

**DARKER
DEMONS**

BY

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CHAPTER 1

Alexandra awakens with a start. She can't tell if her eyes are open or shut so dense is the blackness that surrounds her. Her head is pounding. Reaching up to feel for a lump, her hand brushes against something; something soft and wet.

Stifling the scream threatening to escape from her throat, she tries to move her legs. There is plenty of space to move them from side to side but when she tries to lift them, they hit an obstacle.

The world is still black but it is slowly lightening.

"Think Alex, what's the last thing you remember?" she asks herself. Her voice sounds hollow.

She remembers walking along a dark street. She and Jake had left the movie before it was over and headed downtown for a late dinner. They agreed the storyline of the so-called "based on real events" film was implausible; some nonsense about ghosts and demons roaming the streets of Charleston.

She could picture Jake's face as they passed under the gas lamp in front of their favorite restaurant. His dark brown eyes were crinkling at the corner as they recalled one of the more absurd scenes from the film.

And then...nothing. The pounding in her head is easing up a little. Attempting to sit up she immediately feels the constriction around her neck as if she is wearing a heavy collar. Turning her head she finds she can only move it an inch or two in either direction.

Blinding light is coming from above her. Unable to shield her eyes, she squeezes them shut, but the light penetrates her eyelids. She has the sensation of being touched but can't feel anything solid. It is more an idea of touching, almost like being caressed by a breath.

Her body begins to respond to the touch. Trying to fight it off, she finds it impossible in her confused and weakened state.

Strange scenes play out behind her eyelids. She sees Jake but not Jake, some alien entity is inside of him. His eyes are an odd shape and bulge out of his head. He is laughing.

She sees herself on a metallic platform, arms and legs spread, something holding her down. Around her neck is a metal choker fastened to the platform with a heavy chain.

Then Jake is on top of her...and she is screaming, and screaming.

Waking up again, she hears the birds outside her window. Her neck feels sore as if something has been rubbing against it. She tries to remember what happened the previous night but where there should be memories; there is just a black hole.

Throwing back the covers she gasps as her feet hit the floor. Terrible cramps grip her insides and she doubles over in pain. Collapsing back on the bed she tries to catch her breath.

After a few moments, the pain subsides and she is able to stand then walk to the bathroom. Gazing at her reflection she feels bewildered as if the woman staring back is a total stranger.

“Where were we last night?” she asks the woman but there is no reply.

Showering in the soothing, warm water helps bring her back to reality but doesn't trigger any recollections of the night before. Her phone begins ringing as she is toweling off. It is her boss wanting to know where the hell she is.

“But it's Sunday. Why would I come to work on Sunday?”

“Well, you must have had one crazy weekend. It's Monday morning and you are supposed to be here helping me prepare for our presentation tomorrow,” her boss Caitlin scolds.

“Oh geez, I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened. I will be there as soon as I can.”

“Are you sure you are all right? Your voice sounds kind of hoarse.”

“Yes, yes. I'm fine. I'll see you in a bit.”

Throwing open her closet door she is dismayed to find nothing but tailored clothes in neutral shades.

“Why do I have all these boring outfits? These aren't my taste at all.” Or are they, she wonders. Once again she has the overwhelming feeling of inhabiting a stranger's body.

Pushing hangar after hangar aside she finally comes across a peacock blue, silk dress.

“This is more like it,” she says, as the soft fabric slides between her fingers, giving her chills.

Slipping the dress over her head she turns to admire her image. The woman in the mirror is smiling her approval.

Returning to the bathroom she pulls out her makeup drawer and begins applying lines and color to her eyelids. Puckering her lips she adds deep red lipstick.

“I didn't even know I had this color, pretty hot,” she tells her reflection.

On any other day, she would slip on sneakers and walk the five blocks to her office. Today, she slips on heels and pulls out her phone to arrange for an Uber pickup. By the time she locates her purse and walks downstairs her ride is waiting at the curb.

The young, male driver casts an admiring look in the rearview mirror.

“Headed to the office? Must be rough.”

“How did you know I was going to the office?” Alexandra asks.

“That's all there is at that address. It's an office building.”

“Right, sorry. I had a strange weekend,” Alexandra replies.

The young man grins. “I hear that.”

The car pulls up in front of Alexandra's office and the young driver jumps out almost before the car is stopped to rush around and open the door for her. He reaches out and she takes his hand. Startled by the sudden feeling of heat, she quickly pulls her hand away.

The driver only smiles and bows his head. "Enjoy your day Alex," he says as he walks away.

Hurrying up the steps to the front door of her office building, she is vaguely aware of the hollow sound her heels make as they hit the bricks, almost as if she is on a movie set.

The first thing that strikes her as she throws open the door is the utter lack of motion. People at their desks pose like mannequins. All eyes are on her as she walks across the room to her desk.

"What is it, people? Haven't you ever seen anyone get to work a little late? Geez."

The door to Caitlin's office is opening, slowly. Her boss is looking at her so strangely, shaking her head.

Standing, she shouts a question at Caitlin, "What's wrong with everyone? Why are you all behaving like this?"

Caitlin has now reached Alexandra's desk. She drops something-- a newspaper-- on the desk and points.

Picking it up, Alexandra sees the headline. It's about Jake. The story says his body was found late Sunday night in Riverfront Park on the old Navy base. The horrifying details regarding the condition of the body are too much for her. She collapses in a dead faint.

Struggling to regain consciousness is like trying to leave heaven to enter hell. As she opens her eyes the pain claws away at her brain leaving it shredded and raw.

Caitlin is leaning over her with a damp cloth, patting her forehead. There are two policemen, one on each side of her boss.

"Alexandra, can you hear me? These men want to ask you some questions hon. Are you up to it?"

"Excuse me ma'am but, she has to answer our questions whether she feels up to it or not. "

Alexandra brushes Caitlin's hand away. "What is it you need to ask me, officer...?"

"Butler. Officer Butler. I'd like to know your whereabouts last evening."

She begins, calmly, "I wish I could tell you but, I can't seem to remember anything about last night. In fact, I don't remember anything after Saturday night when Jake...oh God, Jake...Jake!"

The moans coming out of her now are barely human. Unable to utter even the briefest answers to the questions being thrown at her, she just covers her face and screams, "Just leave me alone!"

Caitlin turns on the officers, shouting at them to call an ambulance. "She's hysterical. She needs medical attention now!"

That's the last thing she hears before passing out again.

Opening her eyes she sees a man in a white coat leaning over her. Behind him, she sees Caitlin, teary eyed, wringing her hands. There doesn't appear to be anyone else in the small room.

"Oh thank God you're awake! I was getting so worried!"

Trying to answer, her raw throat makes it impossible to do more than groan.

The doctor pats her hand and turns to Caitlin. Taking her arm, he walks her out of the room and returns alone.

"Don't worry. It's normal for you to have difficulty talking after so much time."

She manages to get out two words, "How long?"

"You've been with us for two weeks." Seeing the panicked expression on her face the doctor takes her hand. "Don't worry Alexandra. You're fine. You're going to be all right now. Try to get some rest," he says as he leaves the room.

"Rest," she thinks. "Isn't that all I have been doing for two weeks? How can I rest when I have no idea what's happening to me?"

The abrupt recollection of events leading up to her collapse explodes in her head.

"Jake oh God. He's dead. He's dead and I have no idea where I was when it happened."

She sits up and frantically searches for a wastebasket or bedpan, anything that can catch the bile rising in her throat. She grabs the water pitcher but too late. She buzzes for the nurse then puts her head back on the pillow and sobs, silently.

The nurse bustles in and cleans up her mess, replacing the soiled blanket with a fresh one. She fetches a bright blue bag and places it on Alexandra's night stand.

"Here you go. If you feel sick again, just use this bag."

Alexandra nods her head and smiles, pointing to her throat. She hopes the nurse understands it is still difficult to speak.

After patting her hand and smiling, the nurse turns and leaves the room.

Alone again, Alexandra tries to piece together the events that led up to her landing in the hospital in a coma. There is a faint memory, a whisper in her consciousness. She recalls waking up in darkness almost unable to move; then a bright, piercing light...then nothing.

The doctor and Caitlin return.

"I'm sending your boss home. She has been here almost constantly since we admitted you. She needs some rest before she collapses too. I'll give you two a minute alone."

Suddenly, Alexandra feels herself slipping back again, away from the present. It's like being sucked into a deep hole. Caitlin is receding until she is no more than a tiny dot in Alexandra's vision.

She is in her apartment. The hospital gown is gone. She is dressed in jeans and a low cut silk blouse. She is holding two glasses of wine. She looks up and sees a man on the couch. He is smiling at her, holding out his hand to accept the glass she is offering.

She hands him the wine and sits down next to him.

“Are you all right baby? You’re looking at me a little oddly,” Jake says.

“Yes, I’m okay. I just had the weirdest feeling, though. I can’t put my finger on it but...I feel like we have done this exact same thing, had this same conversation before.”

“That’s not really so peculiar, is it? I’m sure we have had very similar conversations in the past.”

“I guess but this was different somehow. I got a really strong feeling of déjà vu.”

“So, what would you like to do tonight? Do you want to see that new movie everyone is talking about, *Darker Demons*?”

“NO! Sorry, no, I heard it was terrible. Why don’t we just stay home?”

“Mmm. I like the sound of that,” Jake says. He puts down his wine and reaches over to grab Alexandra’s hair, pulling her towards him. Roughly, he pushes her down on the couch and pulls her blouse over her head. He is kissing her so hard her mouth feels bruised and hot.

“What are you doing? Take it easy! You’re hurting me.”

“You seemed to like it the other night with all those people watching. You kept begging me for more. Don’t you remember baby?”

As Alexandra looks in his bulging eyes, she sees her own reflection surrounded by flames.