



L. MARIE WOOD

THE
PROMISE
KEEPER

WINNER OF THE GOLDEN STAKE AWARD

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

CEDAR GROVE PUBLISHING

PROLOGUE

The smell of blood wafting up to her nose was exquisite. It penetrated the musty air with its pungency. The aroma was all encompassing, full-bodied and complete in a way that nothing else was. The earthy, metallic smell of it was electric, invigorating; the touch of it was like satin against her skin. She loved it – everything about it. The look, the feel, the smell, the taste. She breathed deeply of it as it flowed from his body in a crimson deluge, allowing the scent to tantalize her nostrils and mix with the stagnant air in her lungs. She dipped her hands in it and collected some to rub on her face and neck, her forearms and calves, covering herself with its warmth. She even touched herself with the blood on her hands, sharing it with her most intimate place. She knew it wasn't normal, that what she was doing wasn't right, but that didn't matter to her then. The concept of right and wrong hadn't mattered to her in a long time.

She looked at him again, at the man who had given her immortality through his seed, the man who had given his blood to her. He was young, only 22 years old, with the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen—a rich hazelnut brown with emerald green flecks in them that sparkled like jewels. The man she had loved lay before her on bloody sheets. He was handsome, virile, and dead.

In the moonlight, his body was flawless, shadowed here and there where his muscles rounded, where his curves crested. His body was perfect. It was tight, firm. She had the chance to experience the pleasures his body could give many times before that day. Before his last day. She had, in fact, sampled him one last time before taking his life. His face was masculine, sporting high cheekbones and full lips. His shoulders were broad, his chest wide, supporting a strong, shapely neck. His waist was slender and his stomach was flat, rippled with fine-tuned abdominal muscles. His body affected a V shape that was every much as tempting to the touch as it was to the eye. His pubic hair was coarse, more so than the hair on his head. In the past, she had taken pleasure in running her fingers through it as he lay on the bed next to her, spent from effort, with his mind teetering on the edge of sleep. But not that night. To look at him, to touch his skin, to taste of the perspiration that

coated his body after he made love to her, had been a fantasy until the day she realized she had looked too long.

At 6'3", he was well proportioned, sleek. His legs were firm, muscular, and shapely. She couldn't help but stare at them, blood splattered and rigid, as they went up, up, up, coming together behind the round of his testicles. She raised a bloody finger to her lips and tasted what was left of him. His blood had begun to cool on her hands and the texture was thick like the skin over luke warm gravy. She rolled her tongue to the roof of her mouth, pressing the blood there, savoring it like fine wine. Then she let her saliva carry it down her throat, deep inside of her. Her heart throbbed at the taste of him, at the thought of him coursing through her body, becoming part of her. It never ceased to surprise her, the way her body reacted to the taste of human blood. The mere sight of it sparked arousal, the sight of it made her come close to losing control. Even in the early days, when to taste of blood was akin to drinking poison in her mind, her body acted out of some primal lust for it, some unquenchable desire. For many years she tried to suppress it. She used to force herself away from its luring aroma, choosing starvation instead. But that was short lived. Now, instead of fighting the feeling, the desire, the need, she allowed the pleasure to take over, to wash her in warmth that penetrated her mind, body, and soul, if, in fact, she still had one. Her desire for blood was unstoppable, insatiable. She was powerless against it. But none of the warmth that usually came when she drank of it filled her that day. Not when she allowed herself to look into the eyes of the man that lay slaughtered in his bed, the man that she loved as she had no other.

Jonathan.

Why did it have to be this way? she thought bitterly, her body and mind suffering more than they had in years. She had promised herself that she would never use him the way she used the others: For food. For blood. She stayed away from him during the times when her hunger was so great she couldn't be trusted to be rational. She hid the truth of what she had called life for more years than she cared to remember. She had been so careful not to include him in that aspect of her existence, as difficult as that had been. So why, then? Why was she forced to murder the only man she had ever loved?

The answer was as clear to her then as it had been when they started, when

she knew the risks of falling in love, she just didn't want to face it. He had come to her in a dream, as he was fond of doing. Before she drifted to sleep, lying in the arms of her beloved, she knew he was near. She was used to him being around, milling, watching, waiting. She was able to ignore him most times; her only acknowledgement of his presence was the glance she cast reflecting her anger, anger she had harbored since the day he made her what she was. Her anger had never ceased, had never lessened nor dimmed. It was always forefront in her mind, making her bitter and ruthless to her victims. She showed no mercy when she took them. In fact, she took pleasure in watching them squirm within her grasp, like bugs caught in a spider's web. She liked to hear them whimper their pleas. How she enjoyed the sound of their tortured voices, the look of death in their eyes. It was an inherent pleasure, one that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside her, a dark room locked away in the caverns of her mind. It frightened her, the depths of her sadism. Maybe, she sometimes thought, she would have been damned in life as she was in death.

On this night she had been falling into a blissful sleep following a most satisfying evening with Jonathan. As she drifted off, she fancied that she could still feel his touch on her skin, warm and firm, as it had been when he grabbed her buttocks and pulled her closer with every thrust. He had commanded her body that night, putting her in the positions of his liking, slapping her upturned bottom until blush sprang upon the skin, licking, sucking, biting her anywhere and everywhere until he was satisfied. Then he lay still beside her, his pants of pleasure evening out to regular drawn breaths, his body settling in for the night.

She laid awake until the sweat that had coated his body dried into his brown skin and his breathing became deep and steady. Those were the times she adored, those minutes between being awake and falling to sleep. When life seemed like a dream, airily light, when the surreal haze of uncertainty hovers over what can be seen and touched. That was when she most felt like a woman, a living being, like she had been so many years before.

Letting the sound of Jonathan's breathing lull her to sleep, she drifted to a place where she was the girl she remembered herself to be long ago. She walked aimlessly in the tall grass as she once had, her bare feet sinking

into the cool dirt under the shade of the mango trees that rimmed the pathway. In her in-between state, she could almost smell the air, sweet from ripening fruit on the vine, crisp and fresh in the light of the morning sun. The sensations were breathtaking. And painful. Her memory had become so sharp, so photogenic, that the images she called up were more than just vague memories of times past. Instead, they were tangible and meaty; she felt like she was reliving them when they pressed into her consciousness, hearing every sound, feeling every touch. Her memories tortured her with their palpability, smothered her in their truth. She would never again feel the warmth of her mother's embrace, would never feel the coolness of the stream that ran nearby the house she shared with her family coursing over her toes. She understood that. But her memory gave those things back to her to experience all over again. The sensations tore at her like a knife in her heart.

She drifted away into a sleep that was surface and light, yet all consuming. In the distance she heard a sound. A whisper that sounded distorted and far away, as though coming from another apartment. The sound was so faint, she wondered if she heard anything at all.

Keep your promise.

The voice didn't stir her, didn't make her open her eyes to see who was speaking. Some part of her mind knew to whom the voice belonged. It screamed for her to wake up, telling her that he was there, in the room with them—in the room with Jonathan—but she didn't listen to it. The part of her mind that had enfolded itself in the warmth of Jonathan's body, into the life of a living mortal woman, turned a deaf ear to the intrusive warning, to the intruder itself.

But still she heard him whisper softly, like a parent to a napping child.

Keep your promise.

If Jonathan heard the words he didn't show it. His body lay next to hers, deep in sleep and seemingly unaware of the presence. The part of her mind that heard the voice, deep in the recesses of her psyche, thought it was just as well Jonathan slept. It was better that he sleep, keeping his eyes shut, and his mind oblivious to the horror he was about to face than to wake to witness his mortality.

She kept dreaming, ignoring the hollow warning to wake up that sounded in the folds of mind. Her mind fed her associations, both physical and

mental. It showed her the sun and she felt its warmth on her skin. It sent a breeze to flow through her hair and her skin sprung goose bumps in kind. It was starting again and she was helpless to prevent it. This was her memory at play and it was always the same. She shifted in bed as her body twirled in the land of the past, dirt shifting under her feet, leaves rattling in the wind. She filled her lungs with the sweet scent of the air, breathing of it in deep gulps, enjoying the memory for what it was worth; living life again as she had many lifetimes ago.

The trees moved in the wind, whistling their song as each leaf rose and fell, undulating at the whim of the wind. She kept spinning, her eyes shut in the world of her dreams, preferring to feel rather than see, for she knew what lay in the distance. She knew he was there as he always was. Waiting.

He stood beside a gnarled tree, misplaced among the luscious limbs of the mango trees that surrounded it. She stopped spinning and dropped her hands to her sides as she had when they first met. She opened her eyes to the bright summer day and saw him standing beside the tree looking at her with eyes that had seen the four corners of the earth in a casual blink, with eyes that told everything yet revealed nothing. She didn't feel fear, didn't feel the shyness that she might have felt had a boy from her village crept upon her and stared while she twirled unaware, caught up in the beauty of the day. Instead, she felt comfortable, relaxed. As he approached her she regarded him with soft eyes, the way a lover would regard her mate as he returned to their bed. She didn't see the evil etched upon his face, the malice that twisted his mouth, the triumphant glee that danced in his eyes. She saw only him to whom she had given herself. To whom she would soon belong.

Her mind begged her to wake up, to spare her the memory masked in a dream, but she didn't stir. Part of her enjoyed the memories as much as she hated them. Returning to a time when nothing mattered except the love of a mysterious stranger. The innocence, the inhibition she felt then; she cherished the memory of those feelings as much as she did those of her family. That was something she would never admit aloud. Not to anyone. He approached her, his face a cloud of mystery, the way it always was in her memory. She held her ground as he drew closer, the voice inside that told her to run away wrestled into submission by the part of her that embraced the fantasy. She stood silent, waiting for him to speak.

“My dear Zaji, at last.”

He spoke in a voice that was a thousand voices, in tongues that caressed many languages. To some he might have spoken the purest of French, to others Mandarin, but to her he spoke the language of her people in a velvet voice, rolling the words in his mouth, savoring them the way one might a delicacy. He hypnotized her with every inflection, every word.

He came to her as he always did when this memory resurfaced, the memory itself was a primer for him, the main attraction. He appeared as he had when they met in the grove that would witness her metamorphosis. Running the softest of hands along her cheek, he touched her, caressing her skin as if it were pure silk. He spoke in hushed tones, keeping his words between them, burning them into her heart, her very soul. His touch, the feeling of air swirling about them, the surreal texture of the world, seemed as it had then, identical to the day her life changed. But his words were different. She strained to hear him, to truly hear the words he spoke and break through the sensually hypnotic melody his voice carried. His smooth tenor filled her, strummed her senses, making her melt in his arms. She fought against it, somehow knowing that they had transitioned from a memory that replayed itself over and over, torturing her with each beginning, to a new environment, one not quite a dream, but far from waking lucidity. Through the veil of her own desires she could see him smiling coyly, using his lips and eyes to seduce her, knowing she couldn't resist. The part of her that wanted to succumb lurched toward him, pressing her body closer to his. How he toyed with her, making her want him with only a look.

She shut her eyes to break his spell, cutting off their connection so that she could regain her composure. In the recesses of her mind, she heard a voice call to her. The voice was light and airy, juvenile in its innocence, pure in its timbre. It was the voice she possessed years before, when she was still a girl of the world and not the monster she had become.

“Yéyé.” One word was all the little voice that flitted around inside her head uttered, but it cleared the fog surrounding her consciousness. The voice was urgent, firm, solid in the midst of the surrealism of her dream. She knew then what he was planning to do. She knew then, for the first time, that she would never let it happen, no matter what the consequences were.

Baby.

She awoke with a knowledge that both empowered and devastated her. She stared at the space in front of the bed she and Jonathan shared, at the place where he would surely show himself, and cried tears full of sorrow and anguish. She turned to look at Jonathan once more before allowing herself to step into the reality that would change her life, and instantly wished she hadn't. In age he was no more than a boy, but in spirit, he was a wise elder. His face, so peaceful in sleep, would soon be no more than a memory to her. She would never see Jonathan smile again, feel his touch, or taste his kisses. Her mourning of him would be lifelong, eternal.

Zaji. The name given to her at birth by her mother. The name whose meaning she would never be able to realize. Womanhood in the truest sense—physical and mental maturity combined—she would never see in her mortal life. She chuckled at the sentiment as she rose from the bed, preparing for the work ahead. That she had died a child seemed like a cruel joke to a body that felt aged and worn.

Zaji. The name echoed in her head, spoken by a voice she couldn't place. She hadn't used that name since she took the great sleep in her homeland. The night she died, she returned to her grave after a visit to a place she would never again call home. She made herself lay inert for decades, trying to still her heart and stop her breathing. But still she rose, weak and weary from lack of sustenance after years of hiding, years of denying her nature, such as it had become. But not dead, no. On the contrary, she was very much alive. Her senses were heightened; even the minutest of sounds rang loudly in her ears. The cool air that met her when she arose from her grave felt harsh against her skin, like needles penetrating flesh that had been rubbed raw. The air she inhaled seemed to burn the delicate lining of her nostrils. Her discomfort was insufferable, yet she had never felt so full of life. She had never felt so alert, so vibrant, so consumed with hunger. It was then, when her hunger could no longer be contained, that she took her first prey: A pretty girl whose beautiful upturned eyes and trusting smile would never escape Zaji's memory. She knew, as she drank ravenously the blood of an innocent, its metallic tang like sweet nectar caressing her tongue and throat, that she was no longer Zaji, the oldest daughter of Hiji and Mariama of Dahomey. Nothing about her present state resembled the person she had been in the past. Before.

She was forever changed. Tainted. Holding on to that girl, the sweet Zaji who thrived on life and the quest for knowledge, would be impious. Zaji was dead. So she let her go and became someone else. She became Angelique.

The name served her well through the centuries, proving to be as versatile as it was timeless. In recent years she'd opted for the shorter Angie, loosening it up, making it blend in more with the casual nature of the times. She had learned to be a chameleon over the years, changing as the situation dictated, fading into the shadows when necessary. She rarely formed ties with people because she didn't want to let anyone get close. She couldn't. Only those whose deaths were written on the wall knew her true being.

Except Jonathan.

He had known her heart if no other part of her. The Angie that he knew was pure to him, she was everything Zaji had not been allowed to become: A sexual being, a compassionate, worldly woman with needs and desires that stretched beyond those of the flesh. She felt free with Jonathan. Free to love, free to live, free to be real. She hid the truth from him to protect him, not to deceive or lull him into a sense of security and take his life when the time suited her. She genuinely loved Jonathan as she had loved no other. Spilling his blood would be the hardest thing Angie would ever have to do.

Angie laid garbage bags along the floor before she killed him. They were cut open along their seams and made to lay flat to catch the blood that might fall to the floor. Angie anticipated her steps before beginning. She was used to it—the process, the detail. She'd done it many times before. The disposal used to be easier. In times past and in different lands, one didn't have to be so diligent. Covering tracks was not as much of a concern. A body could be left to rot wherever it fell, as long as it wasn't within the confines of a house. The animals would have cleaned and scattered the bones long before the authorities found the body, compromising the evidence they might have been able to gather. The authorities never salvaged enough evidence to be able to charge anyone when that happened, and more often than not, the case remained unsolved. Forgotten. Even the families of the deceased let go of their vendettas after a while. Everything was easier then, but times changed. The police in the United States were far more precise than those in the West Indies. They were employing fingerprinting techniques that Europe had yet to consider. Angie had learned to be careful.

Jonathan slept silently as she worked, oblivious to what lay ahead. After all

of the preparations were made, Angie stood over him one last time. She let her mind wander, thinking of what the last minutes of his life would be like. She would begin to suck his neck, caressing it with her tongue, enticing the jugular vein to show itself. She would bite lightly at first, just enough to make his pulse quicken, to make the blood flow through his veins in torrents. He would rouse then, would reach up to hold her as he enjoyed what he would perceive as an invitation to love making. He would caress her sides, run his hands through her hair, cup her behind as she worked. He would moan as he always did when she kissed his body, his mind floating away with every flick of her tongue. Jonathan would do all of this without opening his eyes. He wouldn't see the determination on her face nor the sadness in her eyes. He wouldn't know terror until the final moment, when it was too late.

Angie's eyes filled with tears again as Jonathan's breathing kept its smooth, steady pace. The fantasy she had entertained of a life with him was fading before her eyes. The fanciful existence of her daydreams was nothing more than a kiss carried on a breeze. She realized then that they would never have been able to be together. It would never have worked. There were too many questions that would have gone unanswered, too many secrets she would have had to keep. Inevitably, he would have asked how she kept her youthful looks while he continued to age—those same looks that beguiled him when he was in his twenties, that would have, undoubtedly, beguiled him then.

Would she be able to stand by and watch as his body failed, or would she force him to drink her blood, tricking him, perhaps, in a moment like this one? Could she, every day for years, avoid being detected while she fed? If Jonathan caught her, would he be able to accept her as she was? Nonsense. No one could be expected to accept such monstrosities. Angie would lose him, one way or the other, if they stayed together. It would have to end at some point, before suspicions were raised, before something was done that couldn't be undone. It had to end while it was still beautiful.

Angie leaned in to begin her work when a voice rose from behind her. Startled, she pulled back from Jonathan and turned to face its owner. Him. The names for him that she held in her mind were a jumble; no one word came through clearly enough to be spoken. She was sure that he did that to her, confusing her thoughts when he appeared so that she would be unable to resist him. She had been teaching herself to ward against him when his mind probed into hers like hot tongs against flesh. She had gotten stronger,

better at keeping her thoughts from him, denying him a view of the world she saw through her eyes. She started the moment she awoke from the great sleep when her only desire was to become invisible, to disappear among the masses, and had been practicing ever since. Still, he was able to find her wherever she went, no matter how far. Still, he tightened his reins around her neck.

He stood motionless, as though he were a statue. His chest neither rose nor fell, for no air entered his lungs.

“Angelique,” he said, rolling the name off his tongue like fine wine. “I like that name. It’s not nearly as nice as Zaji, but it suits you just the same.”

Angie was silent, watching him as he stood in the doorway. The need to protect Jonathan from him overshadowed her anger, her fear.

“But what’s this ‘Angie’ business?” He continued, sucking his teeth. “So trendy. Common. That will never do.”

Angie watched him, her body trembling.

“What’s the matter, Angelique? Not a kind word for me? That isn’t the least bit hospitable.”

“What do you want?” Angie hissed.

He smiled. He had taken on the countenance of an attractive man, African American features in brown sugar skin. He was tall and slender with a muscular build and the most endearing eyes she had ever seen. Any woman seeing him stride on the Harlem sidewalk below would do a double take. Of all the forms he visited her in, this one was the most irresistible to her and he knew it. He played on her weaknesses, unchanged in all her years. He knew how to get what he wanted from her and he wanted something now. And she knew exactly what it was.

“This century certainly suits you, my dear. You’re as brash as the mortals running around in the streets. What happened to my mild-mannered, timid little Zaji?”

He was in front of her, crossing the space between the doorway and the place where she stood in an instant. He extended his hand to caress her cheek. Angie turned away and moved closer to the bed upon which Jonathan lay.

“Why are you here?” She spoke softly, trying not to wake Jonathan.

He eyed her suspiciously, dropping his hands to his sides and pacing the floor. He unzipped the black jacket he wore and revealed a slim figure clad in

a white Oxford shirt and black slacks. The clothes fit him well. She couldn't help but look at the place where the bottom of his shirt met his belt at the top of his pants, imagining the beauty of his pelvic muscle through the material. He was trying to distract her with his movements, so deliberately sensual—a masculine projection of his hips as he took a step, pressing his abdominal muscles against the cloth of his shirt so she might see the outline of his muscles. He wanted her to see him, to desire him so he could break the wall surrounding her thoughts. And she did desire him; she did want to see more of what his body had to offer. But she was resilient.

He walked toward the window to look out at the people below, aimless souls wandering the streets, heading to their next destination, going about their meaningless lives in oblivion. Their very auras called to him, desperate in their naiveté, always looking, always searching for more—bigger, fancier, prettier. The wealth of unattached souls beyond the window enticed him, seduced him like a woman might a man, but he had business to attend to. Angie sensed the conflict raging within him and silently prayed he'd acquiesce to the delicacies outside, but she knew he wouldn't.

She snickered under her breath as she watched him watching her out of the corner of his eye. His brow furrowed in concentration as he attempted to penetrate her mind. But he couldn't break through. He couldn't see the things she had hidden, compartmentalized and stored away. He couldn't see the answer to his question, couldn't sense that she had something to hide. He could only see what she wanted him to see. All of her work had paid off. She suppressed the urge to gloat as he stood by the window.

"I asked why you are here," Angie pressed, feeling stronger, more confident. "Just a visit," he said after a long silence. He strolled toward Angie again, stopping right in front of her, standing so close that he could have kissed her had he wanted to. "Can't I drop in on you from time to time?"

Angie stood silent for a moment, taking time to choose her words before she opened her mouth. She knew why he was standing so close to her. He wanted to smell her breath, her sweat, to see if he could detect fear on it. She swallowed before speaking.

"I'd rather you not." Her voice betrayed her, allowing the slightest quiver at the end of her sentence. She hoped he hadn't noticed, knowing he had. He stood still, motionless as he stared in her eyes, through them, into her very soul, to find the secret she was keeping from him. His eyes were urgent

as he stared at her, inside her, looking. His probing was like a cold, wet finger along her spine. Angie forced herself to keep her breathing even. Jonathan's heavy breathing resounded loudly in the room.

"I'm sure you would," he said, confidence lacing his voice. "We haven't yet gotten to the point where we can enjoy each other's company, have we Angeliqne?" His finger traced the line of his jaw seductively. "We haven't yet begun to share things with one another. And we should, my dear. We are a family. No?" Angie could feel his fingers along her own chin, fondling it absently, though he hadn't raised a hand to touch her. With a smile that depicted both the sensual and the ravenous, he moved his eyes to where Jonathan lay on the bed. He spoke with such certainty, Angie felt her legs shake. "I'm sure you'd like to keep him all to yourself."

With a flick of his wrist, he pulled the cover from Jonathan's body, revealing his nakedness.

"They are so beautiful, aren't they?"

Angie went to Jonathan quickly, covering his body to shield it from view. In her haste, she almost woke him. Her breathing hitched as he changed positions, shifting from his side to his back. His breathing remained steady. He never opened his eyes.

"Is that all you wanted?" Angie spat. "You've seen him. Now go!" The tone of her voice both surprised and frightened her.

He walked toward the door slowly, seeming to mull her question over. She could feel him probing her once more for good measure, finding nothing, and retreating from her mind as quickly as he had come. At the door he sighed and said,

"Things should be different between us, Zaji. I so enjoyed our times together. We could be that way again." His voice was filled with poisonous sincerity, rife with trickery and coercion. Angie felt ill in his presence.

"Never," she said fiercely, the anger within her welling up and flushing her cheeks. "You preyed upon the mind of a child. I will never be that person again, thanks to you. That, I can never forgive."

A smile spread across his face as he felt her anger. In it, he could see the things she tried desperately to conceal. She was as open to him then as an infatuated lover. Satisfied, he said, "I still see you, Zaji. Every part of you. You are mine. Forever."

Angie sucked her teeth and turned away from him. He laughed, the richness

of it filling every corner of the room, every crevice of her mind. She heard him utter, "I see you," though his lips had not moved. A chill spread quickly over her skin.

"Until we meet again, dear Zaji. Beautiful Angelique," he said, the glee in his voice sounding somehow obscene. And then he was gone.

Angie trembled in his wake. She cast her eyes over every crevice of the room, searching for him. It couldn't have been that easy. Though she wanted to believe she had hidden the truth from him, his abrupt departure made her think otherwise. He knew something. Somehow she had let him in and he saw it, at least some portion of what she was trying to hide. He didn't know everything. If he did, he surely would have killed Jonathan and taken her away. He was suspicious of something. She was sure of it.

In a whirlwind, Angie descended upon Jonathan. She could still feel his presence in the room, hanging in the air like smoke. He was watching her. And Jonathan. She needed to work fast before he caught her at her most vulnerable, before he read the grief-filled thoughts that stood on the other side of the wall.

Angie bit into the smooth flesh of Jonathan's neck brutally, abandoning the slow approach she had envisioned. The visit changed everything, took away the time she wanted to spend with Jonathan, removed the luxury of doubt. Jonathan's body bucked against hers as she split his flesh, the spasm controlled only by his muscles. His will had already left him; it had been carried out of his body in the blood that spilled from his wound. Angie cried as she felt Jonathan's body fall limp and still beneath her. His blood tasted bitter to her as no one else's had, but she had to drink it. All of it. Or else he would be ruined, damaged like she was. Or worse. Angie couldn't let that happen, not to Jonathan. The flow of blood from his neck wound slowed, lessening to a stream, and then finally a trickle. In the end, she had to suck deeply, pulling his life's blood from his neck instead of accepting it into her mouth without effort.

Finally, Angie stood and looked down at Jonathan, at the bloody mess she made of him. Blood had spurted out of his neck and run down his chest, had spilled onto the sheet beneath him, saturating it, before dripping onto the bags lining the floor. She smeared it on his supple skin, like a child finger painting on a canvas, her hands moving of their own volition. Jonathan's lifeless eyes looked back at her, seeing but not seeing, judging in

the finality of the ever after, accusatory even in death. She always hated their eyes. The way they stared at her when she stood over them, their dying pleas still reflected in their rigidity. She hated the way their gaze felt on her skin, like a cold, dead hand caressing her neck from the grave, engulfing her in the darkness that was their nightmare.

The sight of his eyes was far worse than any others she had seen. Jonathan was beautiful in death, more so than he had been in life. There was an innocence in him as he lay lifeless on the bed, drained of his blood with his body temperature cooling, that hadn't been present in his living countenance. She thought it obscene that she would see him as attractive in such a state, but she did. He was her love in life and more so in death. She had killed him out of love and drained him out of protection.

Keep your promise.

Angie might have been able to hide the truth from the visitor that time, but she wasn't savvy enough to thwart his suspicion. If she had let Jonathan live, it wouldn't have been long before he tapped into his mind to learn the truth. Jonathan had his own suspicions about her disappearance. She left for seven months without telling him where she was going or where she had been. He almost didn't take Angie back when she returned to Harlem, her bags in hand and a sheepish grin on her face. She had hurt Jonathan and she knew it, but she had to do it. For everyone's sake.

Jonathan's suspicions and disjointed thoughts would have been enough to pique her visitor's interest. He would have probed deeper, farther into Jonathan until his sanity, his entire being, was lost. Angie knew what the visitor wanted. She knew why he had come.

He was the Promise Keeper, there to make sure she kept her promise to him. Angie's tears warmed her face and neck as they flowed freely from her. She leaned over Jonathan to smell his scent one last time. Her nipples grazed his cooling flesh as she hovered over his still body. Angie's sobs were deep, emanating from her diaphragm, from the depths of her soul. They were the sounds of sadness, the sounds of loss, the sounds of despair.

"Démon!" she screamed as they closed in on her. She chose to revert back to the language she had used long ago in another place and time, to call out the name of her accuser. They burst into the room, thrusting the door open with such force it banged against the wall behind it and bent the doorstep against the molding. They were so loud, so arrogant, catching her

with Jonathan's blood on her hands. So triumphant.

“De a lo towe csi ouhe!” she said, her tongue curling around the words she spoke in her native tongue, a language she hadn't spoken since she was a girl. Her intonation was guttural and her eyes were fierce as she growled her command. *Get your hands off me!*

But it wasn't the policemen who stood cautiously in the doorway, timid even with their guns waving, confused by the mixture of fear and adrenaline that coursed through their veins, that made her call out with such hatred. It was the one who stood behind them, silent and unseen, as though he were an apparition. He might very well have been invisible to the men in the room, their sweat rich with trepidation as they rushed towards her, yanking her arms behind her back and forcing her away from that which used to be Jonathan Clay. Her only love. Her precious prey. But to Angie, he stood out like a light in the dead of night. The Promise Keeper was there with her as surely as he had been when she came to be, as surely as he would be when she ceased to exist.

To the Promise Keeper, she offered a malevolent smile. How spiteful he was! The arrogance that dwelled within him licked out like fire to caress her face in its heat, yet she refused to turn her head. She glared at him, defied his eyes that commanded her to shy away, to cower, to give in. She would not reveal her secret. She would not succumb to him, no matter what the price. *Maybe*, she thought with a resignation she had never known, *the price will be my salvation.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

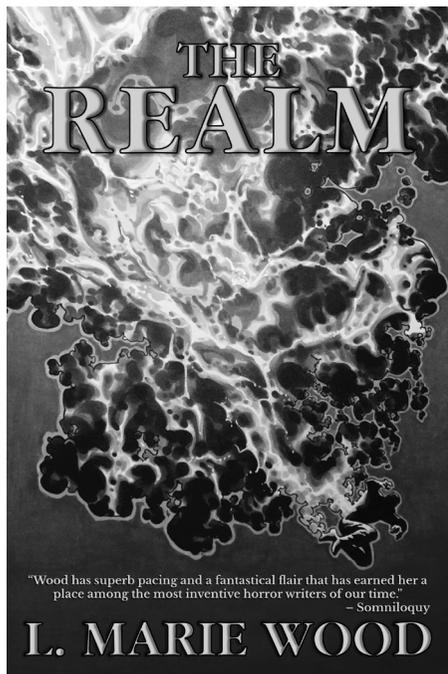


L. Marie Wood is an award-winning psychological horror author and screenwriter. She won the Golden Stake Award for her novel *The Promise Keeper* and Best Horror and Best Afrofuturism/Horror/Sci-Fi screenplay awards at several film festivals.

An Active member of the HWA, Wood's short fiction has been published in *Slay: Stories of the Vampire Noire* and the Bram Stoker Finalist anthology, *Sycorax's Daughters*.

Learn more about her at www.lmariewood.com or join the discussion on Twitter at [@LMarieWood1](https://twitter.com/LMarieWood1) or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/LMarieWood.

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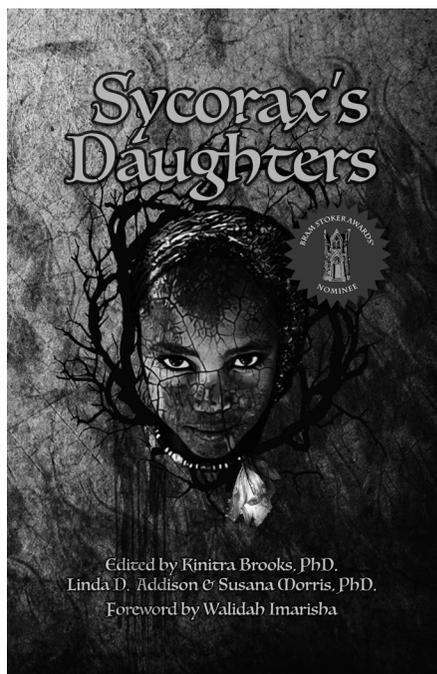
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