

Succubus Dreams

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Extract

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Chapter 1

I wished the guy on top of me would hurry up because I was getting bored.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem like he was going to finish anytime soon. Brad or Brian or whatever his name was thrust away, eyes squeezed shut with such concentration that you would have thought having sex was on par with brain surgery or lifting steel beams.

"Brett," I panted. It was time to pull out the big guns.

He opened one eye. "Bryce."

"Bryce." I put on my most passionate, orgasmic face. "Please . . . please . . . don't stop."

His other eye opened. Both went wide.

A minute later, it was all over.

"Sorry," he gasped, rolling off me. He looked mortified. "I don't know . . . didn't mean . . ."

"It's okay, baby." I felt only a little bad about using the *don't stop* trick on him. It didn't always work, but for some guys, planting that seed completely undid them. "It was amazing."

And really, that wasn't entirely a lie. The sex itself had been mediocre, but the rush afterward . . . the feel of his life and his soul pouring into me . . . yeah. That was pretty amazing. It was what a succubus like me literally lived for.

He gave me a weary smile. The energy he'd had now flowed in my body. Its loss had exhausted him, burned him out. He'd sleep soon and would probably continue sleeping a great deal over the next few days. His soul had been a good one, and I'd taken a lot of it—as well as his life itself. He'd now live a few years less, thanks to me.

I tried not to think about that as I hurriedly put on my clothes. Instead, I focused on how I'd done what I had to do for my own survival. Plus, my infernal masters required me to seduce and corrupt good souls on a regular basis. Bad men might make me feel less guilty, but they didn't fulfill Hell's quota.

Bryce seemed surprised at my abrupt departure but was too worn out to fight it. I promised to call him—having no intention of doing so—and slipped out of the room as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

I'd barely cleared his front door before shape-shifting. I'd come to him as a tall, sable-haired woman but now once again wore my preferred shape, petite with hazel-green eyes and light brown hair that flirted with gold. Like

most of my life, my features danced between states, never entirely settling on one.

I put Bryce out of my mind, just like I did with most men I slept with, and drove across town to what was rapidly becoming my second home. It was a tan, stucco condo, set into a community of other condos that tried desperately to be as hip as new construction in Seattle could manage. I parked my Passat out front, fished my key out of my purse, and let myself inside.

The condo was still and quiet, wrapped in darkness. A nearby clock informed me it was three in the morning. Walking toward the bedroom, I shape-shifted again, swapping my clothes for a red nightgown.

I froze in the bedroom's doorway, surprised to feel my breath catch in my throat. You'd think after all this time, I would have gotten used to him, that he wouldn't affect me like this. But he did. Every time.

Seth lay sprawled on the bed, one arm tossed over his head. His breathing came deep and fitful, and the sheets lay in a tangle around his long, lean body. Moonlight muted out the color of his hair, but in the sun, its light brown would pick up a russet glow. Seeing him, studying him, I felt my heart swell in my chest. I'd never expected to feel this way about anyone again, not after centuries of feeling so . . . empty. Bryce

had meant nothing to me, but this man before me meant everything.

I slid into bed beside him, and his arms instantly went around me. I think it was instinctual. The connection between us was so deep that even while unconscious, we couldn't stay away from each other.

I pressed my cheek to Seth's chest, and his skin warmed mine as I fell asleep. The guilt from Bryce faded, and soon, there was only Seth and my love for him.

I slipped almost immediately into a dream. Except, well, I wasn't actually *in* it, at least not in the active sense. I was watching myself, seeing the events unfold as though at a movie. Only, unlike a movie, I could *feel* every detail. The sights, the sounds . . . it was almost more vivid than real life.

The other Georgina was in a kitchen, one I didn't recognize. It was bright and modern, far larger than anything I could imagine a non-cook like me needing. My dream-self stood at the sink, arms elbow-deep in sudsy water that smelled like oranges. She was hand-washing dishes, which surprised my real-self—but was doing a shoddy job, which did not surprise me. On the floor, an actual dishwasher lay in pieces, thus explaining the need for manual labor.

From another room, the sounds of "Sweet Home Alabama" carried to my ears. My

dream-self hummed along as she washed, and in that surreal, dream sort of way, I could feel her happiness. She was content, filled with a joy so utterly perfect, I could barely comprehend it. Even with Seth, I'd rarely ever felt so happy—and I was pretty damned happy with him. I couldn't imagine what could make my dream-self feel this way, particularly while doing something as mundane as washing dishes.

I woke up.

To my surprise, it was full morning, bright and sunny. I'd had no sense of time passing. The dream had seemed to last only a minute, yet the nearby alarm clock claimed six hours had passed. The loss of the happiness my dream-self had experienced made me ache.

Weirder than that, I felt . . . not right. It took me a moment to peg the problem: I was drained. The life energy I needed to survive, the energy I'd stolen from Bryce, was almost gone. In fact, I had less now than I'd had before going to bed with him. It made no sense. A burst of life like that should have lasted a couple weeks at least, yet I was nearly as wiped out as he'd been. I wasn't low enough to start losing my shape-shifting ability, but I'd need a new fix within a couple of days.

“What's wrong?”

Seth's sleepy voice came from beside me. I rolled over and found him propped on one

elbow, watching me with a small, sweet smile.

I didn't want to explain what had happened. Doing so would mean elaborating on what I'd done with Bryce, and while Seth theoretically knew what I did to survive, ignorance really was bliss.

"Nothing," I lied. I was a good liar.

He touched my cheek. "I missed you last night."

"No, you didn't. You were busy with Cady and O'Neill."

His smile turned wry, but even as it did, I could see his eyes start to take on the dreamy, inward look he got when he thought about the characters in his novels. I'd made kings and generals beg for my love in my long life, yet some days, even my charms couldn't compete with the people who lived in Seth's head.

Fortunately, today wasn't one of those days, and his attention focused back on me.

"Nah. They don't look as good in a nightgown. That's very Anne Sexton, by the way. Like 'candy store cinnamon hearts.'"

Only Seth would use a bipolar poet as a compliment. I glanced down and ran an absent-minded hand over the red silk. "This does look pretty good," I admitted. "I might look better in this than I do naked."

He scoffed. "No, Thetis. You do not."

I smiled, as I always did, when he used the

pet name he coined for me. In Greek mythology, Thetis had been Achilles' mother, a shape-shifting goddess won by a determined mortal. And then, in what was an astonishingly aggressive move for him, Seth flipped me onto my back and began kissing my neck.

"Hey," I said, putting up a half-hearted struggle. "We don't have time for this. I have stuff to do. And I want breakfast."

"Noted," he mumbled, moving on to my mouth. I stopped my complaining. Seth was a wonderful kisser. He gave the kind of kisses that melted into your mouth and filled you with sweetness. They were like cotton candy.

But there was no real melting to be had, not for us. With a well-practiced sense of timing that you could probably set a watch to, he pulled away from the kiss and sat up, removing his hands as well. Still smiling, he looked down at me and my undignified sprawl.

I smiled back, squelching the small pang of regret that always came at these moments of retreat.

But that was the way it was with us, and honestly, we had a pretty good system going when one considered all the complications in our relationship. My friend Hugh once had joked that all women steal men's souls if they're together long enough. In my case, it didn't take years of bickering. A too-long kiss would suffice. Such

was the life of a succubus. I didn't make the rules, and I had no way to stop the involuntary energy theft that came from intimate physical contact. I could, however, control whether that physical contact happened in the first place, and I made sure it didn't. I ached for Seth, but I wouldn't steal his life as I had Bryce's.

I sat as well, ready to get up, but Seth must have been feeling bold this morning. He wrapped his arms around my waist and shifted me onto his lap, pressing himself against my back so that his lightly stubbled face buried itself in my neck and hair. I felt his body tremble with the intake of a heavy, deep breath. He exhaled it just as slowly, like he sought control of himself, and then strengthened his grip on me.

"Georgina," he breathed against my skin.

I closed my eyes, and the playfulness was gone. A dark intensity wrapped around us, one that burned with both desire and a fear of what might come.

"Georgina," he repeated. His voice was low, husky. I felt like melting again. "Do you know why they say succubi visit men in their sleep?"

"Why?" My own voice was small.

"Because I dream about you every night." In most circumstances, that would have sounded trite, but from him, it was powerful and hungry.

I squeezed my eyes tighter as a swirl of emotions danced within me. I wanted to cry. I wanted to make love to him. I wanted to scream. It was all too much sometimes. Too much emotion. Too much danger. Too much, too much.

Opening my eyes, I shifted so that I could see his face. We held each other's gazes, both of us wanting more and unable to give or take it. Breaking the look first, I slipped regretfully from his embrace. "Come on. Let's go eat."

Seth lived in Seattle's university district—the U-district to locals—and was within easy walking distance to assorted shops and restaurants that lay adjacent to the University of Washington's campus. We found breakfast at a small café, and omelets and conversation soon banished the earlier awkwardness. Afterward, we wandered idly up University Way, holding hands. I had errands to run, and he had writing to do, yet we were reluctant to part.

Seth suddenly stopped walking. "Georgina."
"Hmm?"

His eyebrows rose as he stared off at something across the street. "John Cusack is standing over there."

I followed his incredulous gaze to where a man very like Mr. Cusack did indeed stand, smoking a cigarette as he leaned against a building. I sighed.

“That’s not John Cusack. That’s Jerome.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup. I told you he looked like John Cusack.”

“Keyword: *looked*. That guy doesn’t look like him. That guy is him.”

“Believe me, he’s not.” Seeing Jerome’s impatient expression, I let go of Seth’s hand. “Be right back.”

I crossed the street, and as the distance closed between my boss and me, Jerome’s aura washed over my body. All immortals have a unique signature, and a demon like Jerome had an especially strong one. He felt like waves and waves of roiling heat—like when you open an oven and don’t stand far enough back.

“Make it fast,” I told him. “You’re ruining my romantic interlude. Like usual.”

Jerome dropped the cigarette and put it out with his black Kenneth Cole oxford. He glanced disdainfully around. “What, here? Come on, Georgie. This isn’t romantic. This place isn’t even a pit stop on the road to romance.”

I put an angry hand on one hip. Whenever Jerome interrupted my personal life, it usually heralded a series of mishaps I’d never wanted to be involved in. Something told me this was no exception. “What do you want?”

“You.”

I blinked. “What?”

“We’ve got a meeting tonight. An all staff meeting.”

“When you say ‘all staff’, do you mean like *all* staff?”

The last time Seattle’s supervising archdemon had gathered everyone in the area together, it had been to inform us that our local imp wasn’t “meeting expectations.” Jerome had let us all tell the imp good-bye and then banished the poor guy off to the fiery depths of Hell. It was kind of sad, but then my friend Hugh had replaced him, so I’d gotten over it. I hoped this meeting wouldn’t have a similar purpose.

He gave me an annoyed look, one that said I was clearly wasting his time. “That’s the definition of all staff, isn’t it?”

“When is it?”

“Seven. At Peter and Cody’s. Don’t be late. Your presence is essential.”

Shit. I hoped this wasn’t actually *my* going away party. I’d been on pretty good behavior lately. “What’s this about?”

“Find out when you get there. Don’t be late,” he repeated.

Stepping off the main thoroughfare and into the shadow of a building, the demon vanished.

A feeling of dread spread through me. Demons were never to be trusted, particularly when they looked like quirky movie stars and issued enigmatic invitations.

“Everything okay?” Seth asked me when I rejoined him.

I considered. “In as much as it ever is.”

He wisely chose not to pursue the subject, and he and I eventually separated to take care of our respective tasks. I was dying to know what this meeting could be about but not nearly as much as I wanted to know what had made me lose my energy overnight. And as I ran my errands—groceries, oil change, Macy’s—I also found the strange, brief dream replaying in my head. How could such a short dream have been so vivid? And why couldn’t I stop thinking about it?

The puzzle distracted me so much that seven rolled around without me knowing it. Groaning, I headed off for my friend Peter’s place, speeding the whole way. Great. I was going to be late. Even if this meeting didn’t concern me and my impending unemployment, I might end up getting a taste of Jerome’s wrath after all.

About six feet from the apartment door, I felt the hum of immortal signatures. A lot of them. My friends’ auras, familiar and beloved, sang to me instantly. A few others gave me pause as I tried to remember who they belonged to; the greater Puget Sound area had a host of hellish employees that I almost never interacted with. One signature I didn’t recognize at all. And one

. . . one seemed almost familiar. I couldn't quite put my finger on who it belonged to, though.

I started to knock, decided an all staff meeting deserved more than jeans and a T-shirt, and shape-shifted my outfit into a brown dress with a low-cut, surplice top. My hair settled into a neat bun. I raised my hand to the door.

An annoyed vampire I barely remembered let me in. She inclined her chin to me by way of greeting and then continued her conversation with another vampire I'd only met once. I think they worked out of Tacoma, which as far as I was concerned might as well be annexed to Hell itself.

My friend Hugh, dark-haired with a large frame, paced around while chatting animatedly on his cell phone. Jerome lounged in an armchair with a martini. His little-seen lieutenant demonesses stood in a corner, keeping to themselves as always. Peter and Cody—my good friends and the vampires who lived here—laughed about something in the kitchen with a few other hellish employees I only distantly knew.

It could have been an ordinary cocktail party, almost a celebration. I hoped that meant no smiting tonight since that would have really put a damper on the atmosphere. No one had noticed my arrival except for Jerome.

“Ten minutes late,” he growled.

“Hey, it’s a fashionable—”

My words were cut off as a tall, Amazonian blonde nearly barreled into me.

“Oh! You must be Georgina! I’ve been dying to meet you.”

I raised my eyes past spandex-clad double-D breasts and up into big blue eyes with impossibly long lashes. A huge set of beauty pageant teeth smiled down at me.

My moments of speechlessness were few, but they did happen. This walking Barbie doll was a succubus. A really new one. So shiny and new, in fact, it was a wonder she didn’t squeak. I recognized her age both from her signature and her appearance. No succubus with any sense would have shape-shifted into that. She was trying too hard, haphazardly piling together an assortment of pseudo male-fantasy body parts. It left her with a Frankensteinian creation that was both jaw-dropping and probably anatomically impossible.

Unaware of my astonishment and disdain, she took my hand and nearly broke it in a mammoth handshake.

“I can’t wait to work with you,” she continued. “I am so ready to make men everywhere suffer.”

I finally found my voice. “Who . . . who are you?”

“She’s your new best friend,” a voice nearby

said. “My, my, look at you. Tawny’s going to have a tough standard to keep up with.”

A man elbowed his way toward us, and whatever curiosity I’d felt in the other succubus’ presence disappeared like ashes in the wind. I forgot she was even there. My stomach twisted into knots as I ID’d the mystery signature. Cold sweat broke out along the back of my neck and seeped into the delicate fabric of the dress.

The guy approaching was about as tall as me—which wasn’t tall—and had a dark, olive-toned complexion. There was more pomade on his head than black hair. His suit was nice—definitely not off the rack. A thin-lipped smile spread over his face at my dumbstruck discomfiture.

“Little Letha, all grown up and out to play with the adults, eh?” He spoke low, voice pitched for my ears alone.

Now, in the grand scheme of things, immortals like me had little to fear in this world. There were, however, three people I feared immensely. One of them was Lilith the Succubus Queen, a being of such formidable power and beauty that I would have sold my soul—again—for one kiss. Someone else who scared me was a nephilim named Roman. He was Jerome’s half-human son and had good reason to want to hunt me down and destroy me some day. The

third person who filled me with fear was this man standing before me.

His name was Niphon, and he was an imp, just like my friend Hugh. And, like all imps, Niphon really only had two jobs. One was to run administrative errands for demons. The other, his primary one, was to make contracts with mortals, brokering and buying souls for Hell.

And he was the imp who had bought mine.