

Borrowed Souls

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Night Shade Books
New York

CHAPTER ONE

Callie Delgado needed a soul.

Her brother had been kidnapped, his captors were blackmailing her, and here she was, outside one of the most unusual pawn shops in all of Gem City, about to rent one. She just needed to force herself to walk the twenty steps to the Soul Charmer's front door. The one wedged in a dirty, rundown building on a dirty, rundown street in the dirty, rundown part of town. It was the last place she wanted to be, but the one place she had to go.

Fate was kind of a dick like that.

Downtown Gem City rolled up by 6 p.m.; she was alone with her thoughts. She batted an empty soda can with the tip of her shoe. It skittered along the concrete, banging into a nearby dumpster overflowing with the rotting remnants of life. The kind of life her brother would cease to have if she didn't walk in that door and let the Soul Charmer put another person's soul into her body.

What was she doing here? She knew the answer of course, but pride—well, that and a healthy dose of fear—swelled at the base of her skull anyways. What she was about to do was something she'd sworn she never would. It was dangerous, morally corrupt, and maybe worst of all, made her feel like if she went through with it, she wouldn't any better than the junkies and criminals she'd spent her entire life trying to run away from. The thought made her queasy, like she was covered in a coating of grease she'd never scrub away.

But Josh needed her, and family came first. So Callie walked up the steps to the front door of the shop. A faded, gold “Charmer” was painted at eye-level. Flecks of peeling black paint stuck to her damp palm as she pushed the door open. The musk of rotting wood found its way to her nose, along with the warm decay of day-old fast food and cheap beer.

It didn’t smell any better inside the tiny shop. The Nag Champa burning in a glass tray near the door couldn’t cover the stench. It was a reminder of what happened here—dirty, dank things, ones she’d been avoiding all of her life.

The thin carpet squelched beneath her boots. The sound sidled along her skin to spiral up her spine. It was almost enough to make her turn back, walk out the door, and hope everything with her brother turned out for the best.

Dark wood beams peeked out from between tapestries, their gold and burgundy threads muted by the years. If a seedy pawnshop were to set up in a bankrupt church, it would probably look a lot like this, she thought. All that was missing was the “Cash for Souls” sign. She stepped up to the front counter, which was as dilapidated as everything else in the room. The only thing on it was a small, tarnished bell.

Callie clamped her teeth on her tongue as she reached out. A flash of pain centered her. She had to do this. She had no choice. The bell chimed out loudly when she rang it, and she rubbed her palm against her coat in response.

A tiny man, barely five feet tall, emerged from a rear doorway covered in heavy velvet. Words like filthy, dangerous, and wicked rumbled in the back of Callie’s mind. She’d heard plenty of warnings about this man. His eyes narrowed upon seeing her, then lit up like lights on a Christmas tree. He looked just like the type of man who would lie about his height, claiming

he'd shrunken over the years. The feeling fit the Soul Charmer like a glove. Like everyone said: he was a sketchy fuck.

“What can I do for you, sweetheart?” His grandfather looks—the guy wore green pajamas—didn't disguise the prurient way his mouth cradled the pet name.

Telling him off and storming out of the store sounded damn appealing, but Callie needed what he was selling a whole lot more than he needed her business. “A soul.”

He laughed, and her stomach pitched. She swallowed the fear-and-bile cocktail. She knew the shame of what she was doing would come later. “You're going to have to be more specific.”

Moving her weight to her right foot didn't make the words come any faster than shifting back to the left did. She opened her mouth, only to close it again. Her good sense held the reply hostage. “I need one for just a day or two.”

She needed to sound confident, like this was no big deal, a business transaction she did every day, even if the opposite were true. That would be a good start, right?

“A short timer, yes. Not a problem.” His lips parted, revealing two shiny silver teeth in the front. The rest were missing. “The question is: do you want something *pure*?”

The way his tongue curled around the word made her skin crawl. Every individual sin weighed a soul down, if you believed the Cortean Catholic church—and there were a lot of believers in Gem City. If a pure soul had been pawned to the Charmer, it meant horrible things for its original owner. Callie wasn't about to pile on extra shit for that person to shovel. No, she didn't want to taint a clean soul, even if it was a borrowed one. She was after the non-celestial perks anyway. “Purity isn't an issue.”

He cocked his head to the side until his ear nearly grazed his shoulder, staring at her. The shop was quiet, long enough to make her think she'd blown her shot at a soul already. "Purity is always an issue. Your soul, for example, would fetch a nice purse. I could arrange—"

"I'm not here to sell."

He lifted his hands in faux supplication. "I meant no harm."

"Fine. I need an average soul for a couple of days." *Average* soul. She shook herself.

What did that even mean?

"That's understandable. If I were you, I wouldn't want someone too tainted curling up in that little body of yours either."

"Are we going to do this or not?" she almost spat at him. Was this how he treated all of his customers? Callie's irritation was boiling up inside her, but disgusting as the Soul Charmer was, she couldn't afford for him to say no. She had to bite her tongue. She looked around the dank room, avoiding his gaze.

"I don't see a rate menu," she finally said, gesturing toward the counter between them, careful not to touch it.

"How much do you have?"

Great. Renting a soul was just like buying pot for the first time. Now, though, wasn't the time to negotiate; she couldn't risk not getting the goods. "\$200."

He shook his head. "Not enough. What else you got?"

What *did* she have? A car with a hole in the muffler, an apartment with an inconsistent heater, and a brother who fucked up so royally his baby sister had to do a job for some hustler in order to keep his stupid ass alive. A job that required this soul. A soul that wouldn't raise

questions, one that could cover her crimes, and one that could withstand the taint of the filthy things she'd have to do to save Josh.

She shrugged. "Not much."

"You could pawn that pretty soul—"

"We already covered that." Irritation, and her need to get the fuck out of his shop as soon as possible, steeled her spine.

"No need to get testy." His tongue darted to wet his lips, and in that moment Callie swore his green pajamas sprouted scales. Nothing like doing business with the cold blooded.

"Unless you've got layaway, I've got \$200."

"You can work off the extra."

The list of things she wouldn't do to help her brother was short, and renting a soul was already on the outer limits of her comfort zone. She aimed for Zen breathing, and waited for him to take the offer back, shooting him a death glare.

He rolled his eyes. "Not like *that*. I can see your soul, remember?"

He was bored. Too bad. She was roiling with fear, guilt and an extreme need for a shower, but she wasn't getting all preachy about it.

"Then what?"

"A collector."

"Like I'm supposed to know what that is."

"Not everyone is good about returning the souls they barter for in this shop. I employ people to retrieve them for me."

"Employ? You mean like a job."

"Yes. It's a common term."

She didn't need a job; she needed a soul. "Either you want my money or you don't."

"You don't have money."

If only that weren't true. Callie turned and strode toward the door, realizing as she left that she was about to fail Josh. She'd do almost anything for him, but this? Working for the Charmer was too much—too terrifying, if she were being honest—and too close to hitting rock bottom.

The Charmer called after her but she was already out the door, into the alleyway. The wind whirled around her, cold and unforgiving. Her hair whipped her face. Lashes she'd earned. Five minutes earlier, she'd expected to leave the shop loaded down from the guilt of having rented a soul. The weight of *not* renting one was turning out to be worse.

"Okay, I'll give you a partner," the Charmer's voice called out behind her, his tone hardened, like it really was his final offer.

Sometimes people say something so idiotic it nearly stops your heart, and all you can do is wait for your brain to recover and jumpstart the whole operation. That was Callie: a statue in denim. She stopped walking, and turned slowly to face him. "Do I look like the enforcer type?"

"I didn't say anything about collecting funds. Or injuring anyone."

"Yes, because I'm sure a polite 'Please return that soul' is all it will take."

"You're lucky I can see your soul," he muttered loud enough to avoid losing the words to the wind.

"Not interested." She shuffled forward again. She'd find another way to save Josh, she told herself. There had to be another way than this, right?

"I'll give you a partner who can handle the—ahem—heavy lifting. Your soul intrigues me. I think you might have a knack for this work."

“I don’t *want* a ‘knack’ for this.”

“It’s an easy job. You can keep your \$200, *and* you’ll get your soul.”

Follow around some collections guy and she’d get the soul she needed to save Josh? The Charmer eyed her—and her soul—with too much leering interest, but he wasn’t the first creep she’d met. She’d had worse offers before, and besides, deep down she knew she didn’t have fuckall in the way of options.

“How long?” she asked, like it mattered.

“You collect with the partner of my choosing for six weeks, and I’ll let you rent a soul for one day.”

“Six weeks? No.” She could probably earn the money in a legit way in six weeks. Plus, Josh didn’t have that kind of time.

“You need me for the soul.” He wasn’t wrong.

Before Callie knew what she was doing, she began haggling.

“Two weeks.” It was her final offer. This was it or she was out.

The Soul Charmer sighed, and gave Callie one last hard look. “Agreed. Two weeks of work for a one-day rental. You get it after your services are finished.”

Fourteen measly days. A fortnight. Hopefully Ford wasn’t going to do anything to Josh between now and then. And anyway, he was the one who’d ordered her to specifically use the Charmer’s services in the first place.

Making the deal felt like the aftermath of downing a shot of bottom-shelf vodka. “Two weeks, and then I get a soul.”

The edges of the Soul Charmer’s lips curled up slowly, lasciviously. Somehow, Callie managed to keep down her lunch. He gestured back to the store’s front door. A flash of gold on

his hand drew her attention. How had he managed to get bulky gold rings over those knuckles? They looked like tree trunk knots.

“C’mon then. . .” he started, then trailed off. “I should probably know the name of my newest employee?”

“Callie,” she said, uneasy about him having even *that* much of her personal information.

She re-entered his store, but held back as he shuffled toward the worn black curtain he’d parted to enter the room through. He held the curtain open, but didn’t repeat his earlier request. The low ceiling, slathered with a cheap black lacquer, closed in as Callie met his gaze. Guess the job had already started.

The air thickened in the doorway. The step through was like wading in tar. She pushed herself forward, but suddenly her breath locked in her chest. She cleared the doorway, gasping, only to be blasted by a wall of pure heat. It was as though her coat had been incinerated and electricity danced on her bare skin. Callie all but fell into the next room, forcing her hands to stay tight to her side, avoiding the temptation to reach out and grab onto some unknown surface for balance. She finally found her footing, and staggered to a stop. *What the hell was that?*

The Soul Charmer looked back curiously. A momentary brightness in his eyes was gone before Callie could be sure she’d even seen it.

“Don’t mind the door,” he said, making his way across the anteroom and opened another door—this one made of a honeyed wood. Warm light began to spill into the chamber.

“The door?” Callie’s voice was distant as she focused on the rows upon rows of picture frames hanging on the walls at her right and left. The glass panes were cloudy, but her gut told her she probably didn’t want to see the obscured faces anyway.

“Keeps other magic from my workspace,” he explained. “Come, come.” He waved his gnarled hand at her. She didn’t flinch this time.

Other magic? The only known magic was soul magic, she thought.

“The pictures do that?”

“Part of the pawn process. Those who choose to lend their souls for my services are recorded in there. They depart when their term is complete.” Eight lamps filled the 200-square-foot space in the next room, their brightness doubled by the reflection from the pristine tile floor. Gone were the dark wood and aged tapestries pandering to the church. These walls were lined with shelves, obsidian jars stacked to the edges on each one. If she closed her eyes, the astringent in the air brought Callie back to the ICU. Memories welled against her lower eyelids; bringing up broken dreams she’d spent a long time trying to forget.

The Charmer settled behind an aged oak desk and began digging through a lower drawer. Callie shoved her hands in her pockets absentmindedly, and for a moment her coat stretched, showing off more of her figure than she ever wanted to reveal to him. She quickly removed them.

“This—” he finally said, holding up a silver flask with a rich, black stone inlay “—you will need to take with you.”

Callie reached for it, but he pulled it back at the last moment, out of her reach.

“Press the open mouth of the jar to the person’s sternum, nice and low.” He tapped two fingers against his own. “That will transfer the soul to the vessel. Then all you have to do is return it to me.”

“So where’s the on button?” she asked sarcastically.

He ignored her.

“Does it have to be a flask?” She wasn’t averse to booze, but it was a little too close to alcoholic territory than she cared to venture.

“This one. Yes.”

“Why do you need *me* to do this? I mean, I’m not renegeing on the deal, but couldn’t your normal guy touch a flask to people just fine?”

“No.”

Callie waited for him to elaborate, but her nerves were too shot to push it and the Charmer clearly didn’t want to divulge more. She reached out her hand again. “Fine, then.”

This time he obliged. Her fingers slid over the obsidian inlay on the front of the container. The cool stone didn’t heat with her touch, but her fingertips tingled all the same.

The Charmer smiled, flashing silver. “Yes, you’ll do. Derek will meet you at your home tomorrow night.”

“I’ll meet him *here*.”

The Charmer glared, but didn’t argue. “4 p.m. Don’t be late.”

Did she really have a choice?