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Divine Evil

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Published by Piatkus

Extract

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Chapter 1

The rite began an hour after sunset. The circle had been prepared long ago, a perfect nine feet, by the clearing of trees and young saplings. The ground had been sprinkled with consecrated earth.

Clouds, dark and secretive, danced over the pale moon.

Thirteen figures, in black cowls and cloaks, stood inside the protective circle. In the woods beyond, a lone owl began to scream, in lament or in sympathy. When the gong sounded, even he was silenced. For a moment, there was only the murmur of the wind through the early spring leaves.

In the pit at the left side of the circle, the fire already smoldered. Soon the flames would rise up, called by that same wind or other forces.

It was May Day Eve, the Sabbat of Roodmas. On this night of high spring, both celebration and sacrifice would be given for the fertility of crops and for the power of men.

Two women dressed in red robes stepped into the circle. Their faces were not hooded and were very white, with a slash of scarlet over their lips. Like vampires who had already feasted.

One, following the careful instructions she had been given, shed her robe and stood naked in the light of a dozen black candles, then draped herself over a raised slab of polished wood.

She would be their altar of living flesh, the virgin on which they would worship. The fact that she was a prostitute and far from pure disturbed some of them. Others simply relished her lush curves and generously spread thighs.

The high priest, having donned his mask of the Goat of Mendes, began to chant in bastardized Latin. When he had finished his recitation, he raised his arms high toward the inverted pentagram above the altar. A bell was rung to purify the air.

From her hiding place in the brush, a young girl watched, her eyes wide with curiosity. There was a burning smell coming from the pit where flames crackled, sending sparks shooting high. Odd shapes had been carved in the trunks of the circling trees.

The young girl began wondering where her father was. She had hidden in his car, giggling to herself at the trick she was playing on him. When she had followed him through the woods, she hadn't been afraid of the dark. She'd never been afraid. She had hidden, waiting for the right time to jump out and into his arms.

But he had put on a long, dark coat, like the others, and now she wasn't sure which one was Daddy. Though the naked woman both embarrassed and fascinated her, what the grown-ups were doing no longer seemed like a game.

She felt her heart beating in her throat when the man in the mask began to chant again.

"We call on Ammon, the god of life and reproduction. On Pan, the god of lust."

After the calling of each name, the others repeated it. The list was long.

The group was swaying now, a deep hum rising up among them while the high priest drank from a silver chalice. Finished, he set the cup down between the breasts of the altar.

He took up a sword and pointing it south, east, north, and west, called up the four princes of hell.

Satan, lord of fire
Lucifer, bringer of light
Belial, who has no master
Leviathan, serpent of the deep

In the brush, the young girl shuddered and was afraid.

"Ave, Satan."

"I call upon you, Master, Prince of Darkness, King of the Night, throw wide the Gates of Hell and hear us." The high priest shouted the words, not like a prayer, but a demand. As his voice rang out, he held up a parchment. The lights from the greedy flames washed through it like blood. "We ask that our crops be bountiful, our cattle fruitful. Destroy our enemies, bring sickness and pain to those who would harm us. We, your faithful, demand fortune and pleasure." He placed a hand on the breast of the altar. "We take what we wish, in Your name, Lord of the Flies. In Your name, we speak: Death to the weak. Wealth to the strong. The rods of our sex grow hard, our blood hot. Let our women burn for us. Let them receive us lustfully." He stroked down the altar's torso and between the thighs as the prostitute, well-schooled, moaned and began to move under his hand.

His voice rose as he continued his requests. He thrust the sword's point through the parchment and held it over the flame of a black candle until all that remained of it was the stink of smoke. The chant of the circle of twelve swelled behind him.

At some signal, two of the cloaked figures pulled a young

goat into the circle. As its eyes rolled in fright, they chanted over it, nearly screaming now. The athamas was drawn, the ceremonial knife whose freshly whetted blade glimmered under the rising moon.

When the girl saw the blade slice across the white goat's throat, she tried to scream, but no sound passed her lips. She wanted to run, but her legs seemed rooted to the ground. She covered her face with her hands, weeping and wanting to call for her father.

When at last she looked again, the ground ran with blood. It dripped over the sides of a shallow silver bowl. The voices of the men were a roaring buzz in her ears as she watched them throw the headless carcass of the goat into the fire pit.

Now the stink of roasting flesh hung sickeningly in the air.

With a ululant cry, the man in the goat mask tore off his cloak. Beneath he was naked, his white, white skin glimmering with sweat, though the night was cool. Glinting on his chest was a silver amulet inscribed with old and secret symbols.

He straddled the altar, then drove himself hard between her thighs. With a howling scream, a second man fell on the other woman, dragging her to the ground, while the others tore off their cloaks to dance naked around the pit of fire.

She saw her father, her own father, dip his hands into the sacrificial blood. As he capered with the others, it dripped from his fingers. . . .

Clare woke, screaming.

Breathless, chilled with sweat, she huddled under the blankets. With one trembling hand, she fumbled for the switch on the bedside lamp. When that wasn't enough, she rose to flip on others until the small room was flooded with light. Her hands were still unsteady when she drew a cigarette from a pack and struck a match.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she smoked in silence.

Why had the dream come back now?

Her therapist would say it was a knee-jerk reaction to her mother's recent marriage—subconsciously she felt her father had been betrayed.

That was bull.

Clare blew out a defiant stream of smoke. Her mother had been widowed for over twelve years. Any sane, loving daughter would want her mother's happiness. And she was a loving daughter. She just wasn't so sure about the sane part.

She remembered the first time she'd had the dream. She'd been six and had wakened screaming in her bed. Just as she had tonight. But then, her parents had rushed in to gather her up and soothe. Even her brother, Blair, had come in, wide-eyed and wailing. Her mother had carried him off while her father stayed with her, crooning in his calm, quiet voice, promising her over and over that it was only a dream, a bad dream that she would soon forget.

And she had, for long stretches of time. Then it would creep up on her, a grinning assassin, when she was tense or exhausted or vulnerable.

She stabbed out the cigarette and pressed her fingers to her eyes. Well, she was tense now. Her one-woman show was less than a week away, and though she had personally chosen each piece of sculpture that would be shown, she was plagued with doubts.

Perhaps it was because the critics had been so enthusiastic two years before, at her debut. Now that she was enjoying success, there was so much more to lose. And she knew the work that would be shown was her best. If it was found to be mediocre, then she, as an artist, was mediocre.

Was there any label more damning?

Because she felt better having something tangible to

worry about, she rose and opened the draperies. The sun was just coming up, giving the streets and sidewalks of downtown Manhattan an almost rosy hue. Pushing open the window, she shivered once in the chill of the spring morning.

It was almost quiet. From a few blocks up, she could hear the grind of a garbage truck finishing its rounds. Near the corner of Canal and Greene, she saw a bag lady pulling a cart with all her worldly possessions. The wheels squeaked and echoed hollowly.

There was a light in the bakery directly across and three stories down. Clare caught the faint strains of *Rigoletto* and the good yeasty scent of baking bread. A cab rumbled past, valves knocking. Then there was silence again. She might have been alone in the city.

Was that what she wanted? she wondered. To be alone, to find some spot and dig into solitude? There were times when she felt so terribly disconnected, yet unable to make a place just for herself.

Wasn't that why her marriage had failed? She had loved Rob, but she had never felt connected to him. When it was over, she'd felt regret but not remorse.

Or perhaps Dr. Janowski was right, and she was burying her remorse, all of it, every ounce of grief she had felt since her father died. Channeling it out through her art.

And what was wrong with that? She started to stuff her hands into the pockets of her robe when she discovered she wasn't wearing it. A woman had to be crazy to stand in an open window in SoHo wearing nothing but a flimsy Bill the Cat T-shirt. The hell with it, she thought and leaned out farther. Maybe she was crazy.

She stood, her bright red hair disheveled from restless sleep, her face pale and tired, watching the light grow and listening to the noise begin as the city woke.

Then she turned away, ready for work.

* * *

It was after two when Clare heard the buzzer. It sounded like an annoying bee over the hiss of the torch in her hand and the crash of Mozart booming from the stereo. She considered ignoring it, but the new piece wasn't going very well, and the interruption was a good excuse to stop. She turned off her torch. As she crossed her studio, she pulled off her safety gloves. Still wearing her goggles, skullcap, and apron, she flicked on the intercom.

"Yes?"

"Clare? Angie."

"Come on up." Clare punched in the security code and released the elevator. After pulling off her cap and goggles, she walked back to circle the half-formed sculpture.

It stood on her welding table in the rear of the loft, surrounded by tools—pliers, hammers, chisels, extra torch tips. Her tanks of acetylene and oxygen rested in their sturdy steel cart. Beneath it all was a twenty-foot square of sheet metal, to keep sparks and hot drippings off the floor.

Most of the loft space was taken over by Clare's work—chunks of granite, slabs of cherrywood and ash, hunks and tubes of steel. Tools for hacking, prying, sanding, welding. She'd always enjoyed living with her work.

Now she approached her current project, eyes narrowed, lips pursed. It was holding out on her, she thought, and she didn't bother to look around when the doors of the elevator slid open.

"I should have known." Angie LeBeau tossed back her mane of black, corkscrew curls and tapped one scarlet Italian pump on the hardwood floor. "I've been calling you for over an hour."

"I turned off the bell. Machine's picking it up. What do you get from this, Angie?"

Blowing out a long breath, Angie studied the sculpture on the worktable. "Chaos."

"Yeah." With a nod, Clare stooped lower. "Yeah, you're right. I've been going at this the wrong way."

"Don't you dare pick up that torch." Tired of shouting, she stomped across the floor and switched off the stereo. "Damn it, Clare, we had a date for lunch at the Russian Tea Room at twelve-thirty."

Clare straightened and focused on her friend for the first time. Angie was, as always, the picture of elegance. Her toffee-colored skin and exotic features were set off to perfection by the navy Adolfo suit and oversize pearls.

Her handbag and shoes were identical shades of scarlet leather. Angie liked everything to match, everything to be in its place. In her closet, her shoes were neatly stacked in clear plastic boxes. Her blouses were arranged by color and fabric. Her handbags—a legendary collection—were tucked into individual slots on custom-built shelves.

As for herself, Clare was lucky if she could find both shoes of a pair in the black hole of her closet. Her handbag collection consisted of one good black evening bag and a huge canvas tote. More than once Clare had wondered how she and Angie had ever become, and remained, friends.

Right at the moment, that friendship seemed to be on the line, she noted. Angie's dark eyes were hot, and her long scarlet fingernails were tapping on her bag in time with her foot.

"Stand just like that." Clare bounded across the room to search through the confusion on the sofa for a sketch pad. She tossed aside a sweatshirt, a silk blouse, unopened mail, an empty bag of Fritos, a couple of paperback novels, and a plastic water pistol.

"Damn it, Clare—"

"No, don't move." Pad in hand, she heaved a cushion aside and found a chalk pencil. "You're beautiful when you're angry." Clare grinned.

"Bitch," Angie said and struggled with a laugh.

"That's it, that's it." Clare's pencil flew across the pad. "Christ, what cheekbones! Who would have thought if you mixed Cherokee, African, and French, you'd get such bone structure? Snarl a little bit, would you?"

"Put that stupid thing down. You're not going to flatter your way out of this. I sat in RTR for an hour drinking Perrier and gnawing on the tablecloth."

"Sorry. I forgot."

"What else is new?"

Clare set the sketch aside, knowing Angie would look at it the minute her back was turned. "Want some lunch?"

"I had a hot dog in the cab."

"Then I'll grab something, and you can tell me what we were supposed to talk about."

"The show, you imbecile!" Angie eyed the sketch and smothered a smile. Clare had drawn her with flames shooting out of her ears. Refusing to be amused, she glanced around for a clear spot to sit and finally settled on the arm of the sofa. God knew what else lurked under the cushions. "Are you ever going to hire somebody to shovel this place out?"

"No, I like it this way." Clare stepped into the kitchen, which was little more than an alcove in the corner of the studio. "It helps me create."

"You can pull that artistic temperament crap on someone else, Clare. I happen to know you're just a lazy slob."

"When you're right, you're right." She came out again with a pint of Dutch chocolate ice cream and a tablespoon. "Want some?"

"No." It was a constant irritation to Angie that Clare

could binge on junk food whenever the whim struck, which was often, and never add flesh to her willowy figure.

At five ten, Clare wasn't the stick figure she had been during her childhood, but still slender enough that she didn't check the scale each morning as Angie did. Angie watched her now as Clare, wearing her leather apron over bib overalls, shoveled in calories. In all likelihood, Angie mused, she wore nothing under the denim but skin.

Clare wore no makeup, either. Pale gold freckles were dusted across her skin. Her eyes, a slightly darker shade of amber-gold, were huge in her triangular face with its soft, generous mouth and small, undistinguished nose. Despite Clare's unruly crop of fiery hair, just long enough to form a stubby ponytail when it was pulled back with a rubber band, and her exceptional height, there was an air of fragility about her that made Angie, at thirty only two years her senior, feel maternal.

"Girl, when are you going to learn to sit down and eat a meal?"

Clare grinned and dug for more ice cream. "Now you're worried about me, so I guess I'm forgiven." She perched on a stool and tucked one booted foot under the rung. "I really am sorry about lunch."

"You always are. What about writing notes to yourself?"

"I do write them, then I forget where I've put them."

With her dripping spoon, she gestured around the huge, disordered space. The sofa where Angie sat was one of the few pieces of furniture, though there was a table under a pile of newspapers, magazines, and empty soft drink bottles. Another stool was shoved into a corner and held a bust of black marble. Paintings crowded the walls, and pieces of sculpture—some finished, some abandoned—sat, stood, or reclined as space allowed.

Up a clunky set of wrought-iron steps was the store-

room she'd converted into a bedroom. But the rest of the enormous space she'd lived in for five years had been taken over by her art.

For the first eighteen years of her life, Clare had struggled to live up to her mother's standards of neatness and order. It had taken her less than three weeks on her own to accept that turmoil was her natural milieu.

She offered Angie a bland grin. "How am I supposed to find anything in this mess?"

"Sometimes I wonder how you remember to get out of bed in the morning."

"You're just worried about the show." Clare set the half-eaten carton of ice cream aside, where, Angie thought, it would probably melt. Clare picked up a pack of cigarettes and located a match. "Worrying about it is a lesson in futility. They're either going to like my stuff, or they're not."

"Right. Then why do you look like you've gotten about four hours' sleep?"

"Five," Clare corrected, but she didn't want to bring up the dream. "I'm tense, but I'm not worried. Between you and your sexy husband, there's enough worrying going on already."

"Jean-Paul's a wreck," Angie admitted. Married to the gallery owner for two years, she was powerfully attracted by his intelligence, his passion for art, and his magnificent body. "This is the first major show in the new gallery. It's not just your butt on the line."

"I know." Clare's eyes clouded briefly as she thought of all the money and time and hope the LeBeaus had invested in their new, much larger gallery. "I'm not going to let you down."

Angie saw that despite her claims, Clare was as scared as the rest of them. "We know that," she said, deliberately lightening the mood. "In fact, we expect to be *the* gallery

on the West Side after your show. In the meantime, I'm here to remind you that you've got a ten A.M. interview with *New York* magazine, and a lunch interview tomorrow with the *Times*."

"Oh, Angie."

"No escape from it this time." Angie uncrossed her shapely legs. "You'll see the *New York* writer in our penthouse. I shudder to think of holding an interview here."

"You just want to keep an eye on me."

"There is that. Lunch at Le Cirque, one sharp."

"I wanted to go in and check on the setup at the gallery."

"There's time for that, too. I'll be here at nine to make sure you're up and dressed."

"I hate interviews," Clare mumbled.

"Tough." Angie took her by the shoulders and kissed both her cheeks. "Now go get some rest. You really do look tired."

Clare perched an elbow on her knee. "Aren't you going to lay out my clothes for me?" she asked as Angie walked to the elevator.

"It may come to that."

Alone, Clare sat brooding for a few minutes. She did detest interviews, all the pompous and personal questions. The process of being studied, measured, and dissected. As with most things she disliked but couldn't avoid, she pushed it out of her mind.

She was tired, too tired to concentrate well enough to fire up her torch again. In any case, nothing she'd begun in the past few weeks had turned out well. But she was much too restless to nap or to stretch out on the floor and devour some daytime television.

On impulse she rose and went to a large trunk that served as seat, table, and catch-all. Digging in, she riffled