

Sweet Sacrifice
By: L.D. Rose

Her eyes snapped open, her vision blanketed by huge white feathers, before a giant wing shoved her back. Her arms flailed as she fell hard on her tailbone, the impact rattling up her spine and clacking her jaw shut.

Pain and awareness ripped into her, the veil of fantasy torn from her eyes as she gawked at the rail in front of her.

She was outside. In the dark. Ready to jump from her hotel balcony.

Her sharp intake of air scraped her ears, her heart kicking against her ribcage as she covered her gaping mouth with her hand. *Holy shit. Did I sleepwalk?* Was she really about to plummet to her death from fourteen stories high?

And did a huge bird just save her life?

Backpedaling across the concrete, the air cool against her thighs now that she'd nearly torn her dress in half, she hit the glass of the sliding balcony doors. Reaching up with a shaking hand, she clutched the handle and pulled herself haphazardly to her feet, yanking the door open and stumbling inside. She slammed it shut behind her, the glass rattling from the force of the blow as she flipped the lock closed. Retreating farther, she toppled onto the bed, staring at the night outside with growing horror.

She recounted her steps from when she'd arrived at the hotel. The elevator, the housekeeper, entering the room, sitting, crying, falling asleep, the river, the blood, the panic, the tree—

The tree.

Climbing the tree, touching its leaves, remembering . . .

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A loud thump hit the balcony outside, muted by the thick glass. Her bleary eyes shot to the figure standing on the ledge and she released a cross between a sob and a shriek, then stifled her mouth with a hand.

Tall, bare-chested, his suit jacket and shirt bunched in his fist as he tossed them aside. Tattoos covered his arms, shoulders, and the base of his neck. Closer now, she discerned the pattern of inked wings, pale muscles rippling, lines and cuts he'd never worn before. His dark hair fell a little longer on top, disheveled from the wind, his face still carved with gorgeous edges, but thinner, wearier. His eyes were black holes, endless, consuming. Infinite.

Sebastian.

His knuckles rapped on the glass, the sound sending a terrified jolt into her nervous system. His eyes bore into hers, cutting through the darkness.

"Reen. Open the door."

Reen. Her nickname rumbled from his lips, his voice still that resonant timbre she adored. God, some nights she'd pleaded to hear that sound again, just to listen to him speak one last time.

This had to be another dream. *He* had to be a dream. She was hallucinating.

Christ, had Phillippe spiked her drink?

"Reen." He grasped the handle, tugged on it, his inked bicep contracting. "I know you see me."

She couldn't move, nailed to the bed with fear, paralyzed by disbelief. He pressed both palms flat on the glass, big hands with callused fingers, hands that had memorized every part of her body. He broke eye contact, dipping his head as he murmured, "Please, baby. Let me in."

As if his plea granted her motor skills, Irene was suddenly on her feet, hurrying across the carpet toward him. She struggled to control her shaking hands, trembles reverberating

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through her entire body. It took her three tries to flip the latch, and then she backed away, recoiling, afraid of this man who looked so much like her dead lover.

He pulled the slider open in a smooth, fluid movement, the cool ocean breeze escaping into the airless hotel. Setting his sights on her, he stepped over the threshold, his presence filling the room, overwhelming her entirely. When her back hit the main door, the opportunity to flee opened up wide, but she stilled as his scent wafted into her nostrils, a blend of sandalwood and her husband.

Sebastian. Her Sebastian.

The slider closed behind him, the finality of the sound echoing through her bones, and she couldn't run.

Not from him. Never from him.

An almost strangled sigh escaped him and he swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. A gut-wrenching pain glittered in his dark eyes while he drank her in, his gaze skittering over her from head to toe, as if reacquainting himself with his broken disaster of a wife.

Finally, he approached her in the dark, closing the distance between them, and she pressed harder against the door. If he held her, if he so much as *touched* her, she would be lost to him, squandering any semblance of sanity she'd managed to retain in these awful years without him.

Blistering tears flowed freely down her cheeks as he halted mere inches away, so close, so goddamn close his warmth radiated off his bare chest. He lifted a hand and she flinched, stopping him as if she'd slapped him. The pained expression on his face yanked a wretched sob from her throat, and she just couldn't believe it, couldn't believe he stood right there in front of her.

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The medal, the flag, the decorated casket, the salute . . . had it all been a lie?

His finger brushed her cheek, tentative, soft, waiting for her to strike. When she didn't, he cupped her face in his hand, his skin still rough and callused, wiping away her tears with his thumb. She leaned into his touch, unable to resist his warmth, and he framed her face with his free hand, staring into her eyes with a need so raw it stole what little breath she had left in her burning lungs.

"My God." He whispered the words, as if he didn't have the strength to give them voice.
"I've missed you."