

HUNGER

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CHAPTER 1

It was one of those bars you end up in after a movie or a do it yourself dinner. Inside, they played thin reedy music, the kind of stuff that used to be popular in the sixties - favored by the oldies and the sentimental at heart. Half the time you couldn't hear anything anyway above the blanket of noise and anonymous chatter.

There was a little open square among the tables where you could dance if you wanted to, or just cling to someone. The drinks weren't watered and the bartender would talk to you if he wasn't busy. It was cheaper than a session with my shrink and delivered the same kind of service.

Maybe it was the slow pace or the square atmosphere, but there were always a lot of young people hanging around. Some came to enjoy the novelty, liked the mood and the dated sounds and many of them became regulars.

That's how I met Dan.

We were checking out the scenery after ordering; mine was a scotch and dry, no ice. When the drinks arrived, he appeared to scrutinize the amber fluid, gave me a sidelong glance and shrugged.

"If I wanted a decent drink, I wouldn't be here," he decided and raised his tumbler in a salute.

He wore a gray corduroy blazer and black trousers. Clear blue eyes regarded me with amused cynicism. His hair was light brown that sat on his head in a thick mop. It was streaked with strands of white. He had the kind of rugged exterior that made women fall at his feet and men take orders from.

I tried to suppress my jealousy and returned the salute.

"Check," I said with a grin and glanced briefly at the crowd. "It's only a diversion."

The bar was a very good place to get picked up - by either sex.

His laugh was deep and lit up his eyes. No pretense there and I began to warm to him. The eyes can tell you a lot about a person. He leaned back against the bar and scanned the room.

"The name is Dan," he said and stuck out a meaty a hand.

"Frank," I said and nodded. His hand was cool and dry and we maneuvered for a knuckle crusher. He had the height and reach, but I only smiled as his expression changed from a confident smirk into a surprised grimace of pain. I let him go before he was reduced to squirming.

"Damn!" he grunted massaging his hand. "It's been a while since I came off second best."

"I'll be around whenever you want a reminder." We had a hearty chuckle at that.

Looking around, he suddenly pointed with his head. "Frank! Take a look at that

chassis, man."

I followed his glance and almost missed her.

She wasn't all that tall, but there was something about the way she stood, a power held in check that radiated from her and made me stare. I could swear that for a second every male eye in the room was turned on her. Must have been my imagination.

Her black hair spilled across her shoulders and hung straight above a slim waist. She had a long oval face that framed large ebony eyes, a thin delicate nose and generous red lips. I couldn't see any makeup. She wore a velvety brown-black dress that clung without being tight.

She was attractive, but I had seen better.

"Not bad," I said offhandedly.

Dan shook his head and gave me a cold grin.

"You happen to leave your eyeballs at home or something? Step aside. This is man's work, sonny." Without taking his eyes off the woman, he absently placed the tumbler on the bar top and stood up.

Amused, I watched as he walked up to her and said something. She gave him a quizzical look, nodded and smiled. I took a sip and when I looked up they were gone.

I didn't think much of it then, but I remember the angry scowl hanging on the bartender's face when he gave me a refill. To hell with him. I wasn't Dan's keeper, and a man was free to run his own life.

CHAPTER 2

It was a few weeks later that I bumped into Dan again - and didn't recognize him.

I was hanging against the bar for emotional support when this old guy quietly slipped in beside me. He had peppery gray hair worn kind of long and skin hanging off his jowls. He must have been powerful once. Now, he was just another old-timer trying to recapture something he happened to leave behind in his youth.

"Pops," I said pleasantly and nodded.

His clear blue eyes sparkled as he grinned. "How you doing, Frank?"

The voice was kind of familiar and I frowned as I studied him. Then my jaw fell as I took in the gray corduroy blazer and the dark trousers.

"Dan?" I asked, not believing my eyes.

"I always knew you were a pretty sharp boy, Frank," he wheezed, nodding.

"What the hell happened to you? You look..." I trailed off, but deep down I knew. The knowledge sent my skin crawling.

"Yeah, I know. I look like hell." He raised a finger and ordered a drink. He didn't say anything, just stared into space as he waited for that drink. I let him have the moment.

The bartender shook his head as he slid the tumbler across the top.

"On the house," he growled and stomped away, but not before giving me an accusing glare. I glared back. Screw him! Everyone was entitled to ruin their own life.

"Don't mind him," I told Dan.

"Let's find a quiet place," Dan grunted and we carried our drinks to an empty table tucked into a dark corner. The music followed us, but I didn't mind. Looking at him, I still couldn't believe it. It had been awhile...

"Dan?"

"I know, I know," he said tiredly. "I'm dying."

"Dying? From what?"

He smiled and his eyes lit up. "Would you believe love?"

"Come on, Dan. I'm serious."

"So am I."

When he looked at me, there was no pretense, no regrets. "It was her."

He didn't have to explain. I knew. "How?" But I knew that too. He shook his head and shrugged.

"I don't know. There was something about her that made her different from any other woman I ever knew. And she made herself like that for me. She wanted me."

"What're you talking about?"

There was a wistful smile on his face and some of the years seemed to fall away and I could see his old face. Then he looked at me, an old and angry man.

"When I picked her up, or maybe she did the picking. It doesn't matter. Anyway, we both knew where it would lead to. She had me captivated, or bewitched. I don't know."

"Yeah, you were taken in by her, all right."

He snorted and took a quick gulp. "It's not that. She was pretty, but nothing spectacular. What I mean is, when she looked at me, I knew that I was the only man

in the world for her. And that's a powerful weapon, my boy. I was hers and I knew it and something in the back of my mind told me to get the hell out of there in a hurry. But it was too late. My hormones were doing my thinking for me."

"So you were swept off your feet. A one-night stand."

"Sure, except that it lasted for three weeks. Then one morning, I looked in the mirror and saw a stranger. She was gone and her things with her. And in those three weeks, I lived a lifetime."

He looked at me, eyes glistening and a shiver ran down my spine. Obviously she has gone rogue. That wasn't good.

"And you know something? I didn't care. I didn't! Who knows? Maybe she left that with me as some kind of compensation."

I twirled my tumbler, brooding. "You still haven't told me what happened, Dan."

"I don't know what happened! All I know, as I grew weaker, she grew stronger, more radiant, more compelling. When we made love, I could feel my strength draining from me. Frank, making love to that woman was like losing yourself."

"You did," I said dryly. "But, Dan, you know what you're saying? How do you know that she made you old? You could have caught something..." I trailed off feebly, somehow believing him as suppressed memories returned. It wasn't supposed to happen like this!

"I can see it in your eyes, Frank," he said gently and I looked away, surprised that the pain was still there. "All women take something from you when you love. This one just took a bit more than most."

Yeah, his life.

CHAPTER 3

A week later he was dead.

And I was beginning to have doubts. When you strip away the fog of emotion, what he said began to seem pretty far fetched. Sure, he had looked old and now he was dead, but there were a lot of other plausible explanations for that. Weren't there? But I wasn't really fooling myself.

I sighed in disgust. Something would have to be done.

It was a cool evening and the wind keened softly through the alleys. A thin fog was beginning to settle, shrouding the city lights in a soft blanket. I never meant to drop in for a drink that night, but I'd had a long day and the thought of making my own dinner didn't hold much appeal.

I was just finishing my drink when there was a moment of silence as she slid on the bar stool next to me. She ordered something in a low contralto voice. Our eyes met and I could feel my face drain.

She wore that same brown-black dress and her large ebony eyes seemed to widen as I looked into them. They were completely opaque and I couldn't see any reflection in them. Her hair was tied in a knot above her head, extenuating her long face. She touched the corner of her mouth with the tip of a small pointed tongue and smiled slowly.

"Hi," she husked, revealing even white teeth, not recognizing me for what I was. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"You reminded me of someone," I said after a moment, drinking in her face. Yep, the power was there, all right.

"It must have been a painful reminder. Perhaps I should leave."

"No," I said firmly, afraid that I would lose her. "It was something a long time ago." I couldn't believe I was saying that. She had captivated me with a glance and something at the back of my mind was screaming at me to run. For a moment, I wanted to ask her about Dan. Luckily I had enough sense to keep my mouth shut. For what I was about to do, I had to keep my wits about me or it was likely that I would end up like Dan. And that just wouldn't do.

With a smile that didn't touch her eyes, she placed a small hand on my arm.

"I'll make you forget her."

I believed her. I slipped some notes on the bar and stood up. We made our way between the tables and walked out.

I had a fairly large apartment not far from downtown. It was a ten-minute drive. While the car hummed to itself, she didn't say anything. She just sat there, the silence broken by the whisper of tires and the traffic around us. I felt strangely content and at peace, warm in her presence. I didn't want to spoil it with words.

She touched my arm and I glanced at her outline, her face in shadow. On impulse, I pulled over and for a moment we listened to the throb of the engine.

"I don't even know your name," I said softly, trying to make out her face.

She seemed to hesitate, then turned her head, her hair swaying.

"Kaneel."

The air seemed to tremble as I savored the sound.

"Mine's-"

"Frank, I know."

I was pleased that she knew that.

I pulled into the curb and helped her out. We walked up the steps and into a smoky foyer. The elevator sighed to a stop and the doors slid away. Our footsteps were soundless in the thick pile as we walked slowly down the corridor. I gave her a brief smile as I fitted the key into the lock of my apartment.

I hung my jacket and found her in the lounge, eyeing the rows of books that lined the dark shelves and the little trinkets that cluttered the rest of the furniture. I kept the place neat. That always went down well with the ladies.

"You have a very nice place, Frank." She flashed me a smile and opened one of the two bedroom doors. She didn't turn on the lights.

I walked slowly toward her. She had her back to me, outlined in black against the backdrop of outside lights. Slowly, I placed my hands on her shoulders and felt her stiffen. Then she turned and melted against me.

Her lips were soft and cool against mine. Fire ran down my back as our tongues touched. I looked into her eyes, black pools, cold and unblinking.

The zipper hardly made a sound as I moved it down her back. I pulled at her shoulder straps and the dress caught at the swell of her breasts. She was breathing rapidly, her chest straining against me, fingers working on the buttons of my shirt.

This was madness! My head was whirling and I couldn't do anything to stop it.

Dan!

Then her cool, satin flesh was against mine, her hair spilling across her shoulders, arms around my neck.

"You're mine," she whispered against my ear as I picked her up, desire welling within me even as part of me screamed.

CHAPTER 4

I figured I had about five days.

At least I had none of that crap that goes with old age - rheumatism, stiff joints and constant pain. I was just old, senile maybe. But that wasn't an affliction of only the old.

I'd get over it.

She had stayed for three days, then left suddenly. One morning I woke up and she was gone, leaving only the memories. I knew what Dan must have gone through, suspecting the truth, but still willing to pay the price. For what she had to give, any man would. I did.

I took some time off work and waited. She came back on the fourth day.

Her hair was white, streaked with gray and her face had gone all wrinkly and dry. The eyes were still deep black, but something had gone out of them.

I knew how she felt.

"You bastard!" she croaked as I opened the door.

"Come in, Kaneel," I said easily.

"You knew what I was and you still did it! Why?"

The smile slipped off my face as I looked at her. "You took too much."

"I gave them a lifetime!"

"You took too much! We need what they have to survive, but you turned that need into a sport. I couldn't let that continue."

"And who are you to set yourself up as my judge?"

"How many men have you taken, Kaleen, and discarded? No, you brought this on yourself."

She broke then, dry sobs racking her body as she buried her face in her hands. The power was still in her and it touched me. For a moment, I felt sorry for her. Those tears would have worked on anyone else, but I wasn't just anyone.

Finally, she looked at me, her face wet.

"I really cared for you, Frank. You weren't like the others. I couldn't go through with it."

"Is that why you left me after only three days?"

She nodded, her eyes swimming.

I shook my head, smiling. "I wish I could believe that, Kaneel. But I felt your unease, your doubts. You were beginning to suspect what I was. You left to save yourself."

"I don't want to die!"

I knew she meant that, but it was too late.

I felt better the next day. My hair was getting some of its color back and my skin tone was firmer. It would take some time before I was my old self again. But that was all right. I could wait.

They found her body behind some bar two days later, a wistful smile on her face.