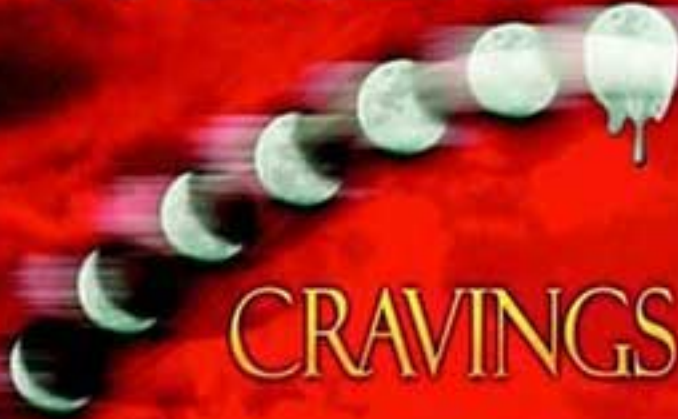


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ORIGINALY HUMAN

from CRAVINGS Anthology

By

Eileen Wilks

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ORIGINALLY HUMAN



Eileen Wilks

Chapter 1



Helen?

Too dignified. I've never been terribly dignified.

Rachel?

A pretty name... it didn't feel right, though. I wasn't in the mood for Rachel. I paused, digging my toes into the sand. Overhead the sky was clear, its black dome fuzzed by the lights ahead. Galveston isn't large, but tourists like a place that's lively at night. I do, too, but prefer to live outside the city proper.

Beside me the great, briny mother was in a quiet mood, her waves lapping at the sand like curled cats' tongues. That made me think of my neighbor, Mrs. Jenks—a nice woman, but with no talent for naming cats. She had three. The one she called Mona was a particular favorite of mine, sleek and black, who referred to herself as Wind-Who-Leaves-the-Grasses-Silent. Quite a mouthful in English, I'll admit.

Well, what about Mona? A better name for a woman than a cat.

No, it was too close to Molly, which was my current name. I'd be forever signing checks wrong.

I sighed and started walking again. Walking in sand is good for the calf muscles.

Doing it at night with the ocean whispering beside you is good for the soul.

I'll admit to being vain about my legs. Otherwise I'm on the nice side of average, with my weight holding steady at fashionable-plus-fifteen and a thoroughly Irish face, complete with freckles and a pug nose. More motherly than cute these days, I suppose; I let my hair go white several years ago. But my legs are still excellent.

Not that I was out walking for the sake of my muscle tone tonight. My calves were in better shape than my soul.

Self-pity is so wearing. Unattractive, too. Really, I needed to settle on a name. It was time to move on. Just last night Sam had commented again on how I never seemed to change.

Dear Sam. I sighed again. I would miss him. And several of the others, too, and Galveston itself. I loved the historic section and the view, breakfast at The Phoenix and seafood at Gaido's. I lived so close to the ocean that the salt-and-sea scent drifted in my window, and I could indulge in the private splendor of walking the beach at night...

I was lucky, I reminded myself. Most women wouldn't feel safe alone on the beach at three in the morning. There have always been predators. But some would say that's what I am, too. I'm not easy to harm.

I'd reached the narrow road that divided the public beach from the RV park where I live. Not that the owners call it an RV park, mind. It's a mobile-living village. That's the name, in fact: Beachside Village. I suppose a touch of pretension is inevitable if you want to charge such outlandish prices to rent a spot, and the location is wonderful—outside the city proper, right on the ocean. I stepped onto the soft asphalt, still warm from the summer sun.

There was a soft sound, sort of a *pop-whoosh!* And a naked man lay at my feet.

A beautiful, unconscious, *bleeding* naked man.

Oh, dear.

The air turned crisp and my hearing sharpened as those trusty fight-or-flight chemicals did their thing. But there was no one to fight—thank goodness—and I couldn't simply run away.

I do not need this, I told myself as I knelt on the soft, tacky asphalt. My heart was galloping. I had no idea where he had come from or how he'd arrived, but those slashes across his chest, belly, and legs looked intentional. Someone did not like this man. I should head home immediately and call 911.

I touched his throat, found a pulse, and exhaled in relief.

The moon was nearly full, and I have excellent night vision. He was a breathtaking man, with skin so pale the sun might never have touched it. Pale everywhere, too, not just in the usual places. His hair was short, very dark, and almost as curly as my own. His eyelashes were absurdly long, giving him the look of a sleeping child... a look quite at odds with one of the loveliest male bodies I've ever seen. And I am something of a connoisseur of male bodies.

And the slashes on that lovely chest, flat stomach, and muscular thighs were slowly closing. Blood barely oozed now.

Whoever he was, he wasn't entirely human. Not as most people counted such things, anyway. And though I loved Texas, there was no denying most people here were not very tolerant of those of the Blood. Not that he was lupus or Faerie or anything else I recognized, but who else could heal a wound so quickly?

One of the Old Ones could.

I shivered and shut a mental door before a name could slip into my thoughts. No point in taking any chances of disturbing Their sleep. Besides, one of Them wouldn't be so poky about healing a few cuts. The bleeding had stopped, but the

gashes remained, a couple quite deep—though not, thankfully, the one in his stomach.

One of Them could have made those cuts, though. And zapped Their victim here, or anywhere else They pleased. I did not need to be part of this. I'd call 911 and let them deal—

He opened his eyes.

They were silver in the moonlight, silver framed by a dark fringe of lashes. And so blank that I was sure there was no one home. The ache of that realization was sharp enough to surprise a small, sad "Oh" from me.

All at once he was *there*, his gaze focused and intent, latching on to mine as if I'd tossed him a lifeline. "*Ke hu rækken?*" he whispered.

I am so weak, I thought, annoyed. Long eyelashes and a body to die for, and I lose all sense. I wasn't going to call 911. "I do hope you speak English."

"Enn... glish." He repeated the word as if he were holding it in his mouth, testing it for familiarity. "Yes. I can speak... English. This is England?"

"No, this is Galveston Island. It's in Texas," I added when he looked blank. His accent was decidedly British—upper crust. "U.S.A.? Never mind. I'm going to help you, but I need to know who hurt you. And if they're likely to be close behind."

"Who..." A frown snapped down. He lifted a hand to his side, touched one of the wounds, winced. He looked at his hand, the gory fingertips. "I'm damaged."

"Yes, but not, I think, fatally. Though heaven knows I'm not a doctor. But a doctor would probably notify the police. You *were* attacked, weren't you?"

He nodded slowly. "Who..." he said again, then stopped, looking baffled. "I'm bleeding."

"Not as much as you were. Look, do you want me to call an ambulance?"

"Am... bulance. An emergency vehicle."

I nodded encouragingly. "Yes, you know—ambulances, doctors, nurses, the hospital, all that. They could take care of you there."

"No." He was suddenly decisive. "No hospital."

I sighed. "In that case, can you walk?"

He considered that briefly. "I think so."

"My motor home isn't far—you can see it from here, the Winnebago with the palm tree and the purple outbuilding. Oh, never mind. You can't see the color now, can you?" I was blithering, which annoyed me. "We need to get you out of sight. Someone might come along—an ordinary someone who would be startled by a naked, wounded man. Or the someone who attacked you. Will he, she, or it be able to follow you here?"

"I don't know."

Not much help. "Well, let's see if we can make it to my place. Please try to be quiet. Mr. Stanhope—he's my neighbor on the west—wakes up if anyone sneezes, and I'd just as soon not have to explain you."

He nodded. Looking as if the motion required every ounce of concentration he could summon, he shifted onto his side, braced himself awkwardly with his hands, and pushed into a sitting position.

He wobbled. I slipped an arm around him. "Dizzy?"

"Not... used to this. It hurts."

"I know. I'm sorry. Can you stand?"

"I will try."

Getting him vertical might have been funny if I'd been watching instead of

participating. All those lovely muscles worked fine, but he was too woozy to know what to do with them. We did end up on our feet, though, with my arm around his waist where I wouldn't touch any of his wounds, and his feet set wide, like a toddler unsure of his balance.

He didn't feel like a toddler. A decided sexual buzz warmed me, and it wasn't entirely due to the hard male body pressed against my side. He fairly hummed with energy, some breed of magic I'd never encountered before.

He was also only about three inches taller than me, which was a surprise. Not only is everyone taller than I am these days, but he'd looked big lying down. I suppose it was something about the way he was proportioned—perfectly. And packed solid. Very solid. I'm stronger than I look, but if I had to support too much of his weight we might both end up on the ground.

I turned my head and looked into eyes only inches from mine. The skin around those eyes was tight and bleached. "You okay?"

"I'm unsure what okay means in this context. I can proceed. I want me out of sight, too."

"Let's do it."

A short chain-link fence runs all the way around the Village. Three years ago I persuaded management to let me put in a gate at my plot so I didn't have to go the long way around to get to the beach. By the time we reached that gate, neither of us was breathing normally.

He was in pain. I was aroused. "Not far now," I assured him. I was going to have to behave myself, that was all there was to it. I glanced at his face, taut and damp with sweat. He looked to be in his mid-to-late twenties—too young to think of me sexually unless I wanted him to.

Or got careless. I sighed. This was not going to be easy. "I don't have a thing you

can wear."

He stared at me, offended. "I am trying... to breathe. And not bleed. You are... worried about clothing?"

I glanced down. The deep gash in his thigh had started oozing again, which wasn't surprising. I could see bone. "If we can get to the tree, you can lean against it while I get the door open."

He grunted. We lurched forward. Getting through the narrow gate was tricky, but we made it and I more or less propped him against the palm. He looked dreadful. A couple more gashes had started bleeding again, which probably meant he was losing control, perhaps close to passing out. He leaned against the trunk, eyes closed, chest heaving. "I liked... lying down better. You have a place... I can lie down?"

"You can have my bed. We just have to get you there." I hurried to the nearest door—which, with the way my Winnebago was parked, meant the driver's door. I didn't think he was up to trekking around to the other side.

He was going to make a mess of my leather seat, I thought sadly as I dug in the pocket of my shorts for my keyless remote.

The lock clicked before I punched it. I froze.

"What is it?" His voice was low, hoarse.

I turned slowly, my eyes searching the shadows. "Someone unlocked the door before I could."

"Oh." He sounded apologetic. "That might have been me. I am wishing very much to be inside."

"You aren't sure?" My voice may have been a little shrill.

"I'm not used to this place. The energies are different than... they're different."

He paused. "Who are you, and why are you helping me?"

Suspicion would be natural, even healthy, under the circumstance. But he sounded more curious than wary. I opened the door, quickly shut off the dome light, and returned to him. "My name is Molly Brown. I'm helping you because you're hurt. Also," I admitted in a flash of honesty, "because I've been rather bored lately."

"You are curious about me." Some fugitive emotion roughened his voice.

Disgust? Satisfaction?

"Very. I'll save most of my questions until I get you inside, but—"

"I can't answer your questions."

"You'll have to, if you want my help."

"I cannot," he said hollowly.

The despair in his voice tugged at me. I fought to hold firm against it. "I don't want your life history, but I do need to know who you are, where you came from, who's after you and why."

"I don't know."

"You don't know who tried to kill you?"

"I don't know any of it."

I believed him. I'm a fool sometimes, the same as everyone else, but I believed the crushed bewilderment in his voice. I didn't say anything more, just slid my arm around his waist again.

"You will help anyway?" That was hope I heard now—and oh, how painful hope can be, in all its uncertainty.

"Looks like." I sighed over my folly and supported him the last few feet to my home.

Chapter 2



WE got him up the step and into the driver's seat, where he discovered that he liked sitting better than standing, too. But he'd be visible up there, not to mention difficult to work on, so we heaved him onto his feet again and staggered together into my little bedroom, where he fell on the bed and promptly passed out.

I stood there getting my breath back, and not due to unrequited lust this time. He was heavy. Then I tossed a blanket over him, grabbed a smudging stick and the bucket I kept under the sink, and headed back out. He'd left a good deal of blood on the road. He'd probably also left various magical traces. I wouldn't be able to get rid of all the blood or other traces, but I could make them less conspicuous.

Twenty minutes later I'd washed most of the blood off the asphalt and tossed dirt on top of what remained to disguise it. I'd smudged all the way around my little lot, quietly calling up what protections I knew. I'm not Gifted, but there are some things even the magic-blind can do, and the sage I used had been prepared and blessed by a Wiccan High Priestess.

I couldn't help feeling like the little piggy in the straw house, though. I suspected that whoever—whatever?—had clawed up my guest could blow away my puny protections with one big, bad huff.

He was still out cold when I came back in, poor boy. I hated to wake him, but,

magic or no magic, those wounds had to be cleaned. He needed fluids, too. But maybe I should call Erin first—my Wiccan friend. I was going to need help. No, better wait until I knew who or what I was dealing with. I needed answers. Or maybe—

Stop it! I told myself sternly. But the body sometimes reveals what we'd rather not know. The hand I lifted to rub my forehead was unsteady, and my insides were gripped by a fine vibration, like a dry leaf aquiver in the wind just before it quits its home on the tree.

Why was I doing this? For all I knew, the unconscious man in my bed was the bad guy, not the victim. Or some complicated mingling of both.

I could do something about that particular uncertainty, at least. I picked up the phone. "Erin?" I said to the sleepy voice on the other end. "This is Molly." For a little while longer, anyway.

"Do you know what time it is?" she muttered. There was a sleepy voice in the background—Erin's husband, Jack, an accountant with a wicked laugh and no trace of a Gift. A good man, though he holds on to trump too long. Erin told him to go back to sleep, then spoke to me. "What is it?"

"I need help."

Now she was crisp, wide awake. "Immediately?"

"No, in the daylight will be fine. Um... I've an unexpected guest, mysterious and somewhat damaged. I'd like you to meet him."

Silence, then a sigh. "I suppose you don't want to tell me more over the phone."

"I'd rather not," I said apologetically. It's very difficult to listen in on a call magically—technology is better at that sort of thing. But it is possible. "Oh, and could you bring me some more of that cleansing mixture you made for me? The one with rue, broom, and agrimony." Which, of course, are not cleansing herbs.

They were components of a spell granting true vision, used to see through lies. Used by a Wiccan High Priestess, however, the spell could reveal a good deal more.

"Look for me about nine-thirty." She was grim. "I'd be there earlier, but my car's in the shop. I'll have to take Jack to work so I can use his."

"I owe you."

"You know perfectly well it's the other way around. Molly, for heaven's sake, what have you gotten yourself into?"

"I don't know yet," I said, eyeing the man in my bed—who had woken and was eyeing me back. "But it promises to be interesting. I'll see you in a few hours." I disconnected and put the phone down.

In the soft light from my bedside lamp, my guest's eyes were a clear, pale blue. Quite striking. Also filled with suspicion. "To whom were you speaking?"

Wasn't that just like a man? Earlier he'd trusted for no particular reason, now he suspected when there was little cause—and little remedy, if he'd been right. "No one says 'to whom' these days," I told him, heading for my tiny bathroom, where I collected peroxide and gauze and dampened a washcloth. "You'll need to learn more colloquial speech if you stay here long."

"Whom is the object of the preposition." He frowned as I returned, either at having his grammar corrected or at the prospect of having his wounds cleaned.

"How else would one say it?"

"Most people would say, 'Who were you talking to?' Which is technically incorrect, but language changes."

"Very well. Who were you talking to?"

"A friend. She'll do you no harm, as long as you mean no harm. This, however, is going to hurt." I poured peroxide into the deep slash on his thigh and started

mopping up the dried blood around it.

His breath hissed between his teeth. He grabbed my wrist. "Stop that!"

I have always wanted to be able to raise one eyebrow, but mine only move in tandem. I lifted them. "Are you certain you can prevent infection?"

"Is that what..." His eyebrows drew together in a frustrated pleat. "There are other ways to prevent infection."

"You didn't want to see a doctor, remember? You're stuck with me, and this is what I know to do."

Grudgingly he nodded and released my wrist. I sat on the bed beside him.

The next few minutes were harder on him than me. I learned long ago how to move into a mental room where sympathy can't intrude. It's a white, private place, nowhere I'd want to live permanently, but there are times when sympathy is a drawback. Besides, I saw no point in both of us suffering.

There were four slashes in his flesh—one in the lower chest, another on the right side of his belly, and two in his thigh. He was lucky. The upper wounds were shallow, slicing through skin and a bit of muscle but leaving his innards intact. One of the thigh wounds was no more than a deep scratch. The other...

I sighed, unhappy with what I saw with the blood cleaned away. "How good are you at healing? The muscle is badly damaged, and I'm not sure my sewing skills are up to putting it back together right."

"Sewing? You wish to sew my muscle?"

"I'll have to, unless you can do something."

He was silent, but with an inward look that suggested he was checking things out in his own way. A moment later, the wound began to close.

It was fascinating to watch. Flesh touched flesh as if hands were gently urging

the sides of the wound together, then gradually meshed into unity like dough kneaded back into a single lump. And a delicious energy surged through me, conveyed from him to me through my hand on his leg. My fingers tingled. I licked my lips.

And snatched my hand back. He was a guest, not a meal. Shaken, I let go of my hold on the white, interior space. The slow knitting of his flesh was still fascinating, but my vision was colored by compassion now.

When he finished, the gash was nearly closed and his face was the color of mushrooms. I patted his knee in a motherly way. "Very impressive."

His voice was flat with fatigue. "I cannot do the rest now."

"None of the others are as deep. They'll heal on their own, I imagine." I stood.

"Now, if you can stay awake a little longer, you need fluids. Since I can't provide an IV, you'll have to drink as much as you can. Water or orange juice?"

He licked his lips. "Water. Molly?"

I waited.

"What are you?"

I could have pretended I didn't know what he was talking about. That was my first impulse. He was weak, lost, sundered even from his name. He wouldn't be hard to deceive. I could have asked what he meant, then unraveled whatever chain of logic had led him to ask that question. I'm good at that. I have to be. And the thought of how he'd react to the truth ached like a fresh bruise laid down over old wounds.

But those blue eyes held steady on me, and there was something about them...

"I'm a succubus."

His eyes widened.

"Cursed, not damned," I added firmly. "A long time ago, by someone who knew what She was doing when it came to curses. I'm not a demon. Originally, I was human."

"Ah." The tension went out of his face, and his eyelids drooped. "That explains it. Better hurry... with water." His speech was slurring as he let go of whatever force of will had been keeping him awake. He smiled at me. "Thank you, Molly."

Chapter 3



HE liked television. And he loved the remote.

At ten-twenty the next morning he was propped up on my couch, channel surfing madly. He'd woken when Erin arrived and had insisted on moving there, over my objections. But he was doing amazingly well.

Erin was outside, readying herself and the spell. She wouldn't perform it out there—between dogs, children, and nosy neighbors that simply wasn't practical. But she needed earth beneath her feet for the preparation.

I'd shown her the spot where my guest arrived last night. Erin had hmm'd and frowned, nodding now and then like a doctor examining a patient, then sent me away.

I was in my galley—it's too small to be called a kitchen—putting together a *bouquet garni* for the chicken simmering on the stove. The connection between chicken soup and healing may not have been established scientifically, but I'm sure it exists.

"Arthur?" I suggested. "Adam? Aillen?"

He looked away from the television, a sudden smile lighting his face. "You find me handsome?"

"You know Gaelic!" I exclaimed. Another puzzle piece, but I had no idea what to do with it. He looked Celtic, but that lovely, upper-crust British accent... I shook my head and plucked a bit of thyme from the pot on the counter by the window. "Of course I find you handsome. You're gorgeous. You know that. Even if you don't remember, you've seen yourself in the mirror." Before occupying my couch, he'd asked where he could relieve himself. I'd had to explain the plumbing.

He touched his jaw as if reminding himself of the face he hadn't recognized. "It seemed to be a pleasing face, but standards of beauty vary widely."

"I wonder if you talk that way in your native language. Have you remembered any more of it?"

"Any more?"

"You said something to me in another language when you first arrived."

His brows knit. "I don't remember. What way do I talk?"

"Correctly. Formally. Did any of those names ring a bell?"

"Ring a bell... oh. You wonder if they are familiar. No, not in a personal way."

An interesting distinction. The names were familiar, but they didn't belong to him. "Well, we have to call you something. Would you object to being Michael for now?"

"Michael... Hebrew for 'gift from God.'" He cocked a single eyebrow at me—which he could do, blast him. "You consider me a blessing."

The idiot male was *flirting* with me. "What an odd memory you have. You know the meaning of Irish and Hebrew names, but not your own."

That stole the smile from his face. I tried not to feel guilty. I tied the ends of the cheesecloth together and lowered the herbs into the simmering pot, catching it in

place with the lid. Keeping my back to him so I wouldn't see the hurt I caused, I said, "Michael is also the name of a militant archangel. Evil is capable of masquerading as good, but generally it prefers not to annoy Michael. One aligned with evil would not be comfortable borrowing Michael's name."

"I am not evil."

"I don't think so, but we don't know what you are. That's what Erin will try to find out." Reluctantly, I abandoned cowardice and turned to face him. "Do you understand what a succubus is?"

"The Latin term for a female demon who draws life from her victims through sexual intercourse. But you said you were cursed into your condition, which makes sense." He smiled suddenly, blindingly. "You aren't evil, either."

"Nor am I good. Michael—"

"You do like that name for me. Very well. I will be Michael."

I could feel myself softening—inside, where it was dangerous, and outside, my muscles growing lax and warm with wanting. So I was sharp to him. "Listen to me. I look like a middle-aged woman, and I am one. A good deal more than middle-aged, actually. But I'm also a succubus, and I live off the energy of others. The energy of men, to be specific, which I acquire through sex."

"Do you not eat?" he asked, curious. "It smells in here as if you enjoy food."

My breath huffed out. He didn't seem to be getting the point. "I eat, but I don't have to. Other people need food and drink to live, and enjoy sex. I need sex to live, and enjoy food and drink."

"I'm glad you didn't lose those pleasures when you were cursed. Do you need to sup in your fashion daily, the same as others need to eat every day?"

"Not every day. Michael, you're either painfully naive or deliberately obtuse. I'm trying to explain why you must not flirt with me. I am not safe."

"You're worried about me!" He was amazed.

I rolled my eyes. The young always think themselves indestructible, but Michael should know better, after what he'd been through. But then, he didn't remember what he'd been through. "Yes," I said. "I'm worried about you."

For an instant his face softened, and I glimpsed in his eyes the ragged edges of adult vulnerability, not the untried trust of youth, as if my simple words had sliced deep into a place that didn't bear touching. "You needn't," he said, and the edges closed up again, hiding whatever memories that deep place held. "You can take nothing from me I don't wish to give."

"What if you wished to give?" My posture shifted as the energy gathered around me, swirling, aching... "I could make you want to give, Michael. You'd want to give... anything."

The door opened. "Molly!" Erin said sharply.

I snapped back. Then just stood there, disoriented, like a stooping hawk suddenly shoved from its plummet. The breath I drew was ragged. "Well," I said as briskly as I could, "what did you learn?"

"Not much." She came in, eyeing me. Erin is a tall woman, bony by my standards but fashionably slender to her generation. Her face was made for drama, with a wide mouth, sharp cheekbones, and a beak of a nose that she considers unlovely but which I quite envy for its distinction. She's supposed to wear glasses, but often forgets or leaves them somewhere. Her hair is a fabulous red bush that nearly reaches her waist. Today she wore it pulled back from her face with a stretchy headband that matched her apple-green t-shirt.

T-shirts are one of the best things about the current age. And bras. Bras have corsets beat all to pieces. "You must have learned something."

She shrugged. "Node energy isn't my area. You knew he came in at a node?"

I nodded. I'm not so utterly insensitive I'd be unaware of a node so close to where I've lived for twelve years. One of the ley lines from it runs beneath my RV. "What else?"

"He's drawing from it."

I glanced at Michael. "Of course," he said. "I could have told you that, had you asked. How else could I heal?"

"And," Erin added, "he came from a long ways away. I couldn't trace him back—the energies are too foreign—but there's a feeling of a great gulf."

I nodded. "I knew he wasn't from this world."

"Not..." She shook her head. "That isn't possible."

Erin is a very good witch and far wiser than I was at her age. But she is young, and thus prone to certainty. "Obviously it's possible, since he's here."

She looked at Michael, eyes wide and suddenly wary.

"Another world," he said thoughtfully, his voice so much deeper than Erin's light soprano. "That makes sense. I don't seem to know much about this one."

"Supposedly you don't remember anything about any others, either," Erin said sharply.

"I don't remember anything, no. But I think perhaps I know a great deal."

"Is that supposed to make sense?" Scowling, she slung her bag off her shoulder and set it on the table of my little dinette. The bag holds her basic ritual apparatus, and is made of heavy black silk. I'd given it to her for Samhain last year. "The realms haven't been close enough to cross between in over five hundred years. Except for Faerie," she added. "And that's closed to mortals. And you aren't Faerie."

"No," he said agreeably. "I'm fairly sure I'm not."

"What about Dis? The place Christians call hell. It leaks into our world sometimes."

"I'm not demonic, either. No more than Molly is."

She looked startled.

"I told him," I admitted. "Not the details, but it did seem he'd a right to know, if he's to stay with me awhile. Now, let's try applying a little reason. Magic is useful, but logic has its place. Michael said—"

"He's remembered his name?" Her eyebrows made a skeptical comment on that.

"I named him, for now."

Erin's eyes narrowed, for names and naming have power, so I hurried on before whatever lecture was simmering could boil over into speech.

"As I was saying, according to Michael, the energies here aren't what he's used to. And he tastes different, unlike anything I've ever—"

"Molly! He's injured."

"I haven't been nibbling," I said, testy. "But I've touched him. I'm sure I've never encountered his like before—and my experience covers rather a lot of ground."

She nodded reluctantly.

"I don't know what he is, but I know some things he isn't. He's not Gifted, not in the sense we use that term, at least. He's not Lupus. And he's not a sorcerer. Last night he unlocked my door without being aware he'd done it, and sorcery requires focus. So does telekinesis. Poltergeists, though—"

"He is *so* not a poltergeist."

"Will you stop interrupting? Of course he isn't. But he may be from the same place, or a similar realm."

"Or he may be lying."

"No." That came from Michael, who spoke with simple assurance. "I do not lie."

Erin's lip curled. "What, you're from the angelic realm?"

I suspected I knew what lay behind Erin's, antagonism, and it wasn't getting us anywhere. I spoke firmly. "That's what you're going to find out, I hope. Are you ready?"

Her brow pleated. "I don't know, Molly. I'm tied to this world—my knowledge, power, and rituals are all of this realm. He uses node magic, not earth magic. If he really is from elsewhere, how much will I be able to learn?"

"Ritual magic is practiced in forty-two realms," Michael said suddenly. "Many are variants of Wicca. Depending on how one defines the parameters, between eight and seventeen religiously oriented magical systems bear strong similarities to it."

"Forty-two realms?" Erin shook her head. "There aren't that many."

"Where did that come from?" I asked.

Frustration was plain in his eyes. "I don't know. It was just there, but when I try to follow it... nothing." He spread his hands. "I, too, want very much to know what manner of being I am."

Erin studied him a moment, and I suspected she was using other senses than sight—including, I hoped, the compassionate sense of the heart. Maybe she was finally considering the possibility that he was telling the truth. Erin has a problem with good-looking men. "I'll do what I can," she said at last, and began to unpack her bag.

The tradition Erin follows requires nudity only for major workings, when the god and goddess are called rather than simply included in the rite. This was a spell, not an act of worship—though the two are not entirely distinct with Wicca—so she and I kept our clothes on. Michael sat up on the couch with the blanket

providing a modesty drape. Not that he had any, from what I'd seen. Modesty, that is. He was well provided with what the blanket was there to conceal.

Erin took out her athame, a glass vial, a black candle, a little pouch, and two silver bowls, each smaller than a cupped hand. "Stand to the south," she said, nodding at me. "No, a little more to your right. That's good. Michael—you have no objection to that name?"

"I'm content with it."

"I've set wards outside Molly's home for protection, and will cast a circle around the three of us to contain the spell. It's vital that you not break the circle once I've set it. You break the circle by stepping outside."

He looked insulted. "Actually it is a sphere, not a circle, but I understand you are using the accustomed term. What type of spell will you be casting?"

"A basic truth spell. It will urge but not compel the truth from you. If you knowingly speak false, I'll see it. With your permission, after a few questions I'll take the spell deeper. That can feel uncomfortable, intrusive. I'll be trying to bring truth up from wherever it's hiding inside you."

He considered that, then nodded. "A great many things have hurt since I woke and saw Molly. I can abide a little discomfort in order to learn what I am and whether I brought danger here with me."

"Also *who* you are, I hope."

"I am now Michael. As I said, I am content with that."

He looked at me then, and his smile burst over me with the pungent sweetness of summer berries.

I was going to have to be *very* careful.

Erin doesn't use a compass. The direction of the cardinal points is as obvious to

her as sunlight is to others. She put her bag on the floor and knelt beside it, then removed her portable altar—a hand-cut, hand-polished square of oak about ten inches on a side and one inch thick. It went on the floor between myself and Michael. On it she set her tools. The two silver bowls were filled with water and salt—salt for the earth, and the north; water for the west. She put a stick of incense in the altar's east quadrant for air, and a candle in the south for fire. Then she waved her hand.

Like a faucet springing a drip, the candle's wick acquired a flame. A thread of smoke drifted up from the incense. She took up her athame and turned in a slow circle, her lips moving, pointing outward.

Michael's eyes followed, not Erin or the athame, but the direction she pointed. I knew he must be looking at the energies she roused, and envied him. I've always wanted to see the colors of magic.

Erin circled three times, then put her athame on the altar with the knife's tip pointing at Michael. She opened the vial, dampened her finger with the contents and touched each of her eyelids. Then she stepped forward and did the same with each of Michael's lips. "As I will, so mote it be."

His eyes widened, though whether he was startled by her touch or some other sensation I couldn't tell.

She nodded, satisfied. "Molly, you ask the questions."

"All right." I licked my own lips, nervous for no good reason. "Michael, do you remember anything of your life from before you arrived here?"

"The first thing I remember is your face. Your skin looked very soft and your eyes were sad. I couldn't see what color they were, and that was strange to me—I think I'm not used to losing colors in the dark. There was a pucker between your eyebrows. I like your eyebrows," he added. "They have a pretty curve."

The eyebrows he'd complimented shot up. Those weren't the curves most men noticed. "You don't know your name from before?"

"No."

"Where do you come from?"

"I don't know. I don't remember it, but it was different from this place. But I do know about this place."

"What do you know?"

"Languages. Facts. Not always the most useful facts," he said ruefully. "And I don't always know that I know until something floats up."

I exchanged a glance with Erin. She nodded, telling me what I was already sure of. He wasn't lying.

She spoke, her voice cool and soothing. "I'm going to take the spell deeper now, Michael. Molly will continue asking questions, but I'll be helping you find the answers."

He nodded fractionally. His eyes never left mine.

"Who gave you those wounds?" I asked.

"I..." He licked his lips. "She? Yes, I think... I was escaping. That made her angry."

"What is she?"

"I don't... that's not coming. But I have the idea she's strong. Very strong."

"Who is she?"

A fine dew of sweat sheened his forehead. "I don't know."

"What do you know about how you got here?"

"They were... someone was... they want to catch me. Keep me."

"Not to kill you?"

"No, they want to—want to—" His head swiveled towards Erin. "Don't!" And he heaved himself sideways, one arm outstretched like a drowning swimmer reaching desperately for rescue.

The circle broke.

Chapter 4



THE *pop!* was like clearing your ears during an airplane's descent with a jaw-cracking yawn, except that it happened under my solar plexus. It should have been similar for Erin, though with more of a sting.

It should *not* have made her eyes roll back in her head as she sank to the floor in a faint.

I jumped and managed to keep her from hitting her head, ending with both of us on the floor with her head in my lap. Michael rolled off the couch so awkwardly I thought something had happened to him, too. But no, he'd simply made an odd dismount, for he fetched up on the other side of Erin's lax body and sat, staring at her in appalled fascination. "I didn't do it," he said. "I didn't mean to do it."

"Breaking the circle shouldn't have harmed her." I checked her pulse. It was strong and steady, thank goodness.

"No, it wasn't that. But it wasn't me, either—at least, it came through me, but I didn't will it. Maybe..." He put his hands on either side of her face and focused intently on her.

I looked at him sharply. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to fix her. Be quiet."

Should I let him try to repair whatever he'd inadvertently damaged? Or prevent him from doing more harm? Before I could decide, Erin blinked herself back to us. "What... Molly?" She put a hand to her temple. "I have such a headache. What happened?"

"I don't know. Michael broke the circle, and you collapsed."

"Michael? Who's Michael? And what," she demanded, "am I doing lying on the floor with my head in your lap?"

"You don't remember?"

She shook her head.

I considered going back to bed.

"The amnesia should be temporary," Michael said. "I think."

"You probably can't remember."

"I believe that's sarcasm."

"Good call."

Erin sat up, pushing her hair out of her face. Her headband had come off. "The last I remember, you'd woken me up at a godawful hour to ask for help. How did —"

Someone knocked on my door. We all jolted.

"Michael, get on the couch and look like an invalid," I said, scrambling to my feet.

"What does an invalid look like?"

"Pale. You've got that part down, so just lie still and pull the blanket up over you. Make sure your wounds and genitals are hidden. Erin—"

"Not wearing a stitch, is he?" She watched Michael's beautiful backside as he moved to the couch. I couldn't blame her for finding the sight distracting. "But

I'm clothed, so we weren't performing a ceremony."

"No, we—" The knocking came again, louder. "Be right there!" I called. "Erin, I know you need answers, but for now pretend you're here to help me with my nephew Michael, who's recovering from a mysterious fever. I thought he'd been cursed, which is why I called you." I headed for the door.

"You don't have a nephew," she informed me.

"That's a fiction," Michael said. "We are supposed to fool whoever is at the door." He pulled the blanket over himself and lay down as stiff and straight if he'd been en-coffined. "Do I look ill?"

Erin was staring at him. "If you had a fever, there wouldn't be anything mysterious about it. Not with those wounds. What—"

"Shh! Michael, until our visitor leaves, speak Gaelic." I jerked the door open and sang out a cheery, "Good morning!" to the stranger on my stoop.

He was alone, so he wasn't from the Mormons. Probably not a salesman, either, not in that suit—gray wool, not top-of-the-line but not shabby, either. Either a Baptist or a business clone, I concluded. Probably the latter. Houston was only forty-five minutes away, and the dress-for-successers there wore suits in spite of our subtropical weather. This was not a testament to endurance; they simply never experienced more than a nibble of it, moving as they did between air-conditioned house, air-conditioned car, and tall, chilly office building.

Or maybe they were icing down the parking garages now, too. "Such nice weather we're having," I told him.

"Lovely," he agreed politely. He was about thirty, with seriously thick lenses on his gold-rimmed glasses. "I need to speak with you a few minutes, ma'am."

"This isn't a good time. Have they started air-conditioning the parking garages yet?"

"Uh... not to my knowledge. Perhaps I should introduce myself." He reached into a breast pocket, then held out a leather case. "Agent Rawlins. FBI."

Going back to bed was sounding better all the time. "A real FBI agent," I said weakly. "How exciting. Are you looking for kidnapers? Terrorists? The Mob?"

"Not today. May I come in?"

"Oh, dear. I don't *think* my nephew is contagious anymore..."

"Pete?" Erin said from behind me. "Is that you?"

The professionally stern face startled. "Lady? I mean—Erin?"

"*Ná hinis faic dhó,*" said the naked man on my couch.

I sighed and stood aside. "Never mind, Michael. Either someone here has some very odd karma, or God is feeling playful. It seems Agent Rawlins is in Erin's coven."

Chapter 5



"THANK you, ma'am." Pete took the mug of coffee I held out. He was sitting on one of the bench seats at my dinette, looking uncomfortable. "Lady—Erin—I need to know why you're here."

"So do I," she said, accepting her mug from me.

He blinked.

"You performed a truth spell on Michael," I told her, settling cross-legged beside Michael on the couch—which put me next to Pete as well, since my couch butts up against the dinette on one side. My quarters are small. "He has amnesia, too, but rather more thoroughly than you."

"You learned I was telling the truth about that," Michael said.

I nodded. "And then you took the spell deeper, trying to unearth those buried memories. But something went wrong. He broke the circle—"

"I was trying to stop the—the—I can't find the word," he said, frustrated. "It slapped Erin away and she passed out. It's supposed to protect me, keep me from being read without permission."

Erin's brows drew down. "I had your permission."

"You remember!" I cried.

"Some of it," she said grudgingly, and sighed. "Most of it, I suppose. I'm pretty sure he's not evil, not inherently. But he's barricaded like crazy. I never saw such shields." She sipped from her mug. "Molly, you make the best coffee. The fumes alone are curing my headache."

"I helped." Michael was pleased.

Pete was lost. "Who are you?"

"Michael."

"Last name?"

"Not yet." He looked at me inquiringly. "Do you wish to gift me with one?"

"We'll worry about that later. Pete—"

"I'm here as Agent Rawlins."

"Don't be stuffy," Erin told him. "We have a situation here. We could use some help. Probably it would be best if you started by telling us why you're here."

Pete frowned at his coffee. "I can't tell you that."

"You're putting him in a difficult position, Erin," I said. "He owes you truth and all reasonable assistance, but he has a duty to the FBI, too. Pete, perhaps you could ask me whatever you came to ask, and I'll be a difficult witness or informant or whatever and insist on knowing more before I answer. Then we can trade information. Will that work?"

He started laughing. It transformed his face, waking a spark of interest in me. I hadn't supped, as Michael put it, in a couple days. Not long enough to be a problem normally, but my appetite had been roused by Michael's presence. And Pete was really quite attractive when he forgot to wear his official face...

Erin poked me in the ribs.

Pete shook his head, still smiling. "I've fallen down the rabbit hole, haven't I?"

Okay, we'll give it a try, though I can't promise to tell you everything."

"That's all right." I leaned towards him and patted his hand. "I doubt we'll tell you everything, either."

PETE was quite forthcoming about himself. He'd been born into a Wiccan family, but had inherited only a modest Gift—little more, he said, than many people unknowingly possessed. But that little had been well-trained, which made him valuable to the FBI. All of which Erin already knew, so his frankness didn't earn him any return information.

He was much vaguer about his reason for knocking on my door. He was speaking to everyone at the Village, he said, because of a report of possible sorcerous activity. He glanced at Erin when he said that, troubled.

"For goodness sakes, Erin didn't do it," I said. "As you ought to know. Not that there has there been any sorcery—at least, a node was involved, which I suppose is what you mean. But that isn't sorcery in and of itself. The current legal definition is absurdly broad."

"How is sorcery defined?" Michael asked curiously.

Pete cleared his throat. "Sorcery is magic that is sourced outside the performer."

I grimaced. "An accountant's way of seeing the world. Follow the funding, ignore everything else." Technically, the law would consider me a sorcerer—if it admitted I existed, which it doesn't. Which is ridiculous. My abilities and disabilities are innate, not learned.

"There was a time when all forms of magic were illegal," Erin said dryly. "As certain of my relatives could have testified, had they survived the flames. It's hard to argue against outlawing sorcery, though."

"All of it?" Michael was startled. "You mean that all forms of sorcery are illegal

here?"

"Sorcery is black magic," Pete said firmly. "The blackest."

Michael looked confused. Apparently the bits of knowledge he could remember about our world didn't include much in the way of history.

"Most people associate sorcery strictly with death magic," I explained. "Which, of course, some sorcerers have practiced, especially since the Codex Arcanum was lost during the Purge, preventing them from—"

"Lost?" He sat bolt upright. "The Codex?"

Pete's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Schoolchildren learn about the Purge in the third grade."

Michael didn't answer. His face was blank, his attention turned inward like one who has been dealt a great shock.

"He isn't from here," I told our FBI agent, and went on to explain, sorting out what needed to be shared, what kept close, as I went. For example, I didn't mention my nature. That was none of his business—and I doubt he would have believed me, not without proof. According to the best authorities, I'm not possible. Nor did I tell him about the snippets Erin had unearthed before she passed out. Which left Pete with the story of a man who appeared out of nowhere, naked, amnesiac, and wounded. A man not from our world.

He didn't buy it. He saw the wounds, so he accepted that part. He also accepted that Michael wasn't lying, because Erin had tested him. But he considered most of our account a mixture of conjecture, confusion, and delusion.

Michael was less offended by this than I. "Delusion is a reasonable explanation, from your point of view. You are interested in facts, not subjective analyses of the situation."

"But there's more than opinion involved," I objected. "There *was* a burst of nodal energy when you arrived. The Unit must have noticed that and—"

"Wait a minute," Pete said sharply. "I didn't say anything about a unit."

He'd just confirmed my suspicions. That vague "report of sorcerous activities" had come from the tiny branch of the FBI charged with investigating magical crimes. "I forgot," I said apologetically. "The Unit is supposed to be hush-hush, isn't it? I shouldn't have said anything."

"You shouldn't *know* anything."

"I meet a lot of people." I waved a hand vaguely.

"I don't know about a unit," Michael said. "I'm not sure what the FBI is, either, but I've made some guesses. It seems to be a bureaucratic entity which investigates sorcery, espionage, terrorism, and the Mob. But why is the Mob identified by a definite article? Is there one mob that is distinct from all others?"

Pete undertook that explanation. I went after more coffee, thinking hard. I'd been too forthcoming. While Pete might discount most of our story, he'd report it—and that report would find its way to the Unit. I didn't know much about that small, secretive group, certainly not enough to wager Michael's life on their good intentions. Besides, even good intentions can misfire.

Well, I could seduce Pete. Men are extraordinarily suggestible when I turn up the power. But that would embarrass my friends and cause problems for Pete later, when the effect wore off.

Maybe I should crank up the disbelief factor. A few comments about flying saucers, for example, or the entity I'd been channeling... "What?" I said, my head swiveling back towards the others. "What did you say about the Azá?"

"You've heard of them?" Pete was surprised.

"Who are they?" Erin asked.

He shrugged. "A cult. Bit fanatical. They're new here, though they've been around in England and Ireland for awhile. They've been known to source their rituals on death magic—animal, of course, but a nasty habit and quite illegal, so we keep an eye on them. Like most cults, they claim to possess ancient wisdom. Theirs is a mishmash, supposedly Egyptian in origin, but they dress up in black pajamas like a bunch of ninjas. They worship some goddess no one's ever heard of, name of—"

"Never mind that," I said quickly. "Why did you mention them?"

He really was a nice man. He smiled, and it was meant to be soothing, not condescending. "No need to be alarmed. I just need to be informed if any of them show up. Someone in their organization is sensitive to node activity, you see. They believe their goddess speaks to them that way. So whenever there's a disturbance, they hustle out, try to set up their rites on the spot. Which, as I said, sometimes include illegal practices, so we want to know if they turn up."

My choices had narrowed drastically, so I did what I had to. "Pete," I said, letting my voice turn softer, slightly breathy. "I think they're already here." I gazed into his eyes. Such a rich, pretty brown they were behind the lenses of his glasses. I'd seen them alight with laughter and I remembered that, and how attractive he'd been then. "Are they dangerous?"

He moved towards me. "It's all right." His voice had gone husky, but I doubt he noticed. "You're not in any danger, Molly."

Erin's voice came sharply. "Stop that."

"Let her be." Michael's voice surprised me. It was firm, the kind of voice one automatically obeys. "She knows what she's doing."

Pete started to turn, frowning. I turned up the power, but carefully—I wanted him protective, not ravenous—and laid a hand on his arm. "I'm frightened."

He put his hand over mine. "You're safe, Molly. I won't let... ah, tell me why you think they're here."

I described two odd-looking fellows in black pajamas who, I said, had been lurking around the Village earlier this morning. I was frightened, but willing to be reassured. He was captivated.

A little too captivated. He scarcely knew the others were present—Erin with her disapproving frown, Michael with an expression of extreme interest. "You'll want to let your superiors know right away," I suggested, looking up into Pete's eyes.

"Yes..." He was holding my hand, and started to stroke it. "Molly—"

"About the Azá," I said firmly, and pulled my hand away. "You need to make your report about *them*." I stressed the last, hoping he'd forget to report about everything else—at least for a little while.

He blinked. "Yes. Yes, of course. Molly, I... this is sudden, but I'd like to call you."

I smiled sadly. "Of course, Pete. You have my number."

I got him to the door. "Don't worry about the Azá," he said gently, worried that I might be worried. "We've checked them out thoroughly. Their rites are harmless—except to the animals, of course. The energy they gather that way is all directed towards their goddess, who doesn't exist."

I had to try. "They aren't harmless, Pete. Be careful. Please be careful. And don't say Her name."

"Her?"

"Their goddess."

He didn't believe me, of course. "We'll be watching them," he assured me. "Don't

worry."

As soon as I shut the door on him, Erin demanded, "What the bloody blazes did you do that for?"

"I had to," I said wearily. "The effect will wear off in a day or so."

Michael spoke. "What about these Azá you saw? They are trouble?"

"They are very much trouble, but I didn't see any of them." I headed for the galley, poured out the last of the coffee, and rinsed the pot. My eyes fell on the little yellow pot that held my thyme. I picked it up and saw a face... a little girl with pigtails, glasses, and a smile wide as the Mississippi. I've never had children and never will, but three times I've taken one to raise. The first time it was war that killed my borrowed son, and grief nearly destroyed me. I did things then I'd rather not think about. My second child was broken by age, crippled in body and mind while I was still young and strong.

I'd vowed never to raise another child.

Ginny had made me break my vow. Her parents had been killed in the Great Storm, the hurricane that leveled Galveston in 1900, killing over six thousand people. They had been my neighbors and my friends, and I'd been unable to save them.

But I'd saved Ginny. I'd taken her to raise as my own, against all better sense. And had never regretted it.

She was gone now—grown up, grown old, and buried.

But I still had the pot she'd made me when she was ten. The pot and the memories. And, I thought with a smile, a dear friend in her great-granddaughter.

Who was appalled with me. "Tell me you didn't just lie to the FBI," Erin demanded.

"Can't do that without telling another lie." If I'd known the Azá had crossed the ocean... well, I know now. I rinsed the coffeepot. "Erin, I'm sorry. I have to leave."

Erin's face is so expressive. I saw anger fade to irritation, puzzlement, distress.

"You don't mean that you need to run to the store."

I shook my head. "I have to leave Galveston. Could you pick up some clothes for Michael? Jeans, a couple t-shirts, shoes, underwear." I cast an experienced eye over him. "Thirty-thirty-one for the jeans, I think."

"I'm going with you?" Michael rose from the couch and stood there in all his glory.

"Yes," I said. "Oh, yes. They'll be after you."

He scowled. "You are leaving because of me?"

"I've been planning to leave for some time. This just moves up the timetable."

Erin grabbed my arm. "Why? We don't know if anyone's even looking for Michael. This isn't the way to handle things. It's not like you to rush off half-cocked, Molly. I know you've talked about moving on soon, but not like this. Not this fast."

I looked at her dear face and let the hurt rip through me. Partings have never gotten easy. "I have to," I told her gently. "The goddess Pete almost named? She's quite real. I've met her, though it's been awhile... about three hundred years. She's the one who cursed me."

Chapter 6



MICHAEL and I left the island shortly after seven o'clock that evening.

The causeway stretching between Galveston and the mainland is man-made. Like a long umbilical cord, it holds fast to its feckless offspring—a mother refusing to release her child to a separate fate. The bay was a ruffled blue mosaic on either side as we crossed from child to parent, and the sun rode low in the sky on our left. Traffic was light.

"Do you realize," Michael said, awed, "that this was all done without magic? All of it—the bridge, the roads and buildings... everything."

"Ah—yes. I knew that." I didn't look at him. Michael wasn't quite as distracting clothed, but his thighs gave the crisp new jeans a lovely form, and the t-shirt Erin had bought him was the color of his eyes—a paler blue than the ocean, but just as unfathomable.

Best to pay attention to driving my rig. It handled beautifully, but I'd driven it very little since purchasing it last year to replace my old one. Not that I'd bought it in my own name. I'd been planning to leave for some time, but I'd kept putting it off...

"I should have realized that," he muttered, his attention fixed on the Powerbook in his lap. Michael liked my laptop even better than television. "Sorcery is illegal

here, you said." He shook his head. "Strange. Very strange."

"I guess magic is pretty easily come by in your realm."

"Mmm," he said, lost once more to cyberspace.

Michael had so much to learn about this world. After Erin left to buy clothes for him, he'd done another healing on himself. He'd come out of that popping with questions. More questions than I had time to answer—or the patience, frankly—and many I couldn't answer. So I'd handed him my laptop and shown him how to Google. He'd picked up the basics quickly, though he had to hunt-and-peck on the keyboard. I'd warned him not to believe everything he read, and he'd vanished into cyberspace while I packed up my life.

He was connected through my cell phone now. Yesterday I would have worried about the charges he was piling up; Molly Brown didn't have much money. But I wasn't Molly Brown anymore.

My fingers drummed once on the steering wheel. "For heaven's sake, shut that thing off and look at the ocean before it's a blue smear in the rearview mirror. Who knows how long it will be before you see it again?"

Suddenly those eyes were focused entirely on me. He closed the laptop. "Will it be a long time before you see it again, Molly?"

"Probably." A very long time. I'd returned to Galveston once, and doubted I would ever go back again. It hurt too much. Places changed. People changed even more... except for me.

"Your friend was upset by your leaving."

"I told her." Already we'd left the causeway. Bayou Vista, a subdivision with all the houses on stilts, was on our left. Ahead lay wetlands. "I told Erin a long time ago that one day I'd have to leave. People grow suspicious if you don't age."

"You'd be in danger if people suspected your nature. I understand that. Yet you

told Erin about yourself. And me," he added thoughtfully.

"You needed to know, and you have to hide your nature, too. You aren't likely to give me away. Erin..." Already the memory hurt. Time would soften that, I knew. Eventually. "I didn't tell her. She figured it out."

"How? You're careful. You must be, or you wouldn't have survived. I've read some history now," he said, giving the laptop a pat. "This world has been hard on anyone able to use magic, but especially on those of the Blood."

I snorted. "True, but I'm not of the Blood."

"Of course you are. You may not have started out that way, but you are now."

"But those of the Blood *do* start out that way. They're born to it."

He was amazed. "You don't know, do you? I didn't find anything on the Internet about it, but I thought surely... some things are such common knowledge that no one bothers to write them down."

"What are you talking about?"

"Molly, originally you were completely of your world. The curse changed that. Now you're of more than one realm. That's really all it means to be 'of the Blood'—that you're inherently of more than one realm."

"You are not making any sense."

He shook his head, as baffled by me as I was by him. "What do you think magic *is*?"

"I... the Church teaches that it's evil, a contravention of God's laws. Most people don't believe that these days, but... I guess I don't know," I admitted. "It's like sunlight. It just is."

"Yet people in your world study sunlight and try to discern its nature. They're called physicists."

"You've absorbed an awful lot from the Internet in one day."

"I am an excellent researcher."

"Modest, too."

"Pardon?"

"Never mind. I suppose there are people who study the nature of magic?"

"Yes. They're called sorcerers. Not the most trustworthy beings," he admitted.

"Though there are exceptions, sorcerers are known more for obsession than altruism. They can cause great havoc. But so, too, have your physicists caused havoc with their splitting of the atom."

"True. So what is magic?"

"One theory holds that it is the stuff between the realms, the current they swim in. Others believe it's the energy created by the realms' interaction. That magic is the friction caused by their, ah, rubbing against each other."

"But they're pulling away from each other, not rubbing up together!"

He made a disgusted noise. "I should expect that sort of thinking from a place that outlawed all sorcery. The realms shift, yes. Constantly. There are theories about this movement, but no one truly knows how or why they move. For some reason, your realm seems to connect to very few others. I believe it must be in... call it a backwater. A stagnant place."

"I think you just called my world a swamp."

He flashed me a grin. "I wouldn't dream of it."

That grin startled me. Aroused me, too, but everything about him aroused me. Grins are different than smiles. Smile can mean all sorts of things, but a grin is an offer of friendship.

A male friend... oh, there was temptation more treacherous than any sexual pull.

I jerked my mind back to the subject. "Wicca is based on the magic of *this* world. It doesn't tap into other realms, or the space between the realms, or whatever."

"Magic continually seeps into all the realms, is absorbed, and can be used. Systems like Wicca use this kind of magic, which is part of the natural processes of each world. It's much weaker than using nodes directly, but safer."

I nodded. It fit what I knew. "And nodes are places where this world used to connect to others?"

"More or less. You might think of them as spots where the fabric between realms is weaker, making connection more likely."

"You mean that connection can happen elsewhere? It's possible to travel between realms without a node?"

"Theoretically, yes—ley lines carry node energy, after all. But it would be rather like crossing the Alps on foot instead of in one of these automated vehicles of yours." He patted the dash and added, with something of the air of one complimenting a backwards child, "Quite ingenious, really, the way your people have overcome this realm's condition."

"Wait till you see Houston." Light was fading even as traffic thickened, with all the little road tributaries emptying their currents of cars onto I-45. We'd left Texas City behind, and were passing an undeveloped stretch. I put on my headlights.

Two things occurred to me. Michael had distracted me quite nicely from my grief at leaving my home and my friend... and he knew an awful lot about magic. Things he must have remembered.

I planned my next question carefully, hoping to stir more of his memories.

"When I was young—and that was a very long time ago—"

"How long?" he asked, interested. "You mentioned something about three hundred years."

"I was born in Ireland in 1701."

He nodded, apparently finding nothing odd about that. "And you were cursed when you were..." He cast an appraising eye over me. "Not quite fifty?"

A laugh sputtered out. "Michael, never guess a woman's age so accurately. It isn't diplomatic. But no, I was twenty."

"You are a very attractive fifty," he assured me. "But you shouldn't be. Fifty, that is. Your body should have been fixed at twenty."

"We're getting off the subject."

"But if something is wrong, if you are aging when you shouldn't be—"

"I did it on purpose, all right?"

He considered that a moment. "You can change your physical appearance?"

"Not exactly. I can grow older, if I choose. It isn't easy." A gross understatement, that. I prefer to avoid thinking about how I'd acquired the crow's feet by my eyes. There's only one way to age a body like mine. Starvation.

"Why did you want to look older?"

"You ask more questions than a two-year-old!"

"I want to know about you, Molly."

Heaven help me, but he softened me in a way I couldn't seem to fight. I sighed.

"For one thing, I could stay in one place longer if I looked older. People notice if you stay twenty. They don't notice so much if you always look middle-aged."

"And the other thing?"

I grimaced. He was both perceptive and persistent—useful traits, even appealing at times. But annoying at the moment. "I wanted... friends. Women friends. I

missed that rather badly." I glanced at him, wondering if he could understand. "When I looked twenty and oozed sex, men wanted me and women disliked me. Now... well, I use a touch more power to get what I need from men, but not much. Half of seduction is simply wanting the person you're with. So most women don't see me as a threat, especially the younger ones. They don't think of a woman of my apparent age as sexual."

He chuckled. "The young always think the world was born when they were."

"Oh, listen to the graybeard. You're what—twenty-six? Twenty-seven?" I held my breath.

"Hardly," he said dryly. "You ought to know better than..." His voice drifted into silence. I stole a glance at him. He was staring straight ahead, stricken. "It was there," he whispered. "For a moment it was all there, but it melted away."

Impulsively I reached for his hand and squeezed it. His fingers closed around mine tightly. "But that's good," I said gently. "That means your memories aren't gone. They're just hiding for some reason."

He drew a ragged breath. "Yes. Yes, of course. And I have been remembering some things. Nothing about myself," he said with a lack of emotion that, by its very dearth, revealed much. "But facts, concepts, theories—they float up when I'm not watching."

"Then you'll have to spend most of your time not watching, won't you?" I gave his hand another squeeze and, reluctantly, let go. I needed both hands to drive.

"That makes sense, but it's easier to decide than to do."

"Like being told not to think of the number ten," I agreed. "I've got a couple of ideas, if you want to hear them." I paused long enough for him to object. He didn't. "First, I wondered if I was wrong about you being a sorcerer. You know so much—"

"I am not a sorcerer."

My eyebrows climbed. "You're very sure about that."

"I can't be a sorcerer. It... isn't allowed. And I don't know why I just said that, so don't ask. But it feels true."

Interesting. "Well, what about a scholar?"

I felt more than saw his head turn towards me. "A scholar?"

"You said you were a good researcher, and I think you must be. You've picked up an amazing amount in such a short time. You read very, very fast. You know languages and theories of magic and odd facts, and just have that manner—as if you've always loved facts for their own sake, not for what you can do with them."

"Truth. Not just facts—truth."

I smiled.

"A scholar..." His voice was musing, but with a lift to it. He liked the idea. And that was all he said, but I was content to let him follow his thoughts. I had a few of my own demanding attention.

Neither of us spoke again until the sun was well down. We'd reached Houston's greedy, spreading fingers—not the city proper, but Friendswood, one of the many small towns that lay in its path. People sometimes compare big cities to anthills, but I think they're more like mold.

Anthills will only grow so large, but mold keeps right on spreading.

I'd slowed to accommodate the heavy traffic when, out of the blue, he asked, "How did Erin figure it out?"

"What?"

"You said you didn't tell Erin what you are, that she figured it out."

"Good grief. You have quite a memory." I winced. "I mean—"

"I know what you meant. And yes, I think I normally have an excellent memory."

"Do you remember everything?"

"No, but what I do recall is accurate." He paused, as if considering something new. "It seems that either emotion or intent can fix things in my memory."

"Hmm. Works that way for most of us. I wonder if emotion or intent could also make you forget."

He shifted in his seat, looked out the window, then back at me. "What an uncomfortable thought. Why would I do such a thing to myself?"

I didn't know, either. "So, what was the first thing I said to you?"

"You hoped that I spoke English. Molly," he said, and amusement ran through his voice, a silvery ripple in a dark current. "You might distract me, but I'll remember what I asked, and ask again. In that way I am rather like that two-year-old you mentioned. They persist, too. Do you not want to tell me how Erin figured out about you?"

"Not really." The habit of secrecy was strong... as was a sneaky little wish that he would think well of me. Foolishness. Both the wish, and the desire to base it on misdirection. I was what I was.

So why not tell him? "All right," I said, signaling that I meant to take the next exit. I wasn't hungry—well, not for food. But he must be. It was nearly eight.

"I... used to know Erin's great-grandmother. So when I moved back to Galveston —"

"You'd lived there before?"

"I was there for the Great Storm. Anyway, I knew about Erin and I was curious, so I sort of kept an eye on her. She liked to walk on the beach at night."

"So do you."

"Yes, but I'm hard to hurt."

"She came into danger?"

"There were two of them that night," I said, remembering. "Two pond-scum bastards who followed her, just as I was. One had a knife. He grabbed her, held the blade to her throat. The other ripped open her shirt."

His breath sucked in. "Did you kill them?"

"You're more bloodthirsty than I realized."

"Perhaps you preferred to let the law kill them."

He was certainly clear on how rapists should be treated. I couldn't say I disagreed. "They had heart attacks. One lived, one didn't."

"How? What did you do?"

"Just a minute," I said, easing the big Winnebago onto the access road. "I want to pull in at that gas station and top off the tank. The sign says they have diesel."

"Are you avoiding my question again?"

"It's easier to show than to tell, that's all."

"I'd rather not have a heart attack."

"You keep asking questions, you can't complain if some of the answers aren't comfortable."

Chapter 7



IT took some maneuvering, but I got my rig tucked up next to the pumps. I shut off the motor, unfastened my seat belt, and turned to Michael. "Do you want something to eat?"

"I want you to show me what you did to Erin's attackers."

All right. No more delay tactics. I took a deep breath, got my focus, and reached out.

I was wearing a t-shirt—a pretty Caribbean blue, one of my favorite colors—so my arm was clearly visible. But as I stretched it towards him, my hand went fuzzy. Translucent. I kept reaching—and slowly, carefully, put my hand inside his chest.

He stared down at his chest, eyes wide. "A most peculiar sensation."

That was it? That was his total reaction? I gave a shaky laugh, pulled my hand back, and let it go solid again. "It was more than peculiar for Erin's attackers. I went a little more solid and tickled their hearts."

"You showed great restraint. You could have ripped them out."

"I've done that, too. But not..." My breath hitched. For a moment I could smell the smoke of the guns, hear the screams of men and horses, feel the shudder of

the ground as the canons fired, and my own desperation as I hunted for the one soldier who'd mattered... but he'd already been dead when I started looking, my beautiful, bright-eyed Charlie, my son, lying butchered in the blood-soaked earth while I searched and searched. Too late.

Quietly I said, "Not for a long time."

"You don't like killing."

"No one should like killing. There's nothing brave or glorious about it."

"No. Yet sometimes it's the only way to stop a great evil."

"You're sounding more like a warrior than a scholar."

"Is it not possible to be both?"

"Maybe." My heart was beating hard. I didn't know why. His eyes were luminous, intent on me... I wanted so much to touch him. I pulled my gaze away. "You've seen what I can do. Most succubi—those who started out that way—are naturally insubstantial, and take on form only with effort. It's the other way around for me, but..." I shrugged. "Other succubi are from Dis. Hell, in other words. I'm originally of Earth, even if I do partake of hell now, too."

"Molly, you aren't of hell."

My eyes flew to him. "But—you said that I was. That the curse made me of both realms."

He shook his head. "Your memory is faulty. I said you were inherently of two realms. I can't tell which other realm claims you," he said apologetically. "I can't read that deeply. But it isn't hell."

"But succubi are from hell. You saw what I did, going fuzzy that way. That's what demons do."

"There are other realms where matter and energy aren't as sharply divided as

they are here. I... I think I come from such a place." He smiled slowly, sweetly. "So do demons, yes, though that's not my realm, or yours. And so do angels."

Without my willing it, my hand reached for him, to touch his face—and a car honked right behind us. I jumped. "I-I'd better get filled up." In more ways than one, but there wasn't time to hunt now. Soon, I promised myself, and opened my door and climbed down. "Want to learn how to pump gas?"

"Yes." He didn't move, though. "One more question."

I waited.

"Where are we going?"

"I wondered when you'd ask that. We're going to see an acquaintance of mine. You need help I can't give you." I closed the door and moved to the pump, selecting the "credit" option. My wallet was in my pocket. It's too easy to be separated from cash and other important items if you carry a purse. The credit card I used, like my rig, belonged to NMN Corporation. That was my little joke. NMN stands for Not My Name.

Michael got out and came around the front of the rig, frowning. "You said acquaintance, not friend."

"I call very few people friend. Cullen is..." I shrugged and took out the nozzle. "Among other things he's one of those who study the nature of magic. The two of you should have a lot to discuss."

"He's a sorcerer."

"Yes."

"No. No sorcerers."

"Go buy yourself a Coke," I said, handing him a five. "When you come back, we'll talk about it."

MICHAEL loved Coke. He bought a six-pack and drank three. He did not love the idea of seeking help from a sorcerer. He had the idea that he wasn't supposed to do that—but of course couldn't say why.

It's hard to argue with someone who has no reasons, only feelings. I did my best. We debated it off and on all the way around the loop—when he wasn't asking about engineering, building codes, the water supply, and all sorts of other things I couldn't answer. He was desperately curious about the city, and looked wistful once it had receded behind us.

"Maybe you can go back later," I said. We were on I-10, headed west. Headlights chained the highway on either side, orderly fireflies lighting the dark at seventy miles an hour. "There are a lot of other cities to see on our route, though. Big ones, little ones, all sorts." San Antonio, El Paso, Las Cruces, Tucson...

"This sorcerer of yours lives where?"

"In California."

"That's on the west coast."

"Yes."

"A long drive for little purpose, since I can't go to a sorcerer."

"You can't go home until you know where home is."

"I'm not sure I want to go back." He slid a long, level glance my way. "I like it here. Besides, we know someone there wants to capture me. We don't need a sorcerer, Molly. We can wait for my memory to come back on its own."

"And if the Azá find you first?" I shook my head. "Someone here wants to find you, too, and I can't protect you from them."

"I don't need your protection," he snapped. "Your help, yes. I don't know this world. But I can protect myself."

"Now you sound like a typical male."

"I am male."

I'd noticed. Oh, I had noticed... "The FBI thinks the Azá's goddess doesn't exist, and that they only use animals for their death magic. I know better."

"They won't kill me. I am... valuable."

"I think so, too, but will they?"

"I don't know what I am," he said, his voice low and tense. "I don't know my name, or where I come from. But I know this much: they will not want me damaged."

"What if they don't know what you are, either?"

He was silent for several minutes. "An unsettling idea," he finally said. "One that should have occurred to me. It would depend on this goddess of theirs, wouldn't it? On what she knows and where she is."

"She's certainly not from these parts," I said dryly. "Nor does she have a strong connection here, thank God. Her followers have been trying for three centuries to find an avatar for her. I'm happy to say they haven't had much luck."

"For three centuries, Molly?"

I glanced at him, nodded. "They had me picked for the honor, yes. I didn't know it, though I'd, ah... dabbled a bit with their rites. I was a wild child for awhile, or thought I was. I'd been raised in the Church, but God and I had a falling out after my parents died of smallpox. I thought He should have handled things differently. Well." I shrugged. "I was young."

"What happened?"

"They were trolling for converts, and they had a good spiel. The idea of worshipping a goddess appealed to me—seemed like men had had things all their way too long." I'd been in London by then, a little lost... make that a lot lost, but sufficiently insulated by the arrogance of youth to pretend otherwise. "They put on a good show, too. Magic was a major crime back then, so it didn't take much to dazzle, make it seem like they knew what they were talking about. And what adolescent doesn't like a secret society? Wisdom hidden from the masses, with a select few admitted to the mysteries." I snorted. "I was easy for them. Easy."

"But you got away."

"At pretty much the last minute, and not through any planning on my part. They'd tested me, though I didn't know it, and I fit Her. That's why avatars are hard to locate, I found out later—body and mind have to be matched up in some arcane fashion to Her. I, ah, got myself unmatched."

He nodded. "Just as with crossing between realms, so must an avatar be congruent with the entity wishing to possess it. How did you unmatch yourself?"

"Well..." I smiled. "Accidentally. Mostly I was just doing what came naturally. The night before the big ceremony—which I thought was to initiate me into their mysteries—a sweet boy named Johnny McLeod performed another sort of initiation. Her avatar must be a virgin, you see."

He laughed.

"She was royally pissed about Johnny, though." A little shiver travelled through me.

They'd brought me to Her when they realized what I'd done—brought me weeping, cursing, fighting. They hadn't been gentle in their disappointment, and I'd learned what they'd planned. Then I saw Her... or, rather, what was left of her old avatar. Centuries old, it was, kept more or less alive by Her power. It—I've

never been able to think of that husk as female—had looked like a mummy. Dead everywhere but the eyes...

"She crumbled," I said. "After She cursed me. That little temper fit cost Her."

"I'm sorry." He reached for my hand and held it. "I've called up bad memories."

The contact was good. Steadying. For a few minutes, I let myself enjoy holding hands. But as memories faded, that simple pleasure was lost in the rise of hunger. With a sigh, I pulled my hand back.

He was silent a moment longer, then said,

"You were right to warn me. These Azá may not know why their goddess wants me. She won't be able to tell them much."

"Why not? She *is* a goddess—or one of the Old Ones who calls herself goddess, which amounts to the same thing. Can't she tell them whatever she wants?"

"Communication across the realms is chancy." He sounded distracted. "And yours is so distant from most... I doubt she can convey actual words. Images, perhaps."

"Visions."

"Yes, and it's devilishly hard to get precise information across in a vision."

He sounded as if he knew from personal experience. A sudden thought chilled me. "Michael, there isn't any chance that... I mean, you aren't..."

"Aren't what?"

I bit my lip. "One of the Old Ones?"

Startled silence, then a sharp bark of laughter. "Gone senile, maybe? Considering my memory problem? That's good. I'll have to tell—" He stopped short.

"Dammit. Dammit, dammit, dammit."

"You remembered something."

"Someone. For an instant I had a face, a name. A friend. I knew he would enjoy the joke, and..." He shook his head. "He's gone now."

A tightness beneath my breastbone told me I was already too involved with this strange, uprooted man. Still I reached for his hand. "You have a friend here, too."

His fingers closed around mine. Then, slowly, he lifted my hand to his lips. I tried to pull it back—and couldn't, for he wouldn't release me. He pressed a kiss to my fingertips, and his breath was warm. His mouth was warmer.

Then, thank God, he dropped my hand. I gave a little laugh that sounded far too nervous. "You've picked up some odd things on the Internet."

"I didn't read about that." He was pleased with himself. "Perhaps it was instinct. I like the way you taste."

"Yes, well, you taste in a different way than I do. I'm trying not to jump your bones here, Michael. You are not helping."

"Jump my... oh. But I would like very much if you jumped my bones, Molly."

Now the hard thud of my heart made sense. So did the way my pulse throbbed in tender places, and the hunger rising, rising... "I can kill that way, too. If I take too much."

"But you wouldn't."

"That doesn't make it safe." For either of us.

"You couldn't drain me."

I snorted. "Oh, the sublime confidence of youth."

"The nodes," he said patiently. "I draw what I need from the nearest node, either directly or through a ley line. You can't drain them."

The nodes? Was that what I'd felt—that sparkling, delicious energy that had flowed when he was healing? Oh, gods, but I wanted to taste that. And *him*. I

wanted Michael. If I could—"Shit."

"What is it?"

"A cop, the state version. He's on my tail, flashing his lights."

"What does that mean?"

"He wants me to pull over. I'm not speeding," I said grimly. "I haven't broken any traffic laws. So he has something else in mind, and it probably isn't good news."

I had no choice, though. I sure couldn't outrun him. There was plenty of shoulder, but I don't put my rig on the shoulder when I can help it. I flashed my lights to let him know I'd seen him, then waited for an exit to come along. While I waited, I briefed Michael on the various other law enforcement agencies, and suggested he let me do the talking.

"You think he is stopping us because the FBI told him to?"

"It seems likely. Unless there's some other player we don't know about in this game." There was an exit for a rest stop coming up, which was perfect. I signaled. The fuzz didn't bother with a turn signal, just stayed on my bumper as I slowed.

"There may be many players we don't know about. There were... I'm almost sure there were two."

I stole a glance at him. Sweat gleamed on his forehead. He was staring straight ahead, his gaze fixed on nothing his eyes could see. "Two?" I said softly.

"Who came for me. She—the one who wounded me—and another. At least one other."

"Do you think *she* might be the Azá's goddess?" There was no traffic on the access road. I pulled up into the curve of the rest stop and eased to a stop.

He shrugged. "How can I tell? I don't remember her clearly, and I know nothing about the Azá's goddess."

"I'll fill you in on her." I glanced at the side mirror. My tailgating cop was getting out of his car. "Later. Michael, I've made some assumptions for you. Maybe I shouldn't have. The FBI might be able to keep you safe from the Azá. You might not mind it if they found you."

"No. You are right. I can't let myself be taken by any government. I'm... too much temptation."

True, but I suspected he didn't mean it the way I did. "Open the glove box, will you? Oh—it's this." I showed him. We had the registration and insurance papers out by the time the cop turned his flashlight on us through the window.

I hit the button to roll it down. "Yes, officer? Would you mind—" I held a hand up. "The light. I can't see you at all."

He lowered the flashlight enough for me to see that the face beneath the Smokey Bear hat was young, but he had his cop face down pat. He looked as friendly as stone. "Are there just the two of you in there, ma'am?"

"Yes, me and my nephew." I held out the papers that proved me to be a law-abiding citizen.

He ignored them. "I need you both to step out of the vehicle, please."

This was not good. Officers never ask middle-aged ladies to step out of our vehicles for a traffic violation. "What's wrong?" I made my voice breathy, as if I were frightened. It wasn't difficult.

"If you'll just step outside the vehicle, ma'am."

I glanced at Michael—who had the most peculiar expression on his face. His upper lip was pulled back as if he were about to sneeze, and his eyes were fixed on the officer demanding our exit. "All right," he said in a thin voice. "I've got

him."

"Got—" I swung my head back. "Oh, my." The stone-faced cop was truly stony now. Frozen.

"What should we do with him?" Michael asked. "I can't hold him very long."

Chapter 8



I took a slow breath. *Steady*, I told myself. *You've seen stranger things ...* but at the moment I couldn't think of any. "What did you do to him?"

"I froze him. You can ask him things," Michael said helpfully. "He won't remember later, if I tell him not to. But hurry."

"Ah..." I looked at the poor, frozen young man and asked, "Why did you stop me?"

"There's an APB out," he said. It was bizarre. His mouth moved, but nothing else. His eyes stayed fixed on a spot near my left shoulder. "For your plate number."

Great. "Why is there an APB out on my license plate?"

"You're wanted by the FBI."

Pete, the rat, had not been sufficiently charmed. He must have made a full report, and now someone in the government wanted to get their hands on Michael. The Unit?

Some other corner of the bureaucracy? "This is not good news. Michael, can you make him do more than forget this conversation? Could you make him think he misread the license plate and that I'm someone else altogether?"

"I believe so. He has no shields." Michael sounded professionally disapproving, like a dentist whose patient hasn't been flossing.

A couple of long minutes later the trooper spoke again, his gaze still fixed over my left shoulder. "Sorry to bother you, ma'am." Then, suddenly, he came unstuck. He gave me a brisk nod and headed back to his car.

I slumped back in my seat. "That was weird. That was so weird." I watched in the rearview mirror as the trooper's car pulled away. "If I'd known you could do that, I would have gotten you to take care of Pete."

"I... didn't know I could, either, at that point."

His voice sounded funny. I straightened and looked at him. His head was tilted back against the headrest, and he was almost as pale as he'd been when I first found him. "Are you okay?"

"It always gives me a headache to do that," he said absently. "A real mother—"

"Whoa. That's considered a very rude phrase."

"Oh. Is the word fuck offensive?"

"Yes, unless you're actually doing it, or about to do it."

"Odd. There are several words with a primary or secondary meaning involving copulation that do not offend. At least I don't think they do. Screw, lay, sleep with, mate, ball—"

"It's all in the context. Michael? You said 'always.'"

"I remembered... a little more." He turned his head to look at me. In the muted light from the dash, his eyes had an odd sheen, almost reflective. Like cat's eyes.

"I performed the same spell on myself just before I came here. I didn't know if my transit would be successful, and I couldn't let them... learn from me. So I told myself to forget. But I was rushed. Something went wrong."

"You forgot too much?"

"I forgot how to get it all back." The twitch of his lips might have been meant for a smile. "There are seventeen versions of this saying in the various realms: whatever can go wrong, will."

"We call it Murphy's Law. You look wrecked." I unbuckled my seat belt and stood. "I'm going to get you some ibuprofen."

"This is a remedy for pain?"

"Yes."

"Good. The nearest ley line is thin, hard to draw from with my head pounding. And the Houston node is too distant to reach directly."

"Houston has a node?"

"Of course. So many people could not live so closely without one. They would become insane. Though that node is well below the land surface, and the energy is badly scattered. I suspect electricity... ah." His eyes lit up. "You brought me the Coke to drink."

He had the oddest gaps in his knowledge. I had to show him how to use "the Coke" to swallow pills. Then, abruptly, I shut off the engine and told him I was going outside to think.

THERE'S so little real night left in the Western world. Here, halfway between Houston and San Antonio, the sky was hazy, the stars thin. But the moon was fat and profligate with its borrowed light. I started walking along the curve of road that denned the rest area.

There were trees. I could hear a dog barking somewhere, far in the distance. And all those noisy fireflies on the interstate swishing by, making good time on their

way to wherever. The grass was soft beneath my feet and the breeze held a pleasant, green scent, but I missed the smell of the sea.

I ached.

Lord knows I should have been thinking about the fix we were in. I tried, but my intentions kept scattering, then re-forming, lined up behind one thought like iron filings obedient to the pull of the magnet.

I could have him. I could have Michael. He was willing, and I hadn't seduced him into it. I didn't have to worry about hurting him.

Not physically, that is. I moved slowly, watching the restless branches of an oak nibble the moon into lace. But that had never been my real worry, had it?

I'd long ago learned control. Whatever vital force I consume—and it's not the soul; that's a ridiculous superstition—a healthy body can easily replace it as long as I don't drink too deeply. Rather like a dairy farmer, I like to think, I dine on what other bodies make naturally, without having to kill for my dinner.

But the worst hurts—the ones that don't heal—aren't physical.

I stopped and looked up at the hazy sky. I've had plenty of time to puzzle out the moral limits of my condition, and ended up with something similar to the Wiccan code. I try to do no harm. This means I leave married men alone. Also those who show signs of real emotional involvement, those too young to make responsible choices, and men too old or infirm to afford the loss of what I would drain from them.

Michael wasn't depleted by his wounds anymore. He was young, but not so young he had to be protected from his own choices. I stared up at a moon a few bumps past full, tucked my hair behind my ear, and admitted the truth. I wasn't worried about the consequences for Michael. I probably should be, but mostly I was afraid for myself.

I was so tired of leaving. That didn't mean I'd like to be the one left behind... and this wasn't his world.

Dammit. Dairy farmers don't fall in love with their cows.

The light in the rig came on behind me. I turned and watched Michael step down, close the door behind him, and restore the semblance of darkness. He walked towards me and my mouth went dry. "Is your headache better?"

"Almost gone." He spoke low, as if someone might overhear. "Have you finished your thinking?"

"I haven't accomplished much." I hugged my arms to myself, though the breeze wasn't cold. "I guess we could steal a license plate, if we get a chance before the next cop spots us."

He moved closer. "It's the numbers on the license plate that give us away? I can fix that."

That jolted me. "You can do that? Change the plates?" Transformative magic was supposed to be impossible for anyone short of an adept—and there hadn't been any adepts since the Codex Arcanus was lost, long before even I was born. But Michael wasn't from here, was he?

"It would be easier to throw an illusion over them. I can cast one that will fool almost anyone here." He put his hands on my arms. "You are chilly?"

"No. Yes." *Step back*, I told myself. And didn't move. "You're remembering more."

"Pieces." He stroked his hands up and down my arms slowly, looking intently at my face. "Are you warming?"

Oh, yes. "Could you cast a bigger illusion? Make the design on the Winnebago beige, for example, instead of blue?"

"Yes. And then we could continue on our way. But I don't want to." His hands slid up to my shoulders. He moved even closer.

Those iron filings were all lined up, pointing right at him. I suspected my nipples were, too. My body longed for him. I was firm with it—firm enough, at least, not to reach for the sweet, serious face so close to mine. "You don't understand the dangers. We—we need to—Michael? What are you doing?"

"I like looking at your hair. I've been wanting to touch it." And he was, drawing his hands slowly along the length of it, then tucking his fingers in so that he cradled my head in his hands. "So cool and soft... you have smiling hair, Molly."

It was getting hard to remember to breathe. "Smiling?"

"Every little hair smiles itself into curls." Yet he abandoned my hair for my face, tracing it with the tips of his fingers, leaving tingles in his wake like the phosphorescence that trails a ship. "Your skin is soft, too. But much warmer."

"Michael." I tried to sound indignant. It came out husky. "Are you seducing me?"

"God, I hope so." And he bent his head.

His mouth was a little sweet, a little salty, and wholly inexperienced. With a sigh, I abandoned all my shoulds and shouldn'ts. Reason floated away with them, carried off on a warm, gentle tide. I tilted my head, slid my arms around him, and showed him how well we could fit.

As always, Michael was a fast study. And he adored kissing.

He had no inhibitions, no cultural context for a right way and a wrong way to touch. So he touched me everywhere. My back, my breasts, my shoulders—every part of my body fascinated him. He nuzzled my hair and licked the tip of my nose, making me giggle. Then he kissed me as if he had no thought of doing anything else, ever again.

If there's anything more seductive than a man who knows how to kiss, it's a man

who puts his whole heart and soul into learning. Finally I pulled my mouth away. "There's a bed." I whispered that, hoping to hide the way my voice shook. "Back in the rig."

"Mmm." He was sniffing along my neck, pausing now and then to lick or nibble. "I don't require a bed. Oh." He raised his head. "Perhaps you do?"

My laugh was breathless. "I'm not sure I could make it there. Here is fine." I tugged on his hand, urging him to the earth with me. "Here is wonderful."

I have all the arts, every skill a woman can use on a man. I was as giddy and awkward as a girl being tumbled in the meadow by the young man she's been walking out with. Together we rediscovered the mysteries of zippers and shoes, removed socks and t-shirts, and made a nest in the long grass on the side of the road.

Then we were skin-to-skin, and hunger turned from a sweet tide to a roaring torrent. His body was a dream and a delight, but I had no patience left to savor it. Energy rose from his flesh like mist around a waterfall, swirling, tempting, teasing without filling me. My own skin was hot and desperately sensitive. When he licked my nipple I arched up, then pulled him fully over me. His weight pinned me, anchored me. His cock was thick and blunt, uncircumcised. It twitched against my stomach. "Now," I said. "I need you. I need you inside me, Michael."

"You have me. Take what you need. All that you need." He propped himself up on his elbows, staring down at me, his face tight with his own need. "Tell me what to do."

"Like this." I opened my legs, using my hands to urge his hips forward. His body knew, even if his mind didn't. The swirling energy sucked at me, setting up answering tremors in my body, as my blood, bones, and flesh answered the call

of an unseen tide. "Come in. Come inside."

He thrust. Came into me. And the currents entered with him, and swallowed me. Sex is God's way of reminding us not to take ourselves so seriously. There are a thousand ways to arrange two sweaty, straining bodies. Each has its own pleasures, and each is as absurd as it is delightful. Passion—real passion—is different, and rare. It grabs you by the throat and shakes you like a terrier with a rat. Then it flings you off, across the abyss.

If you're lucky, you don't break when you land. If you're very lucky, you don't land alone.

I landed sobbing... held safe in Michael's arms.

He was stroking my hair, my side, my hand as I came back to myself. It took a moment for his quiet murmurs to settle into words. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please don't... what is wrong, Molly? Tell me, *querida, mío tesoro, a chuisle mo chroj*. Let me make it better."

I turned my head, which rested on his shoulder. "It's nothing. I'm all right."

"I have heard of happy tears, but this..." His thumb rubbed some of the dampness from my cheek. "... is not happiness."

It wasn't so hard, after all, to smile. I shifted, propping up on one forearm so I could see his face. "Have you ever been around an overstimulated two-year-old?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"They burst into tears for no reason." I traced his lip gently. "Now you've seen an overstimulated three hundred-year-old do the same thing."

He considered that. "This is a compliment, I think."

"Oh, yes. And you were wrong. Part of the overload is happiness." I spoke true. I've lived too long to spurn the good God's gifts—and moments like this were

just that, gifts of grace that fall like sunshine, unsought and unearned.

He smiled slowly. "Good." And he urged my head back onto his shoulder, and stroked my hair.

How strange, I thought. Here I was, lying on my side with a stick digging into my hip and my lover's heart beating beneath my ear. I was sated and sticky, my muscles lax and warm, my skin cooling. None of the physical sensations were new to me, yet everything was new, fresh-minted.

How long had it been since I took a lover? Not a sex partner. A lover. I ran my hand over his ribs, marveling. There would be grief later. I didn't care. Loving was gift enough.

After awhile I asked, "What do you think of the name Sarah?"

"It means soul in one of the Indian languages, princess in Hebrew. Why?"

I shrugged my free shoulder. "I need a new name."

"I like the one you have."

"So do I. But I can't be Molly Brown anymore. I'm having trouble settling on a new name, though."

"Names are important. I will give it some thought. Do you want..." His voice drifted into silence even as his body tensed.

I've hunted, and I've been hunted. I didn't cloud the silence with questions but, like a hare in the bush, went still myself, straining to sort the night sounds. Cars continued to whoosh past on the highway. The breeze ruffled the leaves in the trees. Grass rustled...

Michael sprang to his feet, yanking me up with him. "Run!"

They came at us out of the darkness. Four, five—I don't know how many there were. They seemed splinters of darkness themselves, clothed as they were in

black, their faces smeared with black. We were in full flight when we saw them, our hands clasped, bare feet slapping on the asphalt. They raced out of the trees—from in front of us. Between us and the RV.

Moonlight gleamed on metal. A gun barrel, raised—the shot cracked out even as Michael jerked me to the left. The highway—yes, they might not want to shoot us where so many witnesses streamed by. There were trees between us and the interstate, too. Cover.

There were also two more of them, rising from the brush like shadows. One with a rifle, one with something large and ominous held to his shoulder and pointed, oddly, off to the right.

But the rifle was pointed at me.

I felt the power jump into Michael. He bellowed something. A word. It slid through my brain like melted butter—hot, ungraspable. And the one with the rifle burst into flame.

And so, with an explosion that rocked the earth, did my Winnebago.

Michael jerked. Stumbled. Threw his arms around me, hugging so hard that all the air whooshed out of me. And the universe tilted in an impossible, sideways slide, and burst into bits—into motion—then stillness.

I was lying on my back on something hard and rough. It was hard to draw breath. Something heavy and warm pinned me, covered me, all but smothered me. Heavy and warm and... "Michael," I breathed, and ran my hands over him. He was unconscious, but alive. My questing hands found a dart in his back.

Anesthetic? I blinked, gathering thoughts with care and piecing them together much more slowly than the universe had re-formed itself around me. As gently as I could—he was very heavy—I eased Michael off me, sat up, and looked around.

And began to laugh. I couldn't help it. We were back in the Village, plopped down naked on top of the node where Michael had first appeared.

Chapter 9



"IT'S certainly different," Erin said, dabbing at the graze on my cheek. "Not that you don't look great. You do. But it will take some getting used to."

"Mmm." I was sitting on the closed toilet in the downstairs bathroom of Erin's house, a cozy two-story in Galveston's historical section. I knew the house well, though it has been through a lot of changes. A little over a hundred years ago, the debris from the storm surge had mounded two stories high only a block from here.

I glanced at the mirror over the sink... which had showed me a face I hadn't seen for some time. A face ten or fifteen years younger than the one I'd seen the last time I looked in a mirror. A face surrounded by red hair, not white.

Sex with Michael hadn't just made *me feel* young again.

All that power... apparently a glut could undo what starvation had wrought.

"Ouch! Be careful. I might need some of that skin."

"Hold still."

"I don't know why you're doing this. I'm perfectly capable of cleaning up a couple scratches."

"Maybe I need to."

That silenced me. She slid my robe—well, it was hers, but I was wearing it—off my shoulder so she could clean the scrape there. I don't know where the abrasions had come from. Maybe I'd skidded a bit when Michael brought us back to the one spot he knew well enough to aim for, even as the drug took him under.

I'd used Theresa Farnhope's phone to call Erin, which would have amazed Theresa, had she known. But she takes out her hearing aids to sleep, which was why I'd chosen her trailer for my entering-without-breaking. I'd gone fuzzy, of course; walls aren't a problem when I'm like that. Erin's husband Pete had arrived with her and helped us load a bleary Michael into her Toyota, where he'd passed out again.

He was awake now, though still dopey. I'd left him in the kitchen drinking coffee. Pete, bless him, had made a pot, walked Michael around until he wasn't staggering so much, then left to try to find us some clothes. "Your husband is a miracle," I told Erin.

"True. Are you sure this lawyer of yours can be trusted?"

"For this, yes." I'd called NMN's only employee, an attorney with interesting connections. He was sending cash and another credit card by courier. I expected them in a couple hours. He'd get us identification, too, but that would take a little longer. I'd sent him digital photos of both Michael and me after borrowing Pete's camera and computer.

It takes a good deal of money to acquire such things after midnight, as well as those connections I mentioned. But NMN has a good deal of money. Around twenty-six million, last time I checked. Almost anyone can get rich if they live long enough.

"Getting fake ID for a client isn't part of most attorneys' job descriptions," Erin

said, capping the peroxide. "So either this guy is a sleaze, or he works for sleaze. So how can you trust him?"

"The sleazes he works for—aside from me, that is—don't encourage questions. And they value loyalty. I imagine he'll tell them, but he won't tell the FBI or the Azá." I shrugged. "I don't plan to use the IDs he sends for long."

"Good grief. You're talking about the Mob."

"I didn't say that." I stood and studied myself in the mirror. I could pass for thirty-five, which was unsettling, but useful. They'd be looking for the fifty-year-old me, not this one. I touched my cheek.

"I liked your old face," Michael said from the doorway. "But this one is pretty, too."

I turned. His face hadn't changed. It was still beautiful enough to break hearts. He wore a pair of Pete's jeans, rolled up at the ankles. They were too big at the waist, too. "How wobbly are you?"

"I can walk," he said grimly. "I had better not try to run or work magic. They knew what they were doing. Sedating me was the best way to render me useless."

"They went to a lot of trouble not to damage you. Just as you suspected they would." Either the Azá knew who and what he was, or they had pretty clear instructions from their goddess.

"Instead they destroyed your home."

I wanted to tell him it didn't matter, but my throat closed up. My pot, my little yellow pot, the one thing I still had from Ginny...

"It's my fault," he said bitterly, pushing away from the door. "My fault that you lost everything."

"Not everything." Just the things that mattered. I still had heaps of money.

Erin was worried, but trying to be matter-of-fact. "You couldn't have known what would happen. Probably couldn't have stopped Molly, either, even if you had known."

"Perhaps not. But I should have realized... they traced me through the nodes and ley lines. Through my use of them. They must have."

I thought with dismay of my own use of node energy—through Michael. "Is that possible?"

"Theoretically, maybe." Erin was frowning. "Michael's energy is so distinctive, even I could pick it up when I studied the node. But I don't see how anyone could trace his location that way."

"It's possible," Michael said grimly. "Probably not humanly possible, but it can be done."

"The goddess, you mean." Dismay ripened to fear. "But she isn't here. She can't cross. I don't know why, but she can't. But if she's found an avatar here—"

"I don't think so," he said, a frown creasing his brow. "No, if she had an avatar she would have taken me herself. If only I could remember more!" He ran a hand over his face as if he could rub away the weariness. "I think, if she could reach a world heavily congruent to yours, or plant an avatar in one... Dis or Faerie are the closest."

Much too close, I thought.

"Dis, probably," Michael went on. "Faerie doesn't care for outsiders, and they have strong defenses. Dis is more chaotic. She might have made a deal with someone there."

Erin's eyes widened. "My children. God, Michael, my children are asleep upstairs —"

"They're safe," he said quickly. "I haven't used magic since I brought us here. I

have a low-level connection to whichever node is nearest, yes. I can't sever it. It —it isn't possible. But even an Old One would have trouble finding me this quickly when I'm not drawing power."

I felt cold. "But she could find you? Even if you don't use magic?"

"I don't know. I think... eventually. If I stay in motion..." He shrugged, helpless to offer certainties when so much was unclear. "It would take tremendous power to locate me when I'm not using a node. A goddess has great power, but if she is in Dis, either personally or through an avatar, she must reserve some of that for defense. They are not friendly in Dis."

The sheer understatement of that made me strangle on a laugh.

Erin didn't see anything funny in the situation. She was looking at Michael with something close to fear. "Who are you, that a goddess would go to such lengths to capture you?"

"It's not who I am, but what I know. Or am supposed to know." He grimaced.

I sighed. "I need coffee. And then, I think, Michael and I had better leave. Just to be sure."

There were no lines around Michael's eyes, but when they met mine just then they looked old. Old and terribly sad. "No, Molly," he said gently. "I must leave. Not you."

WE adjourned to the kitchen. It's possible to break a heart in the bathroom, but a good argument demands a better setting. "You're limping," I told him severely as we headed down the short hall.

"It's nothing. An ache where she wounded me."

Apparently even Michael couldn't mend perfectly what a goddess had ripped up.

"If you think that hurt," I muttered, "wait till you see what I can do."

"Molly." He stepped a pace into the kitchen and put his hands on my shoulders.

"I do not want to part. You know that, don't you? But my presence has already cost you too much. Your home, your belongings—"

"Things. Just things," I said fiercely. "And they're gone now, so it's too late to worry about them. Some of them did matter, yes. Sometimes I hold too tightly to things. That's because I can't hold on to people." They died, they left, and now Michael wanted to leave. It was too soon. I wasn't ready.

"I understand your fear," he said quietly. "But I am more of a coward. I don't think I could stand it if I cost you your life."

I closed my eyes for a second. "Michael. You're forgetting something." I looked at him again and held out my hand... and made it go fuzzy.

He stared. "I didn't... God. I didn't have to do it, did I? I forgot. All I could think was that he was going to kill you." Abruptly he pulled away.

Erin tapped me on the shoulder. "Here. Want to tell me what you're talking about?"

She held out a mug of coffee. I took it and watched Michael pace. "They herded us," I said. "Kept us away from the RV. I think they used a bazooka on that, but heaven knows I'm no expert. Maybe it was one of those one-man rocket launchers."

"They blew it up so you couldn't escape," Erin said impatiently. "You told me that. What did Michael do that has him upset?"

"Saved my life."

"How?"

"I'll fill you in later," I said, though I wouldn't. Not about everything. Words of

power are a myth, a legend, like the alchemist's stone—a tantalizing shortcut people have dreamed over for centuries. They don't exist. All the experts agree on that.

I wasn't about to try to change anyone's mind.

I was beginning to think Michael was something of a walking myth, himself—but a confused, unhappy myth-man at present. I gave Erin back the coffee mug and went to him.

He stood with his back to me. "It's forbidden, what I did," he said very low. "Except in the last extremity of self-defense. I wasn't in danger, but you... I didn't think. Perhaps the one I burned had knockout darts, too. Even if you hadn't dematerialized, he might not have killed you."

"And the others?" I put my hands on his shoulders, which were tight and tense. "Do you think they would have left me alive to tell the authorities what they'd done?"

"They couldn't have hurt you if you'd stayed immaterial."

"Their goddess could. She cursed me. She could remove the curse, or just ignore it. I don't know how much knowledge and power she's invested in her followers, but I wouldn't want to bet my life on the chance that they couldn't touch me."

"They came for us with guns, not magic."

"Because you could have stood off any magic they were likely to possess. You were their target, so they used what would work against you. If we'd hung around, we would have found out what they could do to me."

After a moment his breath sighed out. He turned his head to look at me. "All the more reason you shouldn't come with me. They may be the only ones who could truly harm you."

"Define 'harm.' " My hands wanted to tighten on him, to clutch at him and hold

him. My voice wanted to plead. I wouldn't. Not for the sake of my pride—a costly indulgence, pride. Sometimes worth the price, but not this time.

But tears and pleading have a price, too. One Michael would have to pay, along with me. "I've granted you the dignity of making your own decisions," I said levelly. "Even when I disagreed, or didn't think you knew what you were getting into. What gives you the right to take this choice from me?"

He said nothing, just looked at me. I tried to stay with my breath the way the Buddhists say, but my chest was squeezed so tight with waiting that every breath hurt. If he understood, even a little, what mattered, what had kept me sane all these years—

All at once his mouth quirked up. "Do you ever lose an argument?"

I laughed—or meant to; it came out more like a sob. Then my eyes were shut tight against the tears and his arms were tight around me. He rubbed his cheek against my hair. "We'll go to your sorcerer, Molly. And pray he knows how to fix things, because I don't."

Chapter 10



AS soon as our clothes, cash, and Visa arrived, we left. I called my attorney collect and changed the location for the courier to deliver the ID; I'd meet him at a nearby McDonald's in about five hours. Then we walked. For hours, we held hands and walked around Galveston, sometimes talking, sometimes in silence. As it grew light we attracted some glances, but mostly smiling ones. I didn't look that much older than him now.

We'd decided against a hotel, though we were both tired. We didn't want to be separated, but passion was too new between us. It made us unsteady, and Michael couldn't draw from a node. Easier to live with exhaustion than temptation.

At ten-thirty that morning, we were on a plane headed west. I'd called Cullen and told him enough to whet his curiosity. I slept most of the way. Michael slept some, too, but he was wide awake and back to his usual self by the time we landed. Full of questions.

"Are all airports ugly?" he asked, pausing to frown at the boarding gate we disembarked into. "This could be decorated."

"Parts of them are. The people behind us don't want to stop and study the walls, Michael."

"Oh. Of course." He started moving again. "I would like to have a closer look at the way they connected this tube to the airplane. Most ingenious. Not now, I know," he said, favoring me with a smile sweetened by amusement. "Maybe later?"

I couldn't help smiling back. "Maybe."

We made it to the concourse with only a few questions along the way. "I think I didn't travel much, before," he said as we headed to baggage claim, where Cullen would meet us. "But I wanted to. So now I want to absorb everything, all at once. Were you and this sorcerer lovers, Molly?"

I stumbled over nothing.

His hand was instantly there, steadying me. His eyes were oddly gentle. "Am I not supposed to ask?"

"You startled me, that's all." I shook my head. "Unlike you, I don't always tell the truth. But I'll try to, with you. Cullen and I have had sex, yes. But we were never lovers."

He studied my face a moment, then nodded as if he understood the distinction. "I would like it if you did not kiss him. Sexually, that is. I realize that kisses are not always sexual. Would that be difficult for you? I feel... uncomfortable when I think of you kissing others the way you kiss me."

"Michael." I cupped his cheek in my palm. "While I'm with you, I won't want to dine on other men." Though I might have to, if we couldn't find a way for Michael to safely use node energy... but I wasn't going to think about that, not now. "I certainly won't kiss them."

A smile broke over his face. "Thank you, Molly." He reclaimed my hand and started walking. A little boy on the plane had taught him how to whistle—somewhat disturbing my sleep, I might add—and he did that now, whistling

happily and without any discernible tune.

My heart was thumping as if we'd just negotiated some dreadful precipice. I cleared my throat. "You need to remember to call me Sandra."

"That isn't your name."

"It's the name on my ID."

"I will think on it," he told me.

CULLEN Seabourne is the most physically perfect man I've ever known. He's blond, slimmer, and taller than Michael, with a pleasant but unremarkable tenor voice. But people don't listen to Cullen. They stare at him, startled out of courtesy by such sheer, masculine beauty. He's well aware of his effect on others and capable of using it to get what he wants, but looks don't really matter to him. Magic does.

I didn't trust him, not completely. But I liked him, and, oh, but he was a pleasure to watch. Heads turned in baggage claim as he approached us. Among other things, Cullen is a dancer, and he moves like music made solid.

"Hullo, darling," Cullen said as he sauntered up. "Still in one piece, I see, in spite of ninjas and bazookas and such. But you have a new look. Nice," he said, reaching out with lazy grace to stroke one finger down my cheek. "But surprising." He leaned toward me.

"No kissing," I told him firmly.

"No?" He pulled back, quirking one eyebrow. Sometimes I think everyone in the world can do that except me. "How interesting. I have a few questions."

"I'm sure," I said dryly. "But not here, I think. You brought your car?"

"You don't think I'd trust my delicate skin to a taxi driver, do you? And you

indicated a need for privacy." Deliberately he turned to face Michael. "This would be the mystery man."

"Yes. This is Michael."

Who was staring. "You," he said, "are most unusual."

Cullen's eyes narrowed. After a moment of study he said, "So are you. Though I'm damned if I can say what you are. Not quite human, I think?"

"No. But then, neither are you. I've always wanted to meet one of your kind." Michael turned to me with a smile. "Did you know this is the only realm with Lupi?"

Oh, yes. That's another thing that Cullen is. A werewolf.

CULLEN was currently living in a dilapidated little shack in the mountains outside San Diego. At least, that's where he took us. I'm not sure he actually lived there. It looked ready to fall down, but it sat almost on top of a node.

"Quite small," he told us as he pulled his dusty Jeep to a stop in front of it. "No more than a trickle, really. But enough for my purposes, since I'm the only one using it. I'm trusting you rather a lot," he added, sliding me a glance as he climbed out. "I never bring people here."

"I'm paying you rather a lot. Besides, you're eaten up with curiosity."

"True." He flashed me a grin, then turned to Michael, who was studying the land around the cabin. "See anything interesting?"

"Just your wards. Nice work," Michael said politely. "That low one—it's to keep out vermin? Insects and such?"

Cullen went very still. "Oh, yes, I am definitely curious. Shall we go inside?"

The inside didn't look any more solid than the outside, but it was slightly cleaner.

There was only one room.

"Sit," Cullen said, rooting around in a cupboard. "I originally trained in Wicca, if that means anything to you." He took out an athame, two vials, and a small silver bowl.

"Yes," Michael said, seating himself at the small wooden table. It looked sturdier than the walls of the shack. "It means you're grounded in the basic energies of your realm, which is the best way to begin. With sorcery, though, I assume you're self-taught?"

"Mostly. Now and then I run across a tantalizing scrap, or cut a deal with one of my reclusive compatriots. We don't trust each other, of course, but we're equally desperate for knowledge. There's a man in Africa doing good work, a woman in Singapore... I've a contact or two in Faerie, as well, though they're a closemouthed lot." He gestured with the hand holding the bowl. "Sit down, Molly. I'm going to try a little creation of my own in a minute, a combination of truth and seek spells. First I have questions."

I sat. All of a sudden I wasn't at all sure I'd made the right decision, coming to Cullen. But what choice did we have? "I've told you how I found Michael."

"Questions for him, love, not you." He sat in the third chair, put his tools on the table, and looked at Michael. "You say you don't remember who and what you are, where you came from."

"I remember pieces. Not the whole."

"Yet you saw what I was right away. You saw my wards—and knew what they were, too."

"I gather that most people in this realm do not see the *sorcéri*." He gave the word an odd pronunciation I hadn't heard before.

"No. No, they don't. You really aren't from this world, are you?"

"That much I'm sure of."

Cullen drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "I have a feeling you know a helluva lot more than I do about magic. Why come to me?"

"My knowledge isn't always accessible. I want to see if you can hide or disguise my use of the nodes. They—the Azá—track me that way. Molly hopes you can restore my memory."

"You sound doubtful."

"I am. I can tell you the spell I used to forget, but I don't know if you will be able to devise a counterspell. I cannot, but being self-trained, you are accustomed to creating your own spells."

"That will help." Cullen's eyes glittered with excitement.

Michael gave him an assessing look. "You'll get nothing from me without my cooperation. Even with it, there is some danger."

Cullen gave a bark of laughter and leaned back in his chair. "Danger? For what you could teach me, I'd risk hurricanes, lightning bolts, and an IRS audit."

I was feeling worse about this all the time. Cullen glanced at me. "Don't worry, love. If my conscience—an elastic creation, admittedly—snaps under the strain, you can still count on my sense of self-preservation. I know very well you'd make a bad enemy."

"So would I," Michael said mildly. "But we won't be enemies, will we?"

"I hope not." Cullen's grin was little short of feral. "Oh, I do hope not."

TRUTH spells were not safe to use on Michael. This time, the backlash lifted Cullen off the ground and slammed him against the west wall. Boards cracked, broke. He landed half-out, half-in, sprawled in the debris of the wrecked wall.

My ears were ringing, though I hadn't heard a thing except for the wall breaking. I jumped to my feet. "Cullen!"

Michael's hand snatched at me. "Wait. The roof..."

I looked up. Things were leaning alarmingly. "Hold it," I told him, and hurried to Cullen. He was pale, motionless, and slightly bloody—but blinking thoughtfully at the sky now overhead instead of rafters. "Your boyfriend packs a punch, love."

I exhaled in relief. "At least you don't have amnesia."

"No, I remember well enough what happened." He pushed up on one elbow, winced. "At least one rib. It's a good thing I'm Lupus."

There were scraping noises behind me, and a grunt. "I think that will hold."

Michael sounded dubious. "The blow was unintentional, Cullen. I am sorry."

"You have amazing reflexes, then." He took the hand Michael held out, grunting as Michael pulled him to his feet, and rubbed his side. "Or maybe... not reflexes. Defenses. Put there by someone else."

Michael was very still. "You're talented. Given the tools you have to work with, extremely talented."

"You're a construct, aren't you? Made, not born."

"Yes."

That one word dropped into the well of silence it created even as it was spoken. *So many words have power*, I thought dimly, *not just the magical ones*. My voice, when at last I broke the silence, was small. "Michael?"

"I am sorry." His voice was remote. He didn't look at me.

"And you've remembered more than you're admitting." Excitement radiated from Cullen like heat from a stove as he moved closer to Michael. "I only caught a glimpse—but there's so much inside you! Knowledge—vast amounts of

knowledge. Power—"

"Knowledge is power," Michael said sadly.

Cullen stopped in front of Michael. "*What are you?*"

"I cannot tell you." At last Michael turned to me. There was grief in his eyes, old grief and fresh, the raw mixed with scars from other earlier woundings. "Not *will* not, Molly. Cannot. The way I am made, some things are not possible for me."

"You could have told me more than you have." I made it a statement, not a question. I was already sure.

"When we met the state cop, much came back to me. Not everything—I am still in pieces, and they don't all fit together. But that I was made, not born... yes. I could have told you that."

"You didn't trust me?" I whispered.

He lifted one hand as if he would touch me, then let it drop. "The place where I've lived is a good place. Not a world as you are used to worlds, but there is much beauty, much to learn. But it is remote. Few are able to cross, and the others who live there are further from human than I am. I was... lonely."

I swallowed hard. "Did you think I wouldn't understand loneliness?"

"I wanted you to see me as a man. Not a thing."

My breath huffed out. "Good grief, is that all? You *are* a man."

"This is not the body I wore before I came here. Things there are much more fluid. I... borrowed the pattern for this body from a friend."

I shook my head. "Great Mother of Heaven! You think I'm fooled by that delicious body of yours? I was pretty sure that wasn't your original form. Good grief—you scarcely knew how to walk when you first arrived."

Hope woke in his ocean eyes. "You were supposed to assume it was my wounds

hindering my movement."

"I did, at first. But this is my area of expertise, Michael. If anyone in this realm or any other knows about men, I do. Made or born, you are definitely a man."

"Then—you do not mind what I am?"

"I started out human, then became something else, too. You started out something else, then got some human mixed in." I shrugged. "What's to mind? You're Michael."

He whooped, grabbed me, and whirled us both around, kissing whatever part presented itself—my hair, forehead, shoulder. Quick, peppery kisses that stung life into me. Laughing, I seized his face in my hands, and kissed him back.

Until hard hands thrust the two of us apart.

"Good lord," Cullen gasped, one hand still on my shoulder, one on Michael's.

"It's not that I wasn't enjoying the show. I can't remember when I've gotten this hard watching others kiss, being more interested in participating than spectating. But you were drawing down hard from the node, Michael—and Molly, I thought you couldn't *take* without intercourse?"

I gaped at Michael, appalled. "I'm sorry. I didn't—I don't know how I did that."

He shook off Cullen's hand, and ran his own hand through his hair. "It's my fault. I'm supposed to control when I draw. If *she* was watching..."

"Well." Cullen shrugged. "It's a small node. Wouldn't be easy to spot, even drawing like you were, and I stopped you fast enough. I'd say it's unlikely anyone could have located you, but we don't have guarantees, do we? You'd better not do it again. However..." His eyes gleamed. "We do have an idea. At least, I do."

He stopped there, dragging it out. "Well?" I snapped.

"I think I know how to hide Michael's, ah, signature, when he draws. But I want to renegotiate our terms."

"You want more money?"

"Money?" He made a disgusted noise. "What use is that? I was going to use what you paid me, Molly my love, to try to acquire more scraps. I don't have to settle for scraps now."

"What do you want?" Michael's voice was ominously low.

"As much as I can get, obviously." Suddenly Cullen laughed. "If you could see your faces! I haven't turned into an evil wizard before your eyes, scheming to steal your souls and take over the world. I don't want them, for one thing. For another," he said wryly, "Michael could squash me like a bug if I tried anything. No, I want to learn. I want Michael's time for, say, a month. I want to ask questions, learn from him."

"I'm not allowed. No," Michael said to Cullen, holding up a hand. "This isn't negotiable. I thought at first that your realm had just drifted apart from the others, but it's more. You're under interdict. I don't know why, or who established the ban. Those pieces are missing. But I am not allowed to give you the knowledge you want."

Cullen's face tightened. "A week, just a week, then. I could spend a lifetime studying my scraps and not learn as much as I can from you in one week. Do you know what that's like? All right—one day, man!" He was fierce in his need. "Just give me one day."

"One spell." Michael's face was granite. "One spell, of your choice—within reason. No transformations."

Cullen spoke flatly. "Not enough."

"We don't have to deal with you," I said mildly. "If the idea is any good, chances

are one of us will think of it, sooner or later. More likely Michael than me, I'll admit."

Cullen wore an odd little smile. "I doubt this particular notion would occur to him. Even if it does, he'll need help. Because he isn't much at creating spells. Are you?" he said directly to Michael. "You've got more facts lodged in your head than NASA's mainframe, but you don't know much about building from scratch."

"I wasn't made to create, but I can do it."

"Well enough to trust Molly's life to a homemade spell?"

His eyebrows pulled down. His gaze darted to me, then back to Cullen.

"Explain."

"Not until you agree to my terms."

"Then I suppose we must leave. And then, sooner or later, the Azá will find me. They will either kill Molly, or not. And I will either kill more of them, or not—but eventually they will have me, and turn me over to their goddess. Then she will have access to all that you covet."

Cullen flung up one hand—a fencer's gesture, acknowledging an opponent's coup. "And civilization as we know it will come to an end? All right, all right. One spell. You'll give me a little time to think of what I want, since I'm to get just the one?"

Michael nodded. "And your idea?"

"Is simplicity itself, in principle. Probably not in execution." He threw me a roguish glance. "It's right up your alley, sweetheart. All you have to do is make love."

Chapter 11



IT wasn't simple, of course. Michael and Cullen spent the rest of the afternoon discussing the details, arguing, now and then pausing to draw a glowing symbol in the air. But the premise was fairly basic.

Not that I understood it. Michael and I would change places, as far as the nodes were concerned. Instead of me drinking from him, he'd draw power through me. Only I'd still be tapping the magic through him, which is what I didn't understand. Somehow, though, the nodes would "read" my pull, not his. And I was mostly human, natural to this realm, so no one would be able to get a fix on me.

"Your energies are already muddled up together, love," Cullen had told me when I expressed bafflement. "Not that I have a clue how you did that, but that's what I saw when you went into a liplock. It's why you were able to begin feeding short of, ah, the usual ritual. We're just going to muddle things a bit more thoroughly." There was a catch, of course. Isn't there always? Once we were joined this way, I would have to feed through Michael. And only him.

It was a long afternoon. The sun was low by the time they agreed on the basics and finished their preparations. Michael took me aside. "I'm not sure I should do this," he said, smoothing my hair back. I couldn't read his expression, but his

body was tense. "I know you agreed, but you don't—you can't—understand exactly what you're agreeing to."

I smiled tenderly. "You didn't know what you were getting into last night, did you?" Then laughed at my accidental pun. "Well, maybe you knew, technically. Me. I'll trust your experience in sorcery, just as you trusted mine last night."

A smile eased, but didn't erase, the tension around his eyes. "Then we are ready."

"Good," Cullen said from behind me. "I'll start walking, then, and give the two of you a little privacy. I hope you won't linger in the afterglow too long, though. I'm eager."

They'd agreed that Michael would give Cullen his spell—one involving illusion—after our ritual was completed, when Michael could safely draw from the node. "You are considerate," Michael said, turning to face him. "But that won't be necessary."

"Won't be..." Cullen's face worked. The blood drained from it. "Damn you!" he whispered—and his eyes rolled back.

Michael caught him before he hit the floor, and lowered him carefully. "I am sorry," he said to the unconscious man.

My heart was hammering in my throat. "What did you do to him?"

"He will sleep for many hours. When he wakes, he'll remember very little... that you brought a fellow sorcerer to visit him. That he and I exchanged spells, discussed some things, then you and I left. It won't be perfect," he said, straightening Cullen's legs so he could rest comfortably. "I can't build a memory as vivid as the real thing. But I've also planted an aversion in him. He won't want to examine his memories of this day."

"But why?"

"The spell he requested was the smallest part of what he learned today." Michael

shook his head, looking with rueful admiration at the man he'd felled. "We had to collaborate, and in the process he learned more than anyone in your world has known in several hundred years. Which he was counting on, of course. Did you not think he gave in too easily?"

I sighed. I'd been too relieved to be suspicious.

"I will give him what we agreed upon," Michael said, "but must take away the rest." He settled, cross-legged, beside Cullen's body, and touched his forehead.

I didn't interfere. Should I have? I've never been sure.

It didn't take long. After a few moments Michael shook himself like a dog come in from the rain, and stood. "It's done." Regret rang through his voice like a low, sad bell. "I left him a gift."

"What kind?"

"Shields. No one will be able to do to him again what I have done this day."

I sighed. "He wants to learn so much."

"And I understand his need, better than he knows. But he is too hungry."

Michael looked at me. "I've dealt with seekers like him for a very long time. Their hunger can't be sated, like yours can. Better if he forgets. It would be unkind to let him remember only a little, knowing that so much more was somewhere in his world."

"Not kind, no," I said quietly. "And maybe not safe for us, either. Michael?"

"Yes?"

"Just how old are you?"

His eyes crinkled as amusement banished the shadows. "You have been determined to see me as very young, haven't you? Though you claimed not to be fooled by my body. My delicious body?" He quirked an eyebrow at me.

I laughed and held out my hand. "Male vanity crosses all realms. You didn't answer my question."

"Soon," he said, taking my hand, "you will know that, and more. But we had best hurry. Cullen was counting on my unwillingness to use magic and draw the goddess's attention."

I swallowed. "She has to work through human agents, and we're pretty remote. Even if she spotted you, it will take them awhile to get here."

"Yes. But I am unsure how long we will be... occupied."

I tried for a cocky smile. "Doesn't usually take *that* long."

"This will not be as usual, Molly."

THE node lay just east of the shack, its perimeter less than ten feet from the wall Cullen had gone sailing through. In another land it would have been called a fairy circle. The San Diego hills—I refuse to call them mountains, they lack the stature for that—are arid, though, so the grass was scruffy, bleached, and brownish. But though sparse, it grew in the distinctive spiral pattern common to nodes.

The two men had set wards earlier, using four black pillar candles, one at each of the cardinal points. Michael used a gesture rather than an athame to open the circle so we could enter. A quilt awaited us.

We were to enter sky-clad—nude, in other words. This was both ritually necessary and convenient, considering why we were there. I stripped, stepped into the circle, and knelt on the quilt.

Michael left his clothes in a neat pile and joined me. With another gesture, he set flames on the candles' wicks. He knelt in front of me, taking my hands. "You're nervous. You know what to do?"

I nodded. They'd briefed me on my part—which was, basically, to control my appetite, not letting myself dine until Michael told me to. And to set the sexual pace. Most of the time, simultaneous orgasm is overrated. This once, though, it was essential. "One of these days we'll have to try this in a bed," I said, trying to lighten the mood. Mine, mostly.

"I count on that. Molly? Time is short."

I nodded again, leaned forward, and brushed my lips across Michael's—and sprang to my feet. "I'm sorry." I squeezed my eyes shut. "I can't do this. I'm sorry."

Silence. Except for the wind and a distant locust, I heard nothing at all. I opened my eyes. Michael just sat there, his face nearly as frozen as the state cop's had been.

"It's wrong," I said, miserable. "You were worried I didn't know what I was letting myself in for. Well, I knew. I was thrilled, if you want the truth. You couldn't leave me once it was done, could you?" Everyone left—over and over, they grew old and died... "I wanted to keep you. Because you won't die." The wind lifted my hair, pushing it in my face. I shoved it back.

He tilted his head back so he could look at me. His voice was dead level. "And is that the only reason you want to keep me? Because I won't age and die on you?"

"Well, I love you, of course. But—"

"Holy fuck."

I blinked at him.

"You said the word was not offensive when one is about to do it." He rose to his feet and gripped my shoulders. "Didn't you wonder? Of all the nodes in the world, didn't you wonder how I happened to land on yours?"

"I—I supposed it was the closest, or something like that."

"I've been watching you. What you call the Great Storm was the physical expression of a realms-wide disturbance. It opened a small... call it a viewing spot. I saw you save Erin's great-great-grandmother. I bent several rules to watch you raising her. Then you left Galveston, for years and years. I was so happy when you came back." His fingers tightened. "So happy."

"Watching me?" I couldn't take it in. "You've been watching me since 1900?"

"Only when you were in Galveston. I couldn't follow when you left. You were so beautiful. I watched, and I fell in love."

My mouth was hanging open like a fish's. I closed it, then said, stupidly, "But I've been fifty years old all that time."

"Molly." His smile was tender. "You shine. I wish you could see your own colors."

Something tight and small inside me was unfurling. "You love me. It isn't just the sex. You loved me before that."

He nodded, solemn again. "I didn't think you could love me. Not this fast, maybe not at all. But I could feed you, I knew that. Only, of course, I forgot. Forgot everything—you, me, why I'd fled." He shook his head. "I really am bad at creating spells. In my defense, I can only say that I was in a hurry. They'd broken into my place."

"They?"

"They shouldn't have been able to. Even Old Ones have limits. But two of them cooperated with—with—it's gone." The familiar frustration roughened his voice. "Something has changed in the realms, but I don't know what. Not anymore."

"Never mind," I said, and the unfurling reached my face, bringing a smile. "This isn't the time for talk, is it?" I put my arms around his neck. "Make love with me,

Michael."

In the end it was simple, after all.

We sank to the quilt together, kissing and touching as if we had all the time in the world. This time I could be patient, thrill myself with his body, because the other hunger wasn't so great. This time, I could share a little of what I'd learned in the last three hundred years.

I explored him. His toes. The backs of his knees. His scrotum—oh, he was sensitive there, no surprise, but his response nearly tipped me over. I sat back on my heels, breathing heavily. "Give me a moment."

"No," he said, and pulled me over him like a blanket.

"I think you've forgotten who's in charge," I said as he licked my nipple. He smiled and blew on it. I shivered.

Passion was no less strong, but it built more slowly. Maybe because he and I both had to keep track of other things—he was watching the energies I couldn't see, manipulating them in ways I couldn't guess. But I could feel them, oh, yes, feel the power rising, swirling between us, yet I had to keep us paced to each other.

Finally I rose over him, guided myself down and sighed with pleasure at the fullness. I ran my fingernails over his chest. "I am *very* happy with the body you chose," I said, leaning forward and all but purring. "If you see your friend again, give him my compliments."

Michael laughed. He gripped my hips and thrust up. And undid all my care. The fall towards climax hit so fast I couldn't stop it. "Michael!" He thrust again and the swirls seemed to reach for me. "Wait!"

"No, Molly, it's now. Now! Reach for me, go deep—"

I reached. Gripped him tight with my inner muscles even as I bore down, drank-deep—convulsed. And screamed.

It wasn't pain, though something ripped me open. It wasn't pleasure, though I spun on the wheel of a climax, caught in a vortex that was intensely physical, and not physical at all. It wasn't dark or light, warm or cold, or anything I have names for.

And then, for a timeless period, it wasn't me anymore.

Not just me.

Then I was myself again, the only one in my body. Which ached all over, and not just in the usual places. Michael was a warm, lumpy mattress beneath me. His breath was warm and moist against my cheek.

It was dark. The candles had burned down. One was flickering, nearly out.

"Well, sailor," I whispered, "you do know how to show a girl a good time."

"Ahh," he said. "I don't think I have the breath to laugh." He paused. "I can't feel my left hand."

I realized I was lying on it. I moved. "It's asleep. Be prepared for some fierce pins and needles."

"Pins and... ow!" He held it up, glaring at it. "Bizarre."

"Returning circulation." I managed to roll off him. "Whew." I turned my head to smile at him. "About eight hundred, if I've figured it right."

His brow creased. "What?"

"You. You're something over eight hundred years old. Though you weren't entirely *there* for the first three or four centuries, were you?"

I hadn't experienced all of Michael, nor had he, I think, blended with all of me. Partly because, as he'd said, he was still in pieces, with large gaps in his

memories. Partly because some of what he'd lived I had no context for, so it hadn't stuck.

I had enough. "Poor Cullen. If he'd known he was entertaining the—"

"Shh." He laid a hand over my lips. "Not even in teasing, Molly. Not even here. It isn't safe."

I nodded, understanding. Understanding so much more than I'd expected to. My lover, my mystery man really was a myth of sorts.

Michael was the missing Codex Arcanum. The Book of All Magic.

His creator... I had only shadowy images of the one who'd conceived him. An adept? One of the Old Ones? I didn't know, nor did I understand why he'd done it. Perhaps the same desire that led humans to build libraries, the need to keep knowledge from being scattered or destroyed. For centuries, whatever the sorcerers and magicians of many realms had written in their spell books—which weren't always books, nor was the recording always writing—had also been "written" into Michael.

He'd been created here, though. Here on Earth, that is. Not on this continent, but somewhere in my world. Shortly after being made, he'd been sent to another realm, a place where magic ran wild.

Later, he'd developed a sort of homesickness for this world. At the time, though, he hadn't cared. He wasn't alive then.

Had his creator planned for him to come to consciousness? Michael himself didn't know, and I wasn't about to guess. But the place where he'd been stashed was much smaller than our universe, with magic spilling all over itself. Anything that held on to a stable form there for long achieved life. Anything living and sufficiently complex become sentient.

Michael had been built to last. And he certainly wasn't simple.

He shifted beside me, propping himself up to look down on my face. He traced my lip with a finger. "You are well, Molly? You are all right?"

"I'm well." I kissed his finger. "Unbelievably tired, but well. Um... shouldn't we be getting out of here?" I glanced around. "No sign of ninjas yet, but—"

"We can leave in a hurry if we need to. Of course, I only know one place to go." He smiled. "Back to Galveston."

"In that case, I want my clothes. I'm not arriving there naked again."

The two of us creaked to our feet. I was giddy with exhaustion... and happiness.

"What about Cullen?"

"They won't bother him if we are gone. Why should they?" Michael lifted his hand to clear the wards, but paused. "One more thing before we go. I have been giving your name some thought."

I leaned against him, smothering a yawn. "I'm not sure I can give your suggestions the proper attention right now."

"I was hoping you would let me name you, as you did me."

I straightened, looked him in the eye. After a moment I said softly, "All right."

"Then I would like you to remain Molly. And I will give you a new last name."

I nodded solemnly. "That's traditional. What did you have in mind?"

He kissed the tip of my nose. "You are my gift of grace. I name you Molly Grace."

I closed my eyes, checking the fit. And smiled, and opened my eyes. "All right... Michael Grace."

His eyes lit. "You gift me with a last name, too."

"It *is* the twenty-first century." Another yawn overtook me. "Michael? Can we go home now?" Because that's what Galveston was, I realized. I might leave it

again, maybe many times. But I'd go back. And I wouldn't go alone.

Michael lifted the wards, banished the guttering flames on the candles, then swung me up into his arms to carry me out of the circle. I found that very funny, especially when he stumbled and nearly dropped me.

"Is this not tradition? The carrying over the threshold?" he asked.

"Close enough." I handed him his jeans and stepped into my panties. "I love you."

"Good." He said that with great satisfaction, then fumbled his way into his clothes while I pulled mine on. I finished first, and told him I wanted to check on Cullen. "Just to be sure."

His brows twitched down, but he nodded. "I will wait for you."

It was a leave-taking I needed, I realized as I tossed a blanket over Cullen's sleeping body. Something new had begun, but other things had ended. I folded up a jacket and placed it under his head for a pillow, then knelt beside him and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Good-bye," I said softly.

It wasn't really Cullen I was bidding farewell to, of course.

Michael was waiting by the node, as he'd said he would be. I walked into his arms. "You are happy?" He whispered it, as if the question was too large to say out loud. "You do not regret giving up all the beautiful young men like Cullen?"

Oh, he did know me. That was going to take some getting used to, but... "I'm happy," I told him, and grinned. "Besides, sometimes all a woman my age really wants is to curl up in bed with a good book."

Michael grinned, too. And took us home.