

# THE EXCHANGE

CHARMAINE PAULS



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SEVEREST INKS

The characters and incidents depicted in this book are fictitious and a product of the author's imagination. Any similarity to actual persons is purely coincidental.

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A Severest Inks Book

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"How does your exchange program work," Pattie leaned over the counter, squinting to read his nametag, "Erick?"

"Where did you hear about it?" His gaze drifted to her sweater.

Pattie straightened and pulled the lapels of her summer coat together. "A friend told me."

His eyelashes lifted lazily. "I'm asking because we've removed the sign on the door."

"What does it matter where I've heard it from? Are you doing it, or not?"

If he was affected by her tone, he didn't show it. Instead, he stared at her in that way men who are sure of themselves do.

She felt the color rising in her neck.

He was beautiful when he smiled, and he did so slowly, as if he knew it and wanted the impression to last. "Officially we shouldn't be running the program any longer, but I could make an exception for you, if..."

"If what?"

"If you have a good reason."

A customer approached, carrying four books under his arm. The shopper tapped his foot and drummed his fingers on the pile of books.

Pattie stepped aside.

"Let me take that for you, sir." Erick extended his hand. "Thank you."

The man moved into Pattie's vacated space.

"Please, can you wait over here, sir? The lady hasn't finished."

The man, wearing a gray raincoat and Newman tie, something Pattie could imagine Walter in, opened his mouth, but Erick said, "Thank you, sir," and turned back to Pattie. "You were saying?"

She smoothed down her windblown hair.

The man with the tie looked at her like she had jumped the queue.

Swallowing, she pushed her hands deep into her pockets, and motioned with her elbow to the gray coat. "It's quite alright to—"

"To finish what you were saying," Erick said.

Pattie glanced at the man behind her. "Well, as I said, I want to know about the exchange thingy."

Erick crossed his arms. Pattie couldn't help but notice his biceps.

"You leave your books with us, and we loan it to an interested customer for a two week period, after which we return the books to you. You can choose the same amount of books that you offer to put on loan from our second-hand books in that part of the store." He nodded toward the room next to the coffee nook.

"And if you don't find someone interested in the books?"

"Then we leave them in the second-hand library section."

The man in the gray coat looked at the ceiling and started whistling.

"How much per book?"

"Ten rand each."

"Ten rand? A good book costs two hundred rand. For twenty books I can buy another one, new."

A heavy sigh escaped the throat with the expensive tie.

"But with our exchange program, for two hundred rand you would have read twenty books instead of one. And you don't have to worry about cluttering your house with books you don't have space for. That's the most common complaint. No more book space. Isn't it so?"

"If the scheme is so clever, why don't you do it officially anymore?"

A drumroll of thunder announced the storm. Through the window Pattie saw lightning running like a scar across the sky.

"I've run out of space. See the irony?" he said.

"I can go to the library for free."

"The library doesn't exist any longer, love. Budget cuts. Everyone knows that."

The man stopped whistling. "Excuse me, but do you mind just ringing up my books? I'm in a hurry."

"As I said, the lady was first, sir. And she's not done."

The man gaped at Erick, his face turning red. "Shove your books up yours and fuck you. I'll go buy them somewhere else." He stormed off and slammed the door. The bell rang like a deranged wind chime.

Pattie pointed with her thumb to the door. "Oh ... your customer ... sorry..."

"Don't worry. He was rude. Anyway, he'll be back."

"How do you know?"

He pointed at one of the books. "My store is the only one in town that stocks this one."

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Aren't you?"

Pattie cleared her throat. "Well, can I bring my books in tomorrow?"

"Do you want to have coffee with me?"

For a moment there was a stunned silence. Even the thunder was quiet.

"I'm married," Pattie exclaimed when she found her voice again.

"Will you consider an exchange for three weeks?"

She blinked. "What?"

His grin was devilish. "The books? If you consider the exchange for three weeks, I may just make an exception. For you. But you have to have a good reason."

"It's ... for my book club."

"If you'll advertise my store at your club, it's a deal."

"I'll ... I'll think about it. I mean ... I'll talk to the girls. Alright then. Thanks."

She went for the door, pushing instead of pulling, trapping herself for another second inside.

"Wait."

Pattie turned, flushed.

"What's your name?"

"Patricia Norman. Pattie."

"See you tomorrow, Patricia."

"We'll see."

Pattie escaped into the cool air. It had started raining.

The two sat in Sandton Square near the fountain in Nel's favourite restaurant.

Nel flicked her fingers at the passing waiter. "Another two Chardonnays." She crossed her legs and studied Pattie.

"What?" Pattie said, shrugging.

"I don't know." Nel tilted her head. "It sounds like the bookstore guy flirted with you and you don't want to admit you liked it. What's wrong with a compliment?"

Pattie twisted her wedding band around her finger. "Do you really think there's nothing wrong with it?"