



Tryst

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THE DEMON NEXT DOOR

NAVID

Josée Renard

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The Demon Next Door: Navid

By

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Navid

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Dedication

To all of you who love Christmas. And men.
And being naked in the open air.

Chapter One

PJ couldn't stand it a moment longer. Her family, her employees, her friends were all driving her stark raving mad with the whole holiday season thing.

It's not that she wasn't a fan of Christmas, she did, after all, own River City's one and only Christmas store—Very Merry Christmas. But she'd already *done* Christmas to death in February when she'd gone on her annual buying trip.

She needed a break, and she had time for just one single day before all hell broke loose. She needed it *right this minute*.

Otherwise, it would be too late. She wouldn't have the time, and besides, she might just kill someone if she didn't get away.

So she booked off from everything. She left her cell phone at home, told her staff she was incommunicado, told her family she was out of town, told her friends not to call her under *any* circumstances including unplanned pregnancies, divorces or marriages.

She'd already been inundated with Christmas. She'd been opening boxes, sorting shelves and storing extra stock since May. Every single day it had been Christmas, Christmas, Christmas.

Ornaments. Dishes. Linens. Gifts and gift wrapping. Cards and writing paper. New fake trees. Old fake trees. Santa Clauses in all shapes and sizes. Snowmen, snow kids, snow babies and snow globes.

She'd bought stock from what seemed like every country in the world which meant she'd spent what felt like months on the phone with

couriers and customs brokers. Her hands were raw, red and cut from the boxes she'd ripped apart and the delicate glass ornaments that had shattered into pieces in her hands. Her fingernails reminded her of the ghouls she'd been watching on television and her hair got washed and nothing more.

Her manicure and pedicure? No such thing.

Enough was enough.

PJ shook her head as she pulled out of her driveway. She didn't remember last year being like this. She used to *love* Christmas. That's why she'd saved for years and slaved for months to open the store. The two months leading up to the holiday used to be her favorite time of the year, and she lived for the throngs of people who hurried through her exquisitely decorated doors.

This year?

Not so interested. In fact, she was the opposite of interested. She was sick to death of the holiday, and she had two months to go before it was over.

As soon as the calendar clicked over to January first? She was getting an appraisal and calling her friend Jackie to put the damn place on the market. She'd find something else to do for next year's holidays.

Getting away hasn't been easy, she thought, but it's definitely going to be worth it.

November and December in River City were the prettiest months of the year. Not too hot, not too humid, but perfect weather for lazing about in the woods that bordered the river west of the city.

PJ had grown up, in more ways than one, hanging out in those woods. She'd learned to fish with her dad and her brothers, learned what mushrooms were safe to eat from her grandpa, learned orientation with her Girl Scout troop, and learned *all* about sex from her first love.

And even though that love was long gone, she went back to the clearing they'd claimed as their own all those years ago. She'd packed a blanket—*not* the same one they'd used back then—a bottle of wine, some home-fried chicken, her grandma's special coleslaw and a big slab of chocolate cake.

At the last minute she'd added her boom box and a couple of her favorite CDs. This would be her last chance to listen to music that didn't include reindeers or silver bells, angels or Santa Claus.

She drove out to the woods and parked in her usual spot, her black panel van with the Very Merry Christmas logo on its side fitting perfectly under the overhanging leaves.

And no, it really hadn't been a good idea to buy a black work vehicle in a city where the average temperature rarely dropped below seventy, but PJ couldn't bear the thought of driving a white van. Bad enough that she had to have the Christmas tree and star painted on the side of it. Bad enough that she spent all year driving around with her store's name on the side of her black van. And even worse that she couldn't afford both the work van and a kickass car to drive on the rare occasions when she wasn't at work.

She pulled her backpack from behind the seat and slung it over her shoulders, hurried around to the rear doors and pulled out the picnic basket she'd filled with enough food and wine and music for an entire day.

If she wanted to, if twelve hours wasn't long enough, she could stay out overnight and just go straight to work in the morning. The blanket she'd brought would probably keep her warm enough, especially after she'd finished the bottle of wine she had in the basket.

It was a short hike, a short *beautiful* hike, through the trees to her clearing. The light breeze rustled through the leaves and carried the scent of the river with it. The heat was tempered by its fall through the woods and turned into a perfectly comfortable warmth by the time it hit PJ's back.

PJ stopped and took a deep breath, the scent taking her back to the days before she'd become a shop owner, to when she'd had plenty of time to hike her woods and plenty of days to just relax.

This is a great idea and long overdue, PJ admonished herself. She would, once the store was sold, schedule a day off every single week to do whatever she wanted to do.

Spend it in her clearing.

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Get a facial. Or a manicure. Or a haircut.

Drive somewhere away. Anywhere away.

PJ loved River City, she truly did, but she knew every single person and every single person knew her. They knew her family and her friends and her staff. They knew how well she'd done in school, who she'd dated and why they broke up.

They gossiped about why she was still unmarried. They tried to set her up with nephews and newcomers and old-timers alike, but PJ had a policy. No going on blind dates. Not ever. Not anymore.

She'd had way too many bad experiences with blind dates, which would have been okay, but her friends and family always had something to say about why they didn't work, and the why always came down to one thing. PJ.

She wasn't relaxed enough.

She wasn't social enough.

She wasn't trying hard enough.

She wasn't sweet enough.

Well, today there were no blind dates on the horizon, no family or friends to get up in her face, nothing but this clearing, this lovely soft moss, PJ and her music, her food and her drink.

She was going to kick back, relax and try to inhale enough mellow to get her through the holidays without killing someone.