

Lover Revealed

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Extract

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Chapter One

“What if I told you I had a fantasy?”

Butch O’Neal put his Scotch down and eyed the blonde who’d spoken to him. Against the backdrop of Zero-Sum’s VIP area, she was something else, dressed in white patent leather strips, a cross between Barbie and Barbarella. It was hard to know if she was one of the club’s professionals or not. The Reverend only trafficked in the best, but maybe she was a model for *FHM* or *Maxim*.

She planted her hands on the marble tabletop and leaned in toward him. Her breasts were perfect, the very best money could buy. And her smile was radiant, a promise of acts done with knee pads. Paid or not, this was a woman who got plenty of vitamin D and liked it.

“Well, daddy?” she said over the trippy techno music. “Want to make my dream come true?”

He shot her a hard smile. Sure as hell, she was going to make someone very happy tonight. Probably a busload of someones. But he wasn’t going to be riding that double-decker.

“Sorry, you need to go taste the rainbow somewhere else.”

Her total lack of reaction sealed the deal on her professional status. With a vacant smile, she floated over to the next table and pulled the same lean and gleam.

Butch tilted his head back and swallowed the inch of Lagavulin left in his glass. His next move was to flag down a waitress. She didn’t come over, just nodded and beat feet for the bar to get him another.

It was almost three A.M., so the rest of the troika were going to show up in a half hour. Vishous and Rhage were out hunting *lessers*, those soulless bastards that killed their kind, but the two vampires were probably going to come in for a landing disappointed. The secret war between their species and the Lessening Society had been quiet all January and February, with few slayers out and around. This was good news for the race's civilian population. Cause for concern for the Black Dagger Brotherhood.

"Hello, cop." The low male voice came from right behind Butch's head.

Butch smiled. That sound always made him think of night fog, the kind that hides what's going to kill you. Good thing he liked the dark side.

"Evening, Reverend," he said without turning around.

"I knew you were going to turn her down."

"You a mind reader?"

"Sometimes."

Butch glanced over his shoulder. The Reverend was poised in the shadows, amethyst eyes glowing, mohawk trimmed tight to his skull. His black suit was sweet: Valentino. Butch had one just like it.

Although in the Reverend's case the worsted wool had been bought with the guy's own money. The Reverend, a.k.a. Revenge, a.k.a. brother of Z's *shellan*, Bella, owned ZeroSum and took a cut of everything that went down. Hell, with all the depravity for sale in the club, he had a forest worth of green funneling into his piggy bank at the end of every night.

"Nah, she just wasn't for you." The Reverend slid into the booth, smoothing his perfectly knotted Versace necktie. "And I know why you said no."

"Oh, yeah?"

"You don't like blondes."

Not anymore he didn't. "Maybe I just wasn't into her."

"I know what you want."

As Butch's newest Scotch arrived, he gave it a quick vertical workout. "Do you now?"

"It's my job. Trust me."

“No offense, but I’d rather not about this.”

“Tell you what, cop.” The Reverend leaned in close and he smelled fantastic. Then again, Cool Water by Davidoff was an oldie but goodie. “I’ll help you anyway.”

Butch clapped a hand on the male’s heavy shoulder. “Only interested in bartenders, buddy. Good Samaritans give me the scratch.”

“Sometimes only the opposite will do.”

“Then we’re SOL.” Butch nodded out at the half-naked crowd writhing on hits of X and coke. “Everyone looks the same around here.”

Funny, during his years in the Caldwell Police Department, ZeroSum had been an enigma to him. Everyone knew the place was a drug hole and a sex pool. But no one at the CPD had been able to pin down enough probable cause to get a search warrant—even though you could walk in any night of the week and see dozens of legal infractions, most of them happening in tandem.

But now that Butch was hanging with the Brotherhood, he knew why. The Reverend had lots of little tricks in his bag when it came to changing people’s perceptions of events and circumstances. As a vampire, he could scrub clean the memories of any human, manipulate security cameras, dematerialize at will. The guy and his biz were a moving target that never moved.

“Tell me something,” Butch said, “how have you managed to keep your aristocratic family from knowing about this little night job you got going on?”

The Reverend smiled so that only the tips of his fangs showed. “Tell me something, how did a human get so tight with the Brotherhood?”

Butch tipped his glass in deference. “Sometimes fate takes you in fucked-up directions.”

“So true, human. So very true.” As Butch’s cell phone went off, the Reverend got up. “I’ll send you over something.”

“Unless it’s Scotch I don’t want it, my man.”

“You’re going to take that back.”

“Doubt it.” Butch took out his Motorola Razr and flipped it open. “What up, V? Where are you?”

Vishous was breathing like a racehorse with the dull roar of wind distortion backing him up: a symphony of ass hauling. “Shit, cop. We got problems.”

Butch’s adrenaline kicked in, lighting him up like a Christmas tree. “Where are you?”

“Out in the burbs with a situation. The damn slayers have started hunting civilians in their homes.”

Butch leaped to his feet. “I’m coming—”

“The hell you are. You stay put. I only called so you wouldn’t think we were dead when we didn’t show. Later.”

The connection cut off.

Butch sank back down in the booth. From the table next to him, a group of people let out a loud, happy burst, some shared joke teeing their laughter off like birds flushed into the open air.

Butch looked into his glass. Six months ago he’d had nothing in his life. No woman. No family he was close to. No home to speak of. And his job as a homicide detective had been eating him alive. Then he’d gotten canned for police brutality. Fallen in with the Brotherhood through a bizarre series of events. Met the one and only woman who’d ever awed him stupid. Also had a total wardrobe makeover.

At least that last one was in the good category and had stayed there.

For a while the change had been a great mask of reality, but lately he’d noticed that for all the differences, he was right where he’d always been: no more alive than when he’d been rotting in his old life. Still on the outside looking in.

Sucking back his Lag, he thought of Marissa and pictured her hip-length blond hair. Her pale skin. Her light blue eyes. Her fangs.

Yeah, no blondes for him. He couldn’t go even remotely sexual with the pale-haired types.

Ah, hell, screw the Clairol chart. It wasn’t like any woman in this club or on the face of the planet could come close to Marissa. She had been pure in the manner of a crystal, refract-

ing the light, and life around her improved, enlivened, colored with her grace.

Shit. He was such a sap.

Except, man, she'd been so lovely. For the short time when she'd seemed to be attracted to him, he'd hoped they might get something off the ground. But then she'd up and disappeared. Which of course proved she was smart. He didn't have much to offer a female like her and not because he was just a human. He was treading water on the fringes of the Brotherhood's world, unable to fight at their side because of what he was, unable to go back to the human world because he knew too much. And the only way out of this deserted middle ground was with a toe tag.

Now was he a real eHarmony contender or what?

With another rush of happy-happy-joy-joy, the group next door let off a fresh buckshot of hilarity and Butch glanced over. At the center of the party was a little blond guy in a slick suit. He looked fifteen, but he'd been a regular in the VIP section for the past month, throwing cash around like it was confetti.

Obviously, the guy made up for his physical deficiencies through the use of his wallet. Another example of green being golden.

Butch finished his Scotch, fingered for the waitress, then looked at the bottom of his glass. Shit. After four doubles, he didn't feel buzzed at all, which told him how well his tolerance was faring. Clearly, he was a varsity alcoholic now, no more of that training at the junior levels thing.

And when the realization didn't bother him, he realized he'd stopped treading water. Now he was sinking.

Well, wasn't he a party tonight.

"The Reverend says you need a friend."

Butch didn't bother glancing up at the woman. "No, thanks."

"Why don't you look at me first?"

"Tell your boss I appreciate his—" Butch glanced up and clapped his mouth shut.

He recognized the woman immediately, but then again, Zero-Sum's head of security was pretty damn unforgettable. Six feet

tall, easy. Hair jet-black and cut like a man's. Eyes the dark gray color of a shotgun barrel. With the wife-beater she had on, she was popping the upper body of an athlete, all muscles, veins, and no fat. The vibe she gave off was that she could break bones and enjoy it, and absently he looked at her hands. Long-fingered. Strong. The kind that could do damage.

Holy hell . . . he would like to be hurt. Tonight he would like to hurt on the outside for a change.

The woman smiled a little, like she knew what he was thinking, and he caught a glimpse of fangs. Ah . . . so she was not woman. She was female. She was vampire.

The Reverend had been right, that bastard. This one would do, because she was everything Marissa wasn't. And because she was the kind of anonymous sex Butch had had all his adult life. And because she was just the sort of pain he was looking for and hadn't known it.

As he slipped a hand into his Ralph Lauren Black Label suit, the female shook her head. "I don't work it for cash. Ever. Consider it a favor for a friend."

"I don't know you."

"You're not the friend I'm talking about."

Butch looked over her shoulder and saw Rehvenge staring across the VIP section. The male shot back a very self-satisfied smile, then disappeared into his private office.

"He's a very good friend of mine," the female murmured.

"Oh, really. What's your name?"

"Not important." She held out her hand. "Come on, Butch, a.k.a. Brian, last name O'Neal. Come back with me. Forget for a while whatever makes you hammer those shots of Lagavulin. I promise you, all that self-destruction will be waiting for you when you get back."

Man, he really wasn't psyched about how much she had on him. "Why don't you tell me your name first."

"Tonight you can call me Sympathy. How 'bout that."

He eyed her from bangs to boots. She was wearing leather pants. No surprise. "You happen to have two heads there, Sympathy?"

She laughed, a low, rich sound. “No, and I’m not a she-male, either. Yours isn’t the only sex that can be strong.”

He stared hard into her cast-iron eyes. Then looked back at the private bathrooms. God . . . this was so familiar. A quickie with a stranger, a meaningless crash between two bodies. This shit had been the cash-and-carry of his sex life since he could remember—except he didn’t recall ever feeling this kind of sick despair before.

Whatever. Was he really going to stay celibate until he kicked it when his liver corroded? Just because a female he didn’t deserve didn’t want him?

He glanced down at his pants. His body was willing. At least that part of the math added up.

Butch slid out of the booth, his chest as cold as winter pavement. “Let’s go.”

On a lovely tremble of violins, the chamber orchestra glided into a waltz and Marissa watched the glittering crowd coalesce in the ballroom. All around her, males and females came together, hands linking, bodies meeting, stares locking. The mingling of dozens of different variations on the bonding scent filled the air with a rich spice.

She breathed in through her lips, trying not to smell so much of it.

Escape proved futile, however, which was the way things worked. Though the aristocracy prided itself on its manners and style, the *glymera* was, after all, still subject to the race’s biological truths: When males bonded, their possessiveness carried a scent. When females accepted their mates, they bore that dark fragrance on their skin with pride.

Or at least Marissa assumed it was with pride.

Of the hundred twenty-five vampires in her brother’s ballroom, she was the only unmated female. There were a number of unmated males, but it wasn’t as if they would ever ask her to dance. Better that those *princeps* sit out the waltzing or take their mothers or sisters to the floor than get anywhere near her.

No, she was forever unwanted, and as a couple twirled by right in front of her, she glanced down to be polite. Last thing

she needed was for them to trip all over each other as they avoided looking her in the eye.

While her skin shriveled, she wasn't sure why tonight her status as shunned spectator seemed a special burden. For God's sake, no member of the *glymera* had met her stare for four hundred years and she was used to it: First she had been the Blind King's unwanted *shellan*. Now she was his *former* unwanted *shellan*, who had been passed over for his beloved half-breed queen.

Maybe she was finally exhausted with being on the outside.

Hands shaking, lips tight, she picked up the heavy skirt of her gown and made for the ballroom's grand archway. Salvation was just outside in the hall, and she pushed open the door to the mistresses' lounge with a prayer. The air that greeted her smelled of freesia and perfume and within the arms of its invisible embrace there was . . . only silence.

Thank the Scribe Virgin.

Her tension eased marginally as she went in and looked around. She'd always thought of this particular bathroom in her brother's mansion as a luxurious locker room for debutantes. Decorated in a vivid Russian czarist motif, the bloodred sitting and primping area was kitted out with ten matching vanities, each makeup station holding everything a female could want to improve her appearance. Extending out the back of the lounge were the private lavatory chambers, all of which were done in the scheme of a different Fabergé egg from her brother's extensive collection.

Perfectly feminine. Perfectly lovely.

Standing in the middle of it all, she wanted to scream.

Instead, she bit her lip and bent down to check her hair in one of the mirrors. The blond weight, which reached the small of her back when down, was arranged with watchmaker precision on the top of her head and the chignon was holding up well. Even after several hours, everything was still in place, the pearl strands woven in by her *doggen* exactly where they'd been when she'd come down to the ball.

Then again, standing on the fringes hadn't really given the Marie Antoinette job a workout.

But her necklace was out of whack again. She joggled the multitiered pearl collar back into position so that its lowest drop, a Tahitian twenty-three-millimeter, pointed directly down into what little cleavage she had.

Her dove gray gown was vintage Balmain, one that she'd bought in Manhattan in the 1940s. Shoes were Stuart Weitzman and brand-new, not that anyone saw them under the floor-length skirt. Necklace, earrings, and cuffs were Tiffany, as always: When her father had discovered the great Louis Comfort in the late 1800s, the family had become loyal customers of the company and had stayed that way.

Which was the hallmark of the aristocracy, wasn't it? Constancy and quality in all things, change and defects to be greeted with glaring disapproval.

She straightened and backed up until she could see her whole self from across the room. The image staring back at her was ironic: Her reflection was of utter female flawlessness, an improbable beauty that seemed sculpted, not born. Tall and thin, her body was made up of delicate angles, and her face was absolutely sublime, a perfect combination of lips and eyes and cheeks and nose. The skin over it all was alabaster. The eyes were silver blue. The blood in her veins was among the very purest in the species.

Yet here she was. The forsaken female. The one left behind. The unwanted, defective, spinster virgin who not even a purebred warrior like Wrath had been able to bear sexually even *once*, if only to rid her of being a *newling*. And thanks to his repulsion, she was ever unmated, though she'd been with Wrath for what had seemed like forever. You had to have been taken to be considered someone's *shellan*.

Their end had been a surprise and no surprise at all. To anyone. Despite Wrath declaring that she had left him, the *glymera* knew the truth. She'd been untouched for centuries, never carrying the bonding scent from him, never spending a day alone with him. More to the point, no female would have left Wrath voluntarily. He was the Blind King, the last purebred vampire on the planet, a great warrior and a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. There was no higher than he.

The conclusion among the aristocracy? Something had to be wrong with her, most likely hidden beneath her clothes, and the deficiency was probably sexual in nature. Why else would a full-blooded warrior have no erotic impulse toward her?

She took a deep breath. Then another. And another.

The scent of the fresh-cut flowers invaded her nose, the sweetness swelling, taking over, replacing the air . . . until it was only fragrance going down into her lungs. Her throat seemed to close up, as if to fight the onslaught, and she pulled at her necklace. Tight . . . it was so tight on her neck. And heavy . . . like hands choking her. . . . She opened her mouth to breathe, but it didn't help. Her lungs were clogged with the flower stench, coated by it . . . she was suffocating, drowning, though she was not in water . . .

On loose legs, she walked to the door, but she couldn't face those dancing couples, those people who defined who they were by ostracizing her. No, she couldn't let them see her . . . they would know how upset she was. They would see how hard this was for her. Then they would despise her even more.

Her eyes shot around the mistresses' lounge, skipping over everything, bouncing off all the mirrors. Frantically she tried to . . . what was she doing? Where could she . . . go—bedroom, upstairs. . . . She had to . . . oh, God . . . *she couldn't breathe*. She was going to die here, right here and now, from her throat closing up tight as a fist.

Havers . . . her brother . . . she needed to reach him. He was a doctor. . . . He would come and help her—but his birthday would be ruined. *Ruined* . . . because of her. Everything ruined because of her. . . . It was all her fault . . . everything. All the disgrace she bore was her fault. . . . Thank God her parents had been dead for centuries and hadn't seen her for what . . . she was . . .

Going to throw up. She was definitely going to throw up.

Hands shaking, legs like pudding, she lurched into one of the bathrooms and locked herself inside. On the way to the toilet, she fumbled with the sink, turning the water on to drown out her rasping breath in case someone came in. Then she fell to her knees and bent over the porcelain bowl.

She gagged and wretched, her throat working through the dry heaves, nothing coming up but air. Sweat broke out on her forehead and under her armpits and between her breasts. Head spinning, mouth gaping, she struggled for breath as thoughts of dying and having no one to help her, of ruining her brother's party, of being an abhorred object swarmed like bees . . . bees in her head, buzzing, stinging . . . causing the death . . . thoughts like bees . . .

Marissa started to cry, not because she thought she was going to die but because she knew she wasn't.

God, the panic attacks had been brutal these last few months, her anxiety a stalker with no solid form, whose persistence knew no exhaustion. And every time she had a meltdown, the experience was a fresh and horrible revelation.

Propping her head on her hand, she wept hoarsely, tears running down her face and getting trapped in the pearls and diamonds at her throat. She was so alone. Caged in a beautiful, wealthy, fancy nightmare where the bogeymen wore tuxedos and smoking jackets and the vultures swooped down on wings of satin and silk to peck out her eyes.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to get some control over her respiration. *Easy . . . easy now. You're okay. You've done this before.*

After a while, she looked down into the toilet. The bowl was solid gold and her tears made the surface of the water ripple as if sunlight shined within it. She became abruptly aware that the tile was hard beneath her knees. And her corset was biting into her rib cage. And her skin was clammy.

She lifted her head and glanced around. Well, what do you know. She'd picked her favorite private chamber to fall apart in, the one based on the Lilies of the Valley egg. As she sat draped over the toilet, she was surrounded by blush-pink walls hand-painted with bright green vines and little white flowers. The floor and counter and sink were pink marble veined with white and cream. The sconces were gold.

Very nice. Perfect background for an anxiety attack, really. But then, lately panic went with everything, didn't it? The new black.

Marissa pushed herself up from the floor, turned off the faucet, and collapsed into the little silk-covered chair in the corner. Her gown settled around her as if it were an animal stretching out now that the drama was over.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was blotchy, her nose red. Her makeup was ruined. Her hair was a ragged mess.

See, this was what she looked like on the inside, so no wonder the *glymera* despised her. Somehow they knew this was the truth of her.

God . . . maybe that was why Butch hadn't wanted her—

Oh, hell no. The last thing she needed was to think about him right now. What she had to do was straighten herself up as best she could and then scoot up to her bedroom. Sure, hiding was unattractive, but so was she.

Just as she reached up to her hair, she heard the outside door to the lounge open, the chamber music swelling, then easing off as it closed.

Great. Now she was trapped. But maybe it was only one female so she didn't have to worry about being an eavesdropper.

"I can't believe I spilled on my shawl, Sanima."

Okay, so now she was an eavesdropper as well as a coward.

"It's barely noticeable," Sanima said. "Although thank the Virgin you caught it before anyone else did. We'll go in here together and use some water."

Marissa shook herself into focus. *Don't worry about them, just fix your hair. And for the Virgin's sake do something about that mascara. You look like a raccoon.*

She grabbed a washcloth and wet it quietly while the two females went into the little room across the way. Obviously, they left the door open—their voices were undimmed.

"But what if someone saw?"

"Shh . . . let's take the shawl off—oh, my Lord." There was a short laugh. "Your neck."

The younger female's voice dropped to an ecstatic hush. "It's Marlus. Ever since we were mated last month, he's been . . ."

Now the laughter was shared.

“Does he come to you often during the day?” Sanima’s secretive tone was delighted.

“Oh, yes. When he said he wanted our bedrooms connected, I didn’t know why. Now, I do. He’s . . . insatiable. And he . . . he doesn’t just want to feed.”

Marissa stopped with the washcloth under her eye. Only once had she known a male’s hunger for her. One kiss, only one . . . and she held the memory with care. She was going to her grave a virgin, and that brief meeting of mouths was all she would ever have of anything sexual.

Butch O’Neal. Butch had kissed her with— *Stop it.*

She went to work on the other side of her face.

“To be newly mated, how marvelous. Though you mustn’t let anyone see these marks. Your skin is marred.”

“That’s why I rushed in here. What if someone told me to take off the wrap because of the wine I spilled?” This was said with the kind of horror usually reserved for accidents involving knives.

Although, given the *glymera*, Marissa could understand all too well wanting to avoid their attention.

Tossing the washcloth aside, she tried to rework her hair . . . and gave up not thinking about Butch.

God, she would have loved having to hide his teeth marks from the eyes of the *glymera*. Would have loved to hold the delicious secret that under the civilized gowns she wore, her body had known his raw sex. And she would have loved to bear the scent of his bonding for her on her skin, emphasizing it, as mated females did, by choosing the perfect complementary perfume.

But none of that was going to happen. For one thing, humans didn’t bond, from what she’d heard. And even if they did, Butch O’Neal had walked away from her the last time she’d seen him, so he wasn’t interested in her anymore. Probably because he’d heard about her deficiencies. As he was close with the Brotherhood, no doubt he knew all kinds of things about her now.

“Is there someone in here?” Sanima said sharply.

Marissa cursed under her breath and figured she’d just

sighed out loud. Giving up on her hair and her face, she opened the door. When she stepped out, both females looked down, which in this instance was a good thing. Her hair was a train wreck.

“Worry not. I will say nothing,” she murmured. Because sex was never to be discussed in a public place. Or any private ones, really.

The two curtsied dutifully and did not reply while Marissa left.

As soon as she walked out of the lounge, she felt more glances sliding away from her, all eyes going elsewhere . . . especially those of the unmated males smoking cigars over in the corner.

Just before she turned her back on the ball, she caught Havers’s stare through the crowd. He nodded and smiled sadly, as if he knew she couldn’t stay a moment longer.

Dearest brother, she thought. He had always supported her, had never given any indication he was ashamed of how she had turned out. She would have loved him for their shared parents, but she adored him for his loyalty most of all.

With a last look at the *glymera* in all its glory, she went to her room. After a quick shower, she changed into a simpler floor-length dress and lower-heeled shoes, then went down the mansion’s back stairs.

Untouched and unwanted she could deal with. If that was the fate the Scribe Virgin laid upon her, so be it. There were far worse lives to be led, and bemoaning what she lacked, considering all she had, was boring and selfish.

What she couldn’t handle was being purposeless. Thank God that she had her position on the *Princeps* Council and that her seat was secure by virtue of her bloodline. But there was also another way to leave a positive mark on her world.

As she keyed in a code and unlocked a steel door, she envied the couples dancing at the other end of the mansion and probably always would. Except that was not her destiny.

She had other paths to walk.