

Heaven and Earth

Nora Roberts



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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HEAVEN AND EARTH

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BRAZEN VIRTUE
SWEET REVENGE
PUBLIC SECRETS
GENUINE LIES
CARNAL INNOCENCE
DIVINE EVIL
HONEST ILLUSIONS
PRIVATE SCANDALS
BORN IN FIRE
BORN IN ICE
BORN IN SHAME
HIDDEN RICHES
TRUE BETRAYALS
DARING TO DREAM HOLDING THE DREAM
FINDING THE DREAM
MONTANA SKY
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RISING TIDES
INNER HARBOR
SANCTUARY
HOMEPORT
THE REEF
JEWELS OF THE SUN
TEARS OF THE MOON
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RIVER'S END
CAROLINA MOON
DANCE UPON THE AIR
HEAVEN AND EARTH

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Titles written as J. D. Robb

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CEREMONY IN DEATH
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SEDUCTION IN DEATH

SILENT NIGHT

(anthology with Susan Plunkett, Dee Holmes, and Claire Cross)

OUT OF THIS WORLD

(anthology with Laurell K. Hamilton, Susan Krinard, and Maggie Shayne)

To all my sisters, not of blood but of the heart. There's the magic.

Swift as a shadow, short as any dream;
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
That in a spleen unfolds both heaven and earth,
And ere a man hath power to say, "Behold!"
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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Prologue

SK

THREESISTERSISLAND
SEPTEMBER1699

She called the storm.

The gales of wind, the bolts of lightning, the rage of the sea that was both prison and protection. She called the forces, those that lived within her, those that dwelled without. The bright and the dark.

Slender, with her cloak streaming back like bird-wings, she stood alone on the wind-whipped beach. Alone but for her rage and her grief. And her power. It was that power that filled her now, rushed inside her in wild, pounding strokes like a lover gone mad.

And so, perhaps, it was.

She had left husband and children to come to this place, left them under a spell-sleep that would keep them safe and unaware. Once she had done what she had come to do, she could never go back to them. She would never again hold their much-loved faces in her hands.

Her husband would grieve for her, and her children weep. But she could not go back to them. And she could not, would not, turn from the path she had chosen.

Payment must be made. And justice, however rough, would be met at last.

She stood, arms outflung in the tempest she had conjured. Her hair flew free and wild, dark ribbons that slashed at the night like whips.

“You must not do this thing.”

A woman appeared beside her, burning as bright in the storm as the fire after which she was named. Her face was pale, her eyes dark with what might have been fear.

“It is already begun.”

“Stop it now. Sister, stop before it is too late. You have no right.”

“Right?” She who was called Earth whirled, her eyes glowing fierce. “Who has better right? Who they murdered the innocents in Salem Town, persecuted and hunted and hanged, we did nothing to stop it.”

“Stop one flood, cause another. You know this. We made this place.” Fire stretched out her arms, as if to encompass the island that rocked in the sea. “For our safety and our survival, for our Craft.”

“Safety? You can speak of safety, of survival, now? Our sister is dead.”

“And I grieve for her, as you do.” Pleading, she crossed her hands between her breasts. “My heart weeps as yours weeps. Her children are in our keeping now. Will you abandon them as well as your own?”

There was a madness in her, tearing at her heart as the wind tore at her hair. Even recognizing it, she could not defeat it. “He will not go unpunished. He will not live while she does not.”

“If you cause harm, you’ll have broken your vows. You will have corrupted your power, and what you send out in the night will come back to you threefold.”

“Justice has a price.”

“Not this. Never this. Your husband will lose a wife, your children a mother. And I another beloved sister. More, even more than that, you break faith with what we are. She would not have wanted this.”

This would not have been her answer.”

~~“She died rather than protect herself. Died for what she is, for what we are. Our sister abjured power for what she called love. And it killed her.”~~

“Her choice.” One that stayed bitter in the throat long after it was swallowed. “And still she harmed none. Do this thing, use your gift in this dark way, and you doom yourself. You doom us all.”

“I cannot live, hidden here.” There were tears in her eyes now, and in the storm-light, they burned red as blood. “I cannot turn from this. My choice. My destiny. I take his life for hers, and damn him for all time.”

And calling for vengeance, shooting it like a bright and deadly arrow from a bow, she who was known as Earth sacrificed her soul.

One

OK

THREESISTERSISLAND
JANUARY2002

Sand, frosted with cold, crunched under her feet as she ran along the curving shore. Incoming waves left froth and bubbles lying on the crusted surface like tattered lace. Overhead, the gulls called relentlessly.

Her muscles had warmed, and moved fluid as oiled gears in the second mile of her morning run. Her pace was a fast and disciplined jog, and her breath rushed out in white plumes. And rushed in sharp and cold as shards of ice.

She felt fabulous.

The wintry beach held no footprints but her own, and hers were stamped, new over old, as she jogged back and forth across the gentle sweep of winter beach.

If she'd chosen to do her three miles in one straight line, she could have crossed Three Sisters from side to side at its widest point.

The idea of that always pleased her.

The little clump of land off the coast of Massachusetts was hers, every hill, every street, every cliff and inlet. Deputy Ripley Todd felt more than affection for Three Sisters, its village, its residents, its well-being. She felt responsibility.

She could see the rising sun glint against the windows of storefronts on High Street. In a couple hours, the shops would open, people would walk along the streets going about the day's business.

There wasn't much of a tourist trade in January, but some would come over from the mainland on the ferry, poke about in the shops, drive up to the cliffs, buy some fresh fish right off the docks. For the most part, though, the winter was for islanders.

She loved the winter best.

At the end of the beach, where it bumped the edge of the seawall just below the village, she pivoted and headed back across the sand. Fishing boats plied an ocean that was the color of pale blue ice. The colors would change as the light strengthened, as the sky deepened. It never failed to fascinate her how many colors water could hold.

She saw Carl Macey's boat, and a figure, tiny as a toy in the stern, raised a hand. She saluted back and kept running. With under three thousand islanders year-round, it wasn't hard to know who was who.

She slowed her pace a bit, not only to cool down but to prolong the solitude. She often took her morning runs with her brother's dog, Lucy, but this morning she had slipped out alone.

Alone was another thing she liked best.

And she'd wanted to clear her mind. There was a great deal to think about. Some of which she preferred not to, so she tucked those annoyances and problems away for now. What had to be dealt with wasn't precisely a problem. You couldn't call something that made you happy a problem.

Her brother was just back from his honeymoon, and nothing could have pleased her more than to see how happy he and Nell were together. After all they'd been through, and what it had nearly cost her seeing them cozied up together in the house where she and Zack had grown up was pure satisfaction.

And over the past months, since summer, when Nell had ended her flight from fear on the island, they'd become real friends. It was a pleasure to see the way Nell had bloomed, and toughened.

But all that mushy stuff aside, Ripley thought, there was one little blight on the rose. And its name was Ripley Karen Todd.

Newlyweds didn't need to share their love nest with the groom's sister.

She hadn't given the matter a thought before the wedding, and even after, when she'd waved them both off for a week in Bermuda, she hadn't seen the whole picture.

But when they'd returned, all snuggling and flushed with a honeymoon haze, it couldn't have been more clear.

Just-marrieds needed privacy. They could hardly have hot, spontaneous sex on the living room floor if she might stroll into the house any time of the day or night.

Not that either of them had said anything about it. But they wouldn't. The pair of them might well wear we're-nice-people merit badges plastered on their chests. And that, Ripley thought, was something she would never be pinning on her own shirt.

She stopped, used the outcropping of rocks at the far end of the beach for support as she stretched out calves, hamstrings, quadriceps.

Her body was as lean and toned as a young tiger's. She took pride in it, in her control over it. As she bent from the waist, the ski cap that she'd tugged on fell to the sand and her hair, the color of varnished oak, tumbled free.

She wore it long because it didn't require regular trims and styling that way. It was just another type of control.

Her eyes were a sharp bottle green. When she was in the mood she might fuss with mascara and eyeliner. After considerable debate, she'd decided her eyes were the best part of a face made up of mismatched features and angular lines.

She had a slight overbite because she'd despised her retainer. And she had the wide forehead and nearly horizontal dark eyebrows of the Ripley side of the family.

No one would have accused her of being pretty. It was too soft a word—and would have insulted her in any case. She preferred knowing it was a strong and sexy face. The kind that could attract men. When she was in the mood for one.

Which she hadn't been, she mused, for several months.

Part of that was wedding plans, holiday plans, the time she'd spent helping Zack and Nell unwind legal tangles so they could be married. And another part, she was forced to admit, was her own sense of annoyance and unease that lingered from Halloween, when she'd ripped open pockets in herself that she had purposely sewn shut years before.

Couldn't be helped, she thought now. She'd done what needed to be done. And had no intention of repeat performance. No matter how many cool, smirky glances Mia Devlin shot her way.

The thought of Mia brought Ripley back full circle.

Mia had an empty cottage. Nell had rented it, then moved out when she married Zack. As much as Ripley hated the idea of having any sort of dealings, even straight business, with Mia, the yellow cottage was the perfect solution.

It was small, private, simple.

It just made sense, Ripley decided and started up the worn wooden steps that zagged from the beach toward the house. It was irritating, but it was practical. Still, maybe it wouldn't hurt if she took a few days, let the word out that she was looking for a place to rent. Something—something that didn't belong to Mia—might drop in her lap.

Cheered by the possibility, Ripley bounded up the steps, jogged to the back porch.

Nell would already be baking, she knew, just as she knew the kitchen would smell like heaven. The

biggest advantage was that she wouldn't have to hunt up breakfast. It would just be there. Delicious, delightful, and on demand.

As she reached for the doorknob, she saw, through the glass, Zack and Nell. They were wrapped around each other, she thought, like ivy on a flagpole. Wrapped around each other *and* wrapped up each other.

“Oh, man.”

Hissing out a breath, she backtracked, then came back up on the porch stomping like a horse and whistling. It would give them time to peel themselves off each other. At least, she hoped it would.

But it didn't solve her other problem. She was going to have to deal with Mia, after all.



She was going to keep it casual. To Ripley's way of thinking, if Mia knew she really wanted the yellow cottage, she would refuse to rent it.

The woman was so damn contrary.

Of course, the very best way to lock in the deal would be to ask Nell to run interference. Mia had a soft spot for Nell. But the idea of using anyone to clear the path was galling. She would just casually drop in at Mia's bookstore, the way she had almost every day since Nell had taken over the cooking and baking for the café section.

That way she could cop a righteous lunch and new digs all in one swipe.

She walked briskly along High Street, more because she wanted the business over and done than because the wind was up and blowing. It tugged playfully at the long, straight tail of hair that she habitually yanked through the opening in the back of her cap.

When she reached Café Book she paused, pursed her lips.

Mia had redone the display window. A little tasseled footstool, a soft throw of deep red, and a pair of tall candlestands with fat red candles were arranged with seemingly haphazard piles of books. Because she knew Mia never did anything in a haphazard fashion, Ripley had to admit the whole tone was one of homey warmth and welcome. And subtly—very subtly—sexy.

It's cold out, the window announced. Come on in and buy some books to take home and snuggle up with.

Whatever else Ripley could say about Mia—and she could say plenty—the woman knew her business.

She stepped inside into warmth, automatically unwinding her neck scarf. The deep-blue shelves were lined with books, parlor-tidy. Glass displays held pretty trinkets and intriguing dust catchers. The fireplace was simmering with a low golden flame, and another throw, blue this time, was tossed artfully over one of the deep, sink-into-me chairs.

Yeah, she thought, Mia knew her stuff.

There was more. Other shelves held candles of various shapes and sizes. Deep bowls were filled with tumbling stones and crystals. Colorful boxes of Tarot cards and runes were tucked here and there.

All very subtle again, Ripley noted with a frown. Mia didn't advertise that the place was owned by a witch, but she didn't hide it either. Ripley imagined the curiosity factor—both tourist and local—accounted for a healthy chunk of the store's annual profits.

None of her business.

From behind the big carved counter, Mia's head clerk, Lulu, finished ringing up a customer's purchases, then tipped down her silver-framed glasses to peer at Ripley over the top of them.

“Looking for something for your mind as well as your belly today?”

“No. I've got plenty to occupy my mind.”

“Read more, know more.”

Ripley grinned. "I already know everything."

~~"Always thought you did, anyway. Got a novelty book in this week's shipment that's right up your alley. 101 Pick-Up Lines —unisex."~~

"Lu." Ripley gave her a cocky grin as she strolled to the stairs leading to the shop's second level. "I wrote the book."

Lulu cackled. "Haven't seen you keeping company just recently," she called out.

"I haven't felt like company just recently."

There were more books on the second floor, and more browsers poking through them. But here, the café was the big draw. Already Ripley could scent the soup of the day, something rich and spicy.

The early crowd, which would have snagged Nell's muffins and turnovers or whatever treat she dreamed up for the day had shifted to the lunch crowd. On a day like this, Ripley imagined they'd be looking for something hot and hearty, before they treated themselves to one of Nell's sinful desserts.

She scanned the display and sighed. Cream puffs. Nobody in their right mind walked away from cream puffs, even if the other choices were equally tempting éclairs, tarts, cookies, and what looked like a cake made up of many layers of pure gooey sin.

The artist behind the temptations rang up an order. Her eyes were a deep and clear blue, her hair a short gold halo around a face that glowed with health and well-being. Dimples flashed in her cheeks as she smiled and waved her customer off to one of the café tables arranged by the window.

Marriage, Ripley thought, agreed with some people. Nell Channing Todd was one of them.

"You look pretty bouncy today," Ripley commented.

"Feel great. The day's just flying by. Soup of the day's minestrone, sandwich is—"

"I'm just doing soup," Ripley interrupted. "Because I need one of the cream puffs to ensure my happiness. I'll take coffee with it."

"Coming up. I'm baking a ham for dinner tonight," she added. "So no grabbing pizza before you come home."

"Yeah, okay. Sure." It reminded Ripley of the second stage of business. She shifted her feet, gave the room another sweeping glance. "I didn't see Mia around anywhere."

"Working in her office." Nell ladled up soup, added a crusty roll baked fresh that morning. "I expect she'll breeze through shortly. You were in and out of the house so fast this morning I didn't get to talk to you. Something up?"

"No, not up." Maybe it was rude to arrange for alternate living arrangements without saying something first. Ripley wondered if this fell into the area of social skills, a tricky business for her.

"Will I be in your way if I chow down in the kitchen?" she asked Nell. "That way I can talk to you while you work."

"Sure. Come on back."

Nell carried the food over to her worktable. "Are you sure nothing's wrong?"

"Not a thing," Ripley assured her. "Bitchy cold out. I bet you and Zack are sorry you didn't stay south until spring."

"The honeymoon was perfect." Even thinking of it brought on a warm, satisfied glow. "But it's better being home." Nell opened the refrigerator for the container holding one of the day's salads. "Everything I want is here. Zack, family, friends, a home of my own. A year ago I'd never have believed I'd be standing here like this, knowing that in an hour or so I'd be going home."

"You earned it."

"I did." Nell's eyes darkened, and in them Ripley could see the core of strength—a core that everyone, including Nell, had underestimated. "But I didn't do it alone." The bright *ding* of the countertop bell warned her she had a customer waiting. "Don't let your soup get cold."

She slipped out, her voice lifting in greeting.

Ripley spooned up soup and sighed with contentment at the first taste. She would just concentrate on her lunch and think about the rest later.

But she'd barely made a dent in the bowl when she heard Nell call Mia's name.

"Ripley's in the kitchen. I think she wanted to see you."

Shit, shit, *shit* ! Ripley scowled into her soup and got busy filling her mouth.

"Well, well, make yourself at home."

Mia Devlin, her gypsy mane of red hair tumbling over the shoulders of a long dress of forest green, leaned gracefully against the doorjamb. Her face was a miracle formed of high, ice-edged cheekbones, a full, sculpted mouth painted as boldly red as her hair, skin smooth as cream, and eyes gray as witch's smoke.

Those eyes looked Ripley over lazily, one brow lifted in a perfect and derisive arch.

"I am." Ripley continued to eat. "I figure it's Nell's kitchen this time of day. If I thought otherwise I'd be searching my soup for wool of bat or dragon's teeth."

"And it's so hard to come by dragon's teeth this time of year. What can I do for you, Deputy?"

"Not a thing. But I did give some passing thought to doing something for you."

"Now I'm all agog." Tall and slim, she moved to the table and sat. She was wearing those needle-thin heels she was so fond of, Ripley noticed. She could never figure out why anyone would put her innocent feet in such torture chambers without a gun being held to her head.

She broke off another piece of her roll, munched. "You lost yourself a tenant when Nell and Zac tied the knot. I figured you hadn't gotten around to doing anything about renting out the yellow cottage, and since I'm thinking about getting my own place, maybe I can help you out."

"Do tell." Intrigued, Mia broke off a bite of Ripley's roll for herself.

"Hey, I'm paying for that."

Ignoring her, Mia nibbled. "A little too crowded for you at the homestead?"

"It's a big house." Ripley gave a careless shrug, then moved the rest of her roll out of reach. "But you happen to have one going empty. It's a pretty dinky place, but I don't need much. I'd be willing to negotiate a lease on it."

"A lease on what?" Nell swung back in, straight to the fridge to get out the makings for a sandwich order.

"The yellow cottage," Mia told her. "Ripley's looking for a place of her own."

"Oh, but—" Nell turned. "You have a place of your own. With us."

"Let's not make this sticky." It was too late to regret she hadn't arranged to speak to Mia privately. "I was just thinking it'd be cool to have a little place to myself, and since Mia's got one going begging, —"

"On the contrary," Mia said smoothly. "Neither I nor my possessions need to beg."

"You don't want me to do you a favor?" Ripley lifted a shoulder. "No skin off mine."

"It's so considerate of you to think of me." Mia's tone was candy-sweet. Always a bad sign. "But as it happens I just signed with a tenant for the cottage not ten minutes ago."

"Bullshit. You were just up in your office, and Nell didn't say you were with anyone."

"On the phone," Mia continued. "With a gentleman from New York. A doctor. We've signed a three-month lease for the cottage via fax. I hope that relieves your mind."

Ripley wasn't quite quick enough to mask her annoyance. "Like I said, no skin off mine. What the hell's a doctor going to do for three months on Three Sisters? We've got a doctor on-island."

"He's not a medical doctor. He's a Ph.D.—and as you're so interested, he's coming here to work. Dr. Booke is a paranormal researcher, and he's eager to spend some time on an island conjured by witches."

"Fucking A."

“Always so succinct.” Amused, Mia got to her feet. “Well, my work here is done. I must go see if I can bring joy into someone else’s life now.” She strolled to the door, waited a beat before she turned back. “Oh, he’ll be here tomorrow. I’m sure he’d love to meet you, Ripley.”

“Keep your weirdo spook hunters away from me. Damn it.” Ripley bit into her cream puff. “She’s eating this up.”

“Don’t go anywhere.” Nell lifted her order. “Peg comes on in five. I want to talk to you.”

“I’ve got patrol.”

“You just wait.”

“Damn near ruined my appetite,” Ripley complained, but managed to devour the cream puff.



In fifteen minutes she was stalking outside again, Nell glued to her side.

“We need to talk about this.”

“Look, Nell, it’s no big deal. I was just thinking—”

“Yes, you were thinking.” Nell yanked her wool cap down over her ears. “And you didn’t say anything to me, or to Zack. I want to know why you feel you can’t stay in your own home.”

“Okay, okay.” Ripley put on her sunglasses, hunched her shoulders as they started down Highway toward the station house. “It just seems to me that when people get married, they need privacy.”

“It’s a big house. We’re not in each other’s way. If you were the domestic type, I could see you feeling displaced because I have to spend so much of my time in the kitchen.”

“That’s the least of my worries.”

“Exactly. You don’t cook. I hope you don’t think I resent cooking for you.”

“No, I don’t think that. And I appreciate it, Nell, I really do.”

“Is it because I get up so early?”

“No.”

“Because I took one of the spare bedrooms for an office for Sisters Catering?”

“No. Jeez, nobody was using it.” Ripley felt as though she was being systematically pounded with a velvet bat. “Look, look, it’s not about cooking or spare rooms or your baffling habit of getting out of bed before the sun rises. It’s about sex.”

“Excuse me?”

“You and Zack have sex.”

Nell stopped, cocked her head as she studied Ripley’s face. “Yes, we do. I don’t deny it. In fact, we have quite a lot of sex.”

“There you are.”

“Ripley, before I officially moved into the house, Zack and I often had sex there. It never seemed to be a problem for you.”

“That was different. That was regular sex. Now you’re having married sex.”

“I see. Well, I can assure you the process works in almost exactly the same way.”

“Har-har.” Nell had come a long way, Ripley mused. There’d been a time when even the hint of confrontation would have had her backing down.

Those days were over.

“It’s just weird, okay? You and Zack are into the mister and missus thing and you’ve got me hanging around. What if you wanted to do the horizontal tango on the living room rug, or just have dinner naked some night?”

“We’ve actually done the first, but now I’ll give some serious consideration to the second. Ripley touched Nell’s arm, rubbed lightly. “I don’t want you to move out.”

“Jesus, Nell, it’s a small island. It’s not like I’d be hard to reach wherever I landed.”

"I don't want you to move," she said again. "I'm speaking for myself, not for Zack. You can talk to him separately if you want and get his feelings about it. Ripley . . . I never had a sister before."

"Oh, man." She cringed, scanning the area from behind her dark glasses. "Don't get mushy, not right out on the street like this."

"I can't help it. I like knowing you're there, that I can talk to you whenever. I only had a few days with your parents when they came back for the wedding, but knowing them now and having you, I want to have a family again. Can't we just leave things the way they are, for now, anyway?"

"Does Zack ever say no to you once you turn those big blue headlights on him?"

"Not when he knows it's really important to me. And if you stay, I'll promise that when Zack and I have sex, we'll pretend we're not married."

"It might help. Anyway, since some jerk from New York snagged the cottage right under my nose, I'll have to let things ride." She let out a pained sigh. "Paranormal researcher, my butt. Ph.D." She sneered and felt marginally cheered. "Mia probably rented the place to him just to piss me off."

"I doubt it, but I'm sure she's enjoying that side benefit. I wish the two of you wouldn't jab at each other so much. I'd really hoped, after . . . after what happened on Halloween you would be friends again."

Instantly, Ripley closed in. "Everybody did what had to be done. Now it's over. Nothing's changed for me."

"Only one phase is over," Nell corrected. "If the legend—"

"The legend is hooey." Even thinking of it blighted Ripley's mood.

"What we are isn't. What's inside us isn't."

"And what I do with what's inside me is my business. Don't go there, Nell."

"All right." But Nell squeezed Ripley's hand and even through the gloves that both women wore there was a spark of energy. "I'll see you at dinner."

Ripley balled her hand as Nell walked away. Her skin still hummed from the contact. Sneaky little witch, Ripley thought.

She had to admire that.



Dreams came late in the night, when her mind was open and her will at rest. She could deny by day, but she closed herself off, stand by the choice she'd made more than a decade before.

But sleep was a power of its own, and seduced the dreaming.

In dreams, she stood on the beach, where the waves rose like terror. They pounded, black and bitter on the shore, a thousand mad heartbeats, under a blind sky.

The only light was the snake-whips of lightning that slashed each time she raised her arms. And the light that came from her was a furious gold edged with murderous red.

The wind roared.

The violence of it, the sheer, unharnessed power of it, thrilled her in some deep and secret place. She was beyond now, beyond right, beyond rules.

Beyond hope.

And part of her, still flickering, wept grievous tears for the loss.

She had done what she had done, and now wrongs were avenged. Death to death to death. A circle formed by hate. One times three.

She cried out in triumph as the dark smoke of black magic streamed inside her, smearing and choking out what she had been, what she had vowed. What she had believed.

This, she thought as her cupped hands trembled at the force and the greed, was better. What had come before was pale and weak, a soft belly, compared to the strength and muscle of what was now.

She could do all and any. She could take and could rule. There was nothing and no one to stop her.

~~In a mad dance she spun across the sand, above it, her arms spread like wings, her hair falling~~
coils like snakes. She could taste the death of her sister's murderer, the bright copper flavor of blood she'd spilled, and knew she had never supped so well.

Her laughter shot out like bolts, cracked the black bowl of the sky. A torrent of dark rain fell and hissed on the sand like acid.

He called her.

Somewhere through the wild night and her own fury she heard his voice. The faint glow of what had been inside her struggled to burn brighter.

She saw him, just a shadow fighting through the wind and rain to reach her. Love warred and won in a heart gone cold.

"Go back!" she shouted at him, and her voice thundered, shook the world.

But still he came on, his hands reaching toward her—to gather her in, to bring her back. And she saw, just for an instant, the gleam of his eyes against the night, that was love, and fear.

Out of the sky came a lance of fire. Even as she screamed, as that light inside her leaped, it speared through him.

She felt his death inside her. The pain and horror of what she'd sent out springing back, times three. And the light inside her winked out. Left her cold, cold, cold.

Two

DM

He didn't look so very different from the other passengers on the ferry. His long black coat flapped the wind. His hair, an ordinary sort of dark blond, flew around his face and had no particular style.

He'd remembered to shave and had only nicked himself twice, just under the strong line of his jaw. His face—and it was a good one—was hidden behind one of his cameras as he snapped pictures of the island using a long lens.

His skin still held the tropical tan he'd picked up in Borneo. Against it his eyes were the luminous golden brown of honey just bottled. His nose was straight and narrow, his face a bit thin.

The hollows in his cheeks tended to deepen when he lost himself in work for long periods and forgot regular meals. It gave him an intriguing starving-scholar look.

His mouth smiled easily, sensually.

He was somewhat tall, somewhat lanky.

And somewhat clumsy.

He had to grip the rail to keep a shudder of the ferry from pitching him over it. He'd been leaning out too far, of course. He knew that, but anticipation often made him forget the reality of the moment.

He steadied himself again, dipped into his coat pocket for a stick of gum.

He came out with an ancient lemon drop, a couple of crumpled sheets of notepaper, a ticket stub—which baffled him, as he couldn't quite remember when he'd last been to the movies—and a lens cap he'd thought he'd lost.

He made do with the lemon drop and watched the island.

He'd consulted with a shaman in Arizona, visited a man who claimed to be a vampire in the mountains of Hungary, been cursed by a brujo after a regrettable incident in Mexico. He'd lived among ghosts in a cottage in Cornwall and had documented the rights and rituals of a necromancer in Romania.

For nearly twelve years, MacAllister Booke had studied, recorded, witnessed the impossible. He interviewed witches, ghosts, lycanthropes, alien abductees, and psychics. Ninety-eight percent of them were delusional or con artists. But the remaining two percent . . . well, that kept him going.

He didn't just believe in the extraordinary. He'd made it his life's work.

The idea of spending the next few months on a chunk of land that legend claimed had been torn from the mainland of Massachusetts by a trio of witches and settled as a sanctuary was fascinating to him.

He'd researched Three Sisters Island extensively and had dug up every scrap of information he could find on Mia Devlin, the current island witch. She hadn't promised him interviews, or access to any of her work. But he hoped to persuade her.

A man who had talked himself into a ceremony held by neo-Druids should be able to convince a solitary witch to let him watch her work a few spells.

Besides, he imagined they could make a trade. He had something he was sure would interest her, and anyone else who was tied into the three-hundred-year-old curse.

He lifted his camera again, adjusting the framing to capture the spear of the white lighthouse, the brooding ramble of the old stone house, both clinging to the high cliffs. He knew Mia lived there, high

above the village, close to the thick slice of forest.

~~Just as he knew she owned the village bookstore and ran it successfully. A practical witch who, by all appearances, knew how to live, and live well, in both worlds.~~

He could hardly wait to meet her face-to-face.

The blast of the horn warned him to prepare for docking. He walked back to his Land Rover, put his camera in its case on the passenger seat.

The lens cap in his pocket was, once again, forgotten.

While he had these last few minutes to himself, he updated some notes, then added to the day's journal entry.

The ferry ride was pleasant. The day's clear and cold. I was able to take a number of pictures from different vantage points, though I'll need to rent a boat for views of the windward side of the island.

Geographically, topographically, there's nothing unusual about Three Sisters Island. Its area is approximately nine square miles, and its year-round inhabitants—largely in the fishing or the retail and tourist trade—number less than three thousand. It has a small sand beach, numerous inlets, coves, and shale beaches. It is partially forested, and the indigenous fauna include whitetail deer, rabbit, raccoon. Typical seabirds for this area. As well as owls, hawks, and pileated woodpecker in the forested regions.

There is one village. The majority of the residents live in the village proper or within a half-mile radius, though there are some houses and rental units farther afield.

There is nothing about the island's appearance that would indicate it is a source of paranormal activity. But I've found that appearances are unreliable documentary tools.

I'm eager to meet Mia Devlin and begin my study.

He felt the slight bump of the ferry's docking, but didn't look up.

Docked, Three Sisters Island, January 6, 2002. Glanced at his watch. 12:03 P.M. EST.



The village streets were storybook tidy, the traffic light. Mac drove through, circled, logging various spots on his tape recorder. He could find an ancient Mayan ruin in the jungle with a map scribbled on a crushed napkin, but he had a habit of forgetting more pedestrian locations. Bank, post office, market. Ah, pizzeria, hot damn!

He found a parking place without trouble only a stop down from Café Book. He liked the look of the place immediately—the display window, the view of the sea. He fished around for his briefcase, tossed the mini-recorder inside, just in case, and climbed out.

He liked the look of the store even more on the inside. The cheerful fire in a stone hearth, the black checkout counter carved with moons and stars. Seventeenth century, he decided, and suitable for a museum. Mia Devlin had taste as well as talent.

He started to cross to it and the little gnomelike woman sitting on a high stool behind it. Movement, a flash of color caught his attention. Mia stepped out of the stacks and smiled.

“Good afternoon. Can I help you?”

His first clear thought was, Wow.

"I'm, ah, hmm. I'm looking for Ms. Devlin. Mia Devlin."

"And you've found her." She walked toward him, held out a hand. "MacAllister Booke?"

"Yeah." Her hand was long and narrow. Rings sparkled on it like jewels on white silk. He was afraid to squeeze too hard.

"Welcome to Three Sisters. Why don't you come upstairs? I'll buy you a cup of coffee, or perhaps some lunch. We're very proud of our café."

"Ah . . . I wouldn't mind some lunch. I've heard good things about your café."

"Perfect. I hope your trip in was uneventful."

Up till now, he thought. "It was fine, thanks." He followed her up the stairs. "I like your store."

"So do I. I hope you'll make use of it during your stay on the island. This is my friend, and the artist of our café, Nell Todd. Nell, Dr. Booke."

"Nice to meet you."

She showed her dimples and leaned over the counter to shake his hand.

"Dr. Booke has just arrived from the mainland, and I imagine he could use some lunch. On the house, Dr. Booke. Just tell Nell what you'd like."

"I'll take the sandwich special, and a large cappuccino, thanks. Do you do the baking, too?"

"That's right. I recommend the apple brown Betty today."

"I'll try it."

"Mia?" Nell asked.

"Just a cup of the soup and the jasmine tea."

"Coming up. I'll bring your orders out."

"I can see I'm not going to have to worry about my next meal while I'm here," Mac commented as they took a window table.

"Nell also owns and runs Sisters Catering. She delivers."

"Good to know." He blinked twice, but her face—the sheer glory of it—didn't dim. "Okay, I just have to get this out, and I hope you're not offended. You're the most beautiful woman I've seen in my life."

"Thank you." She sat back. "And I'm not the least bit offended."

"Good. I don't want things to start off on the wrong foot, since I'm hoping to work with you."

"And as I explained over the phone, I don't . . . work for audiences."

"I'm hoping you'll change your mind after you get to know me better."

He had a potent smile, she decided. Charmingly crooked, deceptively harmless. "We'll see about that. As for your interest in the island itself, and its history, you won't lack for data. The majority of the permanent residents here are from families who've lived on Sisters for generations."

"Todd, for instance," he said, glancing back toward the counter.

"Nell married a Todd, just a little under two weeks ago, in fact. Zachariah Todd, our sheriff. While she's . . . new to the island, the Todds have, indeed, lived here for generations."

He knew who Nell was. The former wife of Evan Remington. A man who had once wielded considerable power and influence in the entertainment industry. A man who had been found to be a violent abuser. And who was now deemed legally insane and under lock and key.

It had been Sheriff Todd who'd arrested him, right here on Sisters Island, after what were reputed to be strange events on Halloween night.

The Sabbat of Samhain.

It was something Mac intended to explore in more depth.

Even as he started to bring it up, something in Mia's expression warned him to bide his time there.

"Looks great. Thanks," he said instead to Nell as she served their lunch.

"Enjoy. Mia, is tonight still good for you?"

“Absolutely.”

“I’ll come up about seven, then. Let me know if you need anything else, Dr. Booke.”

“Nell’s just back from her honeymoon,” Mia said in a quiet voice when she was alone with him again. “I don’t think questions about certain areas of her life are appropriate just now.”

“All right.”

“Are you always so cooperative, Dr. Booke?”

“Mac. Probably not. But I don’t want to make you mad right off the bat.” He bit into his sandwich. “Good,” he managed. “Really good.”

She leaned forward, toyed with her soup. “Lulling the natives into complacency?”

“You’re really good, too. Do you have psychic abilities?”

“Don’t we all, on some level? Didn’t one of your papers explore the development of what you called the neglected sixth sense?”

“You’ve read my work.”

“I have. What I am, Mac, isn’t something I neglect. Neither is it something I exploit or allow to be exploited. I agreed to rent you the cottage, and to talk with you when the mood strikes me, because of one simple thing.”

“Okay. What?”

“You have a brilliant and, more important, a flexible mind. I admire that. As far as trusting that time will tell.” She glanced over and gestured. “And here comes a bright enough, and very inflexible mind. Deputy Ripley Todd.”

Mac looked over, saw the attractive brunette stride on long legs to the café counter, lean on it, chat with Nell. “Ripley’s another common surname on the island.”

“Yes, she’s Zack’s sister. Their mother was a Ripley. They have long ties, on both sides of their family, to the Sisters. Very long ties,” Mia repeated. “If you’re looking for a cynic to weigh in on your research, Ripley’s your girl.”

Unable to resist, Mia caught Ripley’s attention and motioned her over.

Ordinarily Ripley would merely have sneered and walked in the opposite direction. But a strange face on the island usually bore checking out.

A good-looking guy, she thought as she strolled over. In a bookish kind of way. As soon as the thought hit, her brows drew together. Bookish. Mia’s doctor of freakology.

“Dr. MacAllister Booke, Deputy Ripley Todd.”

“Nice to meet you.” He got to his feet, surprising Ripley with his length as he unfolded himself from the chair. Most of his height, she judged, was leg.

“I didn’t know they gave out degrees for the study of crapola.”

“Isn’t she adorable?” Mia beamed. “I was just telling Mac that he should interview you for your narrow, closed mind. After all, it wouldn’t take much time.”

“Yawn.” Ripley hooked her thumbs in her pockets and studied Mac’s face. “I don’t think I’d have much to say that you’d want to hear. Mia’s the goddess of woo-woo stuff around here. You have any questions about the practicalities of day-to-day life on the island, you can usually find me or the sheriff around.”

“Appreciate it. Oh, I’ve only got a master’s in crapola. Haven’t finished my thesis on that one yet.”

Her lips twitched. “Cute. That your Rover out front?”

“Yes.” Had he left the keys in it again? he wondered, already patting pockets. “Is there a problem?”

“No. Nice ride. I’m going to grab some lunch.”

“She isn’t abrasive and annoying on purpose,” Mia said when Ripley walked away. “She was born that way.”

“It’s okay.” He sat again, picked up his meal where he’d left off. “I get a lot of that kind of thing

He nodded at Mia. "I imagine you do, too."

~~"Now and then. You're awfully well adjusted and affable, aren't you, Dr. MacAllister Booke?"~~

"Afraid so. It's pretty boring."

"I don't think so." Mia picked up her tea, studied him over the rim. "No, I don't think so at all."



Mac left his things in the Rover and did a solo walk-through of the yellow cottage. He'd assured Mia he didn't need her to come along. The fact was, he wanted to get a feel of the place without her. She had a strong and distracting presence.

It was small, charmingly quaint, and heads above the majority of accommodations he usually had on a research jaunt. He knew a lot of people thought he was a man more suited to a dark and dusty library. He often was, but he was just as much at home in a tent in the jungle, so long as he had enough battery power for his equipment.

The living room here was small and cozy, with a sofa that looked comfortably broken in and a little fireplace already set for lighting. He decided to take care of that first and patted his pockets absentmindedly before he saw the box of wooden matches on the narrow mantel.

Grateful for small favors, he got the fire going and continued on his tour. Because he talked to himself habitually, his voice echoed a bit.

"Two bedrooms. That one'll do for a sub-office. I think I'm going to set up primarily in the living room. Kitchen'll do if I get desperate enough to cook. Nell Todd."

He dug in his pockets again, came up with the business card for Sisters Catering that he'd taken from the café counter. He laid it in the middle of the stove where he would see it if he thought about cooking.

He looked out the windows, appreciating the woods that tucked in close and the lack of other houses. He often worked odd hours. Here he didn't have any neighbors close enough to complain.

He tossed the single bag he'd brought in with him on the bed in the larger of the two bedrooms and dropped his butt on the bed to give it a test bounce.

The image of Mia drifted into his mind. "Down, boy," he warned himself. "No carnal thoughts about a woman who might be able to pluck them out of your head, and who's also your primary research target."

Satisfied with his living arrangements, he headed outside to unload the Rover.

On his second trip he stopped to watch the sheriff's cruiser pull up, and Ripley climb out.

"Deputy Todd."

"Dr. Booke." She was feeling vaguely guilty about giving him a hard time on their first encounter. Which she wouldn't have felt, she thought resentfully, if Nell hadn't scolded her about it. "You've got a lot of stuff here."

"Oh, this is only part of it. I've got more being sent in tomorrow."

Nosy by nature, she looked in the back of the Rover. "More than this?"

"Yeah. Lots of neat stuff."

She turned her head. "Neat?"

"Lots of it. Sensors, scanners, and gauges and cameras and computers. Cool toys."

He looked so pleased with the idea that she didn't have the heart to smirk. "I'll give you a hand hauling what you've got inside."

"That's okay. Some of it's pretty heavy."

Now she did smirk, and hefted a large box out of the back. "I can handle it."

No question about that, he decided and led the way inside. "Thanks. You work out? What do you bench-press?"

Her brows lifted. "I do twelve reps of ninety pounds in a set." She couldn't get a good gauge of his body type in the long coat and the thick sweater under it. "You?"

"Oh, about the same, considering body weight." He walked out again, leaving her following and trying to get a sense of his shoulders. And his ass.

"What do you do with all this . . . neat stuff?"

"Study, observe, record, document. The occult, the paranormal, the arcane. You know, the different."

"Freak shows."

He only smiled. Not just his mouth, she noted, but his eyes as well. "Some people think so."

They hauled the rest of the boxes and bags in together.

"It's going to take you a week to unpack."

He scratched his head, scanned the piles now crowding the living space. "I never mean to bring so much, but then, you never know what you might need. I was just in Borneo and could've kicked myself for not packing my backup energy detector—like a motion detector, but not," he explained. "You just can't find one of those on Borneo."

"I bet."

"I'll show you." He shrugged out of his coat, tossed it carelessly aside before hunkering down and pawing through a box.

Surprise, surprise, Ripley thought. Dr. Weird had one excellent butt.

"See, this one's handheld. Completely portable. I designed it myself."

It put her in mind of a little Geiger counter, though she didn't think she'd ever seen an actual Geiger counter.

"It detects and measures positive and negative force," he explained. "Simply put, it reacts to charged particles in the air, or in a solid object, even water. Except this one isn't submersible. I'm working on one that will be. I can hook this up, when I need to, to my computer and generate a graph and printout of the size and density of the force and other pertinent data."

"Uh-huh." She gave a quick glance at his face. He looked so earnest, she thought, so pleased with his little handheld gadget. "You're really a total geek, aren't you?"

"Yeah, pretty much." He flipped his unit on to check the batteries. "I've always been into the paranormal and electronics. I found a way to indulge myself on both levels."

"Whatever floats your boat." But she scanned the piles of boxed equipment. It looked like Rad Shack had exploded. "All this high-tech junk. Lots of dough, I bet."

"Mmm." He wasn't giving her his full attention. His activated sensor was giving off a low but definite reading.

"Do they give you grants for stuff like this?"

"Umm, maybe, but I never needed one. I'm a really rich geek."

"No kidding? Don't let Mia know or she'll jack up the rent." Curious, she wound her way through the boxes. She'd always liked the little cottage well enough, and was still a bit steamed that she wasn't the one moving in. But things with MacAllister Booke weren't adding up for her.

"Look, usually I'm big on minding my own business, and I've got less than no interest in the stuff you do, but I've just got to say, you just don't seem to fit. Professor of strange, geeky rich guy, little yellow cottage. What are you after?"

He didn't smile now. His face went quiet, almost eerily intent. "Answers."

"What answers?"

"All of them I can get. You've got great eyes."

"Huh?"

"I was just noticing. Nothing but green. No gray, no blue, just intense green. Pretty."

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