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Demon's Kiss

Written by Maggie Shayne

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MAGGIE SHAYNE

DEMON'S KISS



1

Seth Connor was cornered and low on energy, crouching on the top of a crumbling crypt in the middle of a cemetery. Toxic sludge had seeped in, covering the ground on all sides, so getting down and running for it was not an option. He wouldn't last long if he stepped into that muck. Besides, he was surrounded by zombies—half-witted, yeah, but still dangerous. The sludge didn't seem to bother them, or maybe they were just too zoned out to notice. Still, between them and the bubbling green chemical cocktail down there, he wouldn't stand a chance. He was going to have to try to jump the gaping distance between where he was, and where he needed to be—the roof of the caretaker's cottage. And it was a long jump. He wasn't sure he had enough juice left in him to make it.

But standing still wasn't an option, either. He shouldered the shotgun, emptied it into the mob of zombies, who were already trying to climb onto the roof themselves, just to clear himself a path, then pushed off hard. His body somersaulted through the air, once, twice, three times, poisonous muck flashing beneath

him with every flip, and then it seemed to be getting closer. Hell! He stretched, straightened, reached—and just barely caught the edge of the cottage roof with his fingertips.

His legs dangled. Zombies were reaching for him, grabbing on, trying to tug him down. He kicked at them, then managed to draw his handgun. Hanging by the fingers of one hand, he peppered the bastards with lead.

They fell away. He dropped the handgun—a hell of a loss, but he might be able to find another at the next level. Tugging himself up onto the roof of the caretaker's cottage, he took a look around and saw the path to safety: a power line suspended from the roof's far side. He headed for it, hopped on and tightrope-walked his way to Level Nine.

Blowing a relieved sigh, Seth dropped the game controller onto the coffee table, stood up and stretched the kinks out of his back. It had taken a while to get through that last level, but the feeling of triumph, though bright, was only fleeting. It was a game. A fun distraction from the constant waiting that had become his life. He didn't even know what he was waiting *for.* But the sense of nervous anticipation, that electrical charge just before a lightning strike, that feeling that something *big* was about to happen, had come on stronger today than it ever had before.

He was destined for something important. He'd always known it. But he was getting awfully bored waiting to find out what it was.

His phone rang. He jumped, that was how tightly wound he was. Then he grabbed it with the half-formed

notion that this might be the call that would start him on his way toward whatever it was he was supposed to be doing. A glance at the caller ID box wiped that notion away. It was only J.J. calling from The Hole, the local sports bar where Seth had been promoted to manager.

Sighing, he picked up the phone. "Yeah, pal, what is it?" It was always something.

"Seth, I don't know what to do, man. Tommy's supposed to be on grill, but he went home sick. We're out of grenadine and the dishwasher's acting up again. And we're packed tonight and short on staff."

"Dude, you call me every time I have a night off."

"It's a crisis, Seth."

"No. It's normal. A crisis is when things are unusually bad. This is stuff that happens all the time. Normal, J.J. You gotta learn how to handle it."

"I'm trying, but there's only one of me."

Seth lowered his head, then sighed and figured what the hell. It wasn't as if he had anything else to do. Maybe go to bed early. Maybe dream about *her* again. The beautiful little redhead with the eyes that looked right through to his soul. The one who had something to do with his destiny. The one he'd never met, but had dreamed of for as long as he could remember.

He sighed. She would be there waiting in his subconscious, no matter what time he went to sleep. "I'll be right over, okay? Meanwhile, call Bobbie to come in and handle the grill. She's closest, and she always loves picking up extra hours. Call Tanya in to wait tables. She goes right by the liquor store on her way in,

so have her pick up a couple of bottles of grenadine on the way, and that'll tide us over until the truck arrives tomorrow. I'll be there in five minutes."

J.J. sighed audibly. "Thanks, Seth. You're a freaking hero, you know that?"

Yeah. Some hero. Master of broken-down dishwashers and missing waitstaff, he could leap stumbling drunks in a single bound. He closed his eyes and shook his head, before grabbing his hoodie off the hook by the apartment door and yanking it over his head on the way out.

Four hours later, the bar was closed, stools upside down on the mahogany counter, chairs upside down on the tables, floor freshly mopped and filling the place with the scent of pine cleaner. Seth was heading out for what was left of the night, which wasn't a hell of a lot.

J.J. was beside him, carrying the money pouch, which they would dump in the bank's night-deposit box on their way to the parking lot on the corner. His out-of-control brown frizz was being held hostage underneath a worn-out, stained-up Yankees cap. He shuffled his feet when he walked, and he slouched too much. Seth thought the kid needed a lot more than just on-the-job training if he ever wanted to get ahead in life.

Then again, Seth thought, who was he to talk? Okay, maybe he didn't have J.J.'s lack of self-esteem. But he was still in a job that was going nowhere, in a life that was nothing but filler, waiting for the big fat hairy deal he'd always believed was his destiny. He was meant for something big. He knew it. And tonight it felt closer than ever.

One block to the bank. J.J. was whistling the theme

song from the newest *Rocky* film. Traffic was nonexistent, and the pavement gleamed.

"Can you believe it rained and stopped again while we were in the bar, and we never even knew it?" J.J. asked.

"Yep. The Hole is like its own self-contained world."

"World?" J.J. echoed. "Nah. Small town, maybe. Better yet, it's a self-contained soap opera. It's got all the characters down. There's the dirty old man, Henry, who can't think about anything but his dick and gets away with sexually harassing every female in the place because he's a hundred and two."

"Henry isn't thinking about his dick, J.J. He's trying to remind himself he's still a man. Patting a waitress on the ass when she passes close enough for him to reach is about the only way he can still manage to do that. Although, I think he'd feel more like a man if one of them would smack him, instead of smiling and patting him on the head as if he's cute and no real threat. They could at least pretend to be insulted."

J.J. lifted his brows. "I never thought of it that way. What about Mrs. Brown?"

"Shauna?"

"Yeah. Everyone knows she's married, but she comes in every night, drinks until she's messed up, then hits on every stranger who walks into the place."

"They never hit on her back, though."

"So?"

"Think about it. She's a good-looking woman, J.J. If she really wanted to get laid by some stranger, she wouldn't have any trouble. She's not really trying. If

anyone shows any interest, she backs off like mad, until they take the hint and leave. Then she keeps drinking until she starts crying, and then she has me call her a taxi." Seth shrugged. "She's miserable and just wants to be loved. If her husband doesn't wake up, I imagine she'll eventually work up the strength to walk. Until then, she'll just keep being miserable, I guess."

"You really see things about people," J.J. told him. "What do you see in me, Seth?"

Seth shrugged and didn't look J.J. in the eye, because it was such a sappy and un-guy-like conversation to be having. "A kid with a lot of potential. You can do anything you want to, J.J. You just have to grow a pair, you know? Like tonight, you could have made some decisions, solved some of those problems on your own, and taken the consequences, good or bad, yourself. But instead, you called me, to save yourself from having to take any chances."

"Why take chances if you don't have to?" J.J. asked.

"You know how I got promoted to manager, J.J.?" Seth didn't wait for an answer, just went on. "There was a major crisis at the bar one night. Manager had a heart attack and got rushed to the E.R. Bartender was his wife and went with him. Head waitress had to drive her there. And there I was. But I jumped in and handled it. Made some calls, got some people to fill in for the bartender and waitress, managed the place myself all night, and kept things going like clockwork. Next thing I know, I'm getting a promotion and a raise. *That's* why you take chances when you don't have to. No risk, no gain, pal."

J.J. nodded. "I think I get it."

The streetlight was flickering. Later Seth would think that flickering streetlight had almost seemed like a warning. But right then, he paid it no more attention than he did the little shiver that tiptoed up his spine for no obvious reason.

Then, in the next second, someone crashed into his back, slamming him to the sidewalk so hard his chin split. Then fists pounded on his head. Pain exploded behind his eyes. Shock and surprise made his heart hammer, but he reacted anyway, rolling and flinging the bastard off him, then scrambling to his feet to take a quick look around.

J.J. was lying on the ground, face-up, with some big SOB kicking him in the ribs. Seth hurled himself at J.J.'s attacker with everything he had, and the two of them sailed bodily into the alley.

He landed on top of the guy. The other one jumped on him before he could even draw a breath. But he managed to shout, "Run, J.J.! Get the hell out of here! *Run!*"

And that was it. One of the bad asses picked him up, spun him around, then knocked him flat again with a fist to his jaw. As he lay on his back in the alley, he caught just a glimpse of J.J. running for dear life, already a block away. Then the thugs—there were four of them now, and he was damned if he knew where the other two had come from—were all around him, blocking his vision. He couldn't see anything except legs in faded, torn jeans that hung loosely, and the front ends of unlaced Columbia suede work boots, with the tongues sticking out.

"Gimme the money bag, asshole," one of the thugs said.

Seth smiled slowly, but it hurt, so he stopped. He figured his lip was split, and maybe his jaw was busted, too. He wasn't going to tell these bastards that J.J. was the one carrying the bag. Not just yet. Give the kid time to get clear. He figured his own ass was grass, either way. "Why don't you take it from me?" he asked.

"My pleasure."

The beating *really* began then. And there wasn't a hell of a lot Seth could do about it. He tried to get a few blows in, tried to block the punches and kicks with his arms, but eventually he was hurting too bad and bleeding too much to do more than curl up like a boiled shrimp and wait for them to get tired.

He wondered, after a while, if this was it, the big shining moment he'd always known he was meant for. Maybe his entire purpose in life had been to be here tonight, to take the heat off J.J. So maybe it was J.J. who was truly meant for something big. Maybe he would end up being president or something. And Seth was just a pawn, a sacrifice for the greater good.

Damn. He had always thought it would be something more. And his biggest regret was her—the girl he'd been dreaming about for so long. Could he really die without ever once meeting her face-to-face? It didn't seem possible, but it looked pretty damned likely.

After thoroughly tapping the vampiric grapevine, Reaper's only lead to Gregor was a spoiled rich vampiress who called herself Topaz. She lived in a mansion

on Emerald Isle, in North Carolina, and rumor had it that she'd recently lost a substantial portion of her wealth to a vampire con man who'd broken her heart. No one had heard the man's name, but his description matched that of Gregor's sidekick. The M.O. was right, the location was right, and Reaper was pretty sure his gut instincts were right, too. The con artist must have been the vampire known as Jack of Hearts. And if he could find Jack, he could find Gregor and the rest of the rogue band.

So he was on his way to Emerald Isle when the sensation hit him. First it was a sense of nervous energy, a clenching of his stomach, a twitching of various muscles, a surge of epinephrine. Fight or flight. But it came for no reason. He wasn't in danger.

No, but someone is.

He felt pain, then. Excruciating pain. Not his own.

And then he sensed the essence behind it, the aura that came whenever one of his kind came into proximity with one of theirs, or whenever one of his kind was in dire need. The feelings were coming from one of the Chosen.

And not just any one of the Chosen. But *his.* Seth Connor. The young man was in trouble. And the bottom fell out of Reaper's stomach in spite of himself. The kid was always in trouble of one kind or another, but the pain he was feeling now… This was no minor scrape.

"God, now of all times?" Reaper rolled his eyes and told himself that Seth was proving to be exactly the kind of nuisance Reaper had told Rhiannon he was. He

told himself that, even as he stopped everything he was doing to race to Seth's aid. He reminded himself that there was no choice. He hadn't been lying when he'd told Rhiannon that he was compelled, as were all vampires, to protect and watch over Seth's kind. If he could have ignored the call, he thought deliberately, determinedly, he might very well have kept on driving.

Yeah. Right. And just who do you think you're kidding, Reaper?

So he obeyed his instinctive need to go to the younger man, and go fast. He took an exit, following his senses, his intuition, and as he got nearer, he realized it was a damn good thing he had.

Reaper felt the cold breath of his grim namesake nearby and knew that Seth, his own charge, was near death. He skidded the car to a halt, leapt out, turned and ran, moving so quickly that he was invisible to human eyes. Moments later, he was at the mouth of an alley, where four upright men were kicking and beating one who lay on the ground, curled loosely in on himself.

Reaper didn't speak, he just moved. His first blow sent one man smashing into a wall, where his head took a chunk out of the cinder block it hit. He grabbed the second one by his nape and hurled him through the air, not bothering to watch where he came down, though he heard glass breaking. He grabbed the third by his hair and slammed his face into the ground. And then he delivered a kick to the solar plexus of the fourth that probably split his intestine apart. And all of it in the space of two seconds, possibly less.

Finally he knelt beside the young man, his cast-iron

stomach churning as he bent closer. Seth's face had been badly beaten. His eyes were swollen and purple, his nose broken, lips split, jaw unhinged or broken. His own mother wouldn't have known him. Reaper knew him, though. He knew his scent, his essence. His restless, frustrated energy.

As much as he disliked physical contact, there was nothing else for it right then. Reaper slid an arm beneath Seth's shoulders and lifted his head up from the concrete floor of the alley where he lay. His body was as broken as his face, but it didn't show as much to the naked eye.

"Did J.J. get away?" Seth asked. His voice was coarse and soft.

Reaper narrowed his eyes, then probed the younger man's mind and saw the scene unfolding through Seth's memory. The attack. The other, even younger, man, J.J., being beaten. He saw what Seth had done, taking the attackers on himself to give J.J. the chance to escape. He could easily have gotten away himself, but he hadn't. Reaper sensed that J.J. had. "Yes, he's safe," he said.

Seth sighed and closed his eyes. "I'm glad."

Seth was dying. Or else he wasn't. The decision was his.

"Open your eyes, Seth," Reaper said. "I need to talk to you."

Also by

MAGGIE
SHAYNE

DEMON'S KISS
LOVER'S BITE
ANGEL'S PAIN

NIGHT'S EDGE
(with Charlaine Harris and Barbara Hambly)

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