



Nauti Seductress (Nauti Girls Book 3)

By Lora Leigh

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But when the shadowy threat returns, will Zoey and Doogan have the strength to hold onto each other and survive the coming storm?

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the books of Lora Leigh

“Lora Leigh knows how to turn up the heat.”—Under the Covers

“Smoking hot.”—Fiction Vixen

About the Author

Lora Leigh is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Nauti Boys series and the Breed novels.

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Prologue

Something was wrong. It oozed through her senses like an oily presence, determined to overwhelm her, to overtake her.. Dark, invisible chains held her in that place between sleep and conscious awareness. And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't push past the restraints tightening around her.

Panic raced through her. She knew she had to fight, knew she had to find a way to open her eyes, to force herself to fight. She had to. If she didn't, then she could die there.

She had to open her eyes. She had to see who was doing this, had to remember. . . . But she couldn't force them open, she couldn't move or fight. With each second the sense of danger grew, wrapping around her with razor tipped bonds.

Hurting her..

Her blood began heating, almost boiling through her veins with so much pain, such agony. It began in her arm, and inch by inch worked along her body until even her brain was on fire.

She couldn't scream. Her voice didn't work, the screams and the pleas couldn't find a path to emit the tortured sounds reverberating through her head.

Icy terror ricocheted through her.

All I have to do is accept it's real. Just accept it isn't a dream and the pain will go away. I just have to accept it. It's not a dream. Accept it, and the pain will stop.

Just accept it.

Accept it and I won't hurt anymore.

That wasn't her voice. It wasn't her thoughts.

What else could it be? If it wasn't hers, then what could it be?

Oh God, the pain!

It was real. It was really happening. It was real.

The pain eased marginally. Boiling, lava-hot agony no longer ripped at her senses but the pain was still intense, excruciating.

She just wanted it to go away.

The whispers moved around her, voices in her head, or were they in the room with her? Demands that she accept it was real.

She was accepting. God, yeah, it was real. Every agonizing second of it was real.

She just couldn't figure out how it was real. No one should be able to get to her here, at her mother's inn. Her suite was the safest place she could be. Her mother's lover, Timothy, was a retired federal agent and revered security gadgets. He would never allow anyone to hurt her like this. She had to wake up. She had to make it stop.

Pain exploded through Zoey's head with the force of a blow connecting with it, sending shards of white-hot pain tearing through it.

This wasn't a dream. It wasn't a dream. It was real.

"Fight, Zoey . . ." It was a hiss of sound more than an actual order. "You have to fight. Harley will kill you . . ."

Harley?

Why would Harley hurt her?

"Look at him, Zoey." That hissing demand was like static at her ear. "Look at him. See Harley. See who's hurting you, Zoey."

Struggling to force her eyes open, she tried to cry out and couldn't. Tried to deny it was happening.

Harley was on the bed with her, smiling, his gentle green eyes filled with laughter like they always were. Except he was naked. Naked and aroused and he was pulling at the elastic waistband of her pajama shorts, ripping the side of them, determined to remove them.

Dizzy, sick to her stomach with pain and confusion, she tried to fight, struggling against the harsh hands tearing at her clothes, ripping them from her and leaving her naked.

The air surrounding her was icy, sinking through her skin to her bones as she bucked against the hands holding her down.

Twisting beneath him, she managed to roll from the bed, scrambling to get to her feet, to get to the door of her suite and rush from the room. She had to get away. If she could just get Timothy's attention, then he'd make Harley stop. He'd find out why her friend was trying to hurt her like this.

Before she could get to her feet, he tripped her, throwing her to the floor. He flipped her to her back and came over her again. Smiling, always smiling at her.

A flash of a darker expression, a darker face flickered across Harley's features. A jagged scar across his eye, a mean, malicious gaze, and eyes that weren't Harley's.

Terror raced through her mind. What was happening to her?

She kicked, trying to cry, trying to scream . . .

Oh God, what was happening to her? Why couldn't she scream? Cry?

It was like a dream where all sound becomes blocked, unable to struggle free. But it wasn't a dream.

Terror resounded in her mind, darkened her vision, and stole consciousness. A deep, black void yawned around her, threatening to pull her into it, to smother her. She was going to die here. If she didn't fight, then she would die in the darkness.

Awareness returned seconds later, voices whispering around her, evil, ugly voices.

"Fight me, Zoey," Harley demanded, his voice harder, rougher, unrecognizable as he stared down at her with a gentle green gaze despite the hate-filled sound of his voice. "Mackay bitch. Come on, fight me. Maybe I won't make it hurt so bad. Come on, Zoey, if you don't fight me I'm going to kill you. I'll fuck you so deep, so hard, it will kill you."

Fight him. It wasn't a dream. Oh God, it wasn't a dream.

She fought, hoarse, terrified sobs trapped inside her, given no voice but echoing through her head with such terror she felt strangled by it.

"Come back here, you silly bitch . . ." She managed to kick out at him, struggling to get away from him.

Why was he doing this? What was happening to him? To her? Why would he hurt her?

What had she done? Why was he so angry? The thought was barely coherent.

"Bitch. Humiliate me again," he snarled in that voice so unlike his. "You humiliated me, Zoey."

She shook her head desperately, fighting the hands grabbing at her breasts, bruising her nipples as he pulled at them.

"Bitch. You don't question me," he snarled.

Fury exploded in her head. Fury, terror, and a determination to fight, to defy him. She was a Mackay. He might kill her, but she refused to make it easy for him.

"No" she wheezed, so desperate to scream, fighting for enough air to scream until her lungs burned with it. Curling her fingers, enraged growls left her throat as she fought to claw him, to dig her nails into his flesh and rip it open.

He laughed at her.

"You going to fight me, little whore? Mackay whore. I'll make you my whore. You'll beg me to hurt you, to show you who's boss."

The hell he would. She would die first.

She would kill him before she let him do something so vile to her.

Hard hands snagged her ankles, jerking her legs apart again as Harley tried to slide between them.

He was going to rape her just as he threatened, and no matter how hard she tried, how hard she fought, she couldn't escape him.

Harley . . . ?

His features twisted, flashed from Harley's face to something else. From Harley's deep blue eyes to cold, pale ice-blue eyes. From Harley's youthful features, to a flash, so fast it made no sense, to harder, more mature features.

She fought him, trying to slap him, hit him, fighting to find something, anything to protect herself, as she kicked out at him, her foot caught him high on the thigh, his hold loosening, allowing her to scramble away from him.

"Fight, bitch," he growled with such black malevolence it was terrifying. "Fight me. If you don't fight I'll just hurt you worse. Go ahead. Kick."

Oh God why was he doing this to her? Harley wouldn't do this..

Pain exploded against the side of her head. He hit her. His fist slamming against her skull, scattering her senses.

Oh God, it hurt so bad.

He struck her again. An open-handed slap to her face.

Enraged, furious growls were all she could push past her throat as tears spilled from her eyes.

"Fight, bitch."

She was fighting. Kicking, twisting beneath him, her nails digging furrows into his face, his shoulders.

"Fight me or I'm going to fuck you, Zoey. Where's your weapon? Find it, bitch."

Find her weapon? What weapon?

A scream tore from her as he came over her again, moving between her legs, one hand gripping his penis, lining it up between her thighs.

No, Harley, please. Please no. Sobbing, reaching behind her, she fought to find a weapon.

"Did you find the knife, Zoey?" Insidious, malicious, that ugly voice whispered through her mind.

"It's right there. It's right by your hand."

Her fingers closed over the hilt of the knife.

"I'm going to kill you," Harley snarled. "I'll rape you until you die, Zoey, and then I'll kill that fucking

Dawg. And his prissy baby girl, Laken? I'll rape her next. I'll fuck her until she begs me . . ." His eyes jerked open wide.

Rage beat at her head, hysteria lashed at her senses. Her fists were beating out at him, slamming against him. He made a gurgling sound, his eyes dimming, turning dull before he fell over to the floor.

Then she saw the blood.

So much blood.

All over her. The knife in her hand, over her naked body, the floor and Harley's body. It stained the wall, the furniture in her living room.

"Ahh ahh God . . ." she sobbed, the knife clattering to the floor, terror gouging at her, tearing through her mind, slamming into it with such force that agony resonated through her head and stole her consciousness.

"You killed me, Zoey," Harley whispered in that rough, unfamiliar voice, his green eyes lifeless, dull as he stared up at her. "You killed me with that knife. Don't you ever forget you killed me, Zoey."

She stared at him, blood flowing around her like a stream, sticky and hot, washing over her feet, then her ankles as she watched it in horror.

"Don't you ever forget, Zoey. Don't you forget, you killed me . . ."

Run.

Run. You have to escape here. Run to Lyrica. Run now. She'll make sure you're safe. Find Lyrica . . . Tell her to find Sam. Lyrica has to find Sam. Confess to Sam. Only Lyrica and Sam can save you . . .

She had to find Lyrica.

She was so cold and dizzy, her senses rocking, pitching her back and forth until she was throwing up, fighting to remain conscious.

She couldn't black out again.

Not again.

"You killed me, Zoey." She felt something wet wiping over her face, the smell of vomit no longer assaulting her senses. "Why did you kill me, Zoey?"

"You can't tell Dawg, Zoey. You can't tell him you killed me. You know he'll tell Natches. Remember? Natches said he loved me like a son. I was his protégé. Remember how much Natches loves me, Zoey?"

Natches did love Harley. They were always hunting and shooting, and Natches said Harley was his heir to . . . To what? She couldn't remember now. What was he Natches's heir to?

The blackout came again, a vicious, agonizing explosion of pain that brought merciful blackness.

"I'm Natches's heir," dark and grating, the voice reminded her again. "Natches will kill you, Zoey. Like he killed his cousin Johnny all those years ago. Natches will kill you. He'll pop your little head like a grape . . ."

“No,” she whispered, fighting to drag herself back to awareness. “No. Please . . .”

“Natches will kill you. Like he killed Johnny when Johnny tried to hurt Christa and Dawg. Remember, Zoey? You heard about it. Cousin Johnny tried to hurt Dawg and Christa and Natches popped his little head with a bullet. You killed me. You killed me, Zoey. Natches will enjoy killing you.”

Zoey forced her eyes open, blinking, pain raging through her head. She wasn’t in the suite she’d moved into at her mother’s Bed-and-Breakfast Inn any longer. The bedroom where she had killed Harley was gone. Instead, she was propped against the sliding patio door of her sister’s apartment just outside Somerset.

Lyrica.

Lyrica would help her. Her sister would help her, and maybe Natches wouldn’t kill her like he killed Johnny. She would find Sam, and she would tell Sam what happened. Sam would make sure Natches didn’t kill her.

“Lyrie.” She tried to knock at the door her head rested against.

The glass was cool against her temple but did nothing to help the pain. Her head felt scrambled, as if pieces had been rearranged inside it, leaving her with a feeling of disassociation and complete terror.

“Lyrie, please help me . . .” She tried to knock again, her voice hoarse, weak as she lay at her sister’s doorstep.

How had she gotten there?

Her breath hitched as sobs tried to escape yet still lay trapped inside her. She couldn’t scream or cry. Her voice was so raw and she was so weak. She wanted a drink of water so bad, but her stomach was still pitching, threatening to be sick again.

“Lyrie, please . . .” Where was her sister?

It was so cold. The cement of her sister’s small patio was like ice.

Oh God, was she dressed? Was she still naked?

She couldn’t tell. But she was so cold, so cold she was shuddering, icy from the inside out. Where was Lyrica? She was so scared. And she was so cold.

She needed to be warm again. Just for a minute. Just so she could think.

“Zoey?” It wasn’t her sister.

The voice was soft, gentle, as were the hands that pushed the hair back from her face with tender concern.

She forced her eyes open, staring into the confused, concerned gaze of her sister Lyrica’s neighbor, Samantha Bryce. The police detective, Samantha Bryce.

Sam. She had to tell Sam. Sam would keep her from dying.

Sam would take her away. She would lock her up and Zoey would never be free again.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “Tell Momma I’m so sorry, Sam.”

“Come on, Zoey. Let’s get you inside before someone sees you.”

Long brown curls flowed around Zoey as Sam’s hair slipped over her shoulder and spilled against her own.

It was longer than Zoey thought. Spiral curls like her own. The long, loose, springy curls and deep waves were warm against her neck and shoulders.

Sam lifted her, cradling her in her arms and quickly moving from Lyrica’s patio door to the one next to it.

Icy air surrounded her, but she didn’t feel naked. She was in her shorts and tank she slept in. When had she dressed?

“Sam, I’m so scared,” she sobbed against the other woman’s neck. “I’m so scared.”

Sam’s heart was pounding hard and fast against Zoey’s arm beneath the tank she wore. And though Zoey knew the other woman should be warm, still, that icy freeze encased her.

She would never be warm again. Not ever.

“It’s okay, Zoey.” Sam whispered the promise, her voice deep, sounding thick, clogged. “I promise, we’ll make it okay.”

Sam laid her on a bed, easing her back and sitting down beside her.

“Zoey,” she whispered, her voice rough and worried. “Look at me, sweetie. Open your eyes.”

Zoey fought to open them, but it hurt so bad.

Her head hurt so bad.

“Tell Momma I’m so sorry,” Zoey begged, lifting her arm, trying to catch Sam’s arm, to make her understand.

Darkness washed over her again.

She thought she heard voices, not in her head but around her.

Sam was cussing at someone. “Fix it!” she demanded. “He’s a fucking nutcase,” she cried out. “Just do it. Hurry. If she dies we’ll all die . . .”

“He’ll pop my little head like a grape,” Zoey whispered. “Like Johnny. Just like Johnny.” She shuddered at the image and grew colder.

So cold. So icy. She had to tell Sam what she had done. She had to.

“I’m so sorry, Momma,” Zoey whispered, knowing her mother wasn’t there. So glad her momma couldn’t see her with so much blood on her.

Someone gripped her hand, holding it firmly as blankets were quickly pulled over her.

I’m here.

We’ll get you warm, little one.

. . . heated blankets. Electric blankets. Electric blankets would be so warm, wouldn't they? Wrapped around you like the warmest skin. Holding you close . . .

That voice. She remembered that voice.

At a party. Dancing with him. He'd been just a little bit drunk that night. He'd strolled to her. Striding across the large room where everyone danced, his eyes on her, connecting with hers, heavy lidded, his gaze dark and hungry.

He'd held his hand out and though she'd laughed at him, she'd still accepted the silent demand to dance. To step into his arms. His warmth.

"Dance with me . . ." she sighed. "Hold me."

All my warmth in the blankets around you. Feel it, little one. Feel how warm I'll keep you.

Delicious warmth surrounded her, a cocoon of gentle heat sinking into her skin as the warmth of his hand wrapped around hers, easing her, easing the pain just a little bit.

He was her fantasy.

After that night, his image followed her into dreams and into masturbation. And she'd never seen him again.

She would be gone now if he came back. Taken away and locked up for killing Harley.

"I'm so sorry . . ." She had to force the words past her lips.

"Why? Why are you sorry, little one?" Her eyelid was lifted, light piercing her skull like a sword and causing her stomach to pitch and churn as she cried out with the pain.

The next eyelid was lifted, the lancing white light stabbing into her brain again. She was too weak to fight. She couldn't fight anymore.

"Please don't hurt me," she whimpered, the blissful darkness finally returning. "Don't hurt me more."

"God. Zoey, honey, tell me what happened? Who hurt you, Zoey?" he demanded. "Tell me who hurt you."

Tears slipped from her closed eyes, the horror of the nightmare images racing across her brain filling her with such a desperate, overwhelming need to hide.

"Where's Sam?" She had to tell Sam.

"I'm here, Zoey." Soft, gentle, and so sad. Sam was always so sad.

"Harley." She shuddered in fear. "I killed Harley, Sam. I killed him. I have to tell you. I killed Harley." She kept her eyes closed; she couldn't bear to see the condemnation in Sam's eyes. "I killed Harley, Sam . . ." Her breathing hitched with a cry. "I'm so sorry I killed him. I'm so sorry, but he was hurting me so bad . . ." Panic began welling inside her, racing through her veins, tearing through her mind. "He was hurting me so bad. . . . Please don't let Natches kill me. Don't let him . . ."

Detonations of pain ruptured her mind, sending waves of deep, black nothingness to surround her once again.

Just nothingness where she could hide.

It wasn't cold here, though. The warmth that was wrapped around her stayed, like a pocket of soul-deep comfort amid the terror and icy chill.

"It was just a dream. This is all a dream, Zoey," her fantasy whispered, his voice soothing, filled with the latent hunger she'd heard in it the night they danced. "It was a terrible, horrible nightmare, Zoey . . . It's all okay. Remember, it's all okay. You just had a terrible dream."

The pain in her skull slowly eased. It wasn't gone, but it eased. It wasn't so deep or so agonizing. But she didn't want to think yet. She didn't want to remember yet.

"Zoey, Harley didn't hurt you. You didn't kill Harley. He's fine."

No, it wasn't just a nightmare.

"Don't let Natches kill me. I'm so scared. It was real. I know it was real."

"It was a dream." This time, her fantasy lover's voice was so powerful and filled with demand, surrounding her, even on the inside, with a heat that began to melt the ice trying to overtake her. "This is just a nightmare. Nothing more."

The sound of his voice pulled at her, drew her as it always did in her dreams, making her want to wrap it around her and hold him to her forever.

She could barely hear him, actually had to strain to make the words out, but the throb of power and the determined male force behind it was clearly apparent.

"You're safe, Zoey. You're safe. Harley's safe. This is just a terrible, terrible nightmare."

She couldn't deny him. She didn't want to deny him.

A nightmare.

A terrible dream.

It was more than that and she knew it. There had to be more to it. But she couldn't make the voice understand . . .

"Zoey, do you hear me?" The dark, intently male voice pulled at her senses now as it always did. But only in her dreams. He was only in her dreams, because he'd left and he hadn't come back after dancing with her.

She only knew this voice in her fantasies, and it soothed her, protected her without smothering her.

"Answer me, Zoey. Do you hear me?"

His voice was so strong. It wrapped around her and reminded her of the fantasies that filled her dreams. Fantasies of him. The knight who rescued the maiden, the tough warrior who fought side by side with the sorceress. The dream image of the lover who hadn't yet become a lover.

"I'm scared . . ." She couldn't wake up, she didn't want to wake up, not yet. Not until something made sense. Nothing made any sense. "I'm so scared . . ."

“Don’t be scared anymore, Zoey.” Warm, callused fingertips eased from her temple to her jaw. “Listen to me, and everything will be okay. Do you understand me?”

The voice touched her with pure, raw power. It was so strong. Strong enough to hurt . . .

She whimpered at the thought. She didn’t want to hurt anymore. But she had to fight. And fighting it just made the pain worse. She had to remember everything. The strange voice and Harley’s face flickering with a darker, crueller face. Sam whispering something, then yelling at someone. And now her dream lover.

She had to remember.

Pain lanced at her head, ripping through it with such agony she wanted to scream. Oh God, it hurt so bad.

“Zoey?” he whispered again, his voice so low she had to strain to hear him. “You have to listen to me so the pain will go away. I can make it all go away, but you have to listen to me.”

He was holding her hand, palm turned up as he stroked the skin of her inner arm to the crook of her elbow. There, he massaged the skin, eased the joint. She felt something tighten, and then finally, blessedly, the agony in her head eased a little more.

“See, I’m going to make it better. Trust me, Zoey. Trust me to make it better.” he told her in that deep, rasping whisper she could barely hear. “To always take the pain away. I’ll take it all away.”

Just trust him. That was all she had to do was trust him.

The nightmare would go away then.

Slipping deeper into sleep, into the fantasy she sometimes created for herself, Zoey watched as the shadowy figure moved to her. Strong and tall, pulling her against his warm body. His arms holding her, his voice at her ear.

A sigh slipped from her.

Okay, this was better. The fantasy she had created for herself, the lover who came to her in her dreams and whose touch awakened a sexuality inside her that she didn’t possess while she was awake, he would protect her from the pain.

He was there with her now. His gaze was dark, filled with secrets and with hunger. His expression implacable, aristocratic, and filled with arrogance. And her fascination with him never waned.

“You came back . . . I kept watching for you . . . you’re only in my dreams now . . .” She fought to speak to him, to hold him in this place where everything was so out of control and filled with pain. “Hold me. Just hold me . . .”

If he would just hold her, take it all away . . .

“I have you, Zoey. I won’t let you go. Isn’t this part of the dream so much nicer?” There was a hint of sadness in his voice, in his dark eyes. “I always like this part of the dream better than I do the part that rips open my skull and leaves me wanting to scream, but I can’t find my voice to do so.”

They hurt him too?

No. He was warmth, protection without being smothered. How did she know that? Why did the nightmares come to him too? She fought to tighten her fingers around the hand holding hers. Struggled to find the strength but only succeeded for a moment.

"I hate that part of the nightmare," he agreed, as though that faint pressure were all he needed. "See how much better this part is? See, that's how you know it's just a nightmare. I'll be here with you and if I'm here, then the pain will go away. And if I'm here with you, nothing and no one can hurt you."

Of course. It had to be a nightmare. A horrible, horrifying nightmare. Otherwise, she wouldn't be dreaming of the shadowy lover who usually filled her dreams and kept her waiting for him.

"Just a nightmare . . . When you feel the pain, when it tries to come back, I'll be here with you. The pain can't touch you, Zoey. I'll keep the pain away . . ."

"Don't leave me." She struggled to force the words past her lips, to convince him to stay this time. "Hold me."

"Just for a little while." His lips eased over her fingers. "But I'll be back. If you promise me you'll know it was just a nightmare."

She would promise him anything. "Just a nightmare."

But she knew something wasn't right about that either. Something bad had happened. Something so terrible it was terrifying too, but she didn't know how. She didn't know what it was, or how it happened.

If it wasn't real, then Harley was alive, she reminded herself as the voice stroked the pain from her head, kept her warm and tried to convince her that grass was blue and the sky was green . . . That it was all a nightmare.

"Sleep for me now, Zoey," he whispered. "Sleep. And know when you wake up that everything's going to be fine. It was just a nightmare."

It was much more than a nightmare, she knew. She just didn't know which part was real, and which wasn't. She didn't know and she was terrified to learn . . .

Chatham Bromleah Doogan the Third eased back from the bed and rested his elbows on his knees, watching Zoey painfully as Detective Sam Bryce stood still and silent at the bedroom door, her back to him.

How many times had he stood and watched this little imp over the past few years? She was intriguing, beyond beautiful, and she had mesmerized him from the first moment he'd seen her.

Whoever had done this to her would pay. He'd make damned sure they paid with their lives.

She was lucky Doogan was in town to meet with one of his agents, Graham Brock. Otherwise, Homeland Security as well as the Mackays might have found themselves involved in one hell of a mess.

But what would it have accomplished?

The young man in question didn't work for Homeland Security, officially. Unofficially, Doogan had provided whatever help the younger man needed.

Harley and Zoey were friends, though. They'd had a little spat a few days ago, Harley had laughingly told

him. Zoey had come to his apartment and caught him with a young woman he shouldn't have been with. She'd been outraged. But they hadn't really fought, and she'd hugged him before leaving the apartment's parking lot afterward. Harley had indicated it was no more than a friendly disagreement.

Someone was determined to destroy Zoey with it, though.

On the bedside table were the vials of blood he'd drawn as soon as he'd arrived and the syringe that held the drug he'd used to ease the pain while he worked with the hallucinogenic he was positive had been used to convince her she'd killed her friend. And as he worked to reverse the nightmarish images planted in her head, his chest had ached while a dark, burning fury grew inside him.

What was it about those pale, pale green eyes and Zoey's pleas not to leave her, to keep her warm, that caused the break in his control and in the wall he maintained around his emotions?

Rubbing his hands over his face and blowing out a hard breath, Doogan forced back the regret, the stirrings of anger. If he was going to help her, if he was going to fix this, then he had to keep his head.

Without saying anything more to Zoey he rose from the bed, his movements drawing the detective's attention. Before she could speak, he motioned her to the other room.

He didn't want Zoey's memories further influenced by anything they might say between them. Her mind was so completely open at the moment, the effects of the hallucinogenic she'd been given at its height. Any suggestion, any discussion in her hearing could influence her thoughts and memories detrimentally.

Closing the door silently behind them, he pointed to the door of the guest room across the living room and followed her into that room. Once again securing the door, he breathed out heavily, wearily.

"Harley answer your text yet?" he demanded, keeping his voice low.

She gave a quick nod. "He asked to meet in another hour at Ziggler's All Niter, the convenience store at the north end of town. He's said he was hunting at the moment."

Hunting. He was no wildlife hunter. Harley, despite his youth, was one of the best human trackers Doogan had ever had the discomfort of meeting.

Sam cleared her throat then, her hazel-green gaze wary, heavy with fear for the young woman now sleeping in her bedroom. Sam had a soft spot for the other young woman. It wasn't lust, or love, but her affection for Zoey ran deep.

"I checked her arm," he said, pushing his fingers through his hair. "There's evidence of several injection sites made in the past few hours . . ."

"Zoey does not do drugs, Doogan," she hissed, furious. Gathering the long curls that fell over her shoulder, she pushed them behind her as though preparing to battle.

"You didn't allow me to finish, Detective," he pointed out, berating her mildly. "As I said, the injection sites were made in the past few hours. She has all the signs of having been dosed with a powerful hallucinogenic. It literally rips the mind open and allows someone with the right training to convince the person something has occurred that didn't. In this case, that she killed Harley for trying to rape her."

Sam flinched.

She crossed her arms over her breasts, the gray ribbed cotton wife-beater tank she wore with loose gray shorts attesting to the lateness of the hour. She'd been asleep when the sound of a vehicle stopping outside her neighbor's small patio awakened her. At least, that was what she told her father, director of Homeland Security John David Bryce.

"Why?" she demanded.

To that, Doogan shrugged. "She's a Mackay; according to Timothy, trouble shadows them. Where's her sister Lyrica? Doesn't she have the apartment beside you?"

"She's staying the weekend with Kye Brock, Graham's sister." Sam paced across the room. Turning back to him she watched him suspiciously. "What the hell's going on, Doogan?"

Doogan pursed his lips thoughtfully. Sliding his hands into the pockets of his slacks, he leaned a shoulder into the wall and considered her question for a moment.

"You would know that better than I do. What could the Mackay's be involved in that framing Zoey for the murder of a friend, would profit someone?" he asked.

"Murder?" the detective snapped. "I just talked to him by text."

"But Zoey believes she killed him. Harley said he was hunting," Doogan agreed. "Harley doesn't hunt four-legged prey, Sam. Despite his age, Harley's the best damned human tracker I've ever heard of. He came to me when he tracked a killer to Somerset. That's why he's here, tracking a monster no one has been able to catch."

Should he have anticipated this, Doogan asked himself?

But how could he have? Neither he nor Harley were connected to Somerset. His agents were based here, but Harley hadn't known the Macka's before following his target into the area. As for Doogan, he'd only seen Zoey only once, five years before. The target he and Harley were chasing couldn't possibly know she was a weakness to Doogan?

"Who?"

Doogan let a grin touch his lips. "That's why he's good, Sam. Harley doesn't know what his suspect looks like, he just knows the human 'tracks' his suspect leaves. He's been trying to identify him for over a year now. But framing Zoey for his murder wouldn't serve any purpose."

"He and Natches are friends," Sam pointed out. "Zoey's Natches' cousin and he'd never believe she killed him. Besides, she has an instant defense in her belief he was trying to rape her."

"Makes no sense." Doogan shook his head, one hand reaching back to rub at the back of his neck, irritation beginning to slip past his normally cool façade.

"There has to be a reason. Something we're not seeing," he muttered.

"Damn, Dawg will lock her in a hole so deep and filled with Mackay brotherly love she'll smother to death." Sam grimaced. "Hell of a way to die. So you can forget figuring out why anyone targeted her."

It was a running joke that the Mackay cousins, once the scourge of Pulaski County and surrounding areas for their sexual hijinks and penchants for troublemaking, made certain Dawg's sisters lived totally different

lives. Completely innocent, virginal lives.

“Dawg can’t know about this, Sam.”

She froze for long seconds, simply staring at him.

“Are you kidding me?” she almost wheezed with wide-eyed disbelief. “Dawg finds out we held this from him, Doogan, and he’ll kill both of us. And he will find out. Trust me.”

It amazed him how terrified everyone was of Dawg Mackay and his cousins. They were formidable enemies, agreeably, and no doubt, they’d be enraged when they learned Zoey had been in danger. But they’d never kill a woman..

“And when she dies of brotherly love and overprotection? Or whoever did this to her tonight finds a way to get to her again and ‘suggests’ she kill herself? Herself and her family? Her nieces? Is that a risk you’re willing to take?” he asked, barely managing to keep the cool, uncaring appearance he’d adopted over the past hellish year.

Could he bear seeing anything or anyone harming this innocent young woman? After all he’d lost, the thought of losing more threatened the hard-won control he’d managed to salvage in the past months.

Sam’s nostrils flared and she glared at him in silent fury and denial. It was evident she had no desire to risk their wrath in any way.

“Hate me all you want to,” he suggested, icy determination reflecting in his tone. “But before you go to Dawg, remember this. They got to her tonight. She’s in her pajamas, so she was obviously in her room, asleep. Right beneath Timothy’s nose they took her, Sam. They drugged her and tried to convince her she killed Harley Perdue. And if they convinced her, then she’ll confess to it. She’s a Mackay.” Swiping his fingers through his hair, he knew no matter what he said, Sam would still go with her gut. “It’s in their fucking blood or some shit.”

And he had no doubt the little Mackay now sleeping in Sam’s bed was a Mackay all the way to her soul.

He gave a short, approving nod when she said nothing more.

“Now, we have to get her back to her bed without anyone being the wiser. Especially her brother. Otherwise, she’ll never believe this was all a dream.”

Sam shook her head, one hand slapping to her forehead in a gesture of utter amazement before glaring at him, the disbelief growing.

“Wow, Doogan, that’s a hell of a fucking order,” she snorted, her hands propping on her hips then. “Why don’t we rob Fort Knox next?”

His brow arched mockingly. She could be a smart-ass, even as a child.

“I haven’t finished the plan for that one yet. The plan for this one is easy, though. We have about four hours before the sedative I gave her wears off and she wakes up. We’ll slip her into my truck and I’ll get her to the inn, where Eli can help me do the rest.”

A light brown, heavily mocking brow lifted slowly. “Eli hates you, Doogan. Worse than the rest of us do,” Sam warned him.

Honest little bitch of late, wasn't she, he mocked silently.

"That's really not true." He denied the claim, amused. "But Zoey Mackay, he loves like a little sister and he hates what Dawg does to her. He'll help her, even if he does have a few issues with me. Now, go make that meeting. I'll take care of our little Mackay."

Her lips thinned, her eyes suddenly narrowing in suspicion.

"How do you just happen to have syringes, sedatives, and everything needed to draw blood samples, Doogan? And you're just conveniently here?" She held one hand out as her expression tightened with anger.

"I'm just prepared like that," he assured her. And he actually was. "Would you like to come see the other supplies I carry in my pickup? You might be amazed."

"I might want to shoot you even more than I want to do so now."

And that was possible.

"You have things to do," he reminded her. "I'll call Elijah and get him over here. Hopefully, this can be accomplished without too much trouble."

It was late morning when Zoey woke in her bed. Terror was a sickening taste in her mouth, the fear of what she would find when she looked around the room dragging a sob from her throat.

She didn't want to open her eyes, didn't want to see the carnage she was terrified awaited her.

Sitting up in the bed, she forced herself to look, though. Whatever had happened, whatever she'd done, she'd face it.

But oh God, she didn't want to . . .

Biting back a sob, tremors racing through her, she sat up and opened her eyes.

Then blinked.

There was no body, there was no blood. No blood on the walls, no blood on her blankets and sheets as she remembered. Her sheets were wrinkled and tangled, the comforter trailing to the floor.

A whimper left her lips at the pain throbbing in her temples and echoing through her muscles. She hurt so bad. Every bone and muscle in her body screamed in protest as she slid her legs slowly over the bed and forced herself to stand, to check the rest of her suite.

Stumbling, holding on to the furniture to brace herself against the weakness that made her legs feel like jelly, Zoey forced herself to the bathroom. In that far-too-realistic dream she'd thrown up, more than once. If she had, there would be something in the bathroom. Some proof of it, surely.

But there was none.

It was as spotless as it had been the night before. There was nothing out of place; nothing had been moved. The shower door was open as she always left it, her used towel folded in half and hanging on the glass door.

Backing out of the smaller room, her steps halting, tentative, she pushed through the door to the sitting room.

It was similarly neat. Her sketch pad lay where she had placed it the night before, the canvas she was working on carefully covered and sitting on the easel. The plastic wrapper that covered a new paintbrush still lay under the coffee table where she'd forgotten to pick it up. It hadn't been moved.

Forcing her steps backward again, Zoey returned to her bedroom and stood in the middle of it, shaking, shuddering at the knowledge that whatever had happened . . . hadn't happened?

Fisting her fingers, she fought back the tears that would have fallen and looked down at her sore wrists. They were unmarred, no bruising, no scratches.

Covering her lips with one hand, Zoey bit back the scream tightening her throat. A whimper escaped, though. Low, drawn out, the sound was filled with fear.

Just a nightmare?

Zoey shook her head.

"It wasn't just a nightmare," she whispered, to assure herself she could speak. Because in those nightmarish memories, or dreams, she'd been unable to scream.

Something had happened, she just didn't know what. Or why.

But she knew to the depths of her soul, something bad had happened.

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