? No thank you.”

“No. Just...trust me?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Okay, wrong thing to say. Please?”

“I don’t want to leave Gen alone for long,” she warned.

“Okay.”

With reluctance, she got into the passenger seat of his car. They drove in complete silence for about twenty minutes until Lake Ontario came into view.

“Where are we going?” she asked coolly.

“I just want to talk to you for a bit. I promise I’ll take you back later, if you want.”

She hated being mad at him. It felt unnatural. But she’d trusted him more than, arguably, anyone else in her life. What else could he be keeping from her? It was righteous anger, she told herself. Sure, he was sorry. But that wasn’t good enough.

He drove the car right up to the beach where a tent was set up and a fire pit awaited flame.

“Camping in winter?”

He didn’t answer her as he cut the engine, got out, and went to build a fire.

With a sigh, she followed. She crossed her arms over her chest and shivered while she stood over him.

“I miss you,” he said quietly. The wood started to glow, and soon orange flames rolled up, starkly contrasting the pale snow, lake, and beach.

“You lied to me.”

“And I’m sorry.” He chanced a glance up at her. “I really am. I know it’s a cliché, but I haven’t been able to eat or sleep or even think.” He rose slowly, cautiously, and stepped toward her. “I didn’t tell you what Michael and I have been doing, but you didn’t tell me you were almost killed. I had to hear that from him, standing there in that hotel room, where you *almost* died. Do you know what that’s like?” His voice broke. “To stand there...and see *bullet holes* in the walls? To know if things had happened a little differently, I could have been standing over your body? Looking at your blood?”

She felt her eyes burn with tears. Though she opened her mouth, she couldn’t think of what to say.

“I know you’ve always taken care of yourself. And I know you have Gen and Sage. But...Merri, I need you. I can’t...”

She threw her arms around him then, guilt heavy and leading her to forget her own anger. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He ran his hand back through her hair. “I should have told you. I’m sorry.”

She shivered again. “Did you have to bring me to the beach in the dead of winter to tell me this, though?”

He kept his arms around her, but pulled back and nodded to the tent. “It has a heater in it. Gen lent me the tent. Her Christmas gift to you, or us. So...” He looked back at her. “Want to stay?”

Merri answered with a kiss.

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Genevieve had Merri’s laptop set up with reruns of *South Park* Christmas specials playing. She lay on her stomach watching, and wished she had some popcorn to go along with it.

The episode she watched got to the point at the end where Jesus sang “Happy Birthday” to himself, and she felt like she was identifying way too much with the son of god.

Christmas Eve. All by herself.

She was staying at Merri’s because her parents didn’t want her left alone, and yet here she was, all alone. Sure, Penny was there. And she was grateful. And she couldn’t blame Merri for being gone—not when Gen herself had helped plot to get her and Thad together to talk. That was four hours ago. Now the clock neared midnight, and she wasn’t home yet. Gen took that to be a good thing.

Or, good for Merri and Thad. Bad for me. But she wouldn’t dare have interfered with the plan. No, they were too cute to be all broken up and angsty.

The front door opened and slammed closed outside of Merri’s room. For a moment, she held her breath, kind of hoping it was Merri. But then footsteps stomped across the hardwood and thumped up the stairs.

Michael.

So he was home. No one had seen him in the past few weeks. Wherever he went, Merri said he didn’t even return to pick up clothing.

Part of her wanted to go upstairs and apologize. Well, most of her, actually. But the other part of her—the rational side—suspected he might kill her on sight, and easing her conscience with an apology wasn’t worth certain death.

Her gaze travelled to the large wrapped gift leaning against the wall by the door. It was Christmas Eve, after all. Michael didn’t seem the type to be bought, but maybe a friendly present would keep some of the homicidal tendencies at bay? At least during the holidays...

She waited several minutes until she grew bored with the *South Park* rerun and rose. After an unsuccessful attempt at talking herself out of bothering him, she picked up the big, flat, wrapped package, opened the door, and hauled the heavy gift out into the main room. All the lights were off except for one or two upstairs and the little multicoloured LED lights around

the doorways. Every few seconds there was a sudden thump up in the loft, as if one object kept colliding with another.

She walked up the stairs with trepidation. When she neared the top, she made out a figure at the far end of the loft. Michael stood facing the wall, blindfold on, throwing knives at a target board. She was pretty sure he'd been wearing a sweatshirt and not a sleeveless black shirt when he'd stormed off weeks ago, so wherever he'd been, he had clothes. *So he wasn't in a gutter drinking somewhere—I guess that's a good thing.*

At the top of the stairs, she rested the gift along the half wall in the shadows. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, she put extra weight on her left foot. The floor beneath her barely creaked, but it was enough to snap Michael to attention. He twisted around and a knife shot from his hand immediately. It whizzed past her head by only a few inches and clattered to the floor downstairs.

Michael yanked the blindfold off to stare at her.

"I thought we agreed not to throw knives at each other anymore, and by that I mean you wouldn't throw them at me."

"I thought you were Merri."

"And...you throw knives at her?"

"I...kinda threw that without thinking. Natural reaction."

Naturally creepy.

He tossed the blindfold and other pair of knives onto the tabletop in the corner, and walked past her to jog down the stairs to retrieve the other knife.

She shivered a little, more from nervousness and a near-death experience rather than finding the house cold, and wandered around the loft. Most of the knives had hit the target, but a noticeable few hadn't. Either his concentration was off, or he suddenly sucked.

"Merri's not home?" he asked as he came back up the stairs.

"She's with Thad. They're making up. I hope."

He didn't ask why they needed to make up in the first place. Either he knew, or he didn't care.

"So I stayed here anyways. I thought she might have been back by now, but... It's still okay, right?"

He shrugged as he gathered up the knives and put them away in the cabinet on the far wall. "I don't care."

That's better than a, "No, I want to kill you," she thought.

After putting away the knives, he reached for a glass of honey brown liquid on top of his dresser.

"More car bombs?" she asked.

Michael shook his head as he downed the rest. "Bourbon." He went for the mini fridge and pulled out a bottle. He filled up his glass, then glanced at her. "You want?"

She'd never had bourbon before, but she was alone on Christmas Eve with Michael of all people. If ever there was a reason to drink...

"Sure."

He took another glass, filled it with ice, and poured her a drink. She accepted it and took a seat on the edge of the bed while she sipped. It burned like fire down her throat, and she wondered why the hell anyone would drink such an awful thing. Even as she questioned that, she took another sip.

Merry Christmas to me.

“So Merri just left you alone?” he asked.

“Yeah. I thought she’d be home...but I think I already said that.” She took another sip. “Can you tell me...where you’ve been? We haven’t seen you in weeks. Is this the first time you’ve been back?”

“Yeah.”

“Where...?”

“Trinidad.”

“Oh. Is it... nice there during Christmas?”

He didn’t answer, but instead walked towards the armoire, opened the door, and started rifling through the contents.

“So yeah,” Gen continued. “It’s been really boring around here. Very anti-Christmas. I almost put up a tree yesterday.”

“You didn’t visit friends?” he asked, still looking for something in the pile of clothes. “Um...Levi?”

“Naw...it’s a weird Christmas there with the split up family. He and his mom went away for a few days. I webcammed with him, though.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Girlfriend? We broke up, remember?”

“Merri said something about Priya.”

“Oh...I’m not dating her. Yet. Hopefully soon. Raji’s not being too helpful there. I think he’s still in denial that I don’t like boys. So...you? You didn’t go to your...girlfriend’s?” *Most awkward question of the year...*

He actually stopped his searching to look around the armoire at her. “Huh?”

“Krysta.”

“Not my girlfriend.”

Gen rolled her eyes. Stupid boys and their stupid semantics. “Whatever. Fuck buddy, then.”

“What?”

“Well, that’s what Merri said.”

Michael shook his head and went back to looking. At last he seemed to come to what he’d been looking for, and pulled out a small package wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. He tossed it onto the bed beside her.

Gen picked up the package gingerly, as if it might bite. “What’s this?”

He grabbed his glass and took a long drink, then spoke without looking at her. “Merry Christmas.”

Maybe he wasn’t Michael anymore. Maybe he was...fake Michael. Or evil Michael. She’d have to get a good look later to see if he had an evil moustache.

She pulled the twine off and gently slid her finger under the seam in the paper until it tore. “You got me...a book.” She pulled the paper off complete

and frowned as she recognized it. “You got me...The Witch history book that you let me borrow last year? Do I get to borrow it again?”

He paced a little, still with his drink in hand. “You wanted to keep it before, and I figured this is the end, right? It doesn’t matter now. This was the last reincarnation. There’s no reason to keep it, and I’m not fucking giving it to Cade. Merri and Sage are getting theirs too.”

She flipped open the pages, so many of them yellow with age. The book scared her—it had always creeped her out a little. All these other hers. All dead so young. Stories about them. Pictures...the odd photo, several drawings, and...

Her gaze settled on the last picture in the book. Genevieve’s own eyes looked back at her.

“Oh my god,” she whispered. If a mirror could reflect a black and white, pencil drawing of her...that would be it. She glanced up at him. “You did this?”

Michael shrugged. “You’re The Witch. You should be in The Witch Book.”

“God...” She looked back at the picture. “It’s beautiful. Not that I’m...like...but...wow. You’re so good.”

His response was to finish his bourbon.

“I...kinda have something for you. I was hoping you’d like it and forgive me for being bitchy and yelling at you, but I was uber cheap this year and made everyone presents, so...it might suck.” She gestured toward the large gift against the wall.

Michael’s gaze followed hers, and he walked over to pick it up.

“I totally won’t blame you for making fun of it...”

The green paper tore under his grasp until he’d revealed the framed painting.

He stared at it for several long moments.

“I know it has some abstract stuff, but—”

“It’s good.” He still studied it but gave a slight nod.

He’d barely ever said a handful of positive things about her art. She wasn’t entirely convinced he’d like it, but she’d done it for school and never liked keeping around old art pieces, unless her mom choice to display them. This was a mix of realism and abstract, and praised by her art teacher. Ninety-five percent; her best mark yet. Of course, that never mattered to Michael—he hated nearly everything she did anyway.

“It’s...okay,” she said.

“No...it’s good. You stopped trying to copy other styles. This is your own.”

“It’s not all realism, though—”

“And it doesn’t need to be.” His gaze scanned the far wall, and he nodded toward it. “It can go over there.”

“You don’t actually have to hang it up,” she said, still a little surprised at how well it was received.

He set it down again and went to get something from the bottom drawer of his dresser, then returned with a hammer and nail. “At least it’s something

different.” He gestured to the oil paintings on his walls, mostly scenery. “First piece not by yours truly.”

She glanced around at all the art pieces. Once again, she marvelled at how good he was. How could someone with such artist talent be such an awful person...

But then, there was something missing in his work, usually. With few exceptions, it lacked life. Lacked soul. Technically perfect, but... Usually, there was no feeling.

Because he doesn't have feelings.

He held up the painting against the wall and looked it over. “Is this straight?”

“Little to the left.” Maybe she'd had too much bourbon, but even as he moved it to the left, it still didn't look straight. “No, the other left. Wait, that doesn't look right either...”

“Okay, *you* hold the damn picture,” he muttered.

She left her glass on the nightstand and went to hold the large painting for him while he made minor adjustments, and planned where to put the nail in the wall. She held it in place while he marked the spot with a pen, then drove the nail in. Gen handed him the wide frame to place.

So it was Christmas Eve. And, of all people, she was hanging out with Michael. And he said her painting was actually good. She felt a little lightheaded and figured she ought to lay off the bourbon from then on, but emotion welled in her and she couldn't help herself. She threw her around his neck and hugged him tightly.

“Merry Christmas and thank you,” she whispered.

He tensed under her arms, and now it was dread surging in her.

The painting slipped from his grasp.

“I'm sorry,” she said quickly as she stepped back. “I know you said not to hug you, but we're almost like friends now, and—”

He backed away, gaze on the ground, and turned away from her.

“I'm sorry,” she said again. “It was...just the Christmas spirit. I didn't mean to...”

This wasn't helping...and she didn't know *what* to do to help. Her brain felt like she'd missed some important bit of information, but couldn't quite grasp what.

Last time I'll be nice. Him being nice back was too much of a Christmas miracle to expect it to last.

He must have some kind of sensory complex. Didn't like people touching him, and probably hating the feeling of wet socks and grains of rice too.

“I'll just go back to Merri's room,” Genevieve said. “I'm sorry.” Through she tried to move quickly, she halted as a hand grabbed her wrist suddenly.

She gazed over her shoulder, fearfully. *This isn't going to end well.* “I'm sorry, okay?”

Michael's eyes met hers. He'd snapped. That was the only thing she saw in his gaze now—something had snapped.

But I'm stronger than that now. She wouldn't let him push her around. Maybe this whole "friend" thing had been a ploy for him to then attack her because she'd yelled at him before. Maybe she really had done something wrong.

Whatever. I don't fucking care.

Her back straightened as confidence touched her. "Let me go."

His grip on her wrist tightened.

"Let me go." She tried to yank out of his grasp, even pulling her wrist against his thumb like Sage had taught her. Didn't do any good.

Spells. Why was she worrying about competing physically? She had to have something there to stop him. Her mind cycled through the ones she had memorized.

Let's get a little offensive then... The spell she'd used on Gardner—the one that had killed her—left her lips with barely a thought about the consequences.

And...satisfaction. She tried not to smile as she noticed his eyes startled; he knew what was happening. His lips parted to gasp for breath.

But he didn't crumple over like Gardner—he tugged her back and reached for her throat. Michael sucked in a deep breath, eyes even angrier than before.

Fuck. She hadn't expected that, and the spell ceased as her concentration evaporated. She tried again to pull out of his grip, but his other hand circled her neck and held her there, tightening.

Oh god...he's going to kill me.

She pulled her arm away again, but he squeezed her wrist tighter and twisted it behind her. She winced—not from pain, but because the action startled her.

"Get your damn hands off of me," she whispered, anger rising. She was beyond this now. She wasn't going back to being that scared little girl every time he threatened her. "Let me—"

Suddenly she was moving towards him again as he tugged her forward, and then he kissed her.

The kiss didn't register in her brain at first. She felt disconnected from her body, like it wasn't really happening to her. But the lips against hers were real—too real. This kiss wasn't a request. It wasn't a question. It was a demand.

She poured all of her strength into twisting out of his grip and pushing him away. Her steps moved backward involuntarily, as if her feet were ready to move before her brain knew to tell them.

Green eyes bored into hers. Words wouldn't form, and if they did, she wasn't sure her mouth could speak them. She searched his gaze, looking for any of the confusion there that she felt, but...

I have to go, I have to get out of here... She moved forward, but not past him this time—instead she reached for him and pressed her lips to his.

It didn't make sense. It was irrational. Everything in her was repelled at the thought, yet at the same time it felt...

She pulled away, lower lip trembling. *What the hell is happening to me?* Michael grabbed her again and kissed her roughly. Her head swam. And then she was moving backwards, stepping back rapidly as he moved forward, until her back hit the brick wall behind her. He took her wrist again and pinned it against the wall above her head. The prickle of hair on his chin scratched her as he dragged his mouth down, over her jaw, to her throat. She gasped as she leaned her head back, and his hands moved to travel over her body...

Reality struck her coldly, almost violently, and she froze. “Stop,” she whispered. Eventually her brain seemed to regain control of her limbs, and she pushed him away long enough to slip to the side.

“Okay...what the *hell* is going on here?” Gen’s gaze darted to him, but he stood with his back to her and didn’t say anything. “Am I really drunk? I don’t feel drunk. Maybe buzzed. Does bourbon do this to everyone? Did you drug me? What just happened?”

He still didn’t answer, but then Gen didn’t think she could stop talking if she wanted to.

“This doesn’t make any sense.” She sank down on the edge of his bed. “It’s insane. I don’t even like boys. I’ve never liked boys—not like that. And I still don’t. And I hate you. I mean, well...occasionally you have moments of humanity, but...it’s not like...”

“I know,” he said at last, voice low.

“And I thought you hated me.”

He nodded.

Oh, this was so not good. It wasn’t natural. “I don’t feel so good... Oh, god, what the hell am I going to say to people? I can’t—”

He turned to her suddenly, finally, to glare. “You don’t say anything.”

“But...” Okay, so maybe there was no logical reason to tell anyone, but still... “But I have to say something. It’ll come out—”

Michael started pacing swiftly back and forth in front of her. “No one needs to know anything about this. *Ever.*”

She prickled, as if he’d insulted her. “What the hell? Are you suddenly ashamed that you kissed a rather cute girl?”

“No, just that it’s *you.*”

“Hey—”

“Are you *honestly* saying you want people to know about this?”

He was right. She was ashamed and horrified and feeling rather dirty. And not dirty in a sexy way, either. Whether drunk or possessed or something, she’d never say anything, ever. God, the looks of disgust she’d get...

Possessed.

“What if we’re possessed?” she asked. “Or, at least I am. Well, probably you. But remember, when we were being haunted by that woman? She possessed Priya, who in turn tried to jump your bones, which was way gross, and do you think you can *please* stop pacing for two fucking seconds and help me figure this out?”

He stopped abruptly and dropped onto the edge of the bed beside her, chin resting on his folded hands and staring blankly ahead.

“Are we possessed?” she asked again.

“With temporary insanity, maybe,” he muttered.

“I’m serious.”

Michael sighed. “No. Alex’s spirit is gone.”

“Are you sure—”

“Priya’s a medium. She would have known.”

Gen grabbed her drink from the nightstand. Most of the ice had melted, and the watered down drink went down smoother than the concentrated stuff. She returned the empty glass to the table and noticed her fingers trembling a little.

She glanced over at him. “This is freaking me out. I’m...I don’t... I’m trying to rationalize it and process it and convince myself I’m not insane or secretly high or something, and all my brain keeps coming back to is that I’d rather go back to the kissing part.”

Michael looked at her sharply. A few breathless seconds passed in which fear filled her. When at last he reached for her, she felt something beyond terror, but didn’t fight it.

Everything was different. Rough, hard, frightening. The opposite of anything she had ever wanted or desired. There was a hint of violence in every coarse kiss, every touch...

She sank back on the bed, with Michael heavily atop her. For several long moments she was lost. Searing lips moved over her throat, teeth grazing her flesh. His knees slid between hers and she involuntarily lifted her hips to meet his. The fierce hunger of his hands and mouth consumed her.

As she felt calloused hands on her waist, tugging her shirt up, her eyes shot open and brain rebelled.

“No.”

One small shove of his shoulder was enough. Michael rolled off of her to lie on his back beside her. He stared up at the ceiling and didn’t say anything.

“Look...I don’t know what’s happening. And I’m scared. And I’m pretty sure we’ll be sober and not-possessed in the morning so we’ll forget all about this. Or maybe not. I don’t know. But I...” She looked over at him. God, she wished he’d look back—if only so she could try to gauge some sort of reaction from his eyes. “I’m not going to be your new fuck buddy. So if that’s what you’re going for and you’re just trying to screw with my head for kicks, don’t bother. I’m not going to sleep with you.”

She should go. He wasn’t going to say anything and this whole situation was just getting weirder and weirder as the minutes ticked by.

“Okay,” he said at last.

Did I hear that right? “What?”

He turned his head and met her eyes. “Okay.”

A few beats passed, and then she was on him. His hand tangled in her hair, and her mouth met his in brutal kiss.

~~*

Michael lay awake well into the night watching her sleep. And thinking. They had talked. About art, about people, about...god, he couldn't even remember anymore. But he'd maintained their agreement: that was all they did.

Sure, he was probably a little drunk. That didn't explain what happened, and he knew it, but he let Gen continue to think that was the reason.

He wasn't going to think about the real cause. Wouldn't let his mind tread there—not tonight, not in the foreseeable future, he hoped. Anything could happen the next day, or the day after that. No reason to tell her. She didn't need to know.

If she hadn't touched him, hadn't tried to hug him, hadn't been that close...nothing would have happened. They'd have hung the picture. Maybe spoken awkwardly some more. Eventually, she would have returned downstairs.

But that wasn't how it happened, and he couldn't go back. One embrace changed everything—pushed him over the edge, force him to confront something within in. And that spark of power in her eyes...the challenge, the danger, the strength...that did it. Driven by emotion, spinning out of control... No more fighting it. He was lost.

Her eyes twitched beneath their lids as she dreamed. What went on in her mind, in her dreams, he couldn't guess. She mumbled something once or twice, but that was it. For a fleeting second, he wished she'd wake up. But no, this was easier.

He reached for her forehead and brushed the strands of blonde hair back. She didn't stir. His hand continued along her cheek and jaw, then paused heavily on her throat. His thumb brushed the tender flesh there.

Two desires resided within him. For so long, it was only to kill. To damage. That had always been the strongest—almost blinding in its intensity. And earlier that night, the want rose again and he thought it was the same old thing—to kill. But with startling clarity, it hit him. He wanted *her*. He wanted to watch her eyes roll back, lips part, and body clutch his in climax. Pleasure and pain. Sex and death. Nearly indistinguishable at times.

Merri's words, from over a year ago, echoed in his head.

This isn't going to end well.

She was right, and Michael was terrified.

*For people reading the PDF only—please keep an eye on the site for an announcement about the future of serials, including Children of the Apocalypse.

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