

DEEPER

by

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PROLOGUE

Arcane, Alabama

The birdies. She concentrated, clenching her eyes shut and focusing on their sweet summer song.

A flood of hot tears ran down her face. Her cheek hurt. One eye was hard to open. Her shorts and panties clung around her ankles.

The stranger said something, sick pleasure high on his voice. His hand was knotted in her hair. He shoved her face up against the rough bark of the tree with every painful stab. She could feel her flesh tearing, felt a full burning between her legs. Why was he stabbing her there? She wished he'd just kill her. When he laughed she tried to rear back against him. But it only angered him more. He banged her head against the tree. Once, twice, then she lost count.

When she opened her eyes again everything was blurry. The birds sounded far away and distorted. She began to cry. Loudly. "Stop it, please." She tried to move but she was so dizzy she couldn't even raise her head. Her face was against the tree, drool and blood sliding over the earthy-smelling bark. Again she begged, "Stop, stop."

He smacked her upside her head, making her ear ring. She heard him talking to himself. Mumbling words that would get her a slap from her aunt Dayne. She held on to the tree. Clung to it until her nails ached. She thought of Lizzie. She couldn't let the man touch Lizzie. She fought off the looming dark tunnel, determined to keep the man from her sister.

Don't come back, Lizzie, don't come back, she prayed over and

over. Her head swam and soon she could no longer feel. All she could do was listen to the birds sing.

“The birdies,” she said. “The birdies.”

“That’s right.” The man tugged on her hair and spun her around. “Listen to those birdies.”

She swayed and swore there were three of him. She caught sight of the blood on his pecker and wondered why he had stabbed himself too. He gripped her hair again, forcing her down to her knees.

The birdies were watching. She was sure of it. Her aunt Dayne had always told her about angels. Angels watched over you. Angels protected you. The birdies were her angels.

The man smacked her again, this time hard and sharp across her cheek. He held her head upright because she could no longer do it herself. She could smell him, raw onions and something else. Blood and the scent of her own ravaged flesh.

“The birdies will save me,” she whispered, feeling sick with dizziness and disgust.

“Those birdies cain’t help you. They cain’t do anything but watch.” He yanked back on her head and looked down at her face. “What was your name? Jay?”

She stared up at him.

He leered. “Well, then...be just like them birdies up there. Be my little Jay bird.”



Valle Luna, Arizona

Twenty-two years later

A voice carried to him, deep and distorted, a demon whispering in his ear, a nightmare. His head was heavy and pounded with his pulse. He opened his eyes, but there was only darkness. He blinked. The dark was too dark. He tried to speak but only rough moans managed to escape. His tongue was fat and thick. Breathing was difficult, his throat feeling as if it would collapse upon itself. Panic seized him further, down deep into his burning chest. He concentrated as hard as he could.

“Ello?” He tried to move but he hurt everywhere, pain shooting

from his neck down his arms to his entire body. His panic grew, gripping every nerve.

A slit of light pierced his eyes. He stilled. Blinking, he realized he was blindfolded. He focused on the thin beam in an attempt to make out his surroundings.

He was on his back. A chair stood next to whatever he was lying on, a bed, he assumed. His feet were still clad in his socks, but when he tried to move them the pain shot out from his neck again. It made him gasp for breath, each intake of air jabbing his throat.

He wanted to cry but couldn't. The pain was too great.

A figure approached, darkening the slit of light for a brief instant.

He moaned, hoping against hope for help. "He...help me."

Laughter resounded from the stranger, echoing through his head, shattering any and all hope. His sluggish mind searched desperately for where he was and who his captor could be. He remembered the bar, the promise of casual sex over two cocktails. Kisses, hot and heated. He tried to think further but nothing came.

"Money," he managed to say, thinking he must've have been knocked out in order to be robbed. "Take it." He didn't care. He just wanted to be left alone.

His mind churned wickedly over foggy thoughts.

All I wanted was a fuck.

Tuna salad. I had tuna salad for lunch.

The movie.

My role.

Fucking bitch.

Fucking bitch Adams.

The bed gave as the figure sat down next to him. Warm hands began massaging his chest, moving closer and closer to his neck. His shirt was gone. He was cold. He struggled for breath, again panicking. He didn't want the hands on him. Didn't want them anywhere near his painfully sore neck.

"Wha...what do you want?"

The bed squeaked as the stranger leaned in. He felt hot breath against his ear and then a wicked whisper.

"To watch you die."

CHAPTER ONE

Music throbbed, alive and beating, surging its blood throughout the crowd, feeding them. Like vampires, the women were hungry for lust. Hundreds moved under the flashing lights, bodies scantily clothed, slick with sweat, a unison wave of purple, blue, and red. Hands in the air, hands touching neighboring bodies, hands feeling, gripping, owning. There were mouths set in dancing determination, mouths slightly open in enticement, mouths feeding on skin.

Wall to wall.

A carnival of women.

Elizabeth Adams watched the spectacle from the second-story VIP room with a strange detachment. On the raised platforms, her dancers entertained the crowd dressed in vintage carnival outfits. The lion tamer moved fluidly with whip and chair, keeping her animalistic partner at bay. Two sparkling red stars were all that covered her breasts beneath the open, long-tailed jacket. The lion was equally erotic, clad in nothing but brown and gold body paint, her hair standing out wild on her head. She growled at the tamer, showing off the whiskers above her lip. Two other women worked the vaudeville angle in tight black pants, striped long jackets, and painted-on curly mustaches, miming the introductions of various acts. The crowd oohed and cheered as one of them, a fire-eater, first swallowed and then blew pulsing flames. Jugglers positioned at the corners of the bar stood above the crowd throwing up glowing balls while a woman on stilts worked the edges of the room.

“Welcome to the show,” Liz whispered, expressing the theme of the evening.

As if the DJ had heard her, the speakers pounded out “Ladies and

Gentlemen” by Saliva. She had to admit, this was her best event yet, another successful Saturday night at La Femme. Yet even though this particular night was special, she still had other things on her mind.

She ran a hand through her hair, noticing a slight tremble in her fingers. Grimacing, she lowered her hand and shoved it down into her black pin-striped pants pocket.

“Hi.”

Liz turned and felt her face light up despite the darkness hidden inside. “Hey.”

Erin McKenzie fell into her arms. Liz pressed her face into her lover’s short dirty blond hair and inhaled, seeking the comfort it often brought.

“You’re early,” she grumbled, only half disappointed.

“The place looks great.” Erin smiled brightly, looking around the club in awe. “Is this why Tyson looked like he swallowed a canary when I walked past him just now? Is this my surprise?”

“It was supposed to be.” Liz forced a smile. She wanted to scream at Tyson and the other members of her security. The bouncers at the door should’ve stopped Erin and notified her immediately. This was supposed to be a surprise party.

Irritated, Liz reached up to check the earpiece she usually wore to communicate with her security. In disbelief, she realized she hadn’t put it on. Damn. Where was her head? Nothing seemed to be going right lately.

The fake smile made her face feel like stone. Before it crumbled away, she asked, “Do you like it?”

“I love it.” Erin moved in front of Liz to scan the crowd below. “The woman on stilts.” She covered her mouth in surprise as her gaze continued on. “Is that cotton candy?”

“Uh-huh.” Liz looked with her down at the woman spinning the pink fluff next to the bar. Across the room a woman popped fresh popcorn. They could already smell it.

Erin laughed. “How did you come up with this?”

Liz allowed the laughter to penetrate her anger. Instead of balling her fists, she leaned into Erin, placed her palms on her hips, and nuzzled her neck. Just the feel of her relaxed Liz’s mind and set her more at ease. “Remember when we were on our little cruise?”

“Little cruise?” Erin leaned back into her.

“Okay, not so little. Do you remember the night we were on Lesbos and you had a bottle of wine?” Liz licked her ear as she spoke.

Erin stiffened, her arousal obvious. “It’s a little fuzzy.”

“I bet.”

Erin reached back to pinch her legs.

Liz responded by biting her neck. “You were very talkative that evening, as you always are when you’ve had wine. And I asked what one of your favorite memories was.” Liz paused, waiting to see if she’d remember.

“The carnival,” Erin whispered. “I used to go every summer with my grandfather.” She turned around in Liz’s arms. Tears welled up in her eyes. “I...it was never like this...this is wonderful...this is...thank you.”

“No need.” Liz touched her face. Erin had such an effect on her, one she still couldn’t believe. The soft warmth in Erin’s eyes began to erode the walls Liz had erected around her heart. When she was able to speak, the words felt like fire, their truth powerful. “Your smile is all I need.”

Erin swallowed and compressed her lips, obviously holding in her emotion. She hugged Liz tightly. Liz held her back just as tight, relieved that the night was still a success. Erin was happy. Nothing else mattered.

When they drew apart, Liz peered over Erin’s shoulder once again to look down upon the crowd. It felt good to just be in the moment, just feel rather than think. She inhaled Erin’s scent, smelled the shampoo and her sweet yet musky perfume. She studied her, always moved by her beauty.

Erin’s gaze was on the platform dancers.

Liz whispered into her ear. “They don’t look near as good as you do.”

Erin blushed and ran her hands down her sleeveless black blouse and worn jeans. “I know how you like me in black.”

“Do I ever.” When she turned, Liz planted a soft kiss on her lips.

“I see you’re dressed for the part,” Erin said, looking Liz up and down, appreciating her pin-striped pants, white tank, and suspenders.

“For your birthday, anything.”

“Mmm. Thank you.” Erin licked Liz’s lips as she ran nimble thumbs over her thinly veiled nipples.

Liz wished she could get lost in her completely, to dive so deep she'd never have to surface again. When she trembled, Erin's expression changed. Looking worried, she held Liz's face.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." Liz offered a tired smile. She could've forced a better one, but Erin had relaxed her.

Erin searched her eyes. "Are you still sick?"

"It's just a virus. I'll be fine." It was what she'd been saying every time Erin asked, trying to explain her odd behavior and weight loss. Erin felt her forehead and scowled. "How long do you expect me to believe that?"

Liz grabbed her hands. "For as long as I say it."

Erin looked unimpressed.

"I'm fine," Liz said. "Just a little under the weather."

"Then go to the doctor."

Liz shook her head. "I'm too busy."

"I heard about the fight with Joe."

Liz looked away and set her jaw. Suddenly her mood was far from relaxed. Joe was one of her new actors. She'd fought with him again about changing the script. But she hadn't wanted Erin to know. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You're *too* busy, Liz," Erin said. "You have so much stress. Maybe we should get away for a while? Take that trip we were talking about?"

Liz had been promising to take Erin anywhere she wanted to go for their wedding but time just hadn't permitted. She was busy with the new addition to her movie production company, not to mention the club. And she preferred it that way. If she was busy, she couldn't think.

"Soon, I promise." Liz decided to head off any more talk of worries. "Besides, if I didn't have my nose to the grindstone, I never would've been able to pull this off." She held out her hands at the carnival-like atmosphere. In truth, planning the party had been the one thing, other than Erin herself, that kept her going over the past few weeks, kept her focused.

Around them the DJ's seductive voice echoed throughout the club. "Ladies and ladies, welcome to the show."

The crowd cheered.

"Tonight's a very special night here at La Femme." More applause

exploded. “One very special lady is having a birthday.” The lights moved around sporadically and then focused on Erin.

“Wave,” Liz said into her ear. “This is all for you.”

Erin gave a small wave, overcome with the attention. The crowd cheered, many women waving back.

The DJ continued. “Ms. Erin McKenzie, each and every lady here at La Femme wants to wish you a very happy birthday. So without further ado...”

Liz signaled to the VIP bartender. Smiling, she then embraced Erin from behind and covered her eyes. The bartender, dressed as a vintage show girl, rolled an enormous cake toward them. Five tiers sat purposely off center, covered in black and white mosaic frosting and wild-colored ribbons. Thirty tall candles burned brightly, some sparkling like Fourth of July fireworks.

“Are you ready for the best birthday ever?” Liz asked in her ear.

Erin bit her lower lip in anticipation. “I think so.”

“You think so?” Liz laughed.

“I’m nervous, Liz. God, there isn’t a stripper, is there?”

“Do you want there to be a stripper?”

“What?”

“Because whatever you want, you know I’ll...”

“No!”

“You sure?”

“Liz!”

“Okay. You’re ready, then?”

Erin nodded.

Liz uncovered her eyes and cued the DJ.

As Erin turned deep red and stared at her giant cake in awe, hundreds of women belted out “Happy Birthday to You.”

Erin kept looking around as if it all was a dream. Liz couldn’t help but feel moved. Erin’s happiness, it was like a drug.

“You better blow out those candles before the sprinklers go off,” she said when the song was over.

Erin lifted her hands to her face, as if grounding herself in reality. “Very funny.” She stood there, staring at the cake, the flickering light golden against her.

“Make a wish!” someone yelled.

Erin lowered her hands. “They’ve all come true already.” She

looked again at the cake and then back up at Liz. “Almost.” She closed her eyes and took in a big breath. The candles went out in a whoosh and the crowd cheered. The music kicked up again, as did a few of the sparkling candles.

“What did you wish for?” Liz asked.

“If I tell you, it won’t come true.”

“But if you don’t tell me, how can I make sure it will?” The words scraped her throat in their raw honesty. *Will I always be able to make her wishes come true? More importantly, will I always be able to keep her safe?*

They fell into one another and danced. Around them the club pulsed a life all its own and Liz’s mind threatened to turn as dark purple as the strobe lights. She held Erin closer, tighter, and just breathed.