

TIFFANY REISZ

THE  
SIREN

THE ORIGINAL SINNERS



"Dazzling, devastating...  
a story that will leave you breathless and bruised."

—Miranda Baker

# *The Siren*

TIFFANY REISZ

# 1

**T**here was no such thing as London fog—never had been. The London Fog of legend was only that. In reality London fog was London smog, and at the height of the Industrial Revolution it had killed thousands, choking the city with its poisonous hands. Zach Easton knew that in the offices of Royal House Publishing, he was known as the London Fog, the disparaging nickname coined by a fellow editor who disapproved of Zach's dour demeanor. Zach had no love of his nickname or the editor who'd coined it. But today he was eager to earn his epithet.

As he knew he would, Zach found John-Paul Bonner, the chief managing editor of Royal House Publishing, still hard at work even after hours. J.P. sat on the floor of his office, piles of manuscripts stacked about him like a paper Stonehenge in miniature.

Zach stopped in J.P.'s doorway and leaned against the frame. He stared his chief editor down and did not speak. He didn't have to tell J.P. why he was here. They both knew.

"Death—she comes to me on an Easton fog," J.P. said from the floor as he sorted through another stack of books. "A poetic enough way to die. You are here to kill me, I presume."

At sixty-four and with his gray beard and spectacles, J.P. was literature personified. Usually Zach enjoyed playing word games with him, but he was in no mood for repartee today.

"Yes."

"'Yes'?" J.P. repeated. "Just 'yes'? Well, brevity is the soul of wit after all. Help an old man off the floor, will you, Easton? If I'm going to die, might as well die on my feet."

Sighing, Zach stepped into the office, reached down and helped J.P. stand. J.P. patted Zach gratefully on the shoulder and collapsed into his chair behind his desk.

"I'm a dead man anyway. Can't find that damn *Hamlet* galley for John Warren. Should have had it in the mail yesterday. But happiness is good health and a bad memory they say, and I am a happy, happy man."

Zach studied J.P. for a moment and silently cursed him for being so endearing. His affection for his boss made this conversation far less pleasant. Zach walked over to J.P.'s bookshelves and ran his hand along the top of the case. He knew J.P.'s habit of stashing important papers where even he couldn't reach them. Zach found a manuscript and pulled it down. He threw it on J.P.'s desk and watched it kick up a small cloud of dust.

"Bless you," J.P. said, coughing as he put his hand over his heart. "You have saved my life."

"Now I get to be the one who kills you."

J.P. eyed Zach and pointed at the chair across from the desk. Zach reluctantly sat down, pulling his gray coat around him like a suit of armor.

"Easton, look," J.P. began but it was as far as Zach let him get.

"Nora Sutherlin?" Zach infused the name with as much disgust as he could muster, a considerable amount at the moment. "You must be joking."

"Yes, Nora *Sutherlin*. I've thought about it, looked at the sales projections. I think we should acquire her. I want you to work with her."

"I will do no such thing. It's pornography."

"It's not pornography." J.P. peered at Zach over the top of his glasses. "It's erotica. Very good erotica."

"I had no idea there was such a thing."

"Two words—Anaïs Nin," J.P. retorted.

"Two more words—Booker Prize."

J.P. exhaled noisily and leaned back in his chair.

"Easton, I know your track record. You're one of the top talents in the industry by far. I wouldn't have paid to import you here to New York if you weren't. Yes, your writers have won Booker Prizes."

"And Whitbreads, Silver Daggers—"

"And Sutherlin's last book outsold your Whitbread and Silver Dagger combined. We're in a recession, if you hadn't noticed. Books are a luxury. If it can't be eaten, no one is buying it right now."

"So Nora Sutherlin's the answer?" Zach challenged.

J.P. grinned. "Janie Burke at the *Times* called her last book 'highly edible.'"

Zach shook his head and looked up at the ceiling in disgust.

"She's a guttersnipe writer at best," Zach said. "Her mind's in the gutter, her books are in the gutter. I wouldn't be surprised if her last publishing house kept its offices in the gutter."

"She might be a guttersnipe, but she's our guttersnipe. Well, your guttersnipe now."

"This isn't *My Fair Lady*. I'm not Professor Henry Higgins, and she is no Eliza bloody Doolittle."

"Whoever she is she's a damn fine writer. You would know this if you'd bothered to read one of her books."

"I left England for this job," Zach reminded him. "I left one of the most respected publishers in Europe because I wanted to work with the best young American writers."

"She's young. She's American."

"I did not leave England, my life..." Zach stopped himself before he said, "*and my wife.*" After all, it was his wife who'd left him first.

"This book has real potential. She brought it to us because she's ready to make a change."

"Give her twenty shillings for a pound if she wants change. I leave for L.A. in six weeks. I can't believe you want me to set everything aside and give my last six weeks to Nora Sutherlin. Not a chance."

"I've seen your in-box, Easton. It's not so full you can't work with Sutherlin while you tie up loose ends around here. Don't tell me you don't have the time when we both know you just don't have the inclination."

"Fine. I don't have the time or the inclination to edit erotica, even good erotica, if there is such an animal. I'm not the only editor here. Give it to Thomas Finley." Zach named his least favorite coworker, the one who'd given him his nickname. "Or Angie Clark even."

"Finley? That pansy? He'd make a pass at Sutherlin, and she'd eat him alive. If you punched him in the face, he wouldn't even know how to bleed right."

Zach nearly laughed in agreement before remembering he was fighting with J.P.

"Then what about Angie Clark?"

"She's too busy right now. Besides..."

"Besides what?" Zach demanded.

"Clark's afraid of her."

"Can't say I blame her," Zach said. "I've heard grown men practically whisper her name at parties. The rumor is she slept her way to her first book deal."

"I've heard that rumor, too. But she hasn't slept her way to this one. Unfortunately," J.P. said with a playful grin.

"I read on Rachel Bell's blog that she never leaves the house in any other color than red. She said Sutherlin's got a sixteen-year-old boy working as her personal assistant."

J.P. smiled at him. "I believe she prefers 'intern' to 'personal assistant.'"

Zach nearly choked on his own frustration. He'd been ready to leave for the evening, even had his coat on, when some demon voice in his head told him to check his work email one more time. He had a note from J.P. telling him that he was considering acquiring erotica writer Nora Sutherlin and her latest book for their big fall/winter release. And since Zach didn't have much to occupy him until he left for L.A. in a few weeks...

"I need you to do this for me. You and no one else," J.P. said.

"Why am I the only one who can handle her?"

"Handle her?" J.P. practically chortled the words before turning serious. "Listen to me—no one handles Nora Sutherlin. No, you're just the only one I've got who can keep up with her. Easton...Zach. Hear me out, please."

Zach swallowed and resigned himself to a moment's *détente*. It was a rare thing indeed when John-Paul Bonner called anyone by his first name.

"She writes romances, J.P.," Zach said quietly. "I hate romances."

J.P. met his eyes with sympathy.

"I know you've been through hell this past year. I've met

your Grace, remember? I know what you've lost. But Sutherlin...she's good. We need her."

Zach took a slow, deep breath.

"Has she signed the contract yet?" Zach asked.

"No. We're still ironing out the terms."

"Is there a verbal agreement in place?"

J.P. eyed him warily. "Not yet. I told her we'd have to look at the figures and get back to her, but we were leaning toward yes. Why?"

"I'll talk to her."

"A good start."

"And I'll read the manuscript. If I think there's any chance she—we—can make something decent out of her book, I'll give her my last six weeks. But the book doesn't go to press until I sign off on it."

J.P.'s eyes bored into Zach. Zach refused to blink or look away. He was used to having final say on all his books. He wasn't about to relinquish that power, not for J.P., not for Nora Sutherlin, not for anyone.

"Easton, one Dan Brown title will outsell in a month what the entire poetry section of a bookstore will sell in five years. Sutherlin's 'pornography,' as you call it, could pay for a lot of poetry around here."

"I want the contract in my hands, J.P., or I won't even meet her."

J.P. sat back in his chair and exhaled loudly through his nose.

"Fine. She's all yours. She's got a nice little place in Connecticut. Take the train. Take my car. I don't care. She'll be home on Monday, she said."

"Very well then." Zach knew he was likely safe. When the mood struck him, Zach could be merciless to an author about his or her book's shortcomings. The great writers took the



criticism. The hacks couldn't handle it. If he was hard enough on her, she'd beg for another editor.

The argument now at a stalemate, Zach rose tiredly from the chair and with hunched and aching shoulders headed toward the door.

A small cough stopped Zach before he could leave the office. J.P. didn't meet his eyes, only ran his hand over the first page of the *Hamlet* reader's copy in front of him.

"You should read this book when it comes out," J.P. said, tapping the page. "Fascinating exploration of the feigned madness of Hamlet—I am but mad north north-west..."

"But when the wind is southerly, I can tell a hawk from a handsaw," Zach finished the famous quotation.

"Sutherlin's only as mad as Hamlet was. Don't believe everything you've heard about her. The lady knows her hawks from her handsaws."

"Lady?"

J.P. closed the book and didn't answer the insult. Zach turned to leave again.

"You know, you're still young, Easton, and too handsome for your own good. You should try it sometime."

"What? Madness?" Zach asked, nodding toward the book.

"No. Happiness."

"Happiness?" Zach allowed himself a bitter grin. "I'm afraid my memory's too good for that."

Zach returned to his office. His assistant, Mary, had left Nora Sutherlin's manuscript on his desk along with a file folder.

Zach flipped the file open and barely glanced at Sutherlin's bio. She was thirty-three, about a decade younger than him. Her first book had come out when she was twenty-nine. She'd released five titles since then; her second book, entitled *Red*, had created a minor sensation—great sales, lots of buzz.

Zach studied the numbers in the file and saw why J.P. was so eager to acquire her. With each subsequent release, her sales had nearly doubled. Zach ran through the little he knew of erotica writers in his mind. These days erotica was about the only growth market in publishing. But it shouldn't be about the money. Just the art.

Zach threw Sutherlin's bio and sales projections in the trash. He'd stolen his philosophy of editing from the old New Critics—it's just about the book. Not the author, not the market, not the reader...one judged a book only by the book. He shouldn't care that Nora Sutherlin's personal life was rumored to be as torrid as her prose. Only her book mattered. And his hopes for the book were not high.

Zach examined the manuscript with suspicion. Mary knew he preferred to read his books in hard copy versions. But she'd obviously had a little too much fun printing out this one for him. Across the scarlet-red cover blazed the title in a lurid Gothic font—*The Consolation Prize*. Editors almost invariably changed a book's title, but he had to concede it was an interesting choice for a work of erotica. He opened the manuscript and read the first sentence: "I don't want to write this story any more than you want to read it."

Zach paused in his reading as he felt the shadow of something old and familiar whisper across his shoulder. He brushed the sensation off and read the line again. Then the next one and the next one...

## 2

Some days Zach hated his job. The actual editing he loved, taking a novel with pretensions of greatness and actually making it great. But the politics he hated, the budget crises, having to let a brilliant midlisters go to make room for a better-selling hack... And now here he was, hauling his arse into Connecticut to meet some loony smut writer who'd somehow convinced one of the most respected lions in publishing that she deserved one of the best editors in literary fiction. Yes, some days he hated his job. Today he felt quite certain it hated him back.

Zach parked J.P.'s car in front of a rather quaint two-story Tudor cottage in the tame and pedestrian suburb. He checked the address, his directions and stared at the house. Nora Sutherlin—the notorious erotica writer whose books were banned as often as they were translated lived here? Zach could imagine his own grandmother in this house forcing tea and biscuits on small children.

With a heavy sigh, he strode to the front door and rang the

bell. Shortly after, he heard footsteps approaching—sturdy, masculine footsteps. Zach allowed himself the pleasure of imagining that *Nora Sutherlin* might simply be the pen name for some overweight bloke in his mid-fifties.

A man did open the door. No, not a man—a boy. A boy wearing nothing but plaid pajama pants and a cluster of hemp necklaces, one dangling a small silver cross, stood across the threshold from Zach and regarded him with a sleepy smile.

“Nineteen,” he said in an accent Zach immediately recognized as American South. “Not sixteen. She just tells everybody I’m sixteen for the street cred.”

“Street cred?” Zach asked, stunned that the rumor of the teenage intern had proved true.

The boy shrugged his sun-freckled shoulders. “Her words. Wesley Railey. Just Wes.”

“Zachary Easton. I’m here to meet with your...employer?”

The boy, Wesley, laughed and brushed a swath of dark blond hair out of his brown eyes with the graceful languor of youth.

“My *employer* is right this way,” he said, exaggerating the Southern accent for comic effect. Zach entered the house and found it cozy and homey, replete with overstuffed furniture and bursting bookcases. “I like your accent. You’re British?”

“Lived in London the past ten years. You don’t sound like a native, either.”

“Kentucky. But Mom’s a Georgia peach so that’s where I get this mess from. I keep trying to lose it, but Nora won’t let me. Has a thing for accents.”

“That does not bode well,” Zach said as Wesley grabbed a V-neck white T-shirt off a pile of folded laundry and pulled it on. Zach noted the boy’s slim but muscular frame and wondered why Nora Sutherlin bothered with the intern pretense.

A nineteen-year-old lover might be rather disgraceful for a woman of thirty-three but certainly legal.

Wesley led him down an abbreviated hallway. Without knocking he pushed open a door.

“Nor, Mr. Easton’s here.”

He stepped to the side and Zach blinked in surprise at his first glimpse of the infamous Nora Sutherlin.

From all the rumors he’d heard, he’d expected some sort of Amazonian in red leather wielding a riding crop. Instead, he found a pale, petite beauty with wavy black hair barely contained in a loose knot at her nape. And no red leather in sight at all. She wore men’s style pajamas, blue ones covered in what appeared to be little yellow ducks.

Her legs rested on top of her desk and she had her keyboard balanced across her lap. With quick nimble fingers she typed away, saying nothing and giving them only her beguiling profile.

“Nora?” Wesley prompted.

“I’ve got a crisp new Benjamin for the first person who can give me a good synonym for *thrust*, noun form. Go,” she said, her voice both honeyed and sardonic.

Although irritated by her cavalier attitude and her unfortunate attractiveness, Zach couldn’t help but scroll through his substantial mental thesaurus.

“Push, lunge, shove, attack, force, jab,” he rattled off the words.

“*His slow, relentless jabs sent her reeling...*” she said. “Sounds like commentary on a boxing match. Goddammit, why are there no good synonyms for *thrust*? Bane of my existence. Although...” She set her keyboard aside and turned to face him for the first time. “I do love a man with a big vocabulary.”

Zach’s spine stiffened as the most unusually beautiful

woman he'd seen in years smiled at him. She stood up and walked on bare feet to him.

"Ms. Sutherlin." Zach took her proffered hand. "How do you do?"

From her small stature he expected a dainty grip. But she grasped his hand with surprisingly strong fingers.

"Gorgeous accent," she said. "Not a bit of the old Scouser left, is there?"

"You've done your homework, I see," Zach replied, troubled that she seemed to know more about him than he knew about her. He now regretted tossing her bio into the bin. "But not everyone born in Liverpool speaks like a young Paul McCartney."

"Shame." Her voice dropped to a whisper as she continued to gaze at him. "What a shame."

Zach forced himself to really meet her eyes and then wished he hadn't. At first glance her eyes appeared a deep green, but she blinked and they seemed to change to a black so dark they likely could not remember the green they had just been. He knew that she looked only at his face, but still he felt stripped bare by her penetrating gaze, torn open. She knew him. He knew it, and he sensed she knew it, too.

Determined to regain control of the situation, Zach pulled his hand back.

"Ms. Sutherlin—"

"Right. Work." She returned to her desk. Zach glanced around her office and saw even more books than were in the living room: books and notebooks, stacks of paper and dark wooden filing cabinets.

"One quick question, Mr. Easton," she said, dropping into her desk chair. "Are you, by any chance, ashamed of being Jewish?"

"Excuse me?" Zach said, not quite certain he'd heard her correctly.

"Nora, stop it," Wesley scolded.

"Just curious," she said with an indifferent wave of her hand. "You go by Zachary but your name is actually Zechariah like the Hebrew prophet. Why did you change it?"

The question was so personal, so entirely none of her concern that Zach couldn't believe he deigned to answer it.

"I've been called Zach or Zachary since the day I was born. Only when filling out formal documents do I even remember Zechariah is actually my name." Zach kept his tone cool and even. He knew that he could only win here if he stayed calm and didn't allow her to get the rise out of him she so clearly desired. "And the only thing I am ashamed of currently is this sudden downturn in my career."

He expected her to flinch or fight. Instead, she just laughed.

"I really can't blame you. Have a seat and tell me all about it."

Warily, Zach sat down in the battered paisley armchair across from her desk. He started to cross his ankle over his knee but froze in midmovement as his foot tapped an unusually long black duffel bag that sat on the floor. He heard the distinct, unnerving sound of metal clinking against metal.

"I've got to get to class," Wesley said, sounding desperate to leave. "That okay?"

"Oh, I doubt Mr. Easton will bend me over my desk and ravish me the second you leave," she said, winking at Zach. "Unfortunately."

The words and the wink forced an image into Zach's mind of doing that very act. He forced the thought out just as quickly as she put it in.

Wesley shook his head in amused disgust.

"Mr. Easton, good luck," Wesley said, turning to him. "Just don't act impressed, and she'll eventually settle down."

"Impressed?" Zach repeated. "I doubt that will be a problem."

Zach waited for his words to register. He saw Wesley's eyes narrow, but she only looked at him from under her veil of black eyelashes.

"Oh..." She nearly purred the word. "I like him already."

"God help us all." Wesley left on the heels of his prayer. Zach glanced back at Wesley's retreating form. He wasn't quite sure he wanted to be left alone with this woman.

"Your son, I presume?" Zach asked after Wesley departed.

"My intern. Sort of. He cooks so I guess that makes him more of a factotum. Intern? Factotum?"

"Houseboy," Zach supplied, putting his large vocabulary to use again. "And a rather well-trained one, I see."

"Well-trained? Wesley? He's horribly trained. I can't even train him to fuck me. But I don't think you drove all the way from the city just to talk about my intern with me, adorable as he is."

"No, I did not." Zach fell silent. He waited and watched as Nora Sutherlin sat back in her chair and studied him with her unnerving eyes.

"So..." she began. "I can tell you don't like me. Shows you've got good taste in women at least. Also shows you've heard of me. Am I what you expected?"

Zach stared at her a moment. The last three writers he'd worked with had been men in their late fifties and early sixties. Never once had he seen any of them in their pajamas. And never had he met a writer as uncomfortably alluring as Nora Sutherlin.

"You're shorter."

"Thank God for stilettos, right? So what's the verdict? J.P."



said he's giving you total control over the book and me. It's been a long time since I've let a man boss me around. I kind of miss it."

"The verdict is undecided."

"A well-hung jury then. Better give me a retrial."

"You're very clever."

"You're very handsome."

Zach shifted in his seat. He wasn't used to flirtation from his writers, either. Then again, she wasn't one of his writers.

"That wasn't a compliment. Cleverness is the last recourse of an amateur. I look for depth in my books, passion, substance."

"Passion I have."

"Passion is not synonymous with sex. I'll admit your book was interesting and not entirely without merit. At one point I even detected a heart inside all that flesh."

"I hear a 'but' in there."

"But the heartbeat was very faint. The patient might be terminal."

She looked at him and glanced away. Zach had seen that look before—it was defeat. He'd scared her away as he'd planned. He wondered why he wasn't happier about it.

"Terminal..." She turned her face back to him. A new look was shining in her eyes. "It's almost Easter—the season of Resurrection."

"Resurrection? Really?" Zach said, astonished by her tenacity. "I leave for Royal's L.A. offices in six weeks. Six weeks is not nearly enough time to involve myself with any project of worth or magnitude. But six weeks is all we have."

"You just said six weeks isn't long enough—"

"But it's all I have to give. Fix it in six and it's off to press. If not—"

"If not, it's back to the gutter for the guttersnipe writer, right?"

Zach stared at her in stunned silence.

"John-Paul Bonner's the biggest gossip in the publishing industry, Mr. Easton. He told me what you think of me. He told me you think I'll fail."

"I'm quite certain of it."

"If you're my editor, my failure will take you down, too."

"I'm not your editor yet. I haven't agreed to anything."

"You will. So why did you quit teaching?"

"Quit teaching?"

"You were a professor at Cambridge, right? Pretty good gig especially for someone so young. But you quit."

"Ten years ago," Zach said, shocked by how much she seemed to know about him. How on earth had she learned about Cambridge?

"So why—"

"Why my personal life is of such fascination to you, I cannot fathom."

"I'm a cat. You're a shiny object."

"You're insufferable."

"I am, aren't I? Somebody should spank me." She sighed. "So you're kind of an asshole. No offense."

"And you appear to be two or three words I don't feel quite comfortable saying aloud."

"I'd tell you to say them anyway, but I promised Wesley I wouldn't let you flirt with me. But I digress. Tell me what's wrong with my book. Say it slowly," she said, grinning.

"You have a very sanguine attitude toward the editing process. What will you say when I tell you that you must cut out the ten to twenty pages you're certain constitute the living, beating heart of your book?"

She said nothing for a long minute. Her eyes glanced away

from him and she seemed to lose herself in a dark place. He watched as she breathed in slowly through her nose, held the breath then exhaled out her mouth. She turned her uncanny green eyes to him.

"Then I'll say that I once cut the living, beating heart out of my own chest," she said, her voice devoid of its usual flippancy. "I survived that amputation. I'll survive this one."

"May I ask why you're so determined to work with me? I've done my research, Ms. Sutherlin. You have a rabid fan following that would buy your phone bill in hardcover and still manage to wank off to it."

"I'm also very big in France."

Zach gritted his teeth and felt the first stirrings of an impending headache. "Didn't your 'intern' say you would settle down at some point?"

"Mr. Easton," she said, rolling back in her swivel chair and throwing her legs back on her desk. "This is me settled down."

"I was afraid of that." Zach stood, prepared to leave.

"This book," she began and stopped. She moved her legs off the desk and sat cross-legged in her chair. For a moment she looked both very earnest and terribly young.

"What about it?"

She looked away and seemed to search for words. "It... means something to me. It's not another one of my dirty little stories. I came to Royal because I need to do right by this book." She met his eyes again and without a trace of levity or mirth said, "Please. I need your help."

"I only work with serious writers."

"I'm not a serious person. I know that. But I am a serious writer. Writing is one of the only two things in this world I do take seriously."

"And the other?"

"The Roman Catholic Church."

"I think we're done here."

"You're not much of an editor then," she taunted as he headed to the door. "It's much too early for an ending. I'm no editor and even I know that."

"Ms. Sutherlin, you're obviously emotionally involved in your book. That's fine for writing, but editing a book you love hurts."

"I like doing things that hurt." She gave him a Cheshire cat grin. "J.P. said you were the best. I think he's right. I'll do whatever it takes, whatever you say. I'll beg if it will help my case. I'll get down on my knees and beg if it'll help yours."

"I'm going now."

"J.P. also said they call you the London Fog around the office," she said as he turned his back to her. "Is that because of the long coat, the accent or your gift for putting a cold, wet damper on everyone's good time?"

"I'll leave you to decide that."

"Tell me what to do and I'll do it," she called out, and Zach was forced to admire her stubbornness. He couldn't believe he was tempted to consider rewarding it.

"A writer writes," he said, facing her again. "Write something for me, something good. I don't care how long it is, and I don't care what it's about. Just impress me. You've got twenty-four hours. Show me you can create under pressure, and I'll consider it."

"You'll be surprised what I can do under pressure," she said, but Zach had his doubts. The houseboy, the jokes, the flirting—she was no serious writer. "Any suggestions?" she asked, slightly more sincere this time.

"Stop writing what you know and start writing what you want to know. And," he said, pointing a finger at her, "none of your cheap tricks."

Her spine straightened as if he'd finally found an insult that

stuck. "I assure you, Mr. Easton," she said in a tone both stern and reproving, "my tricks are anything but cheap."

"Prove it then. You've got twenty-four hours."

She leaned back in her chair and smiled.

"Fuck your twenty-four hours. You'll have it tonight."

### 3

Numbing.

As an editor Zach often forced his writers to dig deep, cast aside the obvious and find the perfect word for every sentence. And the perfect word to describe this book release party he'd been forced to attend? *Numbing*.

Zach stalked through the party saying little more than the occasional hello to various colleagues. He'd only come because once again J.P. had twisted his arm, and Rose Evelyn—the guest of honor—had been a Royal House writer for thirty years now. What a ludicrous party anyway—someone dimmed the lights to create a nightclub sort of atmosphere but no amount of ambience could turn the banal hotel banquet hall into anything other than a beige box. He wandered toward a spiral staircase in the corner of the room to surreptitiously check his watch. If he could survive two hours at this party, maybe it would be long enough to placate his social butterfly of a boss.

Scanning the crowd, he saw his twenty-eight-year-old as-

sistant, Mary, trying to talk her new husband into dancing with her. His first week at Royal, he'd been pleasantly surprised to find out his spitfire of an assistant was, like him, Jewish. He'd teased her he'd never known a Jew named Mary before and started calling her his pseudoshiksa. Mary, for all her endearing brusqueness, only ever called him "Boss." J.P. stood with Rose Evely. Both J.P. and Evely had been happily married to their respective spouses for decades but nothing stopped J.P. from chivalrously flirting with any woman who had the patience to listen to his literary rambles. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves at this miserable party. Why wasn't he?

Once more he glanced down at his watch.

"I can save you, if you want," came a voice from above him.

Zach spun around and looked up. Smiling down at him from over the top of the staircase was Nora Sutherland.

"Save me?" He narrowed his eyes at her.

"From this party." She crooked her index finger at him.

Zach's better judgment warned him that climbing that staircase could be a very bad idea indeed. Yet his feet overruled his reason, and he mounted the steps and joined her on the platform at the top. He raised his eyebrow as he cast a disapproving gaze over her clothes. That morning at her house, she'd worn shapeless pajamas that concealed every part of her but her abundant personality. Now he saw on full display what his mind had before only imagined.

She wore red, of course. Scarlet red and not much of it. The dress stopped at the top of her thighs and started at the edge of her breasts. She had miraculous curves that the dramatic floor-length red jacket she wore over her dress did nothing to hide. Even worse, she wore black leather boots that laced all the way above her knees. Pirate boots and a roguish grin

on a beautiful black-haired woman...for the first time in a long time Zach felt something other than numb.

"How do you know I want to be saved from this party, Miss Sutherlin?" Zach leaned back against the railing and crossed his arms.

"I've been watching you from my little crow's nest here since the second you walked in. You've said maybe five words to four people, you've checked your watch three times in as many minutes, and you whispered something to J.P., which, guessing from the look on his face, was a death threat. You're here against your will. I can get you out."

Zach cocked a self-deprecating smile at her.

"Unfortunately, you're right. I am here against my will. I have to wonder, however, why you're here at all. Didn't I give you homework?" he asked, remembering his rash decision this morning to give her one chance to impress him.

"You did. And I was a good girl and finished it. See?"

He tried and failed to look away as she reached into the bodice of her dress and pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to him. The paper was still warm from her skin.

"This is it?" he asked, seeing only three paragraphs on the page.

"Don't judge a book by its mother. Just read."

Zach glanced at her once more and wished he hadn't. Every time he looked at her, he found something else to attract him. Her jacket had slipped down her arm and her pale sculpted shoulder peeked out. Sculpted? His petite little writer had some muscle to go along with her impressive curves. Tougher than she looked.

Remembering himself, Zach turned from her, tilted the page into a patch of light and read.

*First she noticed his hips. The eyes might be the windows to the soul, but a man's hips were his seat of power. She doubted he'd cho-*



*sen those perfectly fitted jeans and that black T-shirt that belied the tautness of his stomach for the purpose of flattering his lower body, but he had and now she lost herself in the thought of caressing with her lips that exquisite hollow that lay between smooth skin and elegantly jutting hip bone.*

*She had to meet his eyes eventually. With reluctance she dragged her gaze to his face, as dignified and angular as the rest of him. Pale skin and dark Brutus-cut hair contrasted with eyes the color of ice. Glacial, she decided his eyes were—they spoke of hidden depths. A stark beauty, he was a man made to be admired by intelligent women.*

*Lean and tall but with the substantial mass of an athlete, he was utterly masculine. The world had fallen away in his presence and now that he was gone, she was left in the equally potent presence of his absence.*

Zach read the words one more time trying all the while to ignore the annoyingly pleasant image of Nora Sutherlin caressing his naked hips with her mouth.

"I've noticed you usually shy away from long descriptive passages in your book," he said.

"I know people think erotica is just a romance novel with rougher sex. It's not. If it's a subgenre of anything, it's horror."

"Horror? Really?"

"Romance is sex plus love. Erotica is sex plus fear. You're terrified of me, aren't you?"

"Slightly," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

"A smart horror writer will never put too much detail in about the monster. The readers' imaginations can conjure their own demons. In erotica you never want your main characters to be too physically specific. That way your readers can insert their own fantasies, their own fears. Erotica is a joint effort between writer and reader."

"How so?" Zach asked, intrigued that Nora Sutherlin would have her own literary theories.

“Writing erotica is like fucking someone for the first time. You aren’t sure exactly what he wants yet so you try to give him everything he could possibly want. Everything and anything...” She enunciated the words like a cat stretching in sunlight. “You hit every nerve and eventually you’ll hit the nerve. Have I hit any nerves yet?”

Zach clenched his jaw. “Not any of them you were aiming for.”

“You don’t know what I was aiming for. So what do you think of the writing?”

“Could be better.” He refolded the page. “You use ‘was’ too much.”

“Rough draft,” she said unapologetically. She stared at him with dark, waiting eyes.

“The last line’s the strongest—‘*the equally potent presence of his absence.*’” Zach knew he should give the page back to her but for some reason he stuck it in his pocket. “It’s good.”

She gave him a slow, dangerous smile.

“It’s you.”

Zach only stared at her a moment before pulling the folded page back out.

“This is me?” he asked, his skin flushing.

“It is. Every last long, lean inch of you. I wrote it right after you left this morning. I was, needless to say, inspired by your visit.”

Swallowing hard, Zach unfolded the sheet again. *Brutus-cut black hair...ice-colored eyes...jeans, black shirt...* It was him.

“Excuse me,” Zach began, trying to regain control of this conversation, “but didn’t I repeatedly insult you this morning?”

“Your kvetching was very fetching. I like men who are mean to me. I trust them more.”

She tilted her head to the side and her unruly black hair fell over her forehead, veiling her green-black eyes.

"Forgive me. I might be speechless right now."

"Your orders," she said. "You told me to stop writing what I knew and start writing what I wanted to know. I want to know...you."

She took a step closer and Zach's heart dropped a few feet and landed somewhere in the vicinity of his groin.

"Who are you, Ms. Sutherlin?" he asked, not quite knowing what he meant by that question.

"I'm just a writer. A writer named Nora. And you can call me that, Zach."

"Nora then. I'm sorry. I'm not used to being hit on by my writers. Especially after verbally abusing them."

Nora's eyes flashed with amusement.

"Verbal abuse? Zach, where I come from 'slut' is a term of endearment. Want to see where I come from?"

"No."

"Pity," she said, sounding not at all surprised or disappointed. "Where should we go then? I promised to save you from this party, didn't I?"

"I really shouldn't leave," Zach said, terrified what would happen the second he found himself alone with Nora.

"Come on, Zach. This party sucks and not in the good way. I've had pap smears more fun than this."

Zach covered a laugh with a cough.

"I must admit you do have a way with words."

"So you'll edit me then? Please?" She batted her eyelashes at him in mock innocence. "You won't regret it."

Zach glanced up at the ceiling as if it could give him some hint of what the hell he was getting himself into. Nora Sutherlin...he had only six weeks left in New York until he left for L.A. Why was he even considering getting involved with

Nora Sutherlin and her book? He knew why. He had nothing else in his life right now. He liked Mary and enjoyed working for J.P. But he'd made no friends in New York, no connections of any kind. He hadn't allowed himself to even consider dating. One day he'd taken off his wedding ring in a fit of anger and couldn't find a reason to put it back on. He wouldn't consider inflicting himself on any woman right now. At least working with Nora Sutherlin might give him a much-needed distraction from his misery. She seemed like the type of woman who'd help you forget about your headache by setting your bed on fire.

Won't regret it? He already did.

"You do realize that working with you could be bad for my career," Zach said. "I do literary fiction, not—"

"Literary friction?"

"I can't believe I'm doing this." Zach shook his head.

Nora leaned in close to him. He was suddenly and uncomfortably aware of the long, bare curve of her neck. She smelled of hothouse flowers in bloom.

"I can." She breathed the words into his ear.

Zach exhaled slowly and pulled, reluctantly, away from her.

"I'm a brutal editor."

"I like brutal."

"I'll make you rewrite the whole book."

"Now you're trying to turn me on, aren't you? Shall we?"

"Fine," he finally said. "Save me then."

"Let's do it," she said. "If J.P. gives you shit about leaving the party with me, tell him it was my idea for us to go work on my book. J.P. won't spank me."

"I'm not certain of that," Zach said.

"I knew I liked that man for a reason."

"I need to say a few goodbyes if we're leaving." J.P. for

one. Then Mary. And he hadn't met her husband yet. And Rose Evelyn, too.

"Nope. Can't do that," Nora said. "Never say goodbye when you leave a party. That way you leave a mystery in your place. They'll have so much more fun talking about us than they ever would talking to us. Can't you already hear them? *Zach Easton just left with Nora Sutherlin. Are they...surely not...of course they are—*"

"We aren't," Zach said with finality.

"I know that. You know that. They don't know that."

Zach looked around the room. Everywhere he looked he saw eyes glancing furtively in their direction. The most intense gazing came from Thomas Finley, his least favorite co-worker. Zach noted that Finley didn't so much stare at him as he did at Nora. And the look in his eyes wasn't particularly friendly.

"I prefer not being a topic of gossip," Zach said.

"Too late. At least with me, it'll be really good gossip." She strode down the staircase with an audacious kick of her heels on each step.

Zach followed in her wake. The crowd parted for her as she cut a bloodred swath through the center of the room.

Finally free of the suffocating party, Zach threw on his coat and breathed in the bracing winter evening air.

A cab stopped within seconds for Nora and she slipped gracefully inside. He took a sharp breath as her black-booted legs disappeared into the cab. One more time he asked himself what the hell he was doing before sliding in next to her.

Nora said nothing as he joined her, only turned her head and gazed out at the night. She seemed to be trying to stare down the city. He had a feeling the city would blink first.

Nervously, he rubbed the empty spot where he'd once worn his wedding band. Nora reached out and wrapped her

hand around his ring finger. Facing him now, she raised her eyebrow in a question.

“Grace,” he answered.

Nora nodded. “You married a princess.”

Princess Grace—her mother called her that.

“She hates being called ‘Princess.’” Zach heard the anguish in his voice.

Nora lifted his hand and brought it to her neck. She pressed his fingers into her throat. Her pulse throbbed through her warm, soft skin.

“Søren,” she said and met his eyes. In those dark, dangerous depths he saw a glimmer of something human—not merely sympathy but empathy. And he felt something inhuman in response—not passion but pure animal need. For a brief moment he imagined his hands digging into her thighs and the bite of her leather boots on his back. He tore his gaze away before her uncanny ability to read him saw that image in his hungry gaze.

She released his hand just as the cab pulled up in front of Zach’s apartment building. He opened the door and got out. He wanted to ask her up, wanted to spend a few hours forgetting his pain and all the reasons for it. But he couldn’t, could he? Because of Grace, not that she would care anymore. Zach opened his mouth but before he could ask Nora up, she reached out to shut the door.

“See, Zach? I told you I’d save you.”

Nora watched Zach stare after the cab before turning and walking into his building. What a beautiful wreck of a man. Kingsley always said beautiful wrecks were a specialty of hers. He should know. He certainly qualified as one himself.

“Where to, lady?”

Nora thought about it for a moment. For the next six weeks

she and Zach would rewrite her book. If he started kicking her ass tomorrow, might be cathartic to kick a little ass of her own tonight.

“Lady?” her driver prompted.

Nora rattled off an address for a Manhattan town house and nearly laughed as she saw her driver’s eyes widen in the rearview mirror.

“You sure about that? That’s no place for a nice girl to go after dark. Or ever.”

This time Nora did laugh out loud. Every cabdriver in town knew Kingsley’s address. No one with anything to lose would ever turn up there in his or her own car. Good thing she had nothing to lose. Not anymore anyway.

Nora looked back out onto the city night. Søren might kill her for getting involved with a guy like Zach, a guy still technically married. Pissing off Søren—yet another reason to go for it.

“Don’t worry.” She crossed her legs and leaned back in the seat. She’d tip the driver a Benjamin just for giving her a giggle. “I’m not a nice girl.”

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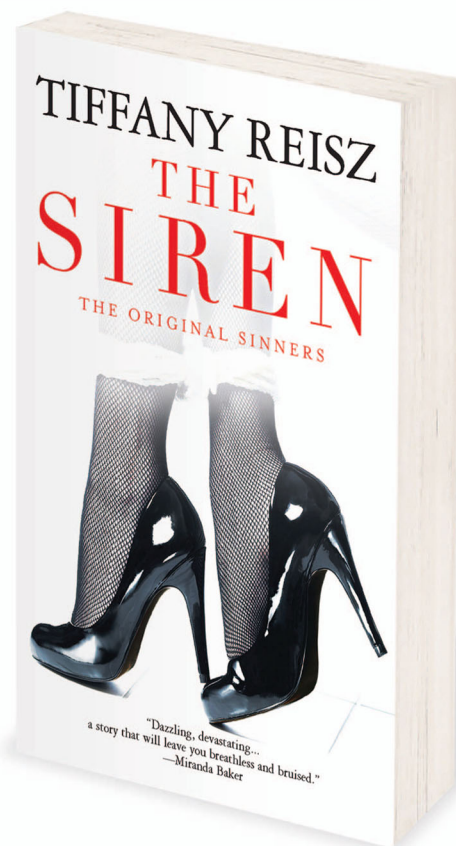
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Nora Sutherlin is an erotica writer by day and a Dominatrix by night. With a nymphomaniac Frenchman for a boss, a stuffy Englishman for an editor and an all-American college boy for a roommate, the only thing wilder than Nora's fiction is the truth. *And don't even ask who she's sleeping with....*

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