

Bestselling author of the *Vampire Academy* novels

RICHHELLE
MEAD

Sin is her speciality...
and business is booming

SUCCUBUS
REVEALED

About the Book

Georgina Kincaid has had an eternity to figure out the opposite sex, but sometimes they still surprise her.

Take Seth Mortensen. The man has risked his soul to become Georgina's boyfriend. But with Lucifer for a boss, Georgina can't just hang up her killer heels and settle down to domestic bliss. In fact, she's being forced to transfer operations ... to Las Vegas.

The City of Sin is a dream gig for a succubus, but Georgina's allies are suspicious. Why are the powers-that-be so eager to get her away from Seattle - and from Seth? Georgina is one of Hell's most valuable assets, but if there's any way out of the succubus business she plans to take it - no matter how much roadkill she leaves behind.

She just hopes the casualties won't include the one man she's risking everything for ...

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Succubus Revealed

Richelle Mead



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For the man in my dream

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Chapter 1

THIS WASN'T THE first time I'd worn a foil dress. It was, however, the first time I'd done so in a family-friendly setting.

"Vixen!"

Santa's voice rang out above the mall crowd, and I hurried away from where I'd been corralling a group of Burberry-clad kids. It wasn't actually Santa Claus calling me, of course. The man sitting in the holly-and-light-bedecked gazebo was named Walter something-or-other, but he asked that those of us working as his "elves" refer to him as Santa at all times. Conversely, he had christened all of us with either reindeer or Seven Dwarves names. He took this job very seriously and said the names helped him stay in character. If we questioned that, he'd start regaling us with tales of his extensive career as a Shakespearean actor, one that he claimed had come to an end because of his age. We elves had our own ideas about what might have cut his career short.

"Santa needs another drink," he told me in a stage whisper, once I reached his side. "Grumpy won't get me one." He inclined his head toward another woman dressed in a green foil dress. She was holding back a squirming boy while Santa and I conducted our conversation. I met her pained expression and then glanced down at my watch.

"Well, Santa," I said, "that's because it's only been an hour since the last one. You know the deal: one shot in your

coffee every three hours.”

“We made that deal a week ago!” he hissed. “Before the crowds picked up. You have no idea what Santa endures.” I didn’t know if it was part of his acting method or just a personality quirk, but he also referred to himself in the third person a lot. “A girl just asked for SAT scores good enough to get her into Yale. I think she was nine.”

I spared him a moment’s sympathy. The mall where we were earning holiday pay was in one of Seattle’s more affluent suburbs, and the requests he got sometimes went beyond footballs and ponies. The kids also tended to be better dressed than me (when I wasn’t in elf-wear), which was no small feat.

“Sorry,” I said. Tradition or not, I sometimes thought putting children on an old guy’s lap was already creepy enough. We didn’t need to mix alcohol into it. “The deal stands.”

“Santa can’t take much more of this!”

“Santa’s got four hours left of his shift,” I pointed out.

“I wish Comet was still here,” he said petulantly. “She was much more lenient with the drinks.”

“Yes. And I’m sure she’s drinking alone right now, seeing as she’s unemployed.” Comet, a former elf, had been generous with Santa’s shots and also partaken of them herself. Since she was half his weight, though, she hadn’t held her liquor as well and had lost her job when mall officials caught her taking off her clothes in The Sharper Image. I gave a curt nod to Grumpy. “Go ahead.”

The little boy hurried forward and climbed onto Santa’s lap. To his credit, Santa switched into character and didn’t pester me (or the boy) further about a drink. “Ho ho ho! What would you like for this nondenominational winter holiday season?” He even affected a slight British accent, which wasn’t really necessary for the role but certainly made him seem more authoritative.

The boy regarded Santa solemnly. "I want my dad to move back home."

"Is that your father?" asked Santa, looking toward a couple standing near Grumpy. The woman was pretty and blond, with the look of someone in her thirties who'd been preemptively hitting the Botox. If the guy she was plastered all over was old enough to be out of college, I would have been very surprised.

"No," said the boy. "That's my mom and her friend Roger."

Santa was silent for a few moments. "Is there anything else you'd like?"

I left them to it and returned to my post near the line's start. Evening was wearing on, increasing the number of families turning out. Unlike Santa's, my shift ended in less than an hour. I could get in a little shopping time and miss the worst of the commuting traffic. As an official mall employee, I got a considerable discount, which made drunken Santas and foil dresses that much easier to bear. One of the greatest things about the happiest time of the year was that all the department stores had extensive cosmetics and fragrance gift sets out right now, gift sets that desperately needed a home in my bathroom.

"Georgina?"

My dreams of sugarplums and Christian Dior were interrupted by the sound of a familiar voice. I turned and felt my heart sink as I met the eyes of a pretty middle-aged woman with cropped hair.

"Janice, hey. How's it going?"

My former co-worker returned my stiff smile with a puzzled one. "Fine. I ... I didn't expect to see you here."

I also hadn't expected to be seen here. It was one of the reasons I'd chosen to work outside the city, to specifically avoid anyone from my old job. "Likewise. Don't you live in Northgate?" I tried not to make it sound like an accusation.

She nodded and rested her hand on the shoulder of a small, dark-haired girl. “We do, but my sister lives over here, and we thought we’d visit her after Alicia talks to Santa.”

“I see,” I said, feeling mortified. Wonderful. Janice was going to go back to Emerald City Books and Café and tell everyone that she’d spotted me dressed as an elf. Not that that could make things worse, I supposed. Everyone there already thought I was the Whore of Babylon. It was why I’d quit a few weeks ago. What was an elf dress on top of that?

“Is this Santa any good?” asked Alicia impatiently. “The one I saw last year didn’t get me what I wanted.”

Over the buzzing of the crowd, I just barely heard Santa saying, “Well, Jessica, there’s not much Santa can do about interest rates.” I turned back to Alicia.

“It kind of depends on what you want,” I said.

“How did you end up here?” asked Janice, with a small frown.

She actually sounded concerned, which I supposed was better than her gloating. I had a feeling there were a number of people at the bookstore who would have loved the idea of me suffering—not that this job was so bad.

“Well, this is just temporary, obviously,” I explained. “It gives me something to do while I interview for others, and I get a mall discount. And really, it’s just another form of customer service.” I was trying hard not to sound defensive or desperate, but with each word, the intensity of how much I missed my old job hit me more and more.

“Oh, good,” she said, looking slightly relieved. “I’m sure you’ll find something soon. Looks like the line’s moving.”

“Wait, Janice?” I caught hold of her arm before she could walk away. “How ... how’s Doug?”

I’d left behind a lot of things at Emerald City: a position of power, a warm atmosphere, unlimited books and coffee ... But as much as I missed all of those things, I didn’t miss them as much as I missed a single person: my friend Doug

Sato. He, more than anything, was what had spurred me to leave. I hadn't been able to handle working with him anymore. It had been terrible, seeing someone I care about so much regard me with such contempt and disappointment. I'd had to get away from that and felt I'd made the right choice, but it was still hard losing someone who'd been a part of my life for the last five years.

Janice's smile returned. Doug had that effect on people. "Oh, you know. He's Doug. The same, wacky Doug. Band's going strong. And I think he might get your job. Er, your old job. They're interviewing for it." Her smile faded, as though she suddenly realized that might cause me discomfort. It didn't. Not much.

"That's great," I said. "I'm happy for him."

She nodded and told me good-bye before hurrying forward in line. Behind her, a family of four paused in their frantic texting on identical cell phones to glare at me for the holdup. A moment later, they hunched back down again, no doubt telling all their Twitter friends about every inane detail of their holiday mall experience.

I put on a cheery smile that didn't reflect what I felt inside and continued helping with the line until Sneezy, my replacement, showed up. I got him up to speed on Santa's drinking schedule and then abandoned the holiday nexus for the mall's back offices. Once inside a bathroom, I shape-shifted out of the foil dress, trading it for a much more tasteful sweater and jeans combo. I even made the sweater blue so that there would be no confusion. I was off the holiday clock.

Of course, as I walked back through the mall, I couldn't help but notice I was never off the clock for my main job: being a succubus in the illustrious service of Hell. Centuries of corruption and seduction of souls had given me a sixth sense for spotting those most vulnerable to my charms. The holidays, while ostensibly being a time of cheer, also tended to bring out the worst in people. I could

spot the desperation everywhere—those hoping to frantically find the perfect gifts to win over the ones they loved, those dissatisfied with their ability to provide for their loved ones, those dragged along on shopping trips to create a “perfect” holiday experience they had no interest in.... Yes, it was everywhere if you knew how to look for it: that sorrow and frustration tucked in amongst the joy. Those were exactly the kinds of souls that were ripe for the taking. I could have picked off any number of guys if I wanted to tonight and taken care of my quota for the week.

My brief exchange with Janice had left me feeling strange, however, and I couldn't muster the energy to go strike up a conversation with some discontent suburban businessman. Instead, I consoled myself with impulse purchases for myself and even found a couple of much-needed gifts for others, proving that I wasn't totally and completely selfish. By the time I left, I felt confident traffic had died down and would give me an easy drive back to the city. As I walked past the center of the mall, I heard Santa ho-ho-ho-ing loudly while waving his arms energetically around, much to the terror of a small child on his lap. My guess was that someone had cracked and broken the drinking rule.

On the way home, I noticed I had three voice mail messages, all from my friend Peter. Before I could even attempt to listen to them, the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?” Peter's frantic voice filled up the small space of my Passat.

“In my car. Where are you?”

“At my apartment. Where else? Everyone's here!”

“Everyone? What are you talking about?”

“Did you forget? Damn it, Georgina. You were a lot more punctual when you were unhappy and single.”

I ignored the jab and scanned through my mental calendar. Peter was one of my best friends. He was also a

neurotic, obsessive compulsive vampire who loved hosting dinners and parties. He usually managed to throw something together at least once a week, never for the same reason, so it was easy to lose track.

"It's fondue night," I said at last, proud of myself for remembering.

"Yes! And the cheese is getting cold. I'm not made of Sterno, you know."

"Why didn't you just start eating?"

"Because we're civilized."

"Debatable." I pondered whether I wanted to go or not. Part of me really just wanted to get home and snuggle with Seth, but I had a feeling he'd be working. I likely couldn't expect snuggling for a while, whereas I could appease Peter right now. "Fine. Start without me, and I'll be there soon. I'm just getting off the bridge now." Wistfully, I drove past Seth's exit and instead set my sights on the one that would take me to Peter's place.

"Did you remember to bring wine?" he asked.

"Peter, until a minute ago, I didn't even remember I was supposed to be at your place. Do you really need wine?" I'd seen Peter's wine cabinet. On any given day, he had a dozen each of reds and whites, both domestic and international.

"I don't want to run out of the good stuff," he said.

"I seriously doubt you're going to—wait. Is Carter there?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll pick up some wine."

I showed up at his apartment ten minutes later. His roommate and apprentice, Cody, opened the door and gave me a broad, fang-filled smile. Light, music, and the scent of fondue and potpourri washed over me. Their home put Santa's gazebo to shame and had decorations filling every square inch. And not just Christmas ones.

“Since when do you guys have a menorah?” I asked Cody. “Neither of you are Jewish.”

“Well, we’re not Christian either,” he pointed out, leading me toward the dining room. “Peter wanted to take a multicultural slant this year. The guestroom is all done in Kwanza decorations, if you know someone looking for a truly tacky overnight experience.”

“It is not tacky!” Peter stood up from a table where our other immortal friends sat around two tubs of melted cheese. “I can’t believe you’re so insensitive to other people’s religious views. Jesus Christ! Is that boxed wine?”

“You said you wanted wine,” I reminded him.

“I wanted good wine. Please tell me it’s not blush.”

“Of course it’s blush. And you didn’t tell me to bring good wine. You said you were worried Carter would drink all your good wine. So I brought this for him instead. Your wine is safe.”

At the mention of his name, the only heavenly creature in the room looked up. “Sweet,” he said, accepting the box from me. “Santa’s little helper delivers.” He opened up the box’s dispenser and looked at Peter expectantly. “Do you have a straw?”

I sat in an empty seat beside my boss, Jerome, who was contentedly dipping a piece of bread in molten cheddar. He was the archdemon of all of Seattle and chose to walk the earth looking like a circa 1990 John Cusack, which made it easy to forget his true nature sometimes. Fortunately, his brimstone personality always came out the instant he opened his mouth. “You’re here less than a minute, Georgie, and already you’ve made this get-together fifty percent less classy.”

“You guys are eating fondue on a Tuesday night,” I retorted. “You were well on your way without me.”

Peter had settled himself back down and was trying to appear calm. “Fondue is very classy. It’s all in the presentation. Hey! Where’d you get that?”

Carter had set the wine box on his lap, dispenser on top, and was now drinking from it with an enormous straw that I suspected had been literally conjured from thin air.

"At least he's not doing that with a bottle of Pinot Noir," I told Peter good-naturedly. I helped myself to a fondue fork and speared a piece of apple. On the other side of Jerome, Hugh busily typed away on his phone's keyboard, reminding me of the family at the mall. "Telling the world about this lowbrow party?" I teased. Hugh was an imp, a type of hellish administrative assistant, so he could have actually been buying or selling souls via his phone for all I knew.

"Of course," said Hugh, not looking up. "I'm updating Facebook. Do you know why Roman won't answer my friend request?"

"No clue," I said. "I've barely spoken to him in days."

"When I talked to him earlier, he said he had to work tonight," Peter explained, "but that we should go ahead and draw for him."

"Draw?" I asked uneasily. "Oh Lord. Tell me it's not Pictionary night too."

Peter sighed wearily. "Draw for Secret Santas. Do you even read the e-mails I send?"

"Secret Santas? Seems like we just did that," I said.

"Yeah, a year ago," said Peter. "Just like we do every Christmas."

I glanced over at Carter who was quietly drinking his wine. "Did you lose my hat? You look like you could use one." The angel's chin-length, blond hair was even more unkempt than usual.

"Tell us what you really think, Georgina," he replied. He ran a hand over his hair, but it somehow only made things worse. "I'm saving it for a special occasion."

"If I get your name again, I'll buy you two hats so you don't have to ration yourself."

"I wouldn't want you to go to the trouble."

“No trouble at all. I get a discount at the mall.”

Jerome sighed and set down his fork. “Are you still doing that, Georgie? Don’t I suffer enough without having to endure the humiliation of a succubus who moonlights as a Christmas elf?”

“You always said I should quit the bookstore and find something else to do,” I reminded him.

“Yes, but that was because I thought you’d go on to do something respectable. Like become a stripper or the mayor’s mistress.”

“This is just temporary.” I handed Carter the elegant crystal wineglass that had been sitting by my plate. He filled it with wine from the box and gave it back. Peter groaned and muttered something about despoiling Tiffany’s.

“Georgina doesn’t need material things anymore,” teased Cody. “She’s paid in love now.”

Jerome fixed the young vampire with a cold stare. “Do *not* ever say anything that saccharine again.”

“You’re one to talk,” I said to Cody, unable to hide my smile. “I’m surprised you could drag yourself away from Gabrielle tonight.” His face immediately grew dreamy at the mention of his ladylove.

“That makes two of us,” observed Peter. He shook his head bitterly. “You guys and your perfect love lives.”

“Hardly perfect,” I said at the same time Cody said, “It *is* perfect.”

All eyes fell on me. Hugh even looked up from his phone. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Why do you always assume that? And no, of course not,” I scoffed, hating myself for the slip. “Things are fantastic with Seth.”

And they were. Just speaking his name sent a flood of joy through me. Seth. Seth was what made everything worthwhile. My relationship with him was what had caused the rift between me and my former co-workers at the

bookstore. They saw me as the reason for his breakup with Doug's sister. Which, I suppose, I was. But no matter how much I'd loved that job, giving it up was a small price to pay to be with Seth. I could endure being an elf. I could endure the quotas he and I put on our sex life, to ensure my succubus powers didn't suck him dry. With him, I could handle anything. Even a future of damnation.

There were just a couple of teeny-tiny things about my relationship with Seth that gave me pause. One had been eating at me for a while, one I kept trying to ignore. But now, suddenly, with my immortal friends watching me, I finally drummed up the courage to address it.

"It's just ... I don't suppose any of you told Seth my name, did you?" Seeing Peter open his mouth in confusion, I immediately amended, "My real name."

"Why would that ever come up?" asked Hugh dismissively, returning to his texting.

"I don't even know your real name," said Cody. "Are you saying it's not Georgina?"

I regretted the words already. It was a stupid thing for me to worry about, and their reactions were just proving that point.

"Do you *not* want him to know your name?" asked Hugh.

"No ... it's fine. I just, well. It's just weird. A month or so ago, when he was half-asleep, he called me by it. Letha," I added, for Cody's benefit. I managed to say the name without tripping over it. It wasn't a name I welcomed. I'd shed it centuries ago, when I became a succubus, and had been taking assumed names ever since. In banishing that name, I'd banished that former life. I'd wanted to erase it so badly that I'd sold my soul in exchange for everyone I'd known forgetting I existed. That was why the conversation with Seth had totally blindsided me. There was no way he could've known that name.

You are the world, Letha ... he had told me drowsily.

He hadn't even remembered saying it, let alone where he'd heard it. *Don't know*, he'd told me, when I questioned him about it later. *Greek myths, I guess. The River Lethe, where the dead go to wash away the memories from their souls ... to forget the past...*

"That's a pretty name," said Cody.

I shrugged noncommittally. "The point is, I never told it to Seth. But somehow, he knew it. He couldn't remember anything about it, though. Where he heard it."

"He must have heard it from you," said Hugh, ever practical.

"I never told him. I'd remember if I had."

"Well, with all the other immortals traipsing through here, I'm sure it came up from one of them. He probably overheard it." Peter frowned. "Don't you have an award with your name on it? Maybe he saw that."

"I don't really leave my 'Best Succubus' award lying around," I pointed out.

"Well, you should," said Hugh.

I eyed Carter carefully. "You're being awfully quiet."

He paused in drinking from the wine box. "I'm busy."

"Did *you* tell Seth my name? You've called me it before." Carter, despite being an angel, seemed to have a genuine affection for us damned souls. And like an elementary school boy, he often thought the best way of showing that affection was by picking on us. Calling me Letha—when he knew I hated it—and other pet names was one such tactic he used.

Carter shook his head. "Sorry to disappoint you, Daughter of Lilith, but I never told him. You know me: model of discretion." There was a slurping sound as he neared the wine's end.

"Then how did Seth find out?" I demanded. "How'd he know the name? Someone must have told him."

Jerome sighed loudly. "Georgie, this conversation is even more ridiculous than the one about your job. You already

got your answer: either you or someone else slipped up and doesn't remember. Why does everything have to be so dramatic for you? Are you just looking for something to be unhappy about?"

He had a point. And honestly, I didn't know why this had bugged me so much for so long. Everyone was right. There was no mystery here, nothing earth-shattering. Seth had overheard my name somewhere, end of story. There was no reason for me to overreact or assume the worst—only a tiny, nagging voice in my head that refused to forget about that night.

"It's just weird," I said lamely.

Jerome rolled his eyes. "If you want something to worry about, then I'll give you something."

All thoughts of Seth and names flew out of my head. Everyone at the table (except Carter, who was still slurping) froze and stared at Jerome. When my boss said he had something for you to worry about, there was a strong possibility it meant something fiery and terrifying. Hugh looked startled by this proclamation too, which was a bad sign. He usually knew about hellish mandates before Jerome did.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I had a drink with Nanette the other night," he growled. Nanette was Portland's archdemoness. "Bad enough she still won't let me forget the summoning. She was also going off on some bullshit about how her people were more competent than mine."

I glanced briefly at my friends. We weren't exactly model employees of Hell, so there was a very good chance that Nanette was right. Not that any of us would tell Jerome that.

"So," he continued, "when I denied it, she demanded we step up and prove what superior Hellish minions we are."

"How?" asked Hugh, looking mildly interested. "With a soul pledge drive?"

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Jerome.
“Then with what?” I asked.
Jerome gave us a tight-lipped smile. “With bowling.”

Chapter 2

IT TOOK ME a moment to really comprehend that in thirty seconds, the conversation had gone from a deeply seriously mystery about my love life to bowling for demonic bragging rights. And yet, this wasn't a particularly unusual pattern in my world.

"And by 'we,'" added Jerome, "I mean you four." He nodded toward Peter, Cody, Hugh, and me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Let me make sure I'm following this. You've signed us up for some sort of bowling league. One that you aren't even going to participate in. And this is somehow going to prove your employees' 'evilness' to the world."

"Don't be silly. I can't participate. Bowling teams only have four people." He didn't comment on the proving evilness part.

"Well, hey, I'll totally yield my spot to you," I said. "I'm not that great a bowler."

"You'd better become one." Jerome's voice grew cold. "All of you had, if you know what's good for you. Nanette will be impossible to live with at the next company meeting if you lot lose."

"Gee, Jerome. I love bowling," said Carter. "How come you never mentioned this to me before?"

Jerome and Carter held gazes for several heavy seconds. "Because, unless you're ready to take a *fall* for the team, you can't really compete with us."

A funny smile fell over Carter's face. His gray eyes glinted. "I see."

"I don't really like your use of 'us,' seeing as you've already written off any participation on your part," I pointed out to Jerome, imitating his earlier snide tone.

Peter sighed, looking rather woebegone. "Where on earth am I going to find tasteful bowling shoes?"

"What's our team name going to be?" asked Cody. That immediately degenerated into a conversation of truly terrible suggestions, such as Soulless in Seattle and Split Decision. After almost an hour, I couldn't handle any more.

"I think I'm going to go home," I said, standing up. I had kind of wanted dessert but was afraid I'd be drafted for beach volleyball and cricket if I stayed much longer. "I brought the wine. You guys don't really need me anymore."

"When you get home, tell my wayward offspring that I need him to coach you guys," said Jerome.

"By 'home,' I actually meant Seth's," I said. "But if I see Roman, I'll let him know you've found a good use for his formidable cosmic powers." Roman—Jerome's half-human son and my roommate—actually *was* a pretty good bowler, but I didn't want to encourage Jerome.

"Wait!" Peter sprang up after me. "You have to draw for Secret Santas first."

"Oh, come on—"

"No complaining," he argued. He hurried to the kitchen and returned with a ceramic cookie jar shaped like a snowman. He thrust it toward me. "Draw. Whatever name you get is who you're buying for, so don't try to get out of it."

I drew a piece of paper and opened it up. *Georgina*.

"I can't—"

Peter held up a hand to silence me. "You drew the name. That's who you've got. No arguments."

His stern look stopped me from any more protests. "Well," I pointed out pragmatically, "at least I have a few

ideas.”

To his credit, Peter sent me home with some chocolate fondue sauce and a Tupperware bowl filled with fruit and marshmallows. Hugh and Cody were running forward with the bowling team plan, trying to come up with a practice schedule. Jerome and Carter said little and instead kept watching each other in a speculative, knowing way that was typical of them. It was hard to read much on their faces, but for once, Jerome gave off the vibe of having the upper hand.

I left Capitol Hill for Seattle’s University District and Seth’s condo. All the windows were dark when I pulled up, and I couldn’t help a smile. It was almost eleven. Seth must have called it an early night, something I’d been urging him to do for a while. Thinking of that, my smile faded as quickly as it had come. A few months ago, Seth’s sister-in-law, Andrea, had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The disease had been pretty far advanced when caught, and although she’d almost immediately gone into treatment, the outcome still wasn’t promising. Worse, the treatments had taken a huge physical toll on her, one that was testing the family’s strength. Seth was frequently helping them out, especially when his brother Terry was working, since it was harder for Andrea to care for their five daughters now. Seth had been sacrificing both sleep and his writing career to look after them.

I knew it was necessary. I loved Seth’s family and had helped them out as well. But I still hated seeing Seth run himself down and knew that it hurt him to put his work on hold. He claimed his writing was the least of his problems right now and had time before deadlines were an issue, particularly since his next two books were queued for printing next year. I couldn’t argue against that, but the sleep issue? Yeah, I was on him a lot about that and glad to see my words had gotten through tonight.

I used my key to let myself in and slipped through the condo as silently as possible. I practically lived here lately and had no trouble finding my way around furniture in the darkness. When I reached his bedroom, I could just barely make out his form wrapped up in covers, softly outlined in the light of his alarm clock. I quietly took off my coat and then shape-shifted into a cotton babydoll nightgown. It was sexy but not blatantly so. I planned on sleeping with him tonight, for real.

I slid into bed and pressed myself up against his back, lightly tossing an arm over him. He stirred slightly, and I couldn't resist pressing a kiss against his bare shoulder. The scent of cinnamon and musk washed over me as he snuggled closer. Despite sternly chastising myself that he needed to sleep, I lightly ran my fingers along his arm and sneaked in another kiss.

"Mmm," he murmured, rolling over toward me. "That feels nice."

A few things hit me at once. First, Seth didn't wear any sort of cologne or aftershave that smelled like cinnamon. Second, Seth's voice didn't sound like that. Third, and perhaps most important, Seth wasn't in bed with me.

I didn't mean to scream as loudly as I did. It just kind of happened.

I was out of the bed in a flash, groping for the light switch on the wall while the intruder attempted to get up. He ended up getting tangled in the covers and falling off the bed with a loud *thump*, just as I found the light. I promptly reached for a weapon, but seeing as this was Seth's bedroom, my options were limited. The heaviest, most dangerous object I could readily grab ahold of was Seth's dictionary, a leather-bound monstrosity that he kept on hand because he "didn't trust the Internet."

I stood poised and ready to literally throw the book at the intruder as he scrambled to his feet. As he did and I got

a good look at him, I noticed something crazy. He looked ... familiar. Not only that, but he *kind of* looked like Seth.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

“Who are *you*?” he exclaimed. He seemed more confused than anything else. I don’t think he found the threat of a five foot four woman with a dictionary all that frightening.

Before I could answer, a hand touched my arm. I yelped and threw the dictionary out of instinct. The guy dodged, letting the book crash harmlessly against the wall. I spun around to see who’d touched me and found myself looking into the eyes of a white-haired woman with gold cat-eye glasses. She was wearing flowered pajama bottoms and a pink sweatshirt with a crossword puzzle on it. She was also wielding a baseball bat, which was pretty astonishing—not just because it was more dangerous than a dictionary but also because I hadn’t known Seth owned one.

“What are you doing here?” she asked fiercely. She glanced over at the shirtless, dumbfounded guy. “Are you okay?”

For half a second, I actually toyed with the idea that I had somehow let myself into someone else’s condo. Like, maybe I was just one door over. This scene was so ridiculous that a mix-up seemed far more likely. It was only the obvious evidence—like my key and Seth’s University of Chicago teddy bear watching this spectacle—that drove home the fact that I was indeed where I was supposed to be.

Suddenly, the sound of the front door opening and closing rang through the condo. “Hello?” came a blessedly familiar voice.

“Seth!” exclaimed all three of us in unison.

Moments later, Seth appeared in the doorway. As usual, he looked adorable. His reddish brown hair was typically unkempt, and he was wearing a *Dirty Dancing* T-shirt that I’d never seen before. Despite my panic and confusion over

this current situation, the concerned part of me still noted the little signs of fatigue on Seth's face, the dark circles and lines of weariness. He was thirty-six and usually looked younger than his age. Not today.

"Seth," said the bat-wielding woman. "This lady broke into your house."

He looked at each of us in turn before resting his gaze on her. "Mom," he said quietly, "that's my girlfriend. Please don't bludgeon her."

"Since when do you have a girlfriend?" asked the guy.

"Since when do you have a baseball bat?" I asked, recovering my composure.

Seth cut me a wry look before gently trying to remove the bat from the woman's hands. She didn't let go. "Georgina, this is my mom, Margaret Mortensen. And that's my brother Ian. Guys, this is Georgina."

"Hi," I said, feeling surprise of a different sort. I'd heard a lot about Seth's mother and younger brother but hadn't expected to meet them anytime soon. Seth's mother didn't like to fly, and Ian was ... well, from the stories Seth and Terry told, Ian was just hard to track down in general. He was the wayward Mortensen brother.

Margaret relinquished the bat and put on a polite but wary smile. "It's very nice to meet you."

"Ditto," said Ian. I now understood why he looked familiar. Aside from the fact I'd probably seen a picture of him somewhere, he also shared some of Seth's and Terry's features. He was tall like Seth, but with Terry's thinner face. Ian's hair was all brown, with no coppery hint, but it had that same messy look that Seth's did. Except, on closer examination, I had the feeling Ian's had been purposely styled that way with the help of much time and product.

Seth suddenly did a double take between Ian and me. He didn't even have to say anything for me to guess the question on his mind. Or questions, perhaps. My nightgown

and Ian's shirtlessness undoubtedly raised a number of them.

Ian's defense came swift and certain. "She got into bed with me."

"I thought he was you," I said.

Seth's mother made a strange noise in her throat.

"You were supposed to be on the couch," said Seth accusingly.

Ian shrugged. "It's uncomfortable. And you weren't home yet, so I figured there was no harm done. How was I supposed to know some woman was going to come manhandle me in my sleep?"

"I didn't manhandle you!" I cried.

Seth rubbed his eyes, again reminding me how exhausted he was. "Look, what's done is done. Why don't we all just go to bed—where we're supposed to—and then get to know each other in the morning, okay?"

Margaret eyed me. "She's going to sleep in here? With you?"

"Yes, Mom," he said patiently. "With me. Because I'm a grown man. And this is my home. And because in thirty-six years, this isn't the first woman to stay over with me."

His mother looked aghast, and I groped for a more comfortable topic. "Your shirt's great." Now that she wasn't threatening to strike me, I could see that the crossword spelled out her five granddaughters' names. "I love the girls."

"Thank you," she said. "Each one of them is a blessing, born within the holy confines of wedlock."

Before I could even fumble a response to that, Ian groaned. "Lord, Mom. Is that from that Web site I told you not to order from? You know their stuff's made in China. I know this woman who could have made you one out of sustainable organic fabric."

"Hemp is a drug, not a fabric," she told him.

“Good *night*, you guys,” said Seth, pointing his brother to the door. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Margaret and Ian murmured their good nights, and she paused to kiss Seth on the cheek—which I actually thought was pretty cute. When they were gone and the door was closed, Seth sat on his bed and buried his face in his hands.

“So,” I said, coming to sit beside him. “Exactly how many women have stayed over in thirty-six years?”

He looked up. “None who were caught by my mother in so little clothing.”

I plucked at the skirt of the nightgown. “This? This is tame.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he added, waving vaguely toward the door. “I should’ve called and warned you. They just drove into town tonight—unannounced, of course. Ian can’t be expected to do what people expect. It would ruin his reputation. They showed up at Terry’s, but there’s no room for them there, so I sent them on ahead since they were so tired. I had no idea it would result in you trying to sleep with my brother.”

“Seth!”

“Kidding, kidding.” He picked up my hand and kissed the top of it. “How are you? How was your day?”

“Well, I tried my best to keep Santa from getting drunk and then found out Jerome signed us up for a Hellish bowling league.”

“I see,” said Seth. “So. The usual.”

“Pretty much. What about you?”

The small smile that had been tugging at his lips fell. “Aside from unexpected family? The usual too. Terry was out late with work stuff, so I was there all night with the girls while Andrea rested. Kendall has to build a papier-mâché solar system, so that was fun for everyone.” He held up his hands and wiggled fingers coated in white powder.

“And let me guess. No writing?”

He shrugged. “It’s not important.”

“You should’ve called me. I could’ve watched them while you wrote.”

“You were working and then ... what, it was fondue night, right?” He stood up and stripped off his shirt and jeans, getting down to green flannel boxers.

“How did you know that?” I asked. “I barely knew that.”

“I was on Peter’s e-mail list.”

“Well, regardless, it doesn’t matter. And that mall job is nothing. I could have been over here in a flash.”

He stepped into his bathroom and returned a few moments later with a toothbrush in his mouth. “That job *is* nuffing. Haf any of your interfeews panned out?”

“No,” I said, not adding that I hadn’t gone on any other interviews. Everything paled compared to Emerald City.

The conversation was put on pause while he finished brushing his teeth. “You should be doing something better,” he said, once he was done.

“I’m fine where I’m at. I don’t mind it. But you ... you can’t keep going on like this. You’re not getting enough sleep or *working*.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. He turned off the light and crawled into bed. In the dimness, I saw him pat the spot beside him. “Come over here. It’s just me, I promise.”

I smiled and curled up beside him. “Ian didn’t smell right, you know. I mean, he smelled good, but not like you.”

“I’m sure he spends gratuitous amounts of money to smell good,” muttered Seth through a yawn.

“What’s he do for a living?”

“Hard to say. He’s always got new jobs. Or no job. Whatever money he’s got goes toward carefully maintaining his hard-fought, effortless lifestyle. Have you seen his coat?”

“No. The only clothing of his I’ve seen is his boxers.”

“Ah. Well, it must be in the living room. It looks like it came from a thrift store but probably cost four figures.” He sighed. “Although, I shouldn’t be too hard on him. I mean,