

A composite image with a purple-to-blue gradient background. On the left, a shirtless man with long dark hair and a muscular build stands with his hands on his hips, wearing shiny, light-colored pants. On the right, a hand with orange-painted nails reaches towards a blue glass bottle with a label, which sits on a wooden table. The text 'ISABELLA JORDAN' is in the upper right, and 'ELEGANT' is in the lower left, both in a white, stylized serif font.

ISABELLA  
JORDAN

ELEGANT

## ELEGANT

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he whispered, catching a lock of her gleaming hair in his rough fingers. “Who are you?”

She could barely find the voice to speak. Spell or no spell, it was the most magical moment of her entire life.

“Ella Kent,” she managed.

Strong fingers tipped her chin back up, forcing her to meet his eyes again. “What?”

“Ella Kent,” she said slowly.

Some emotion crossed his handsome features, but he said nothing. She’d have been uncomfortable with the silence if she hadn’t already wanted to jump out of her skin from the nearness of him. The smell of warm skin and man, and the heat from his body had her tingling with an unfamiliar awareness.

“You know...rhymes with elephant,” she tried with a half-hearted attempted to laugh.

His smile had her heart leaping, the fire down low burning hotter.

“I thought you said ‘elegant.’”

Ian lowered his head and took her mouth with a gentleness she hadn’t expected. His firm, sensuous lips caressed hers slowly, savoring her, as his hands sank into her hair, holding her in place for his skillful exploration. Ella drowned in that kiss, clutching his leather jacket for support because she didn’t know how much longer her shaking knees would hold her up...

ALSO BY ISABELLA JORDAN

*Woman In Chains*

# ELEGANT

BY

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ELEGANT  
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*For Jim...*

# CHAPTER 1

Ella Kent shoved aside the empty platter and made a grab for the double banana split her friend had ordered for her birthday. Richard Shelton, her best friend since high school, gave her that little smirk that let her know there'd be a discussion before he handed over the dessert. He pulled it back across the wooden tabletop until it was out of her reach. Something he might not have managed so easily if her arms were a little longer or the table was a little narrower.

Ah, who was she kidding? She was fat. The spare tire around her waist was the biggest reason she couldn't reach that scrumptious bit of chocolate-topped heaven, and she knew it.

"Oh, no you don't." Richard pulled the dessert further out of reach when she tried again. "Not until you tell me what happened earlier."

"Nothing happened earlier." Ella tried to deny it.

But her friend had always been able to read her far too easily. Richard shook his head, his sharp eyes pinning her in the chair.

"If nothing happened," he said, "why did you stop at Godiva's after

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work?”

Ella cringed. She'd seen him playing the violin in the window of his apartment when she came home, but didn't think he had seen her. And she'd given herself kudos for smuggling the enormous bag of chocolate candy into her apartment without him seeing her. *Damn him!*

“It's my birthday,” she pointed out, knowing she wouldn't get anywhere. “Can't I treat myself for my birthday?”

“For one birthday? Or ten?”

Frowning at him, she slumped back into her chair.

“All right.” Ella blew out a frustrated sigh. He was right. She was celebrating her birthday; she was compensating. She'd had a bad day. And he wouldn't give up until she admitted he was right. “It was a hectic afternoon, that's all.”

“Hectic,” Richard repeated.

“Well, yeah,” she began. “Lunch was busy and it never really slowed down after that. Plus Rudy fired the new part-time cook.”

Richard's dark brows knitted. “Which one was he?”

“The one who called me Ella Kent the Elephant,” Ella replied flatly.

He nodded, but didn't say anything.

Watching Richard nonchalantly sipping wine, she realized how lucky she was to have him as a friend. He accepted her, just the way she was, which was something the rest of the world struggled with. He never looked at her with pity or revulsion or any of the equally annoying emotions in between that she was so accustomed to from everyone else.

Sure, he drove her crazy sometimes harping at her about diets and exercise. But all his advice and nagging came from a place where he wanted to help her.

“Why did he get fired?” Richard asked.

“Mostly for swiping tips,” Ella offered.

“Mostly. But what he actually got fired for was...” He held out his hand, palm up, to prompt her for the answer.



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“Well, it was stupid really.” She felt uncomfortable now. And she shouldn’t. She had no secrets from Richard. But the incident earlier in the café where she worked bothered her, and that was something considering the tough hide she’d developed from years of fat jokes. “He took my uniform out of my locker and drew on it.”

Richard’s brows lifted. He patiently waited for her to continue.

“He drew on the back of my uniform. It was supposed to look like a brand on my butt. Like I was a steer or something. I didn’t know it was there when I started my shift. Really funny, huh?”

The concern she read in her friend’s eyes nearly had her in tears again, but she fought it. She really should be immune to such childishness by now. But it had been hard today. She’d been laughed at for two hours before one of her regulars pointed out the cruel joke that had been played on her.

She’d held onto her composure and had even tried to laugh with them. But Rudy, the owner, found it a convenient excuse to fire the cook who’d been nothing but trouble since they’d hired him. And that had only made matters worse for Ella. Half the restaurant staff thought she’d whined to Rudy about the joke, causing him to get fired, while the other half felt sorry for her. And she hated pity more than anything.

Ella somehow made it through the day and headed straight for Godiva’s the moment she left work, as she always did when she was feeling low. She’d be the first one to admit she had a psychological dependence on chocolate, sugar, cake frosting. And the lower she felt, the more she ate.

“It’s okay,” she told him. “He’s gone now, right?”

“That’s right.”

Tears gathered in her eyes anyway.

“You okay?” Richard reached across the table for her hand.

She nodded. “It’s just not how I envisioned spending my thirtieth birthday. I guess I always thought I’d be spending it with the man of my dreams, maybe a couple of kids, in a nice, big house in the country.

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But here I am—still in Chicago, big as a house, celebrating my birthday with my gay best friend.”

“Dashing, gay best friend,” he corrected with a wink, making her chuckle despite the sad realization.

And then she remembered the other item she’d picked up on her way home. A novelty item she’d bought from a street vendor at the small carnival she’d run across at Navy Pier.

“I bought something else,” she threw out to change the subject. “There was a small carnival at the pier.”

“I hadn’t noticed.” Richard slid the banana split across the table to her. “What did you buy?”

“A magic potion.” Ella winked at him as she snatched up her spoon and dug into the chocolate and nut-covered treat with delight. “This is wonderful. Thank you!”

Richard waved away the thank you.

“A magic potion, huh?” After draining his wine glass, he eyed her curiously as she ate. “What is it supposed to do?”

“Make me beautiful.” *If only*, she thought. “Well, for only thirty days and only if I say the little verse on the jar nine times and make a wish.”

“And if there’s a harvest moon, a one-legged nun walking a goat by the Sears Tower, and—”

“I know.” Ella laughed. “But this Gypsy lady had such a good spiel, Richard. She told me the potion only truly worked for special people and she could see I was one of those—the whole nine yards.”

Richard shook his head. “There’s a good reason to buy things. I’m glad you’re not car shopping.”

“Oh, stop,” Ella managed between bites. “It was fun.”

“They didn’t have a potion that would conjure a gorgeous hunk, did they?” Her friend’s eyes sparkled in mischief. “Now, if she was pitching that...”

“I’d have beaten you to it,” she assured him.

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After a laugh, he said, “Ah, well, at least it’ll make an interesting addition to your knick-knack shelf.”

She finished her banana split and considered that suggestion. It probably *would* be quite a conversation piece for when she had company over. But she was lucky to have company outside of Richard, and her family who only made it in once a year.

*Well, I could always try the potion,* she thought. *Yeah, right.* It would be her luck to end up in the hospital. The fat chick getting her stomach pumped. She could just hear the jokes on that one. “This will take a while,” they’d say.

“I’m going to the restroom before we go,” Ella told him as she clumsily slid out of the booth.

Concern still clouded her friend’s gaze as he looked up at her.

“Did you rent anything for tonight?” she asked hopefully.

His face split into a wide grin. “Of course. A romantic comedy with sex and good-lookin’ boys.”

“Wowsa!” Ella laughed. “My kind of movie! I’ll hurry.”

Ella turned and hustled toward the ladies room. But before she could turn the corner to reach the door, she collided with a large, solid form. The impact knocked her off balance and she landed squarely on her generous butt, hard. Sharp pain raced through her back and legs as she sat on the floor stunned.

“I’m sorry,” a deep voice pierced her disorientation. “Are you all right?”

She gazed up into the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. The man was tall with black hair that framed his face in long layers and his shoulders looked as wide as church doors. Everything about him, from the hard planes of his handsome face to the black leather jacket he wore with faded jeans, told her that he was a man used to the world and well-used by it.

Ella nodded, pulled her gaze away. “I think so.”

“Let me help you up.”

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Shaking her head, she said, “No, I can—”  
“I insist.”

She hated this part. Wasn't it bad enough she was already a spectacle in the crowded restaurant? Fat girl down. But now he'd try to haul her up from the floor, he wouldn't be able to, and she wouldn't be able to return to her favorite restaurant for months.

But he managed the task easily. Kneeling by her side, he wrapped a strong, muscular arm around her back and cupped her elbow with his other hand. She was back on her feet in an instant, mesmerized by the gorgeous stranger standing so close to her. He smelled wonderful, earthy and warm, and his hard body pressing against hers was a new and unfamiliar experience. It messed with her insides.

“Th-thank you,” she managed, gazing up at him shyly.

“You're sure you're okay?”

He had an accent. *Irish*, she thought. And his eyes were warm and friendly. Not a trace of mockery or pity to be found. Her heart melted. What would she give to have a man like that in her life? Someone gorgeous, kind, and nonjudgmental...

“I'm fine,” she muttered.

“El? Are you okay?” Richard's tone was one of worry until he spotted her rescuer. Then he smiled brightly. “Oh, hello.”

The good-looking man nodded briefly at her friend's enthusiastic greeting but nothing more and she knew a moment's relief. *Well, at least he isn't gay*. She could fantasize about him.

“Your meals are on the house tonight,” he said as he stepped back from Ella. “Who's your waitress tonight?”

“Tall and skinny,” Richard described. “Dark hair, crossed eyes.”

The man nodded knowingly. “Crystal. I'll let her know.”

“It's her birthday, too,” Richard tipped his head toward Ella.

Not knowing what he hoped to accomplish with that, she shot her friend the dirtiest look she could manage.

But the handsome man stepped into her line of vision as he headed

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out, and stopped before her with a lazy half-smile on his handsome face.

“Happy birthday,” he bade her softly.

And then he was gone. But Ella could still feel his hard body pressed to hers, could still smell him. And the sound of his deep voice, well, that would be running through her head deep into the night.

“He is fine.” Richard watched him walk away, too.

“He truly is,” Ella said longingly.

They both watched until he’d disappeared from sight. Then Richard said, “Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

Ella stared out of her apartment window with the scene in the restaurant playing over and over in her mind like a favorite movie. She didn’t even mind the part where she fell; she’d abandoned pride long ago. All she could remember was the man who’d come to her rescue, and the beauty of his face, his voice.

And his kindness. It was almost as if he hadn’t seen her as an enormous woman he’d knocked off her feet. It had been a heart-stopping moment. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have him look at her with love in his deep blue eyes, with admiration.

To have him look at her like she was beautiful.

In an instant, she snatched her purse from the sofa where she’d dumped it when she and Richard returned from the restaurant. She pulled out empty candy wrappers, food coupons, lipsticks, keys. Ella began to panic until she spotted the object of her search nestled in the worn lining at the bottom of her purse.

The small jar she’d purchased from the Gypsy woman was glass with a cork top. The word “beauty” had been hand-written on a paper label on the jar that contained a dark green substance. It sure didn’t look very appetizing.

Turning the jar in her hands, she began to read the tiny writing on

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the back of the label:

*Drink all of this elixir at once by the light of the moon and, until the same moon returns, you will be changed. Make your heart's wish and say nine times, May my beauty inside be my beauty outside.*

She knew it was crazy to even consider it. Of course the old Gypsy woman had been convincing and mysterious. Like Richard said, the woman had only wanted to sell her something.

*And yet...* Well, it was fun to dream. If she drank it, what was the worst thing that could happen? Well, if it were poison, she could die, she supposed. But likely, if she drank it, nothing would change; nothing would happen at all.

Like an excited child, she made her way to the kitchen for a corkscrew. She'd never been handy with little tools, but sheer determination got the cork out of that jar. The pleasant scent of flowers and spring rain floated up from the jar.

With a delighted laugh, she lifted the jar, tipping it to and fro to see that the contents were fluid and didn't appear too thick. And she had to drink it by the light of the moon, so she carried it back to her living room, pulled opened the curtains wide to reveal a full moon glowing in the sky overhead.

*Well, here goes...*

And, with a prayer that she wouldn't die of stupidity, she put the jar to her lips and downed the potion in a few great gulps. The taste was not unpleasant—minty and almost medicinal.

*Now for a wish.*

Instantly, an image of the handsome stranger from the restaurant filled her mind and her wish was made. Just once she'd like to know what it felt like to have someone like him to look at her as if she were someone special.

To finish the instructions, she repeated the verse from the label nine times, slowing down on the last repetition. In the silence of her apartment, she waited as she uttered the last word.

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She didn't know what she expected to happen. Lightning bolts from the sky? A magical transformation with colorful smoke rising from the floor?

Nothing happened, and she felt no different.

Then she laughed. It had been fun. For the ten minutes or so she was opening the jar and completing the spell, she'd believed in magic.

It had felt good to do something different tonight because, usually, nothing ever changed for Ella. Every day she woke up alone and took the bus to her job at the café. All day she served the same meals to the same customers, smiling at the stories they'd already told. There were the jokes and slurs about her appearance, and she let those go by. Much worse was the journey back home to an empty apartment with only her television and food to keep her company.

*But there's Richard*, she thought fondly. What would she ever do without him?

Ella put the empty jar on the coffee table next to half-empty bowl of popcorn she'd shared with Richard earlier and sighed.

*My thirtieth birthday. Well, it had been more than just another day, hadn't it?* Her friend took her out for a nice dinner, she was knocked over by the most handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on, and she'd drank a magic potion she'd bought from a Gypsy that was supposed to make her beautiful.

*Well, it would take more than a Gypsy's potion to make Ella Kent the Elephant beautiful*, she thought as she snagged up the bag of chocolate candies she bought earlier and headed for bed.

It would take a miracle.

## CHAPTER 2

Ella stretched as she slowly began to awaken. The sun shone brightly through the filmy curtains of her bedroom window and she fairly leapt from the bed in panic. The clock on the nightstand by her bed said it was half past eight! She should have been up two hours ago. *Rudy will be pissed!*

But the whirlwind of thoughts about being an hour late for work halted all at once as she glanced down.

*Oh, my God*, Ella thought as she reeled in shock. *What the hell happened?* Her body was... Well, it was...gone! Not literally of course, but it was certainly not the healthy two hundred and seventy five pounds of Ella that she'd always known and loved.

She ran to the bathroom and was frozen by the sight that greeted her in the mirror over the sink. Another woman's face stared back at her with her perfect mouth gaped open and her blue eyes wide in amazement.

Her hands flew to her face, verifying what the mirror told her. Her



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fingers traced the smooth contours of her face. The supple skin fit snugly against her cheekbones and jaw. Gone were the pockets of flesh she was accustomed to on both sides of her face and under her chin. Her hands glided down the smooth line of her neck, not finding the pad of flesh that usually hung there, but a smooth, slim column.

Leaning closer to the mirror, she stared at her altered reflection. Her eyes were the same at least—blue, but nothing extraordinary. But the rest of her face... *Dear Lord!* Was that how she looked as a thin woman?

She looked like the women in the fashion magazines who she'd always envied. Her face was pretty, all delicate, perfect angles and smooth, white skin. Her nose was slim and perfectly straight; her chin softly rounded. Her lips were full with that bee-stung look that had been all the rage for ages now, and that was something because her lips had been the thinnest thing about her since childhood.

Then she noticed her hair. Ella's hair had been her one good feature, naturally blonde and heavy. But even it was different; longer than it had been last night when she went to bed. Instead of the shoulder-length bob she normally wore, her hair hung in silky waves that fell past her shoulders to midway down her back.

*My back!* How long had it been since she'd been able to see her shoulder blades, her waist? Shutting the bathroom door with an anxious slam, she gazed at herself in the door's full-length mirror she seldom used.

Ella's mouth fell open again. The body she saw in the mirror was definitely not hers. She had ankles! And they were attached to long, slender legs that were smooth and toned. Turning to look over her shoulder she saw the back of herself in the mirror, and saw that those legs ended in a firm, well-rounded backside. *Hell, it looks as good as J. Lo's!*

Facing forward again, she hauled up the enormous nightshirt that was her favorite, pulling it over her head to reveal a truly glorious

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body. Her panties were missing—had probably fallen off—so she saw everything—the flat abdomen, the faint lines of her ribs, the full, shapely breasts that were just perfect for this body, but that would never fit into her double D bra.

Holding her arms out to her sides, she admired their long, slim lines. Even her fingers were slender, her nails clear and shiny.

What the hell had happened?

*The potion!*

Still naked, she ran into her living room to find the empty jar she'd bought from the lady at the carnival right where she'd left it. She read and reread the writing on the label. Yes, the woman had told her it was a magic potion and to follow the instructions.

It was supposed to be a novelty. It wasn't supposed to actually work!

Her mind spun. *Is this real? Or is it a dream?*

*That's it*, she thought, and she grasped a bit of skin on one of her new arms and pinched hard. She winced at the pain, but nothing changed. She didn't wake up again in her bed. She was still naked in someone else's body in the middle of her living room *Oh, dear God!*

She hurried into her bedroom, snatched her blue robe from the foot of her bed and wrapped it about herself tightly as she headed out of her apartment. In seconds, she stood before Richard's apartment door down the hall, banging on it for all she was worth.

"Richard!"

He wouldn't be awake yet. And she could tell from the grumpy look on his face when he opened the door that he'd just crawled out of bed to answer the door.

"Yes?" His voice was tight and low. But if he saw anything amiss he took great pains not to show it.

"Well?" she asked waiting for the shock to register on his face.

But it didn't. His eyes, barely open from sleep, raked her from head to toe. He shook his head.

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“You’ve got the wrong apartment,” he mumbled and slammed the door in her face.

“Richard!” she cried in frustration. “It’s me! Ella!”

After a couple of seconds, the door was yanked open and she was treated to one of his rare glares before he looked behind her, up and down the hallway. With an angry shake of his head, he slammed the door again.

“Richard! Open the door!” she demanded.

“Look—” His tone turned nasty as he pulled the door open again.

“—I don’t know what you’re up to but you’d better leave or I—”

“Richard,” she cut him off, pressing a hand to her chest. “It’s me. Ella.”

Obviously losing patience, he folded his arms across his chest.

“I hear Ella, but I don’t see Ella,” he said flatly.

“I know,” she tried to explain. “You’ve got to—”

“Ella would already be at work by now,” he pointed out.

“Richard, I overslept,” she explained hurriedly. “You’ve got to help me. I drank that potion last night and—”

“Whoa!” Richard held up a hand to stop her. “Potion?”

“You remember? I told you about it last night at O’Malley’s. I bought it at the carnival at Navy Pier.”

His dark brows knitted as he processed her words. The confusion on his face was easy to read.

“I remember Ella telling me about a potion she’d bought—”

“I’m Ella!” she insisted.

Her friend’s eyes locked with hers for a long moment before they moved over her face. “If you *are* Ella, tell me something only Ella would know.”

She knew a moment’s panic, but it didn’t take long for her scrambling mind to come up with the hard evidence to convince her friend.

“You went to our senior prom with a *girl*.” She deliberately

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emphasized the word “girl.” “Her name was Mary Madison Mathers. And she—”

Before she could finish, Richard grabbed her by the front of her loose robe and pulled her into the privacy of his apartment. Her startled friend stared at Ella as if she had two heads with six eyes between them as he closed his door.

“Ella?”

“It’s me, Richard.” She willed him to believe her. “I’m just as shocked—”

“Wait.” He frowned. “If this is some kind of joke...”

“Who would help me with any kind of joke?” she wanted to know. “You’re my only friend.”

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his own robe, he nodded. “True.”

“Richard, you have to help me!” she begged him as she began to pace. “What am I going to do? If you didn’t recognize me, you know they won’t at work!”

He shrugged. “Call in sick.”

That stopped her. “For thirty days? I’m going to lose my job,” she moaned. “My clothes won’t fit! How am I going to buy something to wear with no job?”

“My God,” Her friend’s stare told her that the enormity of her situation had finally begun to sink into his recently awakened mind. His eyes were dark and serious as they fastened on her. “The first thing we have to do is find that Gypsy woman.”

*Okay, that makes sense*, she decided, thinking it was the first thing since she’d awakened that had.

“I’ll go find something of mine for you to wear.” Richard sprung into action.

Ella smiled. She knew Richard would think of something.

“Richard, thank you.” She followed him to his bedroom in her nervousness. “If she can change me back—”

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“Change you back?” Richard slung open the door of his large closet. “Hell! I want some of that stuff!”

\* \* \*

It was the day after Ella’s thirtieth birthday and her life had been turned upside down. She sat in the same booth at O’Malley’s she and Richard had occupied the night before, eating an enormous plate of spaghetti. The comfort she normally felt from her favorite restaurant didn’t come.

The carnival had disappeared from Navy Pier without a trace and the Gypsy woman with it. Richard had been crestfallen about not having the opportunity to try the potion. She didn’t tell him as much, but she’d been relieved that he’d missed his chance. What good was it to be beautiful for thirty days when, during that time, life as you knew it fell apart?

After they’d grown tired of asking people if they knew anything about the carnival that had been in town, they went to the café where Ella worked. Against Richard’s advice, she tried to explain to Rudy what had happened. The man she’d worked for for some eleven years not only laughed and told her to get out, but he’d tried to grab her ass as well! And he’d told her to tell Ella when she saw her that she was fired.

She would’ve lost her job anyway. Unless she was in the hospital with tubes up her nose, Rudy would never buy she was too sick to work for an entire month.

Finally, Richard had to leave her to go get ready for symphony practice. She’d waved him on. At least he still had a job to go to.

*What a damned mess!*

“Now what’s such a sad look doing on such a beautiful face?”

Ella’s heart began to pound in her chest at the sound of that familiar voice. She figured the whole restaurant could likely hear the loud thumping as she gazed up at him, the man who had felled her last night and haunted her dreams. There he stood in all his beauty, his black hair

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smoothed back from his handsome face by a recent shower and his appreciative male eyes moving over her face and body.

She stared at him with her mouth hanging open. It was all she could do.

His deep blue eyes locked with hers.

“Do I know you?” he asked quietly, studying her.

Ella swallowed hard. Did he recognize her?

“I’ve seen *you* here before,” was all Ella was going to say.

And it worked. Any recognition in his amazing blue eyes melted away as he slid into the booth across from her.

“I’ll have my eyes checked.” He melted her heart with a devilish flash of white teeth and his subtle Irish accent. “I’m sure I’d remember you if I’d seen you here before.”

Her face went up in flames under his intent stare. It wasn’t that she was unaccustomed to being stared at. She most definitely was. But she was used to being stared at with pity or amazement...or worse, mockery.

Men had been eying her all morning in unmasked appreciation. And when she’d finally noticed, it had been quite startling. But the way this man’s eyes caressed her with deliberate intimacy was terrifying. It made her want to run, from him—from the electricity coursing through her that tightened her nipples into hard twin points and created a delicate ache between her thighs. It was so easy to imagine the feeling of his strong fingers stoking that fire down below, gliding on her wetness to tantalize her clit...

“I’ve embarrassed you.” He laughed softly, the low rumble twisting her insides even more. “But you haven’t yet answered my first question.”

“Why I look down? You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Give it a try,” he prompted as he sat back in the seat, his smile never wavering.

It was clear he wasn’t giving up. What was she supposed to tell

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him? *It all started when I bought a magic potion from a Gypsy at Navy Pier. I drank the potion and made a wish—which involved you by the way—and—*

Her wish! The realization that he was here, with her, as she had wished hit her like a blast of hot wind. *Of course!* If the potion had made her beautiful as it had promised, why wouldn't she get her wish, too? Wasn't the man she'd dreamt of all night here gazing at her as if she were the most desirable woman he'd ever seen? Wasn't that what she'd wished for? To know what that was like?

Ella smiled, fighting the urge to laugh out loud in delight. *This man, this beautiful, sexy man is all mine for thirty days.* This was her wish come true. *Oh, the possibilities!*

"Now that's much better," he broke in on her thoughts. "That's a smile to make a man lightheaded."

"I can't help it," she admitted while excitement coursed through her body. "I'm so glad you're here."

His eyes darkened like a night sky as he leaned forward. "Are you now?"

"I am. You're just what I wished for."

"Am I?" His expression had taken on a predatory quality.

The awkwardness Ella felt only lasted a moment. Wasn't she a grown woman with desires and needs? She wasn't a virgin, thank goodness for that, but she couldn't boast much more experience than one. Two uninspiring attempts at sex were all she could claim and both had been early in her twenties. One had been a skinny boy she'd met at the café who'd had no idea of what foreplay meant. The other had been an older man, who'd conveniently forgotten to tell her he was married. The foreplay with him had been good—he had done incredible things with his tongue—but when it came to doing the deed, he'd blown his wad after only half a dozen strokes.

But she had fantasies. Oh, did she have fantasies! Deep in the night she had dreamt of lovers touching her, fondling her breasts, teasing her

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clitoris, and the pleasure of joining her body with theirs. And her dreams of *this* man last night, his hands on her body, his *mouth* on her body. Ella had imagined wrapping herself around him, going down on him...

But as she returned the intense gaze of the man who far surpassed any dream lover she could conjure, it wasn't lost on her that she could make some of those fantasies happen. Why shouldn't she? She only had thirty days. At the end of that month, the memories would be all that Ella Kent the Elephant would have.

Her mind was made up.

"You are. Otherwise, you wouldn't have anything to do with me."

If that had caught him off guard, he did an amazing job of concealing it. Or maybe it was the spell controlling him.

"You're wrong about that." His voice was low and calm.

"Do you always pay such attention to people in this restaurant?" Ella teased.

"It's my restaurant. I'm one of its owners, and I want my customers to be satisfied."

"And you give all of your patrons such personal attention?"

"Just the ones I want."

Ella's thighs squeezed together against the wave of lust—no other word for it—that his words brought on. Moisture flooded the pants she wore. His invitation was clear.

*What? You're going to just leave with him? Have sex with him? You don't even know his name! A voice a lot like her mother's droned on and on in her head. Well, that isn't anything new, she mused. The only difference was that nagging voice usually addressed her eating habits. Do you really need that donut? Isn't that your third piece of pie?*

Her mother would condemn her for a slut if she knew what she was about to do. Ella squirmed in her seat under her gorgeous stranger's gaze, her body quickly winning the passion battle. *What did it matter what anyone thought? Who would recognize her? And once she went*



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back to normal, who the hell would believe her?

“You want me?” She pitched her voice low, enjoying her newly discovered confidence.

“You require proof?”

“I’d like proof.” She met his gaze squarely.

In an instant, he’d captured her hand in his own, his eyes ocean deep as he slid to the edge of his seat.

His erection strained the front of his jeans and had Ella shivering in delicious anticipation.

“Let’s go.”

Ella didn’t know if she’d leapt to her feet or he dragged her out of the booth, and she didn’t care. Before she knew it, they were out the door, his grip tight on her hand. She had a difficult time matching the pace of his long legs as they ate up the sidewalk, but somehow she managed. She was breathless by the time they reached his sleek, black Jaguar.

Holding the door open, he motioned her inside.

She stopped. There was one thing she really should know.

“What’s your name?”

His tight chuckle told her he might have laughed in earnest if he hadn’t been in sorry shape. “Ian Clayton.”

## CHAPTER 3

Ian Clayton lived in Manhattan and had what appeared to be a beautiful apartment. Ella only caught a glimpse of it as he slammed the door behind her and backed her up against it, standing so close, yet not touching her. His breath was ragged, and warm as it caressed her face. The intensity of his gaze captured hers and her heart thundered in her chest.

Each breath she took had her hard, sensitive nipples chafing against the sweater she wore. She wanted to be free of the borrowed sweater and the slacks clinging damply to the vee between her legs. Ella wanted nothing more than to wrap herself around him and burrow into the heat of his hard, ready body.

*No turning back now*, she thought.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he whispered, catching a lock of her gleaming hair in his rough fingers. “Who are you?”

She could barely find the voice to speak. Spell or no spell, it was

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the most magical moment of her entire life.

“Ella Kent,” she managed.

Strong fingers tipped her chin back up, forcing her to meet his eyes again. “What?”

“Ella Kent,” she said slowly.

Some emotion crossed his handsome features, but he said nothing. She’d have been uncomfortable with the silence if she hadn’t already wanted to jump out of her skin from the nearness of him. The smell of warm skin and man, and the heat from his body had her tingling with an unfamiliar awareness.

“You know...rhymes with elephant,” she tried with a half-hearted attempted to laugh.

His smile had her heart leaping, the fire down low burning hotter.

“I thought you said ‘elegant.’”

Ian lowered his head and took her mouth with a gentleness she hadn’t expected. His firm, sensuous lips caressed hers slowly, savoring her, as his hands sank into her hair, holding her in place for his skillful exploration. Ella drowned in that kiss, clutching his leather jacket for support because she didn’t know how much longer her shaking knees would hold her up.

He deepened the kiss at her willing response.

Her hands sought the flat planes of his rock solid chest as his tongue seductively glided in and around her mouth, matching the rhythm of the hard thigh he’d wedged between her legs. The incredible heat of him pressed against her belly, nudging gently in a deliberate rhythm had her senses spiraling out of control. She clung to him as the craving built, pushing against his erection, trying to capture his taunting thigh between her own.

His lips burned a trail from her mouth to the column of her throat and she gasped as his tongue teased the sensitive flesh below her left ear. He captured her ear lobe, suckling it gently before his tongue began to trace the delicate shell of her inner ear. One of his hands slid

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beneath her sweater in the same instant, finding her bare breast. His fingers gently played at her tight nipple, making her want to scream for relief from the storm of sensations.

"I want you now, Elegant," his voice was a course whisper in her ear.

*Elegant.* She liked that.

Ella cried out when his hand left her breast and he pulled his leg free from hers, but she didn't have long to ponder it as he swept her off her feet. Even in the heat of the moment, it wasn't lost on Ella that it was probably the first time since early childhood that someone had been able to carry her anywhere.

He headed through the spacious apartment and into a large, masculine bedroom in shades of tan and black. Gorgeous mahogany furniture was strategically placed around the enormous four-poster bed at its center. The leafy pattern of the tan-and-black comforter raced up at her as he nearly flung her onto the center of his bed.

Ian climbed onto the bed, stalking her. His blue eyes pinned her in place as he stripped away the leather jacket to reveal an impressive display of muscled arms, straining the black T-shirt he wore beneath. She wanted him to strip away the shirt, but he came straight toward her. The hunger in his eyes wiped her mind clean of anything else.

Richard's black-and-silver sweater was pulled over her head in an instant and then Ian's mouth reclaimed hers. Ella was treated to another slow, tantalizing kiss as his body lowered deliciously onto hers. He nudged her thighs apart with his own and began to press himself against her in a relentless rhythm. His kiss had her squirming in desire beneath him, straining to get closer. Her hands were wild on him as he took his time, torturing her.

The thick locks of his hair were cool and sleek between her fingers. Her hands skimmed beneath his shirt to slide on the sweat-dampened skin of his torso, reveling in the sheer power of the muscular body all around her.

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With a low growl, he captured her wrists and pinned them to the bed on either side of her head. “You won’t hurry me, you little devil.” There was a hint of laughter in his voice. “No, you won’t hurry me at all.”

And he meant what he said. No matter how she twisted her slim wrists in his grip, he wouldn’t let go. He took his time, tasting her lips, trailing kisses across her cheek until his hot breath was back in her ear. And all the while, he nudged at the damp vee between her thighs with his heat and hardness.

“You want me so badly, don’t you, Elegant?” His voice and his tongue played in her ear. “You’re on fire. I can’t wait to be inside you. I’m going to fuck you for hours.”

Moaning, she pressed her body up against his as close as she could. It was all she could do.

Ella did cry out when his lips closed around her nipple. His tongue swirled casual circles around the taut tip as the motion of his hips stopped. He seemed not to notice when she began bucking against him, trying to get him to continue the delicate grinding. He grinned at her impishly before his mouth began to work on her other breast, letting her know he’d deliberately stopped.

When finally he lifted his head and released her wrists, she pulled his mouth to hers ferociously, kissing him for all she was worth. Ella caught his full lower lip between her own and nipped playfully at it. She drew a moan from him when she coaxed his mouth open and slid her tongue inside to taste him. Her hands tore at his shirt before they drifted down the muscular abdomen to the huge bulge in his jeans. Her fingers had barely begun to explore the thick length of him beneath the coarse denim when he grabbed her wrists again and dragged her to the top of the bed.

“I won’t be lasting long with you doing that,” he said matter-of-factly. He pulled off his shirt in a single fluid motion, dazzling Ella with the hairless planes of his upper body. She was so caught up in

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admiring him that she didn't immediately realize he was binding her wrists to the bedpost with the shirt.

"Wait, I—"

Ian silenced her with a gentle kiss.

"Trust me," he whispered, his tongue sliding back into her mouth. "Trust me."

Ella was breathless when his hands began to work the fastenings of Richard's black trousers. If Ian noticed that she wore men's clothing, he said nothing as he pulled her legs free and grinned in appreciation at the fact she wore no panties.

*God, what must he think?*

Unceremoniously, he pulled her thighs apart and settled himself between them, sitting on the bed. Now her nervousness blended with her desire. His eyes took in every inch of her body, darkening as they roamed over the smooth skin of her belly to the glossy pale curls trimming the wet, swollen petals of her sex. The body she was in was beautiful, but it was still Ella inside. And no man had ever gazed at her like that. Her thighs trembled as he lifted one graceful leg in his hands, caressing the calf.

"Don't be afraid. You're beautiful. Let me show you."

Ella nearly came off the bed when his mouth closed around her toes, treating each one to gentle lashes of his tongue. His lips gave the same careful treatment to her instep, and he licked at her ankle decadently when he reached it. Her breathy sighs stopped him.

"You like that, do you?"

She strained against the shirt that bound her as his mouth slowly traveled up the soft, warm flesh of her leg, past the knee to her inner thigh. Droplets of sweat trickled over her ribs toward her back as she writhed, the anticipation excruciating as his lips approached her most private place.

His breath fanned hot against the small patch of blonde curls and she shivered in desire. She watched in fascination as he lowered

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himself onto his elbows and wrapped his strong arms about her thighs, spreading them wider, mastering her.

“Do you want me to taste you, Elegant?” Ian asked, his face a mask of desire.

“Yes!”

His mouth lowered to her, pulling a low moan from her lips. His tongue slowly traced the seam of her outer lips before delving into the slick inner flesh that cried out for his touch. He teased the delicate flesh with quick flicks of his tongue, paying no heed to her thrashing or the fact she was mindless with pleasure. Ian held her in place and thoroughly tasted her, his tongue zeroing in on the small button where she wanted it most. He teased the tight, little bud with the tip of his tongue, bringing her to the edge of climax and then backing off to tease the surrounding flesh before she could come.

She didn't know how long he toyed with her before he finally began to nip and suck at her pleasure spot in earnest. He didn't stop when she dug her heels into the mattress and began to push herself at him as hard as she could. The touches of his tongue didn't stop with her screams or her begging for release. No, he held her open to his ministrations until, at last, she felt like her entire body was bursting, shattering. The room spun away as release finally overtook her.

Blinking as the room came back into view, Ella felt Ian moving toward her. She was dimly aware that he'd unfastened his jeans as she felt the vibrations still twitching low in her body, recovering from the most exquisite experience she'd ever known. She wanted to hold him, kiss him.

One look at the intensity of his gorgeous face told her that would have to wait. She caught a glimpse of him—long, thick and throbbing before his body lowered to hers. The passion of his kiss took her breath away and he entered her in a single smooth thrust a second later.

Ella's thighs closed about his slim hips as he began to glide smoothly in and out of her wetness. Her body stretched to

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accommodate him as he established an intoxicating rhythm within her, the rough denim of his jeans scraping her inner thighs with each thrust. How quickly the sensations began to build again as he took her, teasing her breasts, ears and shoulders with his playful tongue all the while. She could smell her own musk on him as he kissed her and played with her.

“God, you feel so good,” Ian moaned as he continued to stroke himself in her, building her craving again while fighting his own release.

Ella gripped the shirt that restrained her, feeling her second release approaching, her pleasure intensified by his knowing eyes as he watched her. Her legs locked around his, holding him to her, never wanting him to stop.

“You’re close aren’t you?” he whispered.

She nodded.

Ian’s hand slid between their bodies and his fingertips found her clit. Delicately, he toyed with the sensitive nub until she screamed when the next wave overtook her. It went on and on because he never stopped thrusting, never ceased the relentless push and drag of his pulsing flesh inside her. She felt boneless as he continued his movements; she felt his entire body tensing, the muscles rigid and unyielding.

His moans were loud as he finally allowed himself release. The long, hard shaft of his cock pulsed inside her and she felt his passion jetting into her again and again. Ian collapsed on top of her and she enjoyed his weight and the feeling of his damp flesh against her own.

Ian lifted himself up to release her hands, his blue eyes drowsy. Ella rubbed at her wrists only a little as she gazed up into this handsome face, happier than she could ever remember being.

“You’re incredible, Elegant.”

The warmth of his eyes had her heart skipping beats.

“Would you like to tell me now why you looked so sad back at the



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restaurant? And why you're wearing men's clothing? Are you running from someone?"

*He had noticed. Damn!*

"No, I'm not running away." She stuck with honesty. "The clothes belong to a friend of mine. He's gay. I borrowed them because—" Her mind scrambled for an excuse, but she'd always been a bad liar. "Well, yesterday I..."

"Answer me this," Ian picked up when she faltered. "Do you belong to someone else?"

"No, I'm not married."

"That's helpful." His grin came out again in all its glory. "But what about your heart?"

"There's no one."

"Good." His smile gentled as he kissed her slowly and gently. He rolled away to lie on his side, pulled her back against him and into the warmth of his body.

Ella enjoyed the way the thick hair on his thighs felt against the smooth flesh of her own.

Within moments, his breath slowed into the cadence of sleep and she joined him shortly after.

## CHAPTER 4

True to his word, Ian had kept her from sleeping most of the night. Ella ached pleasantly in places she didn't know could ache the next morning as she pulled on the black shirt Ian had worn the day before and padded quietly into his kitchen. The soft fabric felt so good against her skin, and it smelled like him. Ella liked that.

She spotted the phone right off in the shiny, modern kitchen. But she'd call Richard later. She was starving.

Ella didn't expect to find much in the way of food in a bachelor's refrigerator or cabinets. But she was pleasantly surprised. He had a few basics—eggs, butter, bread. Bending to inspect the lower shelves of the refrigerator, she even spotted some cheese. *Perfect*, she thought, and got started on breakfast.

She'd thought to treat him to breakfast in bed, but he surprised her in the kitchen just as she transferred the omelets to the fine, gold-trimmed plates she'd found. How easily she could have dropped those plates as his large hands closed over her breasts and pulled her back

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against him. The hot ridge of his arousal rubbed suggestively against the top of her buttocks.

"That's quite a breakfast, Elegant," his voice purred into her ear.

Warmth seeped into her face at his praise. Ella had prepared two generous omelets, a neat stack of toast slices and another plate of French toast.

Flustered, she gently set the plates on the table and turned to smile up at him. "I thought you might be hungry."

His low growl startled her. "I am."

Swatting at the hands that pulled her hips against his, she shook her head. "For food."

With a dramatic sigh, he turned his attention to her culinary efforts and smiled. "I could have a bite. But that's a lot of food, Elegant."

"You need to keep up your strength." She surprised herself with that coy statement.

"Aye." The heat of his gaze had her taking a step back. "I do, don't I?"

To her relief, only because her stomach was growling, he took a seat at the table. His eyes never left her as she made a plate for him.

"I want to know more about you," he said.

Ella placed the plate in front of him and began to work on her own. "There's not much to tell."

"Where do you live?"

Ella panicked at the direction the conversation was headed. She nearly dropped her omelet as she struggled to maintain her composure.

"I live here in the city."

Some of the warmth left his expression. "Where in the city?"

"Not far from your restaurant." Why did she say that? She couldn't tell him where she lived. She wouldn't want him to find her after the spell ended. Ella's mind scrambled for a story. "I'm staying with a friend at the moment."

A black eyebrow rose in question. "The gay one?"

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“Yes,” she answered as she added a slice of toast to her plate and sat down across from him. Letting him think she was staying with Richard seemed safe enough. “I lost my job not too long ago and he’s helping me out.”

After a moment, Ian nodded, glancing down at the enormous plate of food meant for his breakfast. The dark shadow of his beard gave him a dark, dangerous look, as did the rich black waves of his rumpled hair. His upper body was magnificently naked, all tight male muscle. She sighed. *How would I ever be able to give him up?*

Well, she had nearly a month to enjoy him now, she reminded herself—if the spell held true. She watched as he dug into his breakfast. After a couple of bites, he stopped and smiled. Oh, what that smile did to her insides!

“You’re a hell of a cook, Elegant.”

“Glad you like it.” She returned his smile.

And right then and there, she decided no matter what she *would* enjoy her month with him. Sure, he’d have questions. He was already asking things about her. Well, she wasn’t about to say or do a thing to give him any idea that their time would come to an abrupt end in a month. If he knew, it would only ruin what they’d started. She’d simply disappear at the month’s end. And since the spell conjured his attraction along with her temporary beauty, perhaps anything he felt for her would disappear when it ended.

The thought of that was too sad for her to consider at the moment.

“What are you thinking about?” His voice was a soft intrusion on her thoughts.

“I was thinking I’d like to go shopping today,” Ella recovered nicely. Hell, she *had* to go shopping today. She’d never gone braless so long since puberty and she was still embarrassed about having been caught not wearing panties. Besides, she couldn’t continue to borrow Richard’s clothes. Once he spotted the spaghetti on his sweater, she was a goner!

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“Shopping, huh?”

Ella only nodded because her mouth was full of omelet and toast. Alarmed, she realized she'd put away the omelet in record time. She swallowed hard.

“Nice to see a woman with a hearty appetite.” He winked at her from the other side of the table. Then he laughed. “Sorry. Not something a woman wants to hear. All right then, let's talk about your shopping. What are you shopping for?”

“Clothes.”

“I'll go with you,” he threw out as he ate. “I might even pick up the tab if you buy a thing or two that I like.”

She nearly choked on her toast. But before she protested, she thought better of it. *Why not? Wouldn't it be fun to try on things for him?* All the midriff-showing, hip hugging things she'd never been able to wear? She felt guilty he'd be spending money on her...

*Remember, you are supposed to be enjoying yourself.*

“What is going on in that head of yours?” Ian pushed his plate away and gazed at her. “You're a shy girl, Elegant. It's a nice change. But sometimes shy girls...think too much.”

Ella stopped gnawing on her toast as he rose from his chair. Her nerve endings went on red alert as he closed in on her, turning the chair with her in it to face him before kneeling in front of her on the floor.

“I like an intelligent woman,” he continued as if they were having a casual conversation. “Don't get me wrong. But there is time enough at night for dreaming. I like to live life right now.”

And before she knew what he was about, he pushed her legs apart, captured her hips in his hands and took her with his mouth. The toast crumbled in her tight grip as his tongue traced the sensitive flesh between her thighs, and mercilessly teased the center of her pleasure. The soreness blended with the marvel of his lapping tongue sent her senses soaring. Clutching his hair, she held him to her as she writhed in the chair, helpless to do anything else.

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Before she could reach climax, he stopped. His face split into a wide grin as her hands flew to the fastenings of his jeans. In an instant, she'd pushed them down his hips and wrapped her legs around his waist, guiding him towards her. Ian caught her easily in his arms and lowered her to the floor.

"Now that's what I was thinking." His voice was ragged with desire.

"You think too much," she gasped as he entered her in slow thrust.

Ian laughed as he began to move in her, gripping her hips to deepen his penetration. Ella's fingers dug into the carpeting, enjoying the way he filled her, possessed her.

He yanked the shirt up to her neck and moaned at the two tight points he found. His mouth closed around one then the other, laving them gently in turn, even as his hips maintained a solid, driving rhythm, in and out of her wet, hot channel. The sensations built quickly and, within moments, she lost control, clutching at him as waves of exquisite pleasure burst through her.

Ian didn't cease in his work. Relentlessly, he stroked himself into her body, his erection growing harder, pushing deeper, as he continued. He'd discovered the night before that it drove her crazy when he teased her shoulder with his tongue. Now when he did it, she nearly bucked him off she was so overcome with passion. He only chuckled as he held her in place, tracing wet circles on her shoulder as he continued to fuck her.

When she came the second time, he went with her, nearly crushing her in his embrace at the end.

"Ian?" Ella managed after a moment, breathless from his loving.

His breath came faster than hers. "Hmmm?"

"I think I've changed my mind about shopping today." She pushed a shiny, black lock of his hair away from his eyes. "I don't think I'll be able to walk."

Ian threw back his head and laughed. "Yes, you can."

## *ELEGANT*

\* \* \*

And so went many days with Ian. Ella often wondered if the spell made him seem to be the perfect man or if he truly was. Being the co-owner of a restaurant, and various other businesses it turned out, he had to spend a certain amount of time at his office or in meetings. Aside from that, his time was devoted to her.

So many wonderful memories. Trying on clothes for Ian until he followed her into the shop's changing room and took her against the wall. He'd whispered in her ear that she couldn't cry out as he drove up into her. And exciting as that had been, it was nothing compared to the experience of watching him love her, watching them both in the fitting room mirror. If she hadn't felt everything so exquisitely, it would have been like watching a movie, watching Ian with a beautiful make-believe version of herself.

Then there was the night she'd cooked dinner for Ian and greeted him at the door wearing only his black leather jacket and a pair of black stiletto heels he'd bought for her. She could still hear the plates crashing to the floor after he'd swept them from the table, pressed her onto its surface and spread her beneath him. What a night of loving that had been!

But it hadn't all been about sex. There were other moments—tender moments. One night, she'd taken a long luxurious bath, a real treat since it wasn't something she normally felt comfortable with, and Ian had joined her in the tub. He'd told her funny tales of his childhood in Ireland, cradling her against his chest until the water had grown cold.

Another night, Ian had taken her out for dinner with his partners and their wives. He'd given her a single red rose that night, just before they'd entered the restaurant. He'd wrapped his arm possessively about her and introduced her with pride to his business partners and friends.

That's when she knew she'd fallen in love with him.

\* \* \*

### *ELEGANT*

Perched on the edge of his bed, Ella glanced back over her shoulder and watched Ian lovingly as he slept. She'd only been back to her own apartment twice the entire month, though she talked to Richard on the phone nearly every day.

By tomorrow night, the full moon would be back and the spell would be broken. Ella fought the tears as she glanced down at the rose she'd pressed in a book. She'd done a good job of hiding her sadness from Ian as their time grew short. And she'd kept her promise to herself to enjoy every moment of being with him.

But there was one nagging fear that wouldn't let go.

She had her memories. But would it be enough?

At some point tomorrow, his *Elegant* would be gone and Ella Kent the Elephant would be back. But she found she didn't care about that at all. *Sure it's been an incredible thing to be beautiful for a month.* But the true gift she had drawn from that Gypsy's jar had been learning to accept herself. Once she'd been freed from her negative image of herself, and not worried one wit about her appearance or how other people saw her, she'd enjoyed life so much. The freedom she felt had been incredible. And she knew it was the one thing, aside from her memories, that she'd take with her. It wouldn't be as easy to feel that way when she went back to normal, she knew, but she vowed never to go back to being so down on herself again.

She was losing something, too. Her heart. It would go with Ian.

With a weary sigh, she returned the book to the bedside table.

"Come here." His voice was scratchy from sleep as he reached for her in the dark. He pulled her against him, cradling her against his chest as he slept. For Ella, it was the best place in the world to be.

And then she finally let the tears come. Once he left for work tomorrow morning, she'd never see him again.



## CHAPTER 5

*Seven months later*

“I got quite a deal on these ornaments at the florist shop,” Richard announced as he walked into her living room.

Ella rose from the floor where she’d been decorating the bottom of her Christmas tree, smoothing the skirt of her new red dress as she stood.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Wow,” Richard said as his gaze moved over her.

Ella grinned at him. “You like it?”

Richard motioned for her turn around and she did. The incredulous look was still on his face when she again faced him.

“What?”

“Ella, you look great,” he finally said. “I guess I couldn’t tell how much weight you’d lost when you wore your old clothes but you look...wonderful.”

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"It's a size ten," she announced proudly. She had to admit she was still quite the full-figured gal, but nonetheless she was pleased with her appearance. She'd grown her hair out, she'd shed nearly one hundred and forty pounds, and had even joined the gym that Richard went to.

Buying new clothes had been fun and melancholy all at the same time. How wonderful it had been to do something for herself, to boost her confidence with smaller, stylish clothes. She'd hardly been able to believe it herself when she'd gotten into the dress she now wore.

Still, she couldn't go near a fitting room without thinking of Ian.

It had been seven months since that morning she'd left him, and not a day went by when she didn't wonder what he was doing, and if he ever thought of her. He'd called once that first week, but since the initial of her first name, Mary, was on her phone listing, she lied and told him he had the wrong number. He still called Richard every now and then to see if he'd had any word from her. Richard always pled ignorance because she'd made him.

As if he could read her thoughts, Richard said, "You should call him."

"We've talked about this." She feigned annoyance, mostly because she didn't want him to see how very badly she wanted to take his advice. "That's not a good idea."

"Why? I could understand if you still looked...were...like you used to." Richard struggled. "But now? You don't look all that different from when you drank the potion. You—"

"Please!" she cut him off. "I look a *lot* different from that and you know it."

"Ella, I swear, now you've lost the weight, all you'd need to do is get collagen injections for your lips and you'd be right back!"

Ella tried her hardest to glare at him. "Richard, you're a good friend, but you and I both know that's not true."

Shaking his head at her, he continued, "So, do you have to look exactly like that? I don't think so. After all the times you've made me

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talk to him, I think I know how he feels about you. He wouldn't care, El."

Her heart pounded out a hopeful rhythm at his words, but her rational side pushed her hopes back down.

"Even if I do look similar to that now, Richard, how would I ever be able to explain why I left him? Well, without him thinking I'm crazy."

"You could think of something." After an awkward moment, Richard handed her the shopping bag he still held. "Here are the ornaments. And I'm off. I'm having a couple of the cellists over for dinner."

Ella smiled at her friend. "Any prospects?" she teased.

"Both." He winked at her. "Tall, dark and handsome."

Instantly, an image of Ian filled her mind. "Sounds great."

"How's the new job?"

"Good," Ella admitted. And it was.

Not long after her time with Ian ended, she found a nice job in an Italian restaurant. It was a little farther away, but much nicer than the café where she used to work, and the tips had been excellent. That she'd been able to avoid the rich Italian food, her favorite, to accomplish what she did had been nothing short of miraculous.

In the last two weeks, Ella had been promoted to hostess and she loved the chance to do something different. And when she wasn't hostess, she helped with bookkeeping responsibilities. Things couldn't be better.

"Have a good time." She waved her friend on.

No sooner had Richard closed the door than she peered into the bag of ornaments he'd brought her and she noticed something. A sleek bottle of wine nestled at the bottom of the bag.

*Well, he'll be wanting that,* she thought and headed out the door towards his apartment to return it to him. She'd just turned the corner when she encountered a tall, familiar figure knocking on his door ahead

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of her. Shock rooted her to the spot as Ian glanced her way. Those blue eyes that had haunted her dreams lit up with recognition.

“Ella?”

Richard casually opened the door, clearly expecting his guests. Her friend’s eyes rounded in surprise at the scene that greeted him.

Ian didn’t seem to notice when Richard reached for the wine bottle Ella held out to him and closed the door again.

“Aren’t you going to speak to me?” Ian prompted.

Ella began trembling fiercely. She was so happy to see him. His shiny black hair was a little longer than she remembered, he looked a tiny bit thinner, but every bit as handsome in his long, black coat with a dark gray scarf the same shade as his trousers. She wanted to run to him, to tell him—

*Tell him what?*

“Hello, Ian.” She fought the tremor in her voice. “How have you been?”

His blue eyes were angry slits as he approached her.

“How am I?” Ian towered over her in the shadowy hallway. “How am I? How the hell do you think I am? I’ve been looking for you for months, Ella. You just took off. No note, no warning. You’ve never called.”

“Ian, I’m sorry,” she said and meant it. “I didn’t want to leave you. I—”

And that’s when she noticed that the left sleeve of his coat hung empty from the elbow down, where his arm should have been. “Ian? What happened?”

An emotion she couldn’t name crossed his features. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

“My apartment is down the hall.” No harm in telling him now.

She closed the door behind him, crushed by guilt that he’d come to harm since she’d left. Ella found his gaze roaming over her and she felt uncomfortable under his scrutiny. Did he still find her attractive? Did

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she look anywhere close to what he remembered?

"Ella, you look different."

"Heavier." She jumped in before he could say something else.

"Better." A hint of that devilish smile came out. "I like a woman with a little meat on her bones. Didn't want to say anything before, but you were so damned skinny."

Ella laughed. She couldn't help it. Inside her chest, her heart bloomed with hope. Maybe he could accept her after all. Maybe he could love her...

But the sadness returned to his gaze as he motioned toward his missing arm. "I've something to explain to you. And it's not going to be easy."

"Your arm." Ella took a cautious step forward. "What happened, Ian?"

"Ella, I lost my arm in a car accident twenty years ago," he said flatly. "When I was fifteen."

It took a moment for his words to sink in, to jar her out of her guilt. "Fifteen?"

"Ella, it's hard to be...disabled. To have everyone eye you with pity, look at you like you're something different." His blue eyes locked with hers. "Most days, you'd give anything for a break from it all, no matter how short."

Her heart pounded as suspicion crept into her mind. *Could it be?* "Even if it is only for a month?"

Ian nodded first. Then his eyes narrowed on her. "Why did you say that?"

The jar was on her mantle along with her other favorite things. She could feel his eyes on it before she picked it up.

Before she could turn around, he asked, "Where did you get that?"

Ella smiled at his surprised expression. "From a Gypsy woman at Navy Pier," she explained. "I bought it on my thirtieth birthday. It was to make me beautiful for a month. And it did. I weighed over two

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hundred pounds before I drank it, Ian.”

Ian shook his head in disbelief.

“Ian, you saw me! You knocked me over in the restaurant the night I drank it.” She met his gaze squarely, willing him to believe her. “Don’t you remember knocking down an enormous blonde woman around that time?”

His mouth dropped open. “My God.”

“You drank it, too, didn’t you? And for a month you had your arm back.”

He nodded. “I took the witch’s brew the day we met.”

So that’s why he didn’t look at her with pity that night, she realized. He knew what it was like.

“But I don’t understand something.” Ian’s gaze raked over her. “Did you take it again? You look...well, a wee bit heavier. But you look nothing like the night I ran you over.”

Ella blushed and he smiled.

“In the time I was with you, I came to realize I’d spent much of my life worrying about what people thought of me. I didn’t want to live like that any more because of my weight.”

“Ella, you don’t look all that different from how you did the month we were together. Don’t you see?”

“No,” she said honestly. “But I am happy with myself now.”

“Are you happy with your life then, Ella?”

Her heart nearly skipped a beat at the longing in his gaze. “No...because I’ve missed you.”

Ian reached her in a second and the jar went crashing to the floor as he captured her with his arm, the arm that had lifted her in the restaurant, and kissed her until she was breathless. The taste of him, the feel of him, was heaven to her.

When he pulled back from her, his expression was serious. His gaze shifted to his ruined arm and back. “Ella, there’s nothing I can do about this. There are prosthetics, but I just wanted to be like everyone else

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again, even for a little while. I didn't plan on meeting a beautiful woman, but since I did, I damn well enjoyed it. And then I couldn't forget about her. I fell in love with her."

Ella pulled his mouth to hers and poured every bit of love and passion she felt for him into it. Ian loved her. He accepted her. And that was all that mattered. Deliberately, she clutched his ruined arm, running her hand down to where it ended abruptly in the long woolen sleeve. That his arm was missing didn't matter at all.

"I love you, Ian," she whispered. "Just as you are."

"Ella, that's easy to say but—"

"You require proof then?"

The caution in Ian's eyes began to fade at her suggestive smile. "I'd like proof, Elegant."

Pulling his body to hers, she burrowed into his coat and rubbed herself against him. The hot bulge that pressed to her belly made her shiver in anticipation.

"Let's go."

Ella, happier than she could ever remember being, led Ian off to her bedroom. The broken shards of the broken Gypsy's jar vanished the moment the door closed.

## ISABELLA JORDAN

Isabella Jordan is the author of several published short stories and articles. By day Isabella is an instructor at a university in her native Virginia. By night she writes erotic tales and fantasies—and eats chocolate! In her spare time she enjoys life. While Isabella enjoys spending quiet time with her family and reading, she also enjoys bungee jumping, hiking, walking in the rain, rock 'n' roll and volunteering at her local women's shelter.

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