

Worthy



Lynn Viehl

Worthy
by Lynn Viehl

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“Wake up, Juliana.”

I did that as soon I felt blunt fingertips trace the curve of my right shoulder. Eric Locke’s hands were almost as wicked as his mouth, which had also been over most of my body. Even now, with my body still warm and damp from him, I wanted more.

Not that I was going to feed his ego by telling him that. “What time is it?”

“Three a.m. Come on, Jules.” He brushed my cheek with some strands of my hair. “Open those pretty eyes for me.”

I wanted a kiss, not a tickle, so I kept them closed. “I thought you left.”

“I came back.” Air cooled my bare skin as he pulled down the sheet covering me. “Did you miss me?”

“I was asleep.” I reached for him.

“Greedy thing.” He scooped me up in his arms.

Before tonight, I’d never invited Locke to my home. He lived in mansions and penthouses and skyscrapers; I rented a tiny cottage on the beach. We didn’t even date; we just got together for coffee sometimes. We’d met in at a Starbucks. He’d noticed me sketching, brought over two lattes and started talking to me.

How had he gotten back in? I wondered. He didn’t have a key, so I’d have to bitch at him for leaving my door unlocked. Tomorrow.

“Are you falling asleep again?” Eric asked as he carried me out of the bedroom.

I stopped playing coy girl and looked up at him. I had no business getting involved with him, of course. I’d Googled his name and found out he’d made billions from the pharmaceutical company he’d inherited from his parents. Guys like Eric were so far out of my league we didn’t even know, much less frequent, the same ballpark. Still, I’d been lonely, and it wasn’t as if we were going to the chapel or anything.

I nuzzled his neck. Eric always smelled like leather and bourbon and espresso; a lovely rich-man smell. “Where are you taking me?”

“It’s a surprise.” He carried me down the hall.

“Is it a good one?”

“The best.”

I nipped his ear lobe. I liked the way he tasted; he had the cleanest, smoothest, most flawless skin of any man I’d ever known. Earlier tonight I’d had a terrible urge to bite him somewhere it showed and leave a mark to warn off other women. *Next thing you know I’ll be squatting to piss on the bumper of his Hummer.* “You know when we met? Why did you come over and talk to me?”

“You interested me.”

“Why?” That night I’d worn my oldest T-shirt and shorts, both sweat-stained and filthy from a day of housecleaning. Eric had treated me as if I’d been wearing Chanel and silk. Far as I knew, his eyes and nose worked.

He looked down at me. “I saw you and I knew you were the one.”

Eric had this smile, too. It promised things. Things that made me feel goofy and awkward. I'd spilled latte all over my sketch, that first night.

He didn't stop at the bathroom, but kept going. I considered asking him to toss me on the nearest flat surface to save time. As he pushed the kitchen door open with his shoulder, I lifted my head. "Are we going to do it on the table?" I'd have to clear off the bowl of fruit on it, unless he wanted to get kinky again with the grapes. I was willing, as long as we counted them this time.

He bent his head down and kissed the end of my nose. "Guess again."

I giggled, until he opened the back door and carried me out into my postage stamp of a yard. I had no privacy fence, and there were always tourists and retirees wandering the stretch of beach in front of my cottage at all hours.

"Eric, put me down. One of the condo commandoes will see my bare ass and call the cops." I tried to wiggle free, but he tightened his arms around me. I turned my head, and saw strangers waiting by a long black limo.

Strangers with guns in their hands. And the limo's trunk was open.

I chose my next words pretty carefully. "Eric? Who are those guys? What's going on?"

"I have to be sure." He shifted his left arm and clamped a hand over my mouth, so hard that the edge of my teeth cut into the inside of my lips. "Be worthy, Jules," he whispered against my ear. "Be worthy and save me."

I fought, twisting and kicking my legs, but he had a good grip on me. I sank my teeth into the fleshy part of his palm, and he swore and yanked his hand

away. Before I could drag in enough air to scream, he dumped me into the open trunk, and drove his fist into my jaw.

Locke was strong; it was like getting smacked with a sledgehammer. My teeth jammed together, my neck snapped back, and the inside of my head exploded with fire and pain. A freight train of rushing, pounding sound drove from one of my ears to the other.

Everything went from there to black.

I didn't know how long I was knocked out, but I came to in a hurry. A gallon of cold water in the face helped. As I choked and sputtered and coughed, icy rivulets ran down the front of me. I was still naked, but two sets of hard hands kept me from sagging to the ground. Electricity buzzed faintly from some overhead fixtures. Water dripping into my eyes blurred the harsh light.

I didn't know where I was, but it felt like a place to die.

"You know why they mark them?" Locke's voice asked somewhere close to me. "Because they can't bite through a dog collar."

Men laughed.

I squeezed my eyelids shut a few times, until I cleared the water from my eyes and could see where he'd brought me. It appeared to be a warehouse of some kind, big and mostly empty. Near a marina, maybe; I smelled sea water and gasoline. A large group of men formed an uneven ring around me. Some were wearing street clothes, but others were dressed like priests. Two of the guys in black cassocks had me wedged between them, and held my arms curled up behind my back.

Priests or not, every single man there watched me, like I was rolled in chocolate and covered in free diamonds.

“They do have outstanding taste in females.” Locke moved into the circle of light, and reached out to me. I thought he’d hit me, but he ran his hand down the front of my wet body instead. He took his time, drawing it out, stopping here and there to squeeze with appreciation. “She’s like a Porsche with two legs. Quick, strong, responsive as hell.”

I waited until his face was close enough, then I lunged. Before I could break his nose with my skull, the men on either side of me jerked my arms up, so hard and high I doubled over in agony.

“Don’t hurt her. Not yet.” Locke got close again, and his voice went all gentle and soft, the way it had after sex. “Juliana, baby. Look at me.”

I couldn’t get my feet planted squarely on the water-slick floor, and the hold they had on my arms was about to pop some sockets or splinter some bones. I wouldn’t lift my head, so he used a handful of my dripping hair and made me.

“That’s better,” he said. “Now, I want you to tell me the truth. Where is your master?”

I tried to make sense of what he was asking. “Master?” Was this some sort of bizarre sex game he was playing? “I don’t understand.”

“The vampire.” He caressed my cheek. “These men want him. Just tell them where Shamaras is.”

A *vampire*? “I don’t know anyone like that,” I said, hiding my shock. How could Eric have known . . . ?

Locke made a casual gesture, and one of the smaller guys dressed in street clothes stepped forward. He was a head shorter than me, with skinny arms and stubby legs, and close-cut hair so red it looked fake. He set down his beer bottle and pulled off his dingy t-shirt, exposing a narrow, white torso crisscrossed with old scars. He began swinging his arms and twisting from side to side, warming up.

“Listen, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know any vampires or anyone named Shamaras.” I looked past him to the other men. “Please, someone, help me. I swear to God—”

“Blasphemer.” Locke put a hand on my throat, lifted me off my feet, and shook me like a kitten. He wasn’t talking sexy anymore. “Where is the jardin? Where is Shamaras?”

I didn’t tell him, even when he put me down and I could breathe. There was nothing to tell.

Red started slapping me while Locke repeated his questions over and over. I didn’t know the answers. If I said nothing, Red slapped me. If I told him I didn’t know, another slap. The men holding me kept me on my feet, and when I sagged, one of them grabbed my hair at the back of my head and used it to jerk me up straight.

By the time the guys holding me were sweating freely, and my face felt like it was three sizes bigger and on fire, I heard Locke sigh. “Tie her up.”

More hands grabbed me and forced me over to a steel shelf unit. Rope bit into my wrists, ankles, and waist as they knotted me in place.

The other men had a good look and then backed up a few steps. That was when I saw the drain in the floor and a coil of hose.

They needed a hose?

“Eric.” My tongue hurt where my teeth had cut into it. “I would tell you if I knew where the jardin or this Shamaras was. I don’t. Please stop hurting me.”

Red stepped in front of me, and rolled his head and shoulders along with his arms, really loosening up this time.

“You’re lying.” He turned to Red. “Nothing permanent.”

Before I could ask what that meant, the little bastard punched me in the face, pulling back just enough to keep from breaking my jaw. My head slammed back against the metal shelf behind it. I saw little fat white stars orbit my head, just like in cartoons.

“Where is Shamaras? Where is the jardin?”

The beating progressed from there. Red punched me in the face, chest, and belly. When I blacked out the first time, someone doused me with another bucket of cold water. It streamed off me, washing away the drips and dribbles of blood from my mouth and nose.

The world turned into pain, cold water, and more pain.

Locke had me beaten for what seemed like hours. I stopped trying to dodge the blows or brace myself. I passed every threshold of pain and discovered some new ones. I babbled, I sobbed, I begged him to stop. I offered

him everything I had if he would just stop hurting me. Then I vomited up everything in my stomach.

I knew then that I would die here. Eric was going to have me beaten to death.

Eventually dousing me with the water stopped working, and I reached a place where the pain walled me inside my own head. I barely felt Red punching me anymore. It wouldn't be long now.

Someone cut the ropes, and I hit the floor. The sticky puddle under me smelled like copper and urine. I couldn't move, and I hurt so much that I prayed that I would die, right there and then. But Locke picked me up in his arms again.

He gave me his slow, want-you smile again, as if we were back at my place and I wasn't dying all over his Armani jacket. "You did it, Jules," he whispered. "You're truly worthy."

I dropped down into the dark, thinking, *Oh, God, he isn't going to kill me.*

I didn't wake up again until Locke dumped me back in the trunk of the limo. The cold little click of the gun he had taken out of his jacket was a thousand times more effective than the buckets of icy water.

My new lover stood over the open trunk, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking to the side and talking to someone. The roaring in my ears made it hard to hear what he was saying.

"It's obvious that she'll never talk." Eric pointed the gun at my head. "More torture is pointless. She has to pay for betraying humanity."

I hadn't betrayed anyone, but he still shot me.

#

“Miss?” A tired man’s voice woke me up. “Can you hear me, Miss?”

I could hear him, and he wasn’t Eric, but that meant nothing.

“I will take her,” a second, deeper man’s voice said.

Take me where? I wanted to see who was talking, but my eyelids wouldn’t cooperate.

“Not yet.” Fingers touched my wrist and pressed. “Her blood pressure is still too low.”

After the beating I’d taken I expected to feel horrible pain, but my body only ached. I couldn’t breathe through my nose, and I tasted blood in my mouth, but that was all. I kept still anyway. After what I’d been through, playing possum for a few minutes seemed wiser. My eyelids agreed.

“How long before she can be moved?” The deep voice asked.

“I don’t know,” the tired man sounded fretful now. “I think there could be complications.”

“She was dying. We had no choice.”

While they argued about when to move me, I took inventory of myself from the inside. Eric’s thug had pounded my face good – my jaw felt like a rock, and my nose was probably broken – but he hadn’t stopped there. My chest, ribs, and belly hurt just as much. My right shoulder burned. The floaty, who-gives-a-damn frame of mind with which I accepted all that told me that I’d already been given some pretty decent drugs.

But why was I still alive? Last thing I remembered, Eric had shot me in the head. I barely stopped myself from clapping a hand to my face to feel for a bullet hole.

“Look at the bruises on her neck,” Tired Voice said, and something made of metal rattled. “Signs of intercourse, but no trace of semen. She didn’t come from one of their breeding centers.”

Absently I thought of all the condoms Locke and I had gone through tonight. The hell with men. If I survived this, I’d stick with vibrators and Russell Crowe movies.

Heavy footsteps paced the floor to my right. “What about the gunshot wound?”

“It’s closed.” A sheet covered my breasts. “Fortunately the bullet only grazed her shoulder.”

Locke hadn’t shot me in the head? I forced my swollen eyelids apart. Light blinded me for a second, and then I could see.

“There,” Tired Voice said. “She’s coming around.”

I was naked, flat on my back and draped with a light, silky sheet. Two strange men stood over me, one in a blood-stained white lab coat, the other in a dark suit. They didn’t look like Locke’s men, but Eric probably bought people like rich girls shopped for shoes. He was also completely insane. I wasn’t going to be safe until I changed my name, dyed my hair and put several thousand miles between me and Fort Lauderdale. Tonight.

“How do you feel, Miss?”

“Terrible.” I tried to sit up, but they had me strapped down.

“Don’t try to move.” The man in the lab coat had the tired voice. “I’m Dr. Gregory.” He didn’t introduce the other man.

Better play stupid for a few minutes. “Where am I?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Gregory used a light to check my eyes. “You’re safe.”

“Who did this to you?” the other man asked.

It didn’t matter? I was safe? Were they kidding? I shifted, moving my arms and legs. They weren’t broken, but my muscles felt sore, overused. I kept expecting the pain to get worse, but it was receding. After what Red had done to me, how was that possible?

The man in the suit repeated his question.

“I don’t know,” I lied. “How badly am I hurt?”

“You have some contusions and lacerations to your face and upper torso, a minor gunshot wound gazing your shoulder, and there are indications that you were sexually assaulted,” the doctor said as he inspected my ears.

“I wasn’t raped,” I said, trying to think of an explanation that wouldn’t have me Baker-acted. “I . . . I was with someone. It was consensual.”

Gregory clicked off his pen light. “Do you usually let your lover beat the daylights out of you after sex?”

“I’m trying to quit smoking.” I shifted and winced. “Is there something sticking in my back?”

“I don’t think so.” Gentle hands removed some of the straps and lifted me. I heard the doctor took in a sharp breath. “My lord, she bears your mark.”

My lord? What mark?

“All right, *tresora*. You don’t need to lie anymore.” The light clicked off and Gregory leaned close. “Were you abducted? Who is your instructor? What is your bloodline?”

“I don’t know.” Fresh horror settled over me as I realized that these two might be as crazy as Locke. “How did I get here? Did you call the police?”

“You know that the police can’t be involved,” the doctor said. “I found you in the garden here. Who did you have call me? How could you endanger the master like this?”

“She did not ask to be beaten,” the man in the suit chided. To me he said, “Who did this to you, girl?”

“My name is Juliana.” I had to get out of here. “Please take the rest of these straps off. I’ve been tied up enough for one night.”

He did, although very reluctantly, and helped me sit up. I didn’t recognize the bedroom I occupied, but it looked like something straight out of the pages of *Art & Antiques*. A vague memory crept into my head, that of a hand pushing something between my swollen, split lips. Pills of some kind.

I know it hurts, Jules. A kiss on my forehead. I had to be sure you were worthy. He expects only the best. He eased a hand around my throat. Now swallow.

I swallowed and, when he asked me to, showed him my empty mouth.

Very good. He'll give me what I need this time. He draped me with his jacket. *I have to set up the trade. Rest now.* He moved back and slammed the trunk shut, leaving me there in the dark.

I waited until I heard his footsteps disappear, and then I used his jack to pry open the trunk from the inside. I stumbled away in the dark, wrapping myself in the jacket, forcing my legs to move until the drugs kicked in. I stopped to rest against a tree . . .

The memory ended there.

"Juliana?" A bigger, stronger hand closed over mine, and I smelled something like incense. "Tell me what you remember."

Without hesitation, I told him everything. I described Eric, and how we'd met. I recounted every moment of the past night and everything I had seen. I told him how we'd made love, the bizarre things Eric had said and done, and even how it had made me feel, to be so helpless. I told that man things I wouldn't have told a shrink, my best friend or the police. Yet the words came pouring out of me without hesitation.

"Eric has lost his mind," I warned the man in the suit. "If he finds me, I think he'll kill me."

He nodded his head, which I saw was completely bald. "He will not touch you again. This I promise you." He reached out and touched my wounded shoulder. "Who marked you, Juliana?"

"There's no . . . you mean my cameo?" When he nodded, I frowned. "I almost drowned once, when I was a little kid. I got caught in a rip current. This

old man rescued me, but when we got to the beach he had a heart attack and died. He had a beautiful black cameo tattooed on his chest. When I grew up and went to get a tattoo with some friends, I thought I'd get one just like his. To sort of thank him for saving me. I sketched it and gave it to the artist." I saw him exchange a look with the doctor. "What?"

"You have a very good memory," the man in the suit said.

"We can't stay here, my lord." Gregory checked his watch. "I will take her to the hospital and admit her under another name. We can have her moved to another part of the country. The seigneur—"

"No," the man in the suit said. "She is innocent. I know Locke. Desperation has driven him mad."

"Actually I'm okay with leaving." Waiting around here seemed about as stupid as hooking up with Eric, who could walk in any minute and start shooting all of us. I wrapped myself up in the sheet and slid off the bed. After a few queasy moments, I started for the door.

Gregory stepped in front of me. "You can't leave here wearing only a sheet. He could still be out there, looking for you."

"That's why I'm leaving. Please give me some clothes." When he didn't move, I stepped around him. "Where is the telephone?"

One of the windows exploded inward as something came hurtling through it. Gregory shoved me to the floor and covered my body with his. The man in the suit walked toward the window and looked through it, his shoulders twitching.

Just as the doctor pushed himself off me and helped me up, Eric and Red came into the room.

“You can’t have her yet,” Eric said to the man in the suit. His voice sounded nasal, and I saw he was wearing nose plugs. “You have to pay for her, Shamaras.”

This man was Shamaras? Eric had sold me to him?

“Mr. Locke,” Shamaras said, “As I have told you before, I cannot help you.”

“There’s no more time for these games. All I want are three pints of blood. It won’t kill you, but it will save my life.” Eric waved one of his guns at me. “She’s worth it, I promise. I tested her thoroughly. She kept up her façade before the Brethren during the interrogation. She’s beautifully trained. She will protect you with her life. Now I want payment.”

“She is not *tresori*, Mr. Locke,” Shamaras told him. “She knows nothing of the Brethren or us. You cannot sell her to me.”

“She has the mark.” Eric’s face twisted with rage. “I saw it myself. She is worthy of you, Shamaras.”

“It does not matter what she is,” Shamaras said. “My blood will not cure your cancer. It will only poison you.”

“You’re lying. I read the old scrolls, I know the blood price,” Eric shouted. “Her life for mine. Now, give me the blood.”

“Carpet,” Gregory murmured.

I looked down. The edge of a big Persian carpet lay in front of us. Eric was standing on the other end. I glanced at the doctor, who gave me a slight nod. Together we dropped down, grabbed the edge of the carpet and jerked it up, sending Eric staggering back into Red.

Shamaras shoved past the doctor and me as he crossed the room, faster than I'd ever seen anyone move, and knocked the guns out of Eric's hands. I screamed as Red stabbed him in the chest with a knife. Metal snapped, and I saw Red pull back and stare at the broken blade. Shamaras picked him up by the front of his shirt and tossed him across the room. Red bounced off a wall, fell to the floor and stayed there.

"You can't cheat me," Eric said, pulling out another knife, one made of dark metal. He whipped it at Shamaras, slashing his face. "If you won't give me the blood, I'll take it."

Shamaras's mouth opened, and two long, sharp white fangs flashed. The cut across his cheek and nose closed like a Ziploc bag and vanished. "You may try."

I picked up one of the guns and aimed it at him, then at Shamaras. "I've had enough," I told them both. "Doctor, get me a telephone. I'm calling the police."

"It's all right, Juliana," Gregory said, his voice soothing. "I can take of this and no one will get hurt. Just give me the gun."

“Don’t listen to him,” Eric said. “He’ll shoot me. The bullets in my gun are copper. It’s the only thing that kills vampires. All you have to do is shoot Shamaras in the head or the heart.”

Eric had nearly killed me. Gregory worked for Shamaras, the vampire. Who did I trust?

No one.

“Back up, Shamaras,” I said. “Eric, put down the knife.”

Locke’s black eyes shifted toward me, and he smiled. “Don’t worry, baby. I enjoyed fucking you. After I go through the change, you can serve me instead of him.” He turned and lifted the knife, and Shamaras lunged at him.

I pulled the trigger.

#

The next morning I woke up in my bed, and thought for a few seconds that it had all been a terrible nightmare, until I saw the bandages and fading bruises. The morning paper carried the story of the unidentified man who had been found shot to death in a wealthy West Palm Beach neighborhood. Police were asking for help in identifying the body.

After I read the article, I spent the rest of the day throwing up.

I stayed inside the cottage until I didn’t look like the poster girl for battered women. No one came to question me, and the paper abruptly stopped carrying articles about the unidentified shooting victim. The first thing I did when I went out was to go to a gun shop. I intended to buy a handgun for my own protection, but the sight of them made me remembering the shooting. Sick with shame, I

went to the hardware store, bought extra locks for the doors and windows and barricaded myself in the cottage. I thought about going to the police or seeing a shrink. But who would believe my story? And how could I explain the fact that I had shot a man to death?

I went back to work, selling my paintings to the local gift shops, and gradually the worst of the fear faded. The guilt remained, though, and knotted inside me. No matter how hard I tried to justify what I had done, I had killed a man. I couldn't sleep, and I started walking on the beach at night, trying to make sense out of what I remembered.

That was where he found me. He came out of nowhere, appearing at my side and walking with me. As if nothing had happened.

I didn't see much point in running away, or talking to him. So we walked.

After a few minutes, he asked, "Are you well, Juliana?"

What a stupid question. "No."

"It was not your fault," he said. "You should not blame yourself."

I stopped and looked up at him. "What do you want from me?"

"I have taken enough." He studied my face. "Why didn't you kill me?"

I started heading back for the cottage, but then I stopped and turned around to face him. "The old man who pulled me out of the ocean said one thing to me before he died. Your name. He smiled when he said it."

"He was my friend."

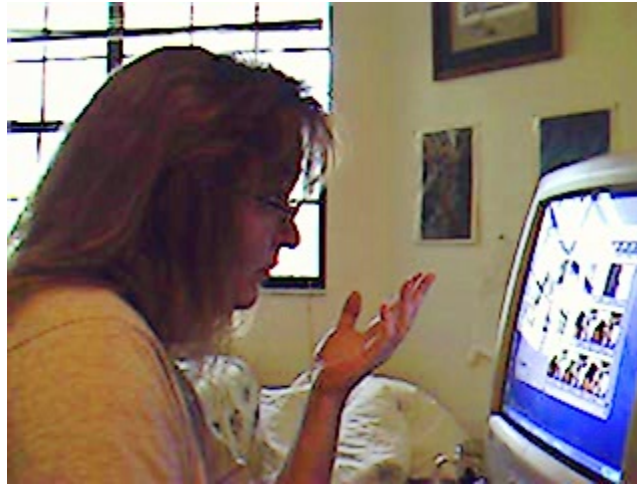
I wrapped my arms around my waist. "He's the reason that I didn't shoot you." Let him figure that out, because I certainly couldn't.

“I see.” He stared at me, his face shadowed. “This is not finished between us, Juliana.”

I had the same feeling. “It is for tonight.” I walked away. Just before I went inside the cottage, I looked back.

Shamaras still stood there, watching me.

About the Author



Since 2000, Lynn Viehl has published thirty-seven novels in five genres. On the internet, she hosts [Paperback Writer](#), a popular publishing industry weblog which she updates daily. Lynn's StarDoc science fiction series has been a genre bestseller for seven consecutive years. Lynn's first three novels of the Darkyn, *If Angels Burn*, *Private Demon* and *Dark Need* all made the USA Today bestseller list, and her fourth Darkyn novel, *Night Lost*, debuted in May 2007 at #21 on the New York Times extended bestseller list.

Readers are always welcome to send feedback on this free e-story by e-mail to LynnViehl@aol.com.

Note to Readers

If you've enjoyed this free e-story, please let other people know about it, as word of mouth is the best advertising a writer *can't* buy. Also, if you're interested in reading other books I've written, here's my public bibliography:

Science Fiction (*writing as S.L. Viehl*)

StarDoc SF series:

StarDoc January 2000 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451457730
Beyond Varallan July 2000 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451457935
Endurance January 2001 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458141
Shockball August 2001 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458559
Eternity Row September 2002 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451458915
Rebel Ice January 2006 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451460626
Plague of Memory January 2007 Roc SF/F ISBN#9780451461230
Drednoc to be published August 2008 Roc SF/F
Crystal Healer to be published in mid-2009 Roc SF/F

Other SF novels:

Blade Dancer August 2003 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451459261
Ring of Fire (Anthology; short story: A Matter of Consultation)
 January 2004 BAEN ISBN# 074347175X
Bio Rescue August 2004 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451459784
Afterburn August 5, 2005 Roc SF/F ISBN# 0451460294

Romance (*writing as Gena Hale*)

Paradise Island April 2001 ONYX ISBN# 0451409825
Dream Mountain August 2001 ONYX ISBN# 0451410033
Sun Valley June 2002 ONYX ISBN# 0451410394

Romance (*writing as Jessica Hall*)

The Deepest Edge February 2003 ONYX ISBN# 0451207963
The Steel Caress May 2003 ONYX ISBN# 0451208528
The Kissing Blades August 2003 ONYX ISBN# 045120946X
Into the Fire March 2004 ONYX ISBN# 0451411307
Heat of the Moment October 2004 ONYX ISBN# 0451411587

Dark Fantasy (*writing as Lynn Viehl*)

If Angels Burn April 2005 Signet Eclipse ISBN#0451214773
Private Demon October 2005 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 0451217055
Dark Need June 2006 Signet Eclipse ISBN# 0451218663
Night Lost May 2007 Signet Eclipse ISBN#9780451221025
Evermore to be published in January 2008 Signet Eclipse
Twilight Fall to be published in Fall 2008 Signet Eclipse

Note to Readers (cont.)

Christian Adult Fiction Series (*writing as Rebecca Kelly*)

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Lynn Viehl