

Dark Double
By Sally Bosco

Chapter 1

New Orleans:

Doppelganger - A
supernatural evil twin.

Seeing one's doppelganger
is thought to portend
imminent death. --

Webster's Dictionary

There was life before I met Jack, then I crossed over
into another dimension, and there was life after I met
Jack.

It's commonly
known that psychology
grad students are the most
fucked up people on the
planet, and I'm no
exception. I've always
been strange, an oddball,
from my dysfunctional
home life to the seriously
screwed up chicks I love to
date who love to torture
me. Common enough,

My hole-in-the wall costume shop, The
Pineapple Palace, in the French Quarter of New
Orleans was doing fairly well. Located just off
Bourbon Street on Ursuline, it was a small storefront
with a complete collection of giant fruit outfits in the
front window. Bananas, pears, grapes, kumquats and
my favorite, a giant pineapple, the first costume I had
ever made in the shop, sat in full view for the casual
passer-by. I was particularly fond of its headpiece, a
voluminous, soft sculpture topiary.

I flew into the shop late that day and dumped
my Christmas packages onto the floor. As usual there

right? At nineteen I've been through about thirty-six jobs, twelve major relationships and two separate broken home situations. To prove myself to myself -- who else do I give a flying rat's ass about anyway -- I decided to get serious about school. That's why I threw myself into my master's thesis about the Lacan Mirror Theory with an abandon and dedication commonly unknown in our times. Trouble is, I got into it too much, w-a-y too much.

My friends, professors and anyone else who might want to fuck me over and deprive me of a passing grade, let this

was the inviting aroma of fresh roasted coffee mingled with patchouli incense.

"Rosalind, you look beat," Fred, my assistant, said as he misted a hanging lipstick plant.

Chloe, my best friend and part time costumer, rushed to my side to help me with my bundles. "Be careful, Roz, you're going to hurt yourself." She tossed her blonde ponytail as she leaned over to relieve me of a particularly heavy book bag.

"If you want to know the truth, I hate all this Christmas crap. I have so much work to do." I began stacking my purchases behind the counter. Bolts of multi-colored fabric, rolls of sequins, pots of feathers and beads adorned the back wall. "And I'm having problems with Parker. I think I've grown uncomfortably numb." I drank my coffee and pondered my life.

"You're just in a rut, Roz. I know. I've been there myself." Chloe resumed painting an intricate design on a Mardis Gras mask she had hand-shaped out of cloth. "We need a girl's night out."

"Yeah, really."

"I think it's lonelier being with someone who's not really there for you than it is being alone," Chloe

serve as an introduction to my unusual thesis. What you are about to read below describes the moment I first knew I had stepped outside of the realm of normal eccentricities and -- my brain told me to say -- foibles and plunged myself directly into the nether worlds.

Having spent a wasted and off-handed night at the all too decadent bla-bla club (names changed to protect the innocent,) I proceeded to weave drunkenly back toward my ratty apartment on Web Street. Trouble was, I wasn't drunk. Sure, I'd had my share of buzz-

said.

"I couldn't agree more." As I unwrapped my packages, I tore my hand on the edge of an open envelope. "Damn," I said, sucking my bleeding flesh. It felt as though a switchblade had cut me, not a piece of paper. I bled all over the tissue I was going to use and had to press a napkin against the cut to seal it up.

I heard the door swoosh open and looked up to see a man of about six foot two with long black hair and the face of Michelangelo's David peering around the corner. Fred grew as quite as a nun during a novena.

"Can I help you?" Fred asked with reverence.

The man blinked his long, dark lashes and smoothed his hands along his painted-on leather pants. But his gaze fell to me, not to Fred and not to Chloe. He smiled at me, showing even white teeth. His eyes crinkled pleasantly at the edges, yet they were sharp and piercing -- eyes that didn't miss a thing. "I want to have a costume made, and I hear you're the best in the business."

"Thank you. I've been told I'm pretty good." I shrugged. "I try anyway."

He glanced down at the floor then back up at

juice, but at 4 a.m. most of the call brand, rat gut drinks I had pounded down had worn off, and I lamented the fact that I actually was at this moment stone cold sober. I would much rather have seen the world through the rose colored glasses of Bombay gin, but alas, my funds had run out. I was thinking about Rita, a cute little blonde, jazz-blues babe I had seen hanging about the bla-bla club. She was a Tulanie, too, in a white cotton sweater, no bra, displaying the most incredible nipples I had ever seen. Undergrad. And did I mention that she was a student in one of the Psych 101 classes I teach?

me, almost shy. I sized him up, trying not to be too obvious. I gauged him to be about thirty-five and solid.

"I want you to help me with a special project."

His focus was on me. Only on me.

I smiled. "Sure, I love a challenge."

Taut, lean biceps and torso muscles showed under a black tee shirt with torn-off sleeves. He brushed his hair back from his face.

Fred busied himself, and Chloe, true friend that she was, kept a low profile at the back of the room, but I could see her sneaking a peak over her shoulder now and then.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"I'm Jack LeFevre." He said this with a proud, almost haughty air, his posture perfect, his chin slightly raised.

"Pleased to meet you." When I extended my hand to him, I half expected him to kiss it, but that would have been too predictable. Instead he placed his other hand over mine and caressed it ever so slightly before releasing it.

His irises dilated like the aperture of a camera as he looked at me. He tilted his head a little. I tilted

Anyway, she dissed me, and I was lamenting that fact, too, when I realized I was in the middle of fucking Bourbon Street and there wasn't a soul around. There should have been heaving masses, a drunken orgy of bodies pouring out of the blues clubs, tittie bars and bisexual joints that lined the strip. Did I mention it was a Friday night? At 4 a.m.?

Strange to say the least, right? I continued walking. What else could I do? I heard some footsteps following me. No big deal, I kept going. Even when they sped up, I didn't particularly think anything of it. But then a

mine. My heart scudded in my chest. "And you are Rosalind."

"Yes." Our eyes met and held for a few beats.

"I'm a dark magician." He leaned imperceptibly closer to me, a fraction of an inch, but noticeable as a solar eclipse. As he approached I caught a whiff of something like the cap pistols I used to play with as a child. Was it gunpowder?

"Oh, really. And what does a dark magician do?"

"I use the dark arts to accomplish feats of magic." He looked as though he was trying to be serious, but face broke into a grin. "It's all hocus-pocus. You should come and see my show. It's in a cabaret off Bourbon Street, named, 'LeFevre.' "

I watched his lips move. They were a little full for a man's lips. Pale and smooth. Succulent. "I'd love to. When are your shows?"

"Every night at eight and ten thirty." Jack had a slight Brooklyn accent that was not unattractive. It gave his voice a masculine sound.

"And what would you like from me?" I asked.

He said nothing, just looked at me as though transfixed.

cold deathly eerie-ness set in, and the surreal moment of being entirely alone on Bourbon street with a pair of increasingly rapid footsteps following me hit me in the face like the snap of a wet locker room towel.

I couldn't control myself then. I started to make a mad dash for my flat. The footsteps kept right up, and I started to think . . . you can't outrun a demon. You can't sprint away from a nightmare. What do all good, psy bullshit Jungian students know by rote? When being chased by a nightmare monster, you're supposed to turn and face it. So, my friends and

I repeated myself. "What's this costume you'd like me to make for you?"

"There's this very special monster I want to create for my show. It must be huge and come apart in sections. I'm going to assemble it on stage then bring it to life."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"Magic." After he said that, his lips remained parted in a most inviting way.

I turned and saw Fred practically salivating on top of the Medusa head as he surreptitiously peeked at Jack.

"But that's not all. I go offstage, the monster takes off his head . . . and it's me." He splayed his fingers in a "ta da," motion.

The machinery in my skull cranked and turned. I pictured a huge, padded Pillsbury Dough Boy, but I knew that wasn't right. The Michelin Tire guy wasn't right either.

"I have a sketch." From a slim portfolio he pulled out a piece of vellum with a pencil drawing of a gargoyle-like creature with huge shoulders, a low-hanging flat head, a great claw extending out of one arm and something that looked like a hand with foot-

colleagues and anyone who would like to fuck me over by rejecting my thesis as the mad, farcical -- my brain told me to say -- heresy of an insane guy, take note.

I stopped live in my tracks and turned to face the thing. And, in your nightmares, when you turn to face the Angel of Death, his face covered by a hood, he's supposed to pull the hood down, and it turns out to be your parents, or your ex-wife or the mean dyke teacher who messed you up in the first grade.

What I did see was utterly beyond belief.

It was myself, me, none other than Bradon

long fingers jutting out from it.

I could picture it emerging from the dawn of time on a misty planet. My mind flashed to a scene in which similar creatures ruled the earth. More terrible than the dinosaurs, they had resorted to cannibalism as the planet tried to shake them off in favor of another biological experiment. "Did you draw this?"

"Yes."

"It's very good."

Fred rushed over to look. "Wow. A costumer's dream."

"Or hopefully, nightmare. They're much more fun than dreams." Jack winked at me.

Thoughts about the mechanics of the costume overtook my brain. I loved a challenge.

"You seem puzzled." He looked at me sideways.

"No, just pondering." The intensity of his gaze rattled me to the point that I dropped his portfolio on the floor.

He hurried to pick it up and hand it to me.

"Can I explain more for you?"

"I'm not sure yet." I was sure about one thing, though -- how much I wanted him, physically,

Knight, the tall, skinny kid with the unruly blonde hair with black rimmed glasses, chain-smoking Red Dogs. Except, here's the crazy part. Keep in mind, it was hotter than a sunofabitch. The sweat tricked down my nose in disgusting rivulets. And he -- no I -- was dressed in a full-length, black wood coat, fur lined hood, gloves and massive boots, and he shivered as he lit up a death stick and sucked it in as though it was the last breath of oxygen he would ever get, just the way I always do, I'm told.

No big deal, right? Some Tulanie playing a trick on me. 'Cept the thing stared into my eyes

spiritually, any way he cared to have me.

"Come to my 10:30 show tonight. I want you to see it like a regular audience member. We'll be able to talk afterwards. Bring a friend if you'd care to." He handed me two tickets and left.

Chloe rushed up to me. "Oh, my God, what a babe? Are you going to go? You'd better."

"I don't know. I really need to start this bookkeeping." I looked over at the pile of paperwork on my desk.

"Come on. You're going if I have to drag you there," Chloe said. "You need someone to take your mind off Parker."

"Do you want to come with me?"

"Nah." Chloe flipped her wrist at me. "You should go alone. But call me tonight when you get home and give me the gory details. Doesn't matter how late. I'll be up finishing a freelance project."

"I'll take my gory details over coffee in the morning, thank you," Fred said. "I'm hitting the sack early tonight. And hopefully not alone," he added as he raised his eyebrows. Then he gave me a serious look. "It's not like you to fall for someone like this. What's up with you?"

as though it bore into my soul. Then it flipped it's cig into the gutter and put both its hands onto my shoulders. I jerked away. Didn't want the thing touching me, but it's iron grip clutched my shoulders 'till I thought they'd break.

"Hey leg-go." I twisted and turned, refusing to look into its face.

But then I couldn't not look away any more. It had done something to me. The fear of the gaze. And oh-my-god, all of the Lacan Mirror Theory bullshit came flooding into my brain. I didn't want it there. And other things. Thoughts that would suck the happiness out of you

"I can't explain it."

"It's that old black magic." Fred smiled at me then continued his work on the Medusa.

"I'm perplexed," I said to Chloe. "Guys always fall for you." It was true. She looked like a member of the Sweedish girl's volleyball team -- blonde with long legs, shapely, pretty. Whenever I walked into a bar with her I may as well have been with Marilyn Monroe for all the attention I attracted.

"You're crazy, Roz. You're a Pre-Raphaelite goddess with your long red hair and beautiful face. You sell yourself short. Look at yourself. Who wouldn't die for those boobs?"

"Thanks, Chloe." I hugged her again. "Now let's get to work. We have a ton of stuff to do."

That afternoon I made a good dent in my paperwork and finished up the rest of my errands, so distracted I nearly stepped in front of a bus which was traveling at light speed or so it seemed. That rattled me. I had to be more careful. As I made my way around town, fighting off all of the other last-minute Christmas shoppers in the ridiculous December heat of New Orleans, I was happy to do the tasks I resented.

The Barnes and Noble seemed magical. I

like a black hole in space. Puppies with their heads blown off. Corpses with black sockets where their eyes should be. And for me, a life of eternal greed, entitlement and delusion.

Had I ever looked as evil as this monster who used my face? As the eyes tunneled into me, invading me, it opened its mouth and spoke. "Death will come to you in frozen time." It released its kill-grip and walked past me.

I was left, a blubbering heap, in the gutter of Bourbon Street at 4:10 a.m. Completely alone as I would be for the rest of my life.

Mind you, this

drank a cup of cappuccino, my nerves all tingly and edgy. If only I could keep this feeling. But how daft and dumb, falling for a person I didn't even know. How impossible. Still, I clung to it. Jack LeFevre would be important in my life in some way. I just knew it.

I entered the theatre, "LeFevre," to the sound of industrial music.

A man with Rastafarian braids caught by a loose hat that made his head look like an octopus took my ticket. "Please use the restroom now if you would like to. Once the show begins, you will not be allowed to leave the theatre."

It was so dark, I practically stumbled across the tables and chairs. All I could make out were strips of glow-in-the-dark decals on the floor. Once my eyes adjusted, I saw that the cabaret was set up with a wide circular stage anchored to the wall at one end by an amorphously shaped video screen.

The usher sat me directly at the side of the stage. I ordered an outrageously-priced Tanqueray and tonic. The waitress, an indifferent-looking young girl with limp black hair gave me back my money.

confronting of myself by myself, if that's what it was, didn't all happen in a vacuum. I did my fair share to bring it on. Not that I realized it at the time.

Now I must backtrack to the moment this odyssey all began.

If I could pick one point in time when my life began sliding into an abyss of torment, it was that afternoon at the Tulaine library. I was trying to get enthused about the Lacan Mirror Theory, I really was, but each book, each dry-as-my-Aunt-Mabel's cunt article lead me down a path of complete, tormented, blasé -- my brain told me to say --

"I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to pay," she said.

When I tried to give her a tip she refused.

At ten-twenty, I wondered if only a few people would be in the audience. At ten-thirty, the place was packed, full of smoke and loud music. I was on my third T & T, vowing it would be my last. The music built to an industrial crescendo and the lights went completely out. I couldn't see the cocktail in front of my face.

I heard a solid thud directly in front of me and felt the table gyrate. When the lights came back on, still dim, I looked straight ahead to see heavy black boots pierced by chains and studs planted on my table. Feeling like David looking up at Goliath, I followed the tight leather pants to see a packed Shakespearean cod-piece, flat abs, taut biceps and the face of a dark angel, tricked out in massive black cape and dangerous-looking spiky metal wrist bands.

Jack had jumped directly onto my table in complete darkness.

He had a cast of characters: a girl gymnast straight out of Cirque du Soleil dressed up like an alien fish, a grim reaper guy and several black leotarded male androids, one with a Mohawk and one

nonexistence. I mean really. Who cares about this drivel? A bunch of geezer psychologists who's big event of the day is taking a crap?

I thought about forgetting it. I couldn't take one more book telling me:

What we have there is the first captation by the image in which the first stage of the dialectic of identifications can be discerned...What I have called the mirror stage is interesting in that it manifests the affective dynamism by which the subject originally identifies himself with the visual Gestalt of his own body: in relation to the still very

with a completely shaved pate. Videos of himself and his cast played in the background during the show.

In carefully choreographed pieces, they disappeared and turned up in places they couldn't possibly be, they levitated and pulled impossible objects out of the air. Jack had some audience members belt him into a straight jacket. He hung upside down Harry Houdini style while being lowered onto a bed of spikes. Watching his sinuous body twist and turn trying to get out of the straight jacket was definitely turning me on.

Jack escaped from his harness, pulled himself up into the rafters then jumped to the side of the dangerous spikes. He had a raw, sensual demeanor that riveted the audience to him as though he were Svengali. Maybe he was. The more I looked at him, the more I realized the power of his charisma.

His eyes caught mine and he motioned for me to come up onto the stage. The music changed from pulsating, synthesizer alternative style into dreamy New Age. After putting out his hand to help me climb the steps, he pressed his lips to my ear and whispered, "I want you to fall straight back into my arms. I'll lower you onto the floor, then I want you to relax."

profound lack of coordination of his own motility, it represents an ideal unity, a salutary imago; it is invested with all the original distress resulting from the child's intra-organic and relational discordance during the first six months, when he bears the signs, neurological and humoral, of a physiological natal prematuration.

or

In the quest for the phallus the subject moves from being it to having it. It is here that is inscribed the last Spaltung [splitting] by which the subject articulates himself to the Logos...
The fact that the phallus is

He looked at me. "Understand?" He exuded an intoxicating, clean sweat smell.

I smiled and pushed my long hair back from my face. "Sure."

He moved me into place with hands as gentle as doves then said, "Now."

Trusting him, I fell backward into his arms. As promised, he caught me and lowered me to the floor. He bent down and whispered, "Now relax."

I levitated with no particular points of pressure under me. How could it possibly be? Floating along with the music, I felt as though he was caressing me with his mind. Glancing up, I saw a surrealistically close ceiling. How high in the air was I? Eighteen feet? Perhaps twenty-five. What if I fell? After fighting down a moment of panic, I reminded myself that I was in the hands of a clever illusionist. They do not let people crash to the floor and die. But there was always a first time, wasn't there? I closed my eyes and thought about those leather pants and what was in them. The audience applauded and whistled.

As I floated downward, I felt solid floor rising up to meet me. Opening my eyes, I saw Jack standing above me, straddling me. He reached down and took

a signifier means that it is in the place of the Other that the subject has access to it. But since this signifier is only veiled, as ratio of the Other's desire, it is this desire of the Other as such that the subject must recognise, that is to say, the other in so far as he is himself a subject divided by the signifying Spaltung

my hand, lifted me, kissed me on the cheek and said, "Thank you. You were terrific."

Stumbling back to my chair, I realized just how badly I was hooked on him.

After curtain call, a standing ovation, and schmoozing with the audience, Jack sat down at my table. Beads of sweat stood out on his face.

"Wow is all I can say. Wow." I smiled at him and raked one hand through my hair, trying to look sultry, trying not to look like the nerdy girl at the high school dance who nearly fainted when the school hunk momentarily sat next to her.

He leaned in toward me. I crossed my legs with the toe of my pump barely touching his calf. God, was I making an idiot of myself?

"Do you have a little better idea of what I want for my monster? It should fill up the whole stage."

"Yes. I'm getting a visual image. Thinking about materials. You'll have to come in again so I can measure you."

"You can measure me right here." He smiled at me, revealing a dimple on the right side of his face. His dark eyes with the long lashes held mine. I didn't look away.

"No, come in to the shop."

"I can do that."

"You really enjoy your work, don't you? It's your whole life, isn't it?"

"I've always loved magic. My dad was an engineer. I wanted to be a magician. My father and I were like this." He made his hands into fists and ground them together. "He wanted me to be an engineer, just like him. Said I'd starve to death as a magician."

"Guess you proved him wrong, huh? You have your own place off Bourbon Street."

"Yeah." He moved the tip of his index finger lightly over the back of my hand, sending a warm shiver right through me. Strange how his smallest touch could incapacitate me. I wet my lips, trying to control my breathing.

"My father died the same night I had a horrible fight with him. I was a senior in high school and he wanted me to start applying to colleges, but I had no use for that; I knew that I wanted to live a life of magic, excitement. Selfish beast that I was, I ran out the door and spent the night with my friends. The next morning when I returned, my mom told me he had had

a heart attack at midnight and died. The worst part is that I never loved him, and that made me feel horrible, but I couldn't help it." He looked a little sheepish. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"All teenage kids are difficult. I was difficult. He wouldn't want you to feel guilty."

"Really? You think?"

"Yeah. He wouldn't." I shook my head and glanced down then back up at him.

"Anyway, though, what can you do? Just live in the moment, I suppose." He seemed so sincere. Or was he merely a good actor?

"I feel as though I know you better than I do." I couldn't believe I had said that. It was a rare bit of honesty for me. Perhaps too much.

"I know. So do I." We stared at each other for a long ten seconds, then he leaned across the table and kissed me. His mouth was warm and open. He put his right hand on the shoulder of my blouse and pulled on it with an urgent tension, and somehow that strong movement made me want him all the more.

As I drew away and looked at him, I saw that his usually sharp eyes had taken on a soft and lonely look. Those misty brown orbs made me remember

Parker's sharp blue ones. I glanced at my watch.

Parker would be waiting for me. "I have to go."

"No, you don't." He put his index finger on my wrist and moved it back and forth.

"Yes, I do." I rose.

"All right. I'll walk you out. Did you drive?"

I nodded.

We exited through the back stage door and down an alley that smelled of rich Cajun spices from the restaurant next door. As we strolled across the cobblestone pavement to my car, which was parallel parked along the curb in front of a closed hair salon, he took my hand. We stood next to the driver's side. I had my key ready.

"I didn't think you'd come to see me alone."

"Really?" Feeling a powerful attraction, along with the four Tanqueray and tonics, I stepped closer to him.

"Nope. I thought you'd bring some boyfriend or something." He stood leaned in to me, his eyes penetrating me.

I said nothing, but held his gaze. Those few moments of looking into his eyes were in a way more intimate than having sex, like a stripping away of

pretense.

He drew closer to me until his face practically touched mine. We held that way for a long time. I sensed that he was waiting for me to make some definitive move, but I was enjoying the moment too much to rush anything. Jack put his hand to my shoulder, his lips to mine, not even kissing me. I had never felt such a delicious sensation in my whole life. I put my arms around him and pressed the full length of my body against his.

The concept that people existed outside of the two of us ceased to exist. It was a rare glimpse of infinity. Living completely in the moment. He ran his tongue around my lips, nibbled softly on my ear. I sucked on his neck, pressed the flat of my hands against his buttocks. "I have to go," I said.

"In a minute. Are you sure we can't go somewhere?" he asked.

"I can't. Really." I thought of Parker, waiting by the door with his arms folded, disapproving.

We kissed some more. He crushed himself against me, causing me to moan, just softly.

"Can I see you again? I have to."

"Sure." I couldn't pull my body from his.

He held me away for a second and looked into my eyes. "I can't tear myself away. Neither can you."

"No, I can't." I kissed his fingers then took each one into my mouth and sucked on them. "There's something I have to tell you, though," I said. "A slight complication."

"You're married." He touched his forehead to mine.

"No. I have a boyfriend. Boyfriends come and go, though."

"You live together?"

"Yeah."

He looked away as though thinking then glanced back at me. "Not a problem."

"Really, I do have to go." I opened the door to my car.

"All right." He kissed me again.

As I got into the car, he jumped into the passenger side and no doubt set out to ravish me. Not that I minded, but I did need to go home. The bucket seats should have made it awkward for him, but the graceful Jack slid right into place. He put his hand up under my skirt, hitting a pantyhose barricade. With one swift motion, he twisted his finger around the

crotch and ripped it out.

That one act made me crazed. No other man on earth could have gotten away with it, though.

"I'll buy you another pair," he whispered.

He had me pretty worked up when I spotted the clock on the dashboard.

"Jack, I really have to go."

He kissed me some more then withdrew.

"Whew!" he said. "I'm sorry, I just got carried away. I hope this doesn't interfere with your making my monster."

I laughed and kissed him. "Not at all."

"I'll call you. About the monster."

The drive home was a journey through another world. Everything glowed with a soft halo. The only thing that spoiled it was the thought of going home to Parker. I flipped open my cell phone and called Chloe as promised.

She answered, breathless.

"What are doing?" I asked. "Sounds like you're having a pretty hot time of your own."

"No, I'm out jogging."

"Oh, that's right. You're the vampire jogger."

Why do you run at midnight? Remind me again."

"I like to do my artwork until midnight then run to clear my head. It's so peaceful this time of night."

"I really wish you wouldn't do that."

"Thanks, Mom," she said sarcastically. "But don't worry. I have a pepper spray that would take down Godzilla."

"Okay, okay. I'll quit."

"Now how was your date?" It sounded as though Chloe had gotten her breathing under control.

"Three words. Oh. My. God." I punctuated each word in order to give the full impact.

"That good, huh? You don't waste any time these days. You must be coming out of your shell."

"Ah, we didn't really do anything, just made out."

"Well don't go any further, then. I swear. When you don't go to bed with them, they're your slaves. Once you do, they're out the door. Never fails."

"Thanks, Miss Rules. I'll remember that."

"Roz . . ." Chloe's breathing sped up again.

"Yeah?"

She hesitated. "I have a funny feeling about Jack. I know he's a babe and everything, but . . . be careful with him, okay?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I think you're out of your league with him. You've been used to preppies and yuppies for God's sake."

"I will. I promise. Thanks for caring."

I hung up and faced my fate.

When I finally arrived at home it was 1 a.m., not very late at all. I felt as though I had been with Jack for at least three hours -- that or an eternity.

Parker woke momentarily to go to the bathroom, but just said "Hi" and went back to sleep. I must have picked up Jack's gunpowder scent, but if he noticed, he didn't say.

I went to the bathroom and leaned over the sink to brush my teeth, when something in the mirror caught my eye, a wisp of shadow that disappeared as soon as I looked directly at it. There it was again when I glanced away. After I rubbed my eyes the silhouette disappeared. I hoped I wasn't getting a detached retina.

I went out to the kitchen for a drink of water, and sat up for a long time, looking out the front window at the moonlight, thinking. Collette, my black and white angora cat, jumped up onto my lap and snuggled. Her loud purr put me into a dreamy, contented state. That was until the shrill ring of the phone pierced the night.

I sprang up, dumping Collette onto the floor. "Sorry, kitty," I said.

Glancing at the caller ID, I recognized Fred's number and picked up the receiver.

"Rosalind. I've got some bad news. Some really bad news. I shouldn't tell you over the phone."

"Come on over then. Hurry."

Fred perched on the edge of my couch looking uncomfortable, as though it was scalding his thighs. His silence was punctuated by Parker's intermittent snoring from the bedroom.

"What is it? I can't stand it."

"Sit down."

I sat.

"It's Chloe. She's been murdered."

Bullshit.

"So what did you think?"

So I slammed the books down, sliced apart my library card and sat on the green to pursue some serious chain-smoking. What else mattered except turning my lungs into inert lumps of diseased charcoal?

Oh, there was one thing that mattered. Kelly. My girlfriend. Did I mention that she was seventeen and had the face of an angel, the body of a Vicky Secrets model and the sass of Yale-bred trial attorney? Did I mention that she was three months pregnant? Yeah, it was mine. Definitely mine. No question about that. To complicate matters, she

"Wow is all I can say. Wow." I smiled at him and raked one hand through my hair, trying to look sultry, trying not to look like the nerdy girl at the high school dance who nearly fainted when the school hunk momentarily sat next to her.

He leaned in toward me. I crossed my legs with the toe of my pump barely touching his calf. God, was I making an idiot of myself?

"Do you have a little better idea of what I want for my monster? It should fill up the whole stage."

"Yes. I'm getting a visual image. Thinking about materials. You'll have to come in again so I can measure you."

"You can measure me right here." He smiled at me, revealing a dimple on the right side of his face. His dark eyes with the long lashes held mine. I didn't look away.

"No, come in to the shop."

"I can do that."

"You really enjoy your work, don't you? It's your whole life, isn't it?"

"I've always loved magic. My dad was an engineer. I wanted to be a magician. My father and I were like this." He made his hands into fists and

lived with her parents. They didn't know yet. I did know that they hated my filthy rotten guts.

I ambled on down to her parents' house on Elm street and called her romance-novel-style by winging a pebble at her second story bedroom window. I was too indigent to afford a cell phone. Christ, with my measly stipend -- which I had to earn slave-labor style my teaching freshman psych -- just about paid for my food, drunken binges, worthless over-priced textbooks, and worthless over-priced student housing.

No, I shouldn't talk

ground them together. "He wanted me to be an engineer, just like him. Said I'd starve to death as a magician."

"Guess you proved him wrong, huh? You have your own place off Bourbon Street."

"Yeah." He moved the tip of his index finger lightly over the back of my hand, sending a warm shiver right through me. Strange how his smallest touch could incapacitate me. I wet my lips, trying to control my breathing.

"My father died the same night I had a horrible fight with him. I was a senior in high school and he wanted me to start applying to colleges, but I had no use for that; I knew that I wanted to live a life of magic, excitement. Selfish beast that I was, I ran out the door and spent the night with my friends. The next morning when I returned, my mom told me he had had a heart attack at midnight and died. The worst part is that I never loved him, and that made me feel horrible, but I couldn't help it." He looked a little sheepish. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"All teenage kids are difficult. I was difficult. He wouldn't want you to feel guilty."

"Really? You think?"

bad about the classes. I did meet lovely Rita Meter Maid there. I'd have her yet, too. This bitch will later turn me in for sexual harassment resulting in my getting canned from my job. The only way I'll have the money to go and pursue my future quest is that said questee's attorney will pay me. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Back to Kelly. She stuck her head out the window looking just like Juliet in the balcony scene.

"Kelly," I yelled, throwing her a big kiss. "Are you going to let me in? Are Boris and Natasha home?"

"No, you're in luck. My parents are not home,

"Yeah. He wouldn't." I shook my head and glanced down then back up at him.

"Anyway, though, what can you do? Just live in the moment, I suppose." He seemed so sincere. Or was he merely a good actor?

"I feel as though I know you better than I do." I couldn't believe I had said that. It was a rare bit of honesty for me. Perhaps too much.

"I know. So do I." We stared at each other for a long ten seconds, then he leaned across the table and kissed me. His mouth was warm and open. He put his right hand on the shoulder of my blouse and pulled on it with an urgent tension, and somehow that strong movement made me want him all the more.

As I drew away and looked at him, I saw that his usually sharp eyes had taken on a soft and lonely look. Those misty brown orbs made me remember Parker's sharp blue ones. I glanced at my watch. Parker would be waiting for me. "I have to go."

"No, you don't." He put his index finger on my wrist and moved it back and forth.

"Yes, I do." I rose.

"All right. I'll walk you out. Did you drive?" I nodded.

and come on up. The door's unlocked." How can I convey the fact that despite my careless ways, my constant lusting over various coeds in my classes, Kelley was the thing closest to my heart? It's just me, part of my anti-disfunctional-intariasm. (I made up that word.) And later, someone I've yet to meet will get to her and slit her throat, but I digress again.

I ran up to her room, picked her up and swung her around.

"Watch it. The baby." She held her had protectively over her stomach.

"Oh, I know. I'm being careful." I held her

We exited through the back stage door and down an alley that smelled of rich Cajun spices from the restaurant next door. As we strolled across the cobblestone pavement to my car, which was parallel parked along the curb in front of a closed hair salon, he took my hand. We stood next to the driver's side. I had my key ready.

"I didn't think you'd come to see me alone."

"Really?" Feeling a powerful attraction, along with the four Tanqueray and tonics, I stepped closer to him.

"Nope. I thought you'd bring some boyfriend or something." He stood leaned in to me, his eyes penetrating me.

I said nothing, but held his gaze. Those few moments of looking into his eyes were in a way more intimate than having sex, like a stripping away of pretense.

He drew closer to me until his face practically touched mine. We held that way for a long time. I sensed that he was waiting for me to make some definitive move, but I was enjoying the moment too much to rush anything. Jack put his hand to my shoulder, his lips to mine, not even kissing me. I had

out at arm's length and looked at her. "Gosh, what a babe you are. For three months, you're really not showing at all, you know it?"

"I'm watching my diet."

"Shouldn't you be showing a little bit?"

"What are you implying? You think I'm lying to you? Just because I'm not a big, fat cow, like most pregnant women, you think I'm faking?" She sank down to her bed, put her head in her hands and bawled. "You don't love me."

I sat down beside her and put my arm around her. "Of course I do. You mean more to me than

never felt such a delicious sensation in my whole life. I put my arms around him and pressed the full length of my body against his.

The concept that people existed outside of the two of us ceased to exist. It was a rare glimpse of infinity. Living completely in the moment. He ran his tongue around my lips, nibbled softly on my ear. I sucked on his neck, pressed the flat of my hands against his buttocks. "I have to go," I said.

"In a minute. Are you sure we can't go somewhere?" he asked.

"I can't. Really." I thought of Parker, waiting by the door with his arms folded, disapproving.

We kissed some more. He crushed himself against me, causing me to moan, just softly.

"Can I see you again? I have to."

"Sure." I couldn't pull my body from his.

He held me away for a second and looked into my eyes. "I can't tear myself away. Neither can you."

"No, I can't." I kissed his fingers then took each one into my mouth and sucked on them. "There's something I have to tell you, though," I said. "A slight complication."

"You're married." He touched his forehead to

anything. That's why I'm working night and day to get this thesis done. So I can finish my master's and get a real job, preferably not teaching."

"Oh, Bradon. I love you." She kissed me - long, slow, wet. I wanted her in spite of her impreggo state.

"I love you, too." It was only slightly a lie. We spent the afternoon in unassuming bliss. I felt only slightly guilty afterward.

mine.

"No. I have a boyfriend. Boyfriends come and go, though."

"You live together?"

"Yeah."

He looked away as though thinking then glanced back at me. "Not a problem."

"Really, I do have to go." I opened the door to my car.

"All right." He kissed me again.

As I got into the car, he jumped into the passenger side and no doubt set out to ravish me. Not that I minded, but I did need to go home. The bucket seats should have made it awkward for him, but the graceful Jack slid right into place. He put his hand up under my skirt, hitting a pantyhose barricade. With one swift motion, he twisted his finger around the crotch and ripped it out.

That one act made me crazed. No other man on earth could have gotten away with it, though.

"I'll buy you another pair," he whispered.

He had me pretty worked up when I spotted the clock on the dashboard.

"Jack, I really have to go."

He kissed me some more then withdrew.

"Whew!" he said. "I'm sorry, I just got carried away. I hope this doesn't interfere with your making my monster."

I laughed and kissed him. "Not at all."

"I'll call you. About the monster."

The drive home was a journey through another world. Everything glowed with a soft halo. The only thing that spoiled it was the thought of going home to Parker. I flipped open my cell phone and called Chloe as promised.

She answered, breathless.

"What are doing?" I asked. "Sounds like you're having a pretty hot time of your own."

"No, I'm out jogging."

"Oh, that's right. You're the vampire jogger. Why do you run at midnight? Remind me again."

"I like to do my artwork until midnight then run to clear my head. It's so peaceful this time of night."

"I really wish you wouldn't do that."

"Thanks, Mom," she said sarcastically. "But don't worry. I have a pepper spray that would take

down Godzilla."

"Okay, okay. I'll quit."

"Now how was your date?" It sounded as though Chloe had gotten her breathing under control.

"Three words. Oh. My. God." I punctuated each word in order to give the full impact.

"That good, huh? You don't waste any time these days. You must be coming out of your shell."

"Ah, we didn't really do anything, just made out."

"Well don't go any further, then. I swear. When you don't go to bed with them, they're your slaves. Once you do, they're out the door. Never fails."

"Thanks, Miss Rules. I'll remember that."

"Roz . . ." Chloe's breathing sped up again.

"Yeah?"

She hesitated. "I have a funny feeling about Jack. I know he's a babe and everything, but . . . be careful with him, okay?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I think you're out of your league with him. You've been used to preppies and yuppies for God's sake."

"I will. I promise. Thanks for caring."

I hung up and faced my fate.

When I finally arrived at home it was 1 a.m., not very late at all. I felt as though I had been with Jack for at least three hours -- that or an eternity.

Parker woke momentarily to go to the bathroom, but just said "Hi" and went back to sleep. I must have picked up Jack's gunpowder scent, but if he noticed, he didn't say.

I went to the bathroom and leaned over the sink to brush my teeth, when something in the mirror caught my eye, a wisp of shadow that disappeared as soon as I looked directly at it. There it was again when I glanced away. After I rubbed my eyes the silhouette disappeared. I hoped I wasn't getting a detached retina.

I went out to the kitchen for a drink of water, and sat up for a long time, looking out the front window at the moonlight, thinking. Collette, my black and white angora cat, jumped up onto my lap and snuggled. Her loud purr put me into a dreamy, contented state. That was until the shrill ring of the phone pierced the night.

I sprang up, dumping Collette onto the floor.

"Sorry, kitty," I said.

Glancing at the caller ID, I recognized Fred's number and picked up the receiver.

"Rosalind. I've got some bad news. Some really bad news. I shouldn't tell you over the phone."

"Come on over then. Hurry."

Fred perched on the edge of my couch looking uncomfortable, as though it was scalding his thighs. His silence was punctuated by Parker's intermittent snoring from the bedroom.

"What is it? I can't stand it."

"Sit down."

I sat.

"It's Chloe. She's been murdered."