



Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

Sara Dennis © 2006

[www.cobblestone-press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

## **Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

### **Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck**

Copyright© 2006 Sara Dennis

ISBN: 978-1-60088-055-1

Cover Artist: Sable Grey

Editor: Brandi Loyd

Excerpt from Dragon Undone by Sara Dennis

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

[www.cobblestone-press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

**Sara Dennis**

## **Dedication**

To Shelli and Lori, my "partners in crime" for the series. What an adventure!

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

### Chapter One

Sam tugged the sleeves on her blouse down as she neared the front door of the Crypt. The polished glass showed her reflection and gave her a chance for last minute adjustments.

She'd bought the blouse specifically because it showed off her shoulders. Because it was thin enough to wear beneath the black brocaded corset she'd chosen for the night. The bell sleeves flowed over her hands, giving glimpses of long fingers and elegant nails. The sleeves played up the simplicity of her tailored trousers with the charcoal gray pinstripes. She intended them to lend mystery. She wore her hair pinned and piled atop her head to show off the length of her neck and attract attention. Comment. Interest.

Right. She was ready. She pulled open the door and held it so that her friends could follow. They fanned out inside the door, pausing for a moment to get their bearings. Sam felt her lips curve up. A carnival? Well well well. This could prove interesting.

"Here's the plan," she said, looking over her shoulder at them. "We're all here to have a good time. We flirt, we drink, and we dance until our feet are numb."

"My feet are *already* numb," Arianna muttered and leaned against the wall.

"Yeah, well you're the dumb witch that wore the cheap shoes with toothpick heels." Scarlet's southern accent sounded stronger than ever. "So don't be asking us for a pity party."

## Sara Dennis

This was nearly routine; it happened so often when they went out. Sam played the peacemaker's part. She raised her hands. "Easy ladies, let's not—"

"Cheap? Do you know how many massages I had to give to buy these shoes?" Arianna lifted her chin. "They're Jimmy Choos. My Goddess, have you no respect for a good designer?"

"No, I have respect for a good margarita." Scarlet winked. "So I'm going to head to the bar and grab one."

Arianna wrinkled her nose, making faces at Scarlet's retreating back, then smiled. Sam bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing out loud.

"I'm going to go check us in and get the keys to our room." She opened her purse and took out her wallet. "And don't look so nervous. This is supposed to be fun, remember? I'll be right back."

She glanced back once as she sauntered away. Fun. The word echoed through her mind. She planned to have fun at least. It was Halloween, the time when all of the things that went bump in the night came out to play without worrying about being caught. They could blame tails and horns and pointed teeth on the holiday and get away with enjoying themselves.

Tonight, a witch could take a chance and let her hair down.

It wasn't something she talked about with the average joe on the street. People who noticed the pendant she wore—a moonstone set into the middle of a pentagram made of sterling silver—commented on the stone itself but didn't ask about the meaning. Every now and then, someone with a shark's smile would reach out to touch it and give her a knowing look. They thought they understood why she wore it. Nine times out of ten, they were wrong.

Occasionally, someone with real magic crossed her path. The little hair on her arms would stand on end. She'd feel as if she'd bitten down on a live wire, her whole body humming, singing in the stranger's presence. Sometimes, the person knew she had it, and when their gazes met, there was a connection, a click. They'd both smile a little wider. Their hands would linger when they touched.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

Most of them didn't realize that their own power changed their luck. That Fate wasn't responsible for the winning streak in Bingo that earned them the ticket to Vegas with the free hotel stay. They didn't know about the raw, untrained power that brought them here. They were wide-eyed and good-natured.

Sam liked meeting the innocents. Almost as much as she liked meeting—and flustering—the charlatans. Since the Crypt had decided to run with a carnival theme, that meant plenty of con-men. Oh yes, she was going to have fun.

Check-in was a simple process. Three keys, one room, and the girls were set. She glanced toward the doors as she tucked her wallet away, just in case Arianna had taken her at her word and was still waiting, fussing over her shoes, and twisting her fingers together. She hadn't worried about Scarlet for a second, since they'd met at a campus Wicca meeting. Arianna, on the other hand, sometimes seemed to need a little steering. That she'd moved on her own and was nowhere in sight was a good sign, Sam told herself. She heaved a happy sigh, readjusted her corset, and headed toward the tents and draping of the "carnival".

She accepted a bag of peanuts from a clown who bowed but refused to talk. She spotted the juggler and his partner who copied his act from above, at the top of six-foot stilts. She stopped to watch them throw a few paces back and forth to one another, and applauded heartily.

A group of wandering musicians pulled her into a dance. The man holding the tambourine caught her around the waist and spun her a few times, shaking his instrument until Sam's ears rang. She laughed, though, and clung to his shoulders. She kissed his cheek and smeared off the lipstick left behind with her thumb.

When she found the mini-stage with the magician performing simple sleight-of-hand card tricks, she grinned from ear to ear. Yes, this was what she wanted. She slipped into a seat in the last row of the audience and crunched peanuts happily, watching him work the crowd.

He wasn't bad, she confessed to herself, when he'd pulled off a levitating card trick that actually looked believable. She'd seen dozens of Vegas showmen come and go, and none of them, save Copperfield, could

## Sara Dennis

make that one work to her satisfaction. Copperfield hardly counted as a magician at all, as far as she was concerned. If the man wasn't a demon or warlock, Sam would eat her shoes.

She knew her cards, too. She'd given up a gig making easy money as a palm reader because it made her feel too cheap to live with herself. She'd traded in her tarot cards for a plain old deck of fifty-two and taken a job as a dealer. She'd seen people try all kinds of things to distract her and stack the deck. A man who could keep her mind off the mechanics of the set up had very good hands.

Not to mention good shoulders, she thought, once more focusing on the magician. And there's nothing weak about that chin. He had the perfect mouth and a single dimple that winked when he talked and dug deeper when he grinned. Straight white teeth and a slightly crooked nose that gave him character, rather than making him look as if he'd spent too much time in a boxing ring.

He was every bit as blond as Sam, although he had more gold in the deeper shadows as opposed to her nearly silver highlights. He filled out that black-on-black suit as if it were made for him. Maybe it had been. Sam caught herself thinking that they'd make a pretty pair. *Look my way*, she willed him. *Look over here*.

It wasn't a spell, exactly. She did wind a thread of will into the wish, but there wasn't any compulsion. She couldn't influence him that way without something of his, and she knew she'd remember if they had met before. And yet, she felt a tug, deep inside, right before he faced her side of the room and their gazes met.

*Electricity. Lightning.* Sam felt as if she'd grabbed an ungrounded wire. Everything tingled, from her scalp to her toes. She took a breath and held it too long. The next gasp for air was audible, body shocked out of that frozen moment. Her cheeks blazed with heat as people in masks and makeup turned to glare her way. "Sorry," she murmured. "Sorry. I'll—" She glanced at the magician once more.

He stared. She wasn't sure he'd moved. The cards in his hands abruptly fountained upward—a dramatic, fluttering end to an otherwise tightly-controlled show. The audience flinched. He flinched and

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

scrambled for a second. He snatched a card out of midair, looked surprised, and turned it into a show-piece, changing the gesture into a flourished bow. Slowly but surely, his audience applauded. He flashed them a few distracted smiles.

Sam couldn't move her hands.

Audience members brushed past, jostling her, but Sam's attention stayed on the man now down on his hands and knees collecting cards. She couldn't leave without apologizing, at least. She'd nearly blown the end of his show and that was unforgivable anywhere, much less Vegas. She smoothed a hand down her corset, checked her hair with a quick touch and forced herself forward. She'd faced worse. She could do this.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Never again.* Alec would never do a party gig again, no matter who offered. It should have been easy money. That's what his agent said when he called and asked if the job was legit. He'd be working without a contract, turning in no percentage, but the agent said to go for it. Have fun for a night. Blow off a little steam.

He'd blown it, all right. Lost control in front of the audience. With any luck, they'd forget his name. If he ever got a show on the strip, he could hope they wouldn't remember the cheap magician who'd played Fifty-Two Pickup as his finishing move.

He'd saved it. Tried to save it. His fingers and his scalp and his face were tingling, but he'd still taken a bow. The audience clapped. So it wasn't a standing ovation. At least they hadn't booed.

Alec had seen a lot of pretty girls in Vegas. Gorgeous women. Heart-stopping beauties. Looks were all but a requirement in this city, but none of them had made him lose control like that. None of them made him feel as if his heart had stopped for a second. As if he stood on a high voltage wire and the last thing he'd ever see was her face. None of them were standing beside his stage.

None of them but her.



Sara Dennis

Alec did a double-take and stopped gathering cards. He stopped doing everything but staring. What did you say to the woman who made the rest of the world disappear?

"Hey."

"So, I wanted to apologize." She spoke at the same time, laughed, and ducked her head.

He watched color climb upward from her collarbones. Not broken and blotchy, but a warm, creeping glow. Alec wanted her to look up so he could see if it had reached her cheeks.

She lifted her head. Rosy cheeks indeed.

"I wanted to apologize," she repeated and offered a hand.

"Samantha Parrish. Sam."

He took her hand a little less than confidently. There was no telling what would happen if eye contact could shock him from across the room. But there was no jolt, no crack of static electricity. Only a very pleasant hum that spread like the warmth from being out in the sun, filtering through his body beneath the skin.

"Alec," he remembered to tell her. "Alec Szymanski."

Her eyebrows rose, and she looked over his head, amusement prompting a smile. "Not Zimm?" She nodded toward the thing that had caught her eye.

Alec twisted to see it, too. "Oh. Right." A banner proclaiming his name hung over the stage. He turned and offered a sheepish smile in return. "Stage name. You caught me. My agent said Zimm was catchy. It stands out more. It's also easier to spell."

Sam watched him, dark eyes all but dancing. He wasn't an eye man, didn't usually notice a color beyond the basic blue or brown or green, but hers were something else—dark at the edges and almost cat's-eye amber at the pupil. He couldn't help but notice.

He quit staring and forced his attention to the scattered cards. *Get cleaned up, get out of here, and stop making a fool of yourself.* "So," he began conversationally, he hoped. "Are you a fan of magic shows?"

She reached for the four of clubs that lay face up by his knee. She had long fingers, which made for the flourish she pulled off, weaving the

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

card between them before she offered it to him. "I might have seen a couple," she allowed.

Alec laughed. "A ringer." He took the card. Their fingers didn't brush but they might as well have held hands. The hum increased. His pulse spiked. "I should have known you were a pro."

Sam's smile warmed. "I might have done some magic here and there, but that..." she said, pointing at the card, "was pure Vegas flash. I'm a dealer at the Lucky Seven." She shrugged cheerfully. "Sorry to disappoint."

"Are you kidding? I'm not disappointed." He gestured at himself. "This is relief. A mess-up like that in front of someone in the biz would all but guarantee I'd never work in Vegas again."

"I doubt that," she said and turned to sit on the edge of the stage.

Alec caught a whiff of her perfume as she moved. It smelled smoky and a little sweet. Maybe vanilla. It didn't matter. It smelled good, and he leaned closer to get another breath.

"You covered it well," she went on, brushing her hair over her shoulder. "They clapped. And I apologize."

His mind drifted, lost somewhere in golden waves and wondering how deft her fingers really were. He needed help. He had a proposition on the tip of his tongue and had already nearly blurted it out twice. Something was definitely wrong with his head. "Apologize for what?"

"For ruining your show." She didn't hesitate, but instead reached out and brushed his cheek. A hot blaze of heat followed the passage of her thumb. "We connected. I didn't mean to throw you off."

He heard himself say, "I don't mind." His eyes were sliding shut against his will. Whoa. He flinched, out of easy caressing range. "I mean, it's okay. It happens." Not to him. Not ever before. "You don't have to apologize."

She leaned forward, closing the distance between them. Her lips were right there, practically begging to be kissed. She had a spray of freckles across the swell of the top of her breasts, and he had an up-close view. "Can I apologize if I want to?" Her eyes were dancing. "Let me buy you a drink."

Sara Dennis

## Chapter Two

The bar was crowded, full of people in costume and conversation. The stools were all taken, and patrons leaned on the empty ends at either side of the bar, shouting their orders to the team of tenders behind it.

Sam nudged his shoulder lightly. "What are you having?" She wasn't shouting, and yet somehow he could hear her clearly.

"Rum and Coke? But with all these people, you'll never get close enough to—"

She was already moving, and Alec couldn't really object. Just watching her walk hypnotized him. He could get lost in the sway of those hips. He could imagine his hands on them, pulling her against him and sliding his arms around her waist. He'd brush all that golden hair out of the way and kiss the back of her neck, feel her melt against him, and know that she belonged to him.

*Whoa.*

Alec shook himself. What the hell was he thinking? Maybe he really had fried something. Maybe he had heatstroke. The lights above the makeshift stage were small, but they were still hot. Maybe he'd hit his head on the shower this morning and forgotten. Head injuries were tricky. He shoved a hand through his hair, checking for lumps as subtly as he could. Something had to explain why he'd lost his mind.

"Aye, she's a pretty one, isn't she?" The voice was low, gruff, and the drunken slur made the accent more pronounced. "I'd like to have a bite of that arse."

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

"Excuse me?" Alec turned around and found himself nose to nose with a walking wall of fur. No, a very furry chest. No again, he decided as he looked up. He stood nose to chest with a drunken werewolf.

It was a good costume. A really good costume. The lips curled, the tongue moved. The eyes blinked and swiveled toward him. Hollywood had nothing on the level of animatronics in this thing. He'd even gotten the smell down—a sort of musky, musty wet dog scent wafting off of him. The oversized mug of beer in his hand ruined the impact, though it explained—but didn't excuse—the commentary.

"I said she's got a great arse," he repeated, loudly enough that half the bar should have heard. He grinned toothily and slapped Alec's shoulder with one beefy paw, making him stumble. "Good on you, lad." He bent abruptly, lowering his voice to a dramatic stage whisper. Sour breath made Alec close his eyes. "I don't suppose you'd let me have a go, wouldja? Have pity on a man who's had none in a long while."

Alec could hardly believe his ears. "You're asking my permission to sleep with her?"

The werewolf nodded. "Seems only right, seein' as she's walked in with you'n'all." He held up claw tipped fingers, an inch apart. "Won't be long. Wouldn't want to keep her from the party, now would I?" One bloodshot, yellow eye winked. He thumped Alec on the shoulder again, harder this time.

He'd been about to protest that, heart-stopping eye contact aside, he and Sam weren't together. *Not yet, anyway*, the rebellious voice inside his head proclaimed. He'd been about to say he didn't have any control over who she slept with when the second blow came to his shoulder and jarred something loose inside of him.

His temper flared. He felt it, like a literal wave of anger, filling him from the pit of his stomach to the top of his head. His fists balled, and his shoulders went back. Samantha was his, and no one—hairy werewolf or not—was getting in his way. "The answer's no."

"Aww." He'd never seen a werewolf pout, but this one did. "Not even a sniff? A lick? A little kiss?"

## Sara Dennis

Another wave of pressure rolled through Alec's body. This one felt different, liquid, as if it would fill him up and then erupt from the top of his head, his eyes, his fingertips, all at once. He could see the fur on the werewolf costume stand on end. The hairs on Alec's arms lifted, too.

"Touch her, and you'll regret it."

People were staring. Alec couldn't find it in himself to care. What mattered now, what was most important, was keeping this idiot's hands off of Sam.

\* \* \* \* \*

She hadn't had any trouble getting to the bar. Sure, it was crowded, but a simple clearing spell, and people turned aside and made room for her. They didn't notice what had been done. They didn't need to, and as she wasn't hurting anyone, she wouldn't have to make amends.

She leaned on her elbows, kicked up one heel, and rolled her foot. She knew Alec watched her from across the room. Sam could feel his gaze on her. Oddly enough, she didn't mind. Oh, she'd been stared at before. Being ogled, mentally undressed, and even groped while she worked wasn't unusual. She didn't much like it, but she could handle herself. Being eye candy for some drunken high roller came with the job. It was irritating but unavoidable, so she didn't complain.

This was different. She wanted him to watch her. She wanted him to look at her and want to touch her. That was the first step. The hands-on would come later. "Hey," she called to the woman behind the bar. "Where's Jake?"

The bartender turned around, spotted Sam, and let out a squeal that made several people flinch. "Sammy!" She bounded forward and leaned over the top to offer an awkward hug. "Where have you *been*? We've missed you around here." She paused and scanned the room. "He's working the dance floor. Word is he took off after this hottie with wings and a mess of black curls. I think he's gonna get some."

Sam couldn't help but laugh. "Good for him. How are you, Twyla?"

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

Twyla dimpled and launched into a report. The curvy bartender was Fae, so she fit right in to the theme of the night. Tall and willowy and very faintly lavender, she had a tendency to wear her hair—shifting shades of turquoise tonight—in pom-pom pigtails. The hairstyle showed off long, pointed ears and the half a dozen earrings she wore in each. It also distracted from the fact that her eyes often changed color from one blink to the next. "And so here I am, working." She lowered her voice to add, "And making money hand over fist. You should try this!"

The tips she made, Sam guessed, had more to do with the skintight pleather bodysuit she wore than her ability to make a good drink. "I'm good on this side of the bar. But speaking of money, I'll give you some if you make me a couple rum-and-Cokes."

"A couple?" Twyla arched a wicked eyebrow. "Two fistfuls drinking, or do I get to meet your date?"

Her date. Sam hadn't gotten around to giving Alec a label. When she thought about him, "date" wasn't the first word that leapt to mind. "You can meet him," she allowed, "but no scaring him off. I don't think he knows what he's got yet." Or who, more importantly, she thought as she turned to find him in the room.

And froze the instant she spotted his conversation partner instead. "Oh hell."

"Skipped off without you, huh?" Twyla sounded almost sympathetic. "It happens at parties like this. I got dumped in the middle of a kiss once. Of course, that was an *ifrit*. He claimed someone rubbed his lamp—"

"He's still here." Sam was grateful for the sturdy, solid bar behind her. It kept her on her feet. "So is Duff."

The big werewolf hadn't bothered with a costume. He didn't have to, here of all places, tonight of all nights. The Crypt catered to the inhuman crowd every night of the year. Witches like Sam rubbed elbows with vampires, bumped hips with demons, and danced with the fae on a regular basis, but on Halloween, all of the stops got pulled. Those few mundane humans who managed to score an invitation on Halloween

## Sara Dennis

thought they were blending in with their rubber masks and cheap costumes.

If only that was a fur suit. Duff had been one of Sam's first, and biggest, mistakes when she'd first come to Vegas. She'd been overwhelmed and giddy, eager to try a little of everything. A little of *everyone*, she admitted to herself. She'd been on her own for the first time in her life and, determined to make the most of it, she'd wanted to live large and have no regrets.

Duff, in his human form, was one hunk of a man. He had dark hair and sapphire eyes—the kind you didn't usually see on a man with that sort of coloring. He had a slow, warm-your-insides grin, and that Scottish burr drove her nuts, especially when she'd had her legs tangled around his waist. Nothing sounded too dirty, not when he rumbled in her ear and moved inside her. He was almost too good to be real.

He was way too much trouble to keep. His charm and good looks distracted from a competitive streak that had no rival. It came from the wolf inside him, he claimed, and Sam had no reason not to believe him. Duff believed he should be alpha of the Vegas pack. Fate conspired against him and cheated him of his rightful place, or so he claimed. The truth was that someone *bigger, badder, and better* for the city was in charge. Even worse, Sam liked Grant. Respected him. And that meant trouble with the territorial types.

She'd broken it off with Duff at six months. He claimed she couldn't leave him. She proved him wrong. For a while there, she'd lived looking over her shoulder. He'd caught her once or twice leaving work. The last time she saw him, she'd kicked him in the balls. It was fighting dirty, but it worked, and she got away. He also got the message. She'd seen neither hide nor hair of him since then.

Until now. And he would have to be talking to her new man.

"Whoa." Twyla had finally caught on. "Is that...?"

"Yes." She wasn't going to repeat his name. Werewolves had better hearing than most people realized.

"Is he...?"

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

"Where he's not supposed to be? Yes." Vegas was Grant's territory, and the casino where he worked most days of the week was certainly off limits. Duff had been banned. "He was never good about following the rules."

"Does Grant...?"

"Probably not. You might want to call him." Sam was already moving toward the two men. She'd get involved before things got out of hand. She had to try.

She'd only made it a few steps when the air in the room became charged, almost electric. The hair on her arms stood on end. She could feel pieces of the thin coiling tendrils at her temples try to do the same. Someone was building up to something *big*, but who? She scanned the room quickly. Who had the talent to call on that much power, that fast?

It wasn't until she heard Duff's growl at Alec and his snarled, "Are you trying to start something with me, *witch*?" that she listened to the stunned-if-logical voice at the back of her mind. If no one else could have done it, and she knew she wasn't charging up accidentally, that left only one choice. Alec.

The blond stood, with his shoulders tight and hands fisted, less than three inches away from Duff. The werewolf's muzzle wrinkled, showing off impressive, dangerous teeth. His ears were pinned, his hackles raised, and the onlookers around him were edging away, wisely. Only Alec seemed unafraid and, more to the point, wasn't cowed. He was insulated in a bubble of building power and probably didn't realize what was happening.

*Not good.*

"Duff!" She shook herself and moved, walking toward them again. She made sure that she didn't stalk, didn't stiffen up, and didn't let herself frown. No telling what might set either one of them off. No, instead she put on a pretty smile as she got closer. "You didn't tell me you were going to be in town. Surprise, surprise, huh?"

The tension broke. The charge in the air dissipated as quickly as it built. Alec shook his head a little. The stiffness in his shoulders melted away. Sam heaved a silent sigh of relief.



**Sara Dennis**

Duff twitched an ear toward her. At least he'd heard. He held Alec's gaze a second longer then dismissed him with a snort. His fur smoothed then rippled away and vanished completely as he shifted into something a little less intimidating. "If I'd thought you wouldn't call a hit on me, I would've let you know," he answered and bent toward her as if he planned to steal a kiss.

Sam turned her head at the last second. Duff's lips brushed her cheek while she slipped her hand into Alec's, squeezing lightly. She sidled closer to him, and another wave of relief washed through her when he slid his arm around her waist.

Duff grunted and straightened. "So that's how it is, is it? Still teasing me and giving nothing."

"Oh, I think I gave plenty," Sam countered smoothly. He still looked good. There was no denying that, but there wasn't a connection. Not like the one singing through her veins now. "Duff, this is Alec. Alec, an old friend."

"Don't mind me if I don't shake hands," Duff said, his smile tight. As long as he wasn't growling, Sam was satisfied.

"I think your Alec here was about to hex me. Must be something you witches have in common. Attacking without provocation," he explained.

"I doubt it was unprovoked. You're not the type to let an opportunity to insult someone pass you by."

Duff curled the beer bottle he held against his chest. "You cut me to the quick, Sam."

"And you're not drunk." She let the arch of her eyebrow punctuate the statement and turned her attention back to Alec. He hardly moved. She nudged him with her hip. "You in there?"

He shook himself. "What? Oh. Yeah. I'm here." His eyebrows tugged together. "But I think I missed something."

"Nothing important," she promised, ghosting her fingers against his jaw. "C'mon. We'll get some fresh air." She tugged his hand gently.

"What? Just like that? You're not even going to say goodbye?" Duff's gaze shifted between the two of them.

## **Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck**

"Good bye, Duff." Sam tugged harder, and Alec moved. She led him toward a side exit, watching Duff shake his head and move toward the bar, muttering as he went.

"Sam?" Alec frowned. "What just happened?"

She shook her head. "Outside. I'll explain. I'll try. The air'll do you good. Trust me." And that was all she said until she'd led him through the door, and it latched behind them, shutting out the sounds of the carnival.

Sara Dennis

### Chapter Three

"What just happened?" Alec knew it was a lousy question before he'd even asked, and yet it was the only thing on his mind. What *was* that? He couldn't have seen—wolves didn't turn into men before the eyes, not anywhere but in the movies, and Alec was pretty sure he wasn't acting.

Sweating, yes. Shaking? Quite a bit. His heart pounded, and it was hard to breathe, but he thought he'd remember being hired for an acting gig. Then again, in a few seconds he wasn't sure he'd be able to remember his own name.

"You're all right," Sam told him. Her fingers grazed his cheek. Her eyes were solemn, but she looked otherwise cool and collected. Just him, then.

"I don't think so," he argued, shaking his head as he backed away. "I don't think I'm all right. I think I just went crazy. Did you *see* that guy? Did it look like a werewolf tried to pick a fight with me?"

"It's Halloween. Things happen—"

"That wasn't a costume. I thought so," Alec admitted, "but real life doesn't come with special effects." Nor did the fact that it was Halloween explain away what he'd felt. He rubbed a hand against the hairs on his other arm, remembering the almost-tender feeling of them standing on end in the bar.

Sam slid her hand over his again. He hadn't heard her move, and she didn't let him pull away. "I can explain," she promised. "Some of it.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

Most of it, actually, but before I start, you need to decide whether you trust me."

Her thumb stroked along his knuckles. It soothed him, calming his speeding pulse. He watched her trace his skin, and the tightness in his chest faded away. He managed to take a deep breath. When he met her gaze again, he couldn't help but smile.

God, she was beautiful. She would have turned his head even if there wasn't a current between them, buzzing just under his skin because she was close. Normally he went for dark-haired girls, preferring the contrast. Blonds dating blondes had always seemed too cute. Now he couldn't imagine anything else.

"I trust you."

She exhaled, laughed, and her shoulders relaxed. She squeezed his hand and stepped in close, going up on her toes to brush her mouth against his. It should have been quick and simple, a fleeting kiss. She'd promised him an explanation, and he needed to understand.

Just not as much as he needed to lick into her mouth, curl his fingers deep in her hair and pull her close, letting go of her hand in favor of winding that arm snugly around her waist. She fit him, curves melding against his body as if she'd been made to do exactly that.

He skimmed his hand down her back after he let go of her hair. His fingers bumped clumsily over the laces of her corset, stopped from settling in the curve at the bottom by boning and brocade. It only took a little more courage to reach farther, let his hands follow the slope of her backside down until his palms were full enough to press her hips firmly against his.

If anyone had told him a week ago that tonight he would stand in the side lot of a casino with a woman in his arms, he would have laughed. He'd been on a few dates since moving to Las Vegas, but none of them had even ended with a kiss.

And yet here he stood, kissing and being kissed. Holding a woman who, judging by the way her hips moved, didn't mind the ridge of his erection between them. She couldn't be offended, not with the hungry

Sara Dennis

way her tongue thrust into his mouth and twined with his. She bit his bottom lip lightly. He groaned into her mouth.

He caught the end of one of her laces in his fingers and pulled slowly. It caught in the knot, so he tugged on it as he trailed kisses down her neck to the smooth expanse of pale skin. He brushed his cheek against the swell of her breasts and pulled again. If it would only loosen, he could peel the corset away....

"Alec." She caught his wrist as she reached behind herself. She held on as she stepped back, putting enough space between them that he could feel the breeze, cool in contrast to the heat of the moment before. Even in the half-light that bled from the casino, he could see that her eyes were darker. Her lips were swollen. Her chest rose and fell a little too quickly to be casual breathing. "I have to explain."

"Now?" He'd wanted answers before. Now he didn't care. He wanted more of her. "Explaining can wait." He pulled her toward him with the hand she still held.

Sam put her free hand against his chest, the pressure firm and unyielding. "Now." She shook her head and confessed, "I want you, too. Believe me, but I have to explain. Please?"

Frustration made him clench his jaw, but he nodded. He backed off and slipped his hand free of her grip. Maybe she was right. Maybe they should take it slower. He turned and paced a few steps away, pushing his hands through his hair. Clean air, cool breeze. *Think, don't feel*, he scolded himself. *Listen to what she's saying*.

She didn't say anything until he'd turned around. She offered him an apologetic smile. "What I'm going to tell you will sound crazy. You might not believe me, but I swear it's true. I've seen a lot of people. I've met a lot of fakes. But you've got real power, Alec. Magic." She paused and when he didn't say anything, she prompted, "The card tricks and sleight of hand. That's nothing to what you could do. You really *are* a magician, Alec. You could do spells and illusions and cast glammers, the whole thing."

The world started spinning off-kilter again. He stared across the little space between them. He could see the expectation, or was that hope

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

in her eyes? And he didn't have a clue about what to say. Several thoughts rolled through his mind before he settled on one. "Are you trying to tell me I'm a witch?"

Her lips twitched.

Alec couldn't tell whether he'd amused or embarrassed her. He wasn't sure how much it mattered either way. His eyebrows rose. "Are you serious?"

"Completely." There was no laughter in her voice. "Like I said, I know it sounds crazy —"

"Crazy," he agreed, cutting her off. "Maybe even insane. You saw my act, at least a part of it. Those are all tricks that anybody with decent hands can learn. It's not *magic*, Sam. I'm not a witch."

He couldn't have misjudged her. His luck couldn't be that bad. She had to be different from all the wannabe stage bunnies looking for a job. Some of them honestly believed in magic, even when he proved that there were no disappearing rabbits and the doves fit up his sleeve. Sam had to know that, didn't she?

She cleared her throat. "Well, no. Technically, you're right."

*There. Sanity!* "Of course, I'm right."

"You're a man," she went on, as casually as if she'd told him he had blue eyes. "So if I'm being picky about titles, you're a warlock."

"No!" He hadn't meant to say anything at all. "No," he repeated. "I'm not an anything but a guy who stands up on the stage and does magic tricks. Please don't go crazy." He caught her carefully by the arms. "I like you, Sam. I really like you. If you turn into a nutjob, I really think I might cry."

She shook her head a little and kissed him again. She broke it off before they could get carried away, smoothing a thumb along his bottom lip instead. "I wish I could let you believe that. I don't like pushing anybody." Her forehead creased. "But you've got so much power that you could be dangerous. You need training, Alec. You need me."

He groaned, closed his eyes, and rested his forehead against hers. "Yeah," he admitted, "but not for magic school."

Sara Dennis

"Hold out your hands." She backed up a bit before he could answer and clasped her hands together in front of her as if she might say a prayer.

"Just what I need," Alec grumbled to himself. Not only crazy, but she had religion, too. If she started speaking in tongues, he'd ditch her where she stood.

It seemed that she'd read his mind. Her lips moved. Far from the spittle-spraying, eye-rolling fit he feared, though, she didn't move. She hardly seemed to breathe. She didn't raise her voice or twitch at all. She kept her eyes closed and her hands raised. Maybe *he'd* gone crazy. He could swear her fingers had started to glow.

A breeze kicked up, lifting light tendrils of her hair. Her lips kept moving, and a definite glow came from between her hands now.

Alec stared with no thought of backing away. Impossible, he told himself. No set up. No props. He hadn't seen her touch a pocket. Then again, a kiss was a powerful distraction.

Her eyes opened. "Hold out your hands," she said again, stepping forward.

Alec stepped back. "What are you giving me?"

She smiled. "Nothing that bites. Play along, please? I promise it won't hurt you." She gestured with backlit hands.

*Crazy.* He held up his hands anyway, cupped a little to catch whatever she planned to pass.

Sam laid her hands between his and said, "Hold on. Lock your fingers, when I let go, or it'll fly away." Then she opened her hands, pulled them away, and clapped his together. "Don't let go."

"Don't let—Sam. Would you just tell me what this—"

Something bounced against his palm, then his fingers a second later. Alec looked down at his hands and found that they had started glowing, too. No, not too. Sam's hands had stopped, and the light between his fingers moved, shifting subtly as though it traveled.

He looked up at Sam, his heart once more beginning to pound in his chest. He didn't have to ask. He didn't know what he'd say if he'd tried.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

She answered the unspoken question all the same. "Will-o-the-wisp. Don't crush it," she warned when he tightened his hands. "It's alive."

"It's *what*?" Alec jerked his hands apart just as whatever he held collided with a finger. The light that had been masked by his hands flared brightly for an instant, making him turn his head and squint. It made no sound, neither a buzz nor the sound of wings, and when the light died down, he turned his head to look again.

It was blue-white now, as if a star had been pulled out of the sky and magnified so that the edges blurred. It hovered, bobbed in front of him, at eye-level. It had no face, no arms or legs, and yet Alec had to admit, the glowing ball of fluff had personality.

He reached for it, and it darted to the right, just beyond his reach. He tried again. It zipped backward and to the left, then swept forward, circled his wrist once and was gone, over his head and out across the empty parking lot, seeming to leave a trail of glowing light behind.

He smiled and turned to follow. "What the heck is that thing?"

Sam caught his elbow and stopped him. "Will-o-the-wisp, I told you. Let it go."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Don't you want it back?"

She smiled faintly. "It's not mine. I only summoned it. And no, I'm pretty sure it doesn't want to be caught again. More to the point, I'm not going to wear myself out trying to chase it down. That could be dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

She shrugged. "They're tricksters. They'll mislead you if they can. Make you chase them into traffic, swim to the middle of a lake until you're tired and drown. They've been known to lead a man right over the side of a cliff. The chaser dies, and the wisp goes on to fool someone else."

Alec turned around fast. "I thought you said it wouldn't hurt me."

"Not if you hold on." She shrugged. "You let it go. Besides." She moved in close. "I'd be pretty upset if I'd been in your hands and you let me go, too." She caught his hand and held it, smoothing her thumb along the arc between his thumb and first finger. "You have good hands. No, gorgeous hands. Strong." She looked up at him slyly. "Magical."



Sara Dennis

It took everything he had not to groan. She said things that didn't make sense. This could turn into a nightmare, but he still wanted her. His pants weren't getting any more comfortable with her standing there, stroking his skin.

He tugged his hand out of hers gently. "They're just hands."

"No," she insisted, though she didn't reach again. "They're a focus. They're how you tell the magic where to go. Some people struggle because they're delicate or afraid. You. You'll have no trouble making things happen."

He needed a subject change in the worst way. He cleared his throat. "So what about the wisp? We can't let it go flying around, luring people to their deaths."

Sam grinned and followed the topic. "They're tricksters, but they also bore easily. If we don't chase it, it'll disappear and go back to wherever it came from." She lifted a hand and brushed it through his hair. "You said you trusted me."

"I did. And I do. I want to," he amended, "but magic? You don't really expect me to believe that, do you?"

"You believed in a spark of light enough to look worried for a second."

*Caught. Damn.* Alec took a breath and held it, then blew it out. She had a point. For a second, he'd really worried that someone else would get hurt because the will-o-the-wisp, or whatever it was, would find and mislead an innocent. But if he didn't believe in real magic, there wasn't any threat. And Sam wasn't *really* acting crazy.

"I think I'm confused."

"I think you're afraid." She watched him closely, taking note of his uncertain expression.

He wasn't wrong to be wary about the way she pushed him. In truth, she wanted to give him time to wrap his mind around what she'd said. He ought to have the chance to accept or deny it, at his own pace, in his own time. Duff being here, though, on a night as important as this made her more than a little uneasy. Alec's reaction to the big werewolf made it crucial that she kept them both under control.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

If only doing that were as easy as it was to think.

"I'm not afraid," Alec countered defensively. "You're not making sense."

"Okay. Okay," she allowed. "That's fair. Things are happening fast. You didn't expect them. I take it back. You're right. I'd be confused, too."

His shoulders slipped a notch of tension. Sam breathed a little easier, too. "But can you tell me what happened in the bar, Alec? Do you remember doing anything? What did Duff say?"

It worked like pushing a button. His fists balled, and his jaw clenched. "He said he wanted to take a bite out of you." The breeze that had come up with the summoning spell suddenly smelled of ozone.

"A bite." She was on her guard and ready to block his powers if he got out of hand, but she hadn't been expecting that answer. "A real bite? He threatened me?" It didn't sound like Duff at all. He knew what she could, and would, do all too well.

Alec smirked. "Not exactly. He asked if he could kiss you, then said he wanted to take a bite out of your ass."

*That* was more like it. "So he was being a dick. There's a shock."

"So you know him." Sam's skin started to crawl. Alec narrowed his eyes. "He wasn't making things up."

Sam shook her head. "I know him. Dated him for a while. It's over," she clarified, watching a muscle in his cheek jump. "Some people have a hard time letting go."

"There's a difference between hard feelings and being a pain in the ass. He was out of line." Behind him, a few clouds scudded into sight. He didn't seem to notice.

Sam cleared her throat. "So you got angry." She summoned up a cautious smile. "On my behalf? You don't have to protect me. I'm pretty good at taking care of myself."

"You weren't there," Alec said, tight-jawed. "You didn't hear him, talking like he owned you."

"So you thought you'd do something about it?" She cast a wary glance at the sky. Lightning flashed between the clouds. "My hero." Her gaze went back to his. "Do you know how you're doing it?"

**Sara Dennis**

His brow furrowed, the first shift in his expression since the storm began to build. "Doing what?"

"Changing the weather."

His frown deepened. "What are you talking about?"

Sam pointed over his shoulder. She'd taken a breath to explain.

The door to the casino slammed open behind them. She startled, whirled toward it, and found Twyla leaning on the handle, chest heaving.

"Fight," she panted. "Duff called Grant out."

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

### Chapter Four

Duff wasn't going to sit and take this. Bad enough he'd made himself look like an ass, stumbling into people and spilling beer all over himself. He reeked of it, and his shirt stuck to his skin. Bad enough that his ex had the nerve to flaunt her new toy in his face. That would make any man crave a little revenge.

But it was Halloween. It was an *event*. It was an *anniversary*.

Two years since he'd been run out of Vegas, threatened with his life if he dared to come back. Two years spent planning, gathering people he could trust. Werewolves who would fight for him when he went to stake a claim on contested territory.

The rules of their kind were very clear. If a man could hold it, he could have it, no matter how far the borders spanned. Everyone respected the invisible dividing lines. Doing otherwise got you banished or killed. But the key point there was hold it. There were no laws about when a man could try to break another wolf's claim. If he'd wanted to, Duff could have tried dirty tricks. He'd opted to play by the rules. He had a sense of honor, no matter what the locals chose to believe.

That same sense kept him from tearing the warlock's throat out. It wasn't fair not to warn him and give him a chance to grab for his magic wand. Sure, he'd managed to work up the static charge in the room, but that was harmless. A little shock wasn't going to slow Duff down when the fight was really on.

Later. He'd challenge Alec later. First, he'd take the city.

**Sara Dennis**

Which was why he stood in the middle of the bar, turning a slow circle as he made eye contact with everyone his pack had penned in. Gauging them. Judging them. If there was going to be trouble, he wanted to see it coming.

He didn't have to wait long.

"You've got a pair, Duff. Standing in Grant's casino, on his turf. I can't wait to see him rip them off." The speaker was someone's groupie, not vampire or werewolf or anything out of the ordinary. He was an average human with the sudden urge to run his mouth. His voice stayed steady, but he stank of fear.

"Kinky," Duff answered. "But I don't put on shows unless I'm offered a lot more money than you're carrying. Shut it."

"Why?" The human snorted. "You afraid I'll say something that makes you look bad?"

"No." Duff curled his lip to show off his teeth. His canines were longer than a human's, and curved in a way normal teeth did not. A glimpse of one gave most people pause, and the troublemaker was no different. He flinched and backed a step away. "Atta boy."

And just in time. Nial reappeared from his reconnaissance mission. He shifted midstride and stopped a hand's breadth away, catching his breath.

"Well," Duff prompted when the silence stretched too long.

Nial shook his head. "Haven't seen a hint of him, but I know he's here. The place reeks of him. Him and the girl."

Furred or not, Duff's ear twitched. It was a hold-over reaction, the equivalent of a flinch. It irritated him, but not enough to train himself out of the habit. "What girl?"

Nial shrugged. "Didn't see her either. They were worked up about each other; I can say that much." He rubbed his nose, too. Duff wasn't sure whether he alluded to the smell or simply had an itch. "Stank of magic, though."

"Is the whole city getting some from the local coven? Christ. Fine." Duff squared his shoulders and raised his voice. "You see how the mighty Grant contests my challenge?" He held his arms out and turned another

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

slow circle, meeting the eye of everyone who dared to stare. "He's off having a shag somewhere instead of protecting his turf. Seems to me like a consolation prize, which sounds like a forfeit, and that means I win."

He let his hands fall as he turned toward the bar. "Drinks for everyone present. On the house." The lone remaining bartender stared, but didn't move. Duff started forward. "Did we get the deaf mute?"

He watched the man swallow, Adam's apple bobbing visibly. "I can't do that," he croaked. "Drinks on the house, I mean. Not without authority."

Duff leaned forward, hands braced wide against the bar. "Permission, you mean."

The bartender nodded fitfully.

"He's got you all whipped, thinking you can't scratch your arse without his permission." He leaned farther, voice lowering until it rumbled up out of his chest. "I'm all the authority you need. Pour the drinks."

"Maybe he's not whipped so much as afraid you'll bite him."

It was Sam's voice, droll and coming from behind him. Duff looked over his shoulder and found a trio standing there. Sam had her fists propped on her hips, a wry smile twisting the sweetest set of lips he'd ever tasted. The faery stood behind her, bouncing on her toes like a boxer anxious for the ring. Her ponytails bobbed, ruining the effect.

And there he stood. The ignorant little warlock. Duff turned and propped his elbows against the bar. "If he does what I say, there's no reason to worry about that." He directed his words at the man. Letting him know who was in charge, despite his casual slouch. If Sam's new man tried to push him again, he'd find out how quickly casual got cast off. "Drinks!"

The bartender jumped and started pouring.

"You know I can't let you do this," Sam said, starting forward as if she had control. The woman still moved like a dream, corset and all. Somehow she managed to sway and curve, even with boning cinching her in.

## Sara Dennis

Duff didn't move. "How exactly do you think you're going to stop me, love? Do you see them?" He gestured with his chin toward the far side of the bar.

Nial had gone to talk with Andrew, another of the boys in his pack. They stood like leaning book ends, shoulders braced against either side of the doorway, deep in conversation with one another. He had no doubt in his mind, though, that the instant he called, they'd sharpen up.

"There." Duff pointed out the pair by the other doorway that led into the bar from the casino. "And here." The pair that stood at the archway that led to the front doors. "They've been waiting for tonight. I wouldn't push them, were I you."

Her gaze followed his gestures around the room. He was certain she'd taken them in. And yet, when he stopped talking, she arched an eyebrow and asked, "That's it?"

He frowned. "What's it?"

"This." She waved vaguely toward the front archway. "You came to pick a fight with Grant with half a dozen men?" She shook her head. "He's not going to fight you. He's going to laugh. I know you've been gone a while, Duff, but this is just sad."

Now he straightened up, shoulders tight and jaw clenched. "I'm not here to pick a fight," he said stiffly. "I'm here to take it back."

"Take what back? The casino. Duff, it was never..." She paused, and he saw understanding flicker in her eyes. The eyebrow she'd lifted lowered. So did her voice. "Las Vegas. You want the city?" She held his gaze. "Are you insane?"

He lashed out, too quick for her to flinch, and caught her arm. From the corner of her eye, she saw Alec step toward them. She saw Twyla catch hold of his sleeve and shake her head, too. *Good*. He didn't need to be a part of this.

Sam tugged, and Duff held on tighter, lowering his voice, too. "Do you know what it's like to live in exile, Samantha? To have everyone know who you are and what you've done, and have nothing to do with you? To have to prove yourself, day in and day out?" He gave her a moment to

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

answer. She stayed silent, and he smirked. "No, I don't suppose you do. It sucks."

"You're hurting me," she said with a glance at her arm.

"I'll do worse if you get in my way," he promised. He let go with a sound of disgust. "I brought six men with me, but if you think that's all I have on my side, think again." He settled against the bar. "In a city this size, do you really believe that everyone's happy with the leader they have?" He let himself grin, lips twisting wryly. "We may be wolves, pet, but we've got our human sides, and mankind is a fickle, pissy lot."

"He's got numbers, Duff. They'll destroy you."

"Will they?" He let his gaze wander around the bar. He watched as the gathered made a line, walking a wide path around him to the end of the bar. Afraid or not, they were claiming their free drinks. "How many do you think they'll be willing to cut through to get to me?"

"You'd use them." The words came out a whisper. For the first time, Duff thought Sam might be taking him seriously. "You'd sacrifice people not involved to get what you want? You'd kill the innocent?"

"I'll do whatever it takes." He locked gazes with her.

And she gave him his space. "You'll forgive me if I don't want to hear all the details of your plan, I hope. I'd really rather not know."

Duff grinned, showing off a fang again. "Not at all. Go and play with your new toy. I'll be here when you get bored." He leaned to look around her, attention shifting now on the man still across the room, making fists and letting them go as if he wanted to hit something. "Or you break him. Whichever comes first. I'm not picky."

Sam pursed her lips. "You're not afraid I'll call for help?"

"I think we both know better."

She took a breath as if she might argue, but let it go and smiled instead. She turned and walked away. She and the would-be-wizard exchanged a few quiet words, and then she took his hand and tugged him toward the hallway that led to the elevator banks.

As he'd suspected, Nial and Andrew snapped alert. "Let them through," he called and waved a hand. "I'm feeling generous."



## Sara Dennis

When they'd gone, and the boys on guard slouched and returned to their conversation, Duff turned back to the bar and pointed at a bottle of whiskey. "That's for me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam stayed silent after the elevator doors closed. She let go of Alec's hand, and he pushed the button for the fifteenth floor, then joined her at the rear of the car. She wrapped her arms around herself and closed her eyes.

Alec let the silence reign for as long as he could stand it. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets. He made fists and curled his toes in his shoes. But the simple fact was that, since Samantha had appeared, the world had stopped making sense. He all but overflowed with questions. The answers confused him more.

So when the floor indicator chimed and the doors slid open, Alec blocked the way out with his arm. "Could you talk—"

Sam laid a finger against his mouth. Despite the heat that radiated from it, the touch felt soft and dry. She replaced it with her thumb, stroking along his lips instead, then reached for the hand that barred her way. She curled her fingers between his when he let her pull it down.

Alec led her down the hallway, letting silence reign. He paused outside a room and slid the keycard from his wallet. A swipe through the reader and the lock thunked open. He pushed the door open and smiled at Sam, then gestured her ahead of him with a flourish.

The size of the room still surprised him. He hadn't spent much time here when he checked in, preferring to go down and explore the stage instead. He'd expected something tasteful if small, though. A cheap single room as part of the compensation for performing. Nothing like this.

The carpet beneath his feet felt thick. The bedspreads on the matching queens were patterned, but not floral, and light in contrast to the deep color on the floor. The furniture was dark, and the walls were light, but it all worked together. It fit the theme of a vampire's crypt but didn't

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

seem overdone. He could almost imagine sleeping here. Waking up surrounded by these walls wouldn't be so bad.

Better if he woke with a pretty blonde in his arms.

But that was not the reason he'd followed her when nothing else made sense. "Any time you want to explain what's going on, I'd be grateful. I still don't think I have the whole story."

A vase stood on the dresser, full of autumn-colored flowers. Fake, Alec guessed. He didn't smell their perfume. Sam plucked one out of the arrangement, and twirled it between her fingers as she paced to a bed and sat.

"The important part, I've already told you." She brushed her hand over the deep red petals on the plant. In the wake of her touch, they shimmered gold.

Alec shook off the distraction. "The warlock thing."

Sam's lips lifted at the corners. She nodded and stroked the flower again. Gold faded with a shimmer into green. "The warlock thing."

*Crazy.* "Okay." Alec scrubbed a hand over his face and reached for the top button on his collar, twisting it open. "Let's say for a second that I buy your story, and I believe that I'm a warlock. What happens next?"

"Next we tap into all that power you've been building. You're strong, Alec," she told him levelly. "One of the strongest warlocks I've ever seen. You need to learn to control your power. I've got a feeling you'll need it soon." She paused. "I think we'll need it tonight."

She was determined; he could see that in her eyes. No matter how casually she perched on the end of the bed, she expected something from him. Something he didn't understand and didn't know how to give.

He closed his eyes. "I'm going to disappoint you, Sam. I can't be what you want me to be. I'm not—"

She stood and stopped his mouth again. "We don't have time for can't and disappointments. Don't think," she prompted. "Just believe."

When he opened his eyes and met hers, desire thrummed through him. Not sexual, not purely, though that was part of it. But more, he wanted to please her. He wanted to live up to her expectations. He wanted to give her reasons to look at him the way she did now, dark eyes

## Sara Dennis

all but glowing with hope and promise, a soft smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

So he nodded, and she moved her hand. "I believe."

"You're a brave soul, Alec," she murmured as she brushed her hand over his eyes, forcing him to close them. The words were quiet, full of affection, and still they made his heart skip a beat. His fingers twitched, and she took his hands, turning him so she could walk him backwards to the bed where she sat.

When the mattress hit his legs, he settled beside her, eyes still closed. It seemed somehow important that he not look, though she hadn't said a word. He took a breath to ask, and she stopped him with a kiss, lips so soft against him that Alec groaned, the sound muffled by the touch of her tongue to his.

Then she was gone, only the lingering scent of her around him. He heard something scrape against the dresser across the room. He felt the mattress dip and tilt. He felt Sam's knees brush his sides as she straddled him from behind. Then her hands slipped beneath his arms, and she lifted them.

She caught his hands and guided them to the vase, cool and hard in contrast with the way her fingers felt on his skin. The vase wavered beneath his fingers, bobbing slightly, and a few moment's exploration proved that it hovered above his lap.

He startled. "What—"

"Magic," she answered, silencing him, and repeated, "Believe. Believe that you can do what I explain." She stroked his arms, as if she could encourage him by touch.

It certainly had an effect, though not the one he thought she meant. His skin tingled in the wake of her fingers. His mind ran wild imagining the effect if she curled them around his cock, if she stroked that sensitive skin. He twitched, stiffened against the zipper of his pants, and closed his eyes a little tighter. *Concentrate. Pay attention. Save the thoughts of sex for another time.*

She murmured behind him, a sound that might have been amused. He felt her breath against the nape of his neck a second before her lips

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

grazed his skin. "You're elemental, Alec. It's like I said. You have power. You could call water or fire. You can control the wind. But only if you focus away from your body. Don't let pleasures of the flesh distract you. Not until we're done."

He turned his head a little toward her. His eyes stayed shut. "You can feel that?"

She laughed. "You're practically glowing with it, baby. Lessons first." She shifted her hand off his arm, sliding it along the crease of fabric at his thigh. She turned it, pressing the heel of her hand against his swelling erection, the pressure pleasant but not enough to ease his need. "I promise we'll play later. Bleed the extra energy off."

Alec sucked in a sharp breath. It was all he could do not to let go of the vase, forget whatever lesson Sam had planned, and pin her beneath him. He imagined what that sultry voice of hers would sound like gone breathy and high-pitched with passion. He wanted to know if the picture in his mind's eye would match the way she arched beneath him. He wanted to peel the stiff boning of her corset away and trace every sweet curve that it hid and bound.

Later. He could wait until later. He cleared his throat and nodded. "What do I have to do?"

"Focus and remember," Sam told him, stroking his arms again. "The way you felt when Duff pushed all your buttons. Every bit of frustration you feel with me. Picture it in your mind's eye as a storm. Let it build up, here," she pressed the heel of her hand against his stomach now. "Then push it out. Through your shoulders, down your arms, and let it roll through your fingers, into the vase."

"A storm?" He pictured dark clouds, lightning flashing somewhere deep inside the bank. He made it rain, heavy visible sheets of rain descending from them. He could almost hear the rumble of rolling thunder when the edges merged together. He could picture that roiling in his stomach, like indigestion, but move it? How?

He gripped the edge of the vase tighter, doing his best to ignore the fact that it bobbed beneath his hands. His fingers. Maybe that was it. He could picture water flowing from them. The runoff from the rainstorm. A

Sara Dennis

slow trickle at first, the sound of a few drops falling against glass. Then more, faster now, making their own kind of music.

Thunder punctuated it, a bass drum to break up the flow. And lightning was the crash of cymbals like that old Disney movie, *Fantasia*. That could work. Rain could pour from his fingertips like flood waters, filling the vase, and the storm could hover overhead, cool wind whipping the water into waves.

"Alec, you're doing it," she reported, her voice quiet by his ear. "Open your eyes."

He became aware of her warmth against his back again, but couldn't remember forgetting it. He didn't know when he'd stopped noticing that she was there, or the fact that he could feel her breasts against his shoulders as she breathed. That he could smell her perfume and something else in the air that circulated around them.

"Open your eyes," she prompted again.

Alec blinked a few times as his eyes fluttered open. He felt light-headed and lighter in body at the same time. His confusion didn't seem as oppressive. There was no longer a knot of frustration in his throat. His gaze dropped to the vase where his hands rested. And he froze.

There, beneath his hands, in the pillar of floating glass, hung the storm that he'd imagined, in miniature. Churning waves of water, a tiny set of clouds, and the flash of lightning leaping between them as a steady rain fell from their base. A soft pop of sound and the rolling vibration that followed was thunder on a scale much smaller than anything he'd ever heard.

"Magic," Sam answered when he opened his mouth to ask. "I told you. You've got some kind of power, baby."

"I did that?" Alec was still stunned by what he saw. It seemed impossible and, yet, the proof was here in his hands. He felt himself start to smile. "I did that. I made a storm. I made a storm by imagining." He paused. "I think I might be having a nervous breakdown."

Sam laughed and hugged him from behind. Her hands were flat against his chest, and she held on hard, her amusement making him laugh

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

as well. "You're not having a breakdown. You're stretching your wings. Watch."

The vase shifted out from under Alec's hands, and through no effort of his, drifted to the dresser again. With the storm still thundering and bubbling inside, it did a slow pirouette and settled where it had been when they came in. He felt Sam relax against him when it settled.

"That was you?"

"That was me," she confirmed. "Pretty impressive for a girl who used her powers to fake palm readings for a living, wouldn't you say?"

Alec needed to see her. He shifted in her arms, breaking her hold enough that he could face her. He lifted a hand and brushed her cheek, thumb stroking along the bone. "It's pretty impressive for anyone, if you ask me. You're a witch." He waited for the voice of reason to pipe up and discount the possibility. It didn't come.

Instead, he felt the full weight of true belief. Everything he'd seen. Everything he'd heard. The man in the wolf suit. The girl with the turquoise hair. He knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that what he'd seen and heard could be as real as the things he'd grown up with and accepted every day until this one.

He thought he must look like a slack-jawed fool, wide-eyed and staring at Samantha as he repeated, "You're really a witch."

"You said that," she teased, eyes dancing. "If you're going to parrot everything, we'll be here all night."

Her amusement was infectious. It spread through him and bubbled up until he couldn't help but grin. "Did you have somewhere else you needed to be?"

"Well, there is the whole saving my city from the evil werewolf thing."

Alec arched an eyebrow. "Now it's your city?"

"Mmm hmm." She moved, inviting herself onto his lap. She wrapped her legs around him again and put her arms around his neck. "My city. Nobody told you?"

He couldn't resist her anymore. He'd been restrained. He'd been hard and willed his erection down too many times already tonight. This

## Sara Dennis

time she'd come to him. She'd made the first move. He wasn't going to let her go until they were both satisfied.

"They must have forgotten to mention it," Alec murmured as he let his hands skim up her sides, thumbs leading as they bumped over the corsetry. His hands followed, curving over her breasts, fingers curling at the edge where brocade met temptingly displayed flesh. He ducked his head and kissed one soft swell, then the other, trailing sweet kisses to her neck and jaw. He heard her gasp for air and grinned against her skin when the bed rocked as she hitched forward, scooting herself closer.

Her fingers played in his hair, nails scraping his scalp just enough to make it sting and then tingle. He found her laces again. This time when the end he caught stopped at the knot, he wrapped it around his knuckles and pulled harder. It popped free, and the satin lacing slithered loose as he went on exploring.

Now he could work his fingers through gaps in the fabric. Now his fingers stroked flesh, and she shivered in response, her breath hot against his neck as she kissed and nipped her way to his ear. She caught his earlobe between her teeth, tugged it and let go. She drew back enough that their gazes met, and then she reached behind herself and pulled the sides of her corset free. She peeled it off and dropped it on the floor beside the bed.

The blouse followed, long sleeves whispering against one another as it fluttered to the pile. God, she was beautiful. There were spots of color on her, scattered freckles and points of pigment that stood out dark in contrast to her skin. Alec wanted to trace them with his tongue, connect them with kisses and then turn his attention to her breasts. Her nipples stood out hard, dark, and flush with color. He wanted to taste her there, too.

Unashamed, unreserved, she reached for his shirt and twisted open the remaining buttons. She peeled up his undershirt, too, long fingers stroking his body as it went, making muscles tense beneath the firebrand of her touch.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

It was good heat. It was welcome. Alec's breathing had already gone hard and short, but when he reached for her, she stopped him with one hand against his heart.

"Let me look," she murmured. "Let me see."

She smoothed her palms against the plains of his chest. She watched him as she scraped a nail over one nipple, her eyes darkening when he groaned. She skimmed her fingers through the faint dusting of hair that darkened as it disappeared beneath his belt.

Then she leaned backwards, an impossible movement that was somehow graceful as she stretched out on the bed. Her gaze never left his as she unbuttoned her pants, lifted her hips, and pushed her pinstripes off too slowly.

He moved. He had to have her. His body demanded it. He pushed off the bed and stood, studying her. If he never got a chance to see her like this again, he wanted to remember every curve. He heard a groan and only belatedly realized it had come from him. His fingers felt thick and clumsy as he fumbled his belt open. He knew he seemed crude and coarse in comparison to the beauty offering herself, displayed for his eyes only, on the bed. He knew it with the certainty that told him she'd finally be his.

Alec slid his hands up her legs as he leaned over the bed. Her skin felt as soft as he suspected it would. She was warm and eager for him, damp with desire when he peeled her silken panties off. He kissed the inside of her thigh as he made his way up her body, dotting kisses around her navel and over her ribs. He put a knee between hers so he could reach more of her, so he could suck a nipple into his mouth and roll the tight nub against his tongue. She arched off the bed, giving him more, and he took it, lingering a while.

But when he stroked a finger against her, when she rolled her hips against his touch and whimpered his name, he knew he was in trouble. His pulse pounded against his zipper. He hovered close enough that he held on to control by the thinnest margin. He wanted her like no one he'd wanted in his life, but...

"I don't have condoms."

They both went still. Alec closed his eyes.



Sara Dennis

And she touched his chin. Stroked his cheek and curled up to brush her mouth against his. "Birth control pills. Like clockwork. Relax," she murmured and caught his lip in her teeth, tugging lightly. She let it go to sink into the pillows again.

Relax? Easier said than done. "You're not worried —"

Sam shook her head. "Not even a little."

"But I could have —"

"Do you?" She arched an eyebrow.

"No!" Alec felt heat in his cheeks. "But I could —"

Sam drew back a leg and grazed her foot against his thigh. She pressed her toe against his zipper, massaging his erection through his pants. "I trust you," she told him, mischief sparkling in her eyes. "But if you'd rather I got dressed..."

Alec had never stripped off a pair of pants so fast in his life.

Sam reached for him when he crawled onto the bed. She hooked a leg over his hip, pulling hers up to meet him, his erection caught in the heat between them. She kissed him, sweet and eager, then bit his lip hard enough to draw blood.

She laughed at the startled sound he made. It trailed off in a whimper when he pushed a finger inside her, then braided a second finger with the first, curling them to stroke against the sweet spot hidden just inside. "Don't tease," she begged, hips rolling. "Please, Alec, I need you."

It was all he could take. He pulled his hand back carefully and guided himself to her entrance. He waited there for one last moment then thrust in with a rough sound of pleasure. She echoed him, her cry higher and sweeter.

Her body gripped him, already trembling around him as he thrust into her, each stroke a little deeper, each one peeling away a little more of his restraint. The bite of her nails against his shoulders, sting and ache of her teeth against his neck were counterpoints to the slick softness inside her. It drove him at fever-pitch toward climax.

## **Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck**

She went with him, arching up hard against him. The echoes of her cry rang off the walls. He curled an arm under her, holding her close as he spilled himself in desperate pulses, his body shuddering.

Then they collapsed to the bed, and he tucked her close against his chest. He wasn't certain when he fell asleep, but he knew he was content.

Sara Dennis

## Chapter Five

*Warm. Safe. Happy.*

Sam replayed the mantra in her mind, endlessly. She drifted toward consciousness with the words tumbling through her mind. She smiled lazily and stretched, feeling muscles that had not seen much use of late protest, a dull ache that sent heat thrumming through her.

Alec. The solid weight of his leg over hers was a comfort. A reassurance. It hadn't been wishful thinking or some wistful fantasy. She hadn't planned to meet anyone tonight. She wished their paths had crossed years ago.

She turned onto her side, tracing the curve of his ear with a fingertip. The corner of his mouth twitched, and he murmured in his sleep, a rumble of contentment that did good things to her heart.

Her finger stilled. Her heart. She knew all there was to know, she thought, about the mystery and the theory behind a soul mate. She'd earned a living telling people whether they would ever find the partner of their dreams. Odd then that she'd never considered whether she might find the special someone for her.

Odder still that she'd found him anyway. Not that she'd complain. Not a chance. She was in love. Her heartbeat sped, a thrill of fear and excitement pumping through her with the blood in her veins. Like anyone, she'd thought she'd been in love before, but it wasn't like this. It didn't *feel* like this, as if a part of her that wasn't sitting right had finally been pushed into place.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

They fit together in all the right ways. Alec wasn't an experienced lover; that much was clear. He'd asked, more than once, if he was doing it right. When she'd cried out, he'd murmured reassurances in her ear. When she gasped for breath at the fierce power of a claim, he stopped until she dragged him into motion again. He drove her to the point of madness half a dozen times before they came together in one last panting moment.

She'd bitten him for his pains. The bruise darkened even now. Sam ghosted her thumb over the dark half-circle and held her breath to keep from laughing out loud. No, not experienced, but what he lacked in ranging repertoire he made up for in skill.

She skimmed her hand down his back, fingers dancing over the curve of his backside. She twisted her hand, following the reverse path up his spine with the edge of her fingernail. Alec murmured something incoherent and stirred, turning onto his side. His eyes fluttered open, hardly focusing, but his body responded, twitching to life again.

She kissed him, tongue exploring the shape of his mouth. He lifted a hand and gathered up a fistful of her hair, pulling her in deeper. Their hips met.

The door rattled on its hinges. Sam and Alec froze as one. There was silence, a hesitation during which neither of them dared to breathe. It could have been a mistake. With the party going on downstairs, someone might have stumbled into the door.

But no. The door rattled again, and then Sam heard the keycard reader click a few times. Someone was trying to get in. Sam rolled off the bed and scrambled for her pants, murmuring the words of a spell that would make the lock hold fast.

Alec hadn't moved beyond sitting up. He rubbed a hand over his face and grumbled something she couldn't quite hear. He yawned and stretched as if he had all the time in the world, then scooted to the edge of the bed and stood, scratching his hip. "I think I like clock radios," he offered. "At least then you wake up singing."

Despite whatever trouble had brought someone to the door, Sam couldn't help but watch the way he moved. She knew that body now,

## Sara Dennis

almost as well as she knew her own. She watched muscles shift and remembered how they felt against her skin. He carried himself with a grace most men didn't have, somewhere between confident and careful with every gesture he made.

He caught her looking as he reached for his pants. He straightened with them in hand, met her gaze, and smiled crookedly. "Are you going to get dressed or stand there looking beautiful? Because you're not encouraging me to put my clothes on by looking at me that way."

Her mouth went dry. She wet her lips and took a breath, all too eager to suggest that he get back into bed.

The door rattled in its frame. She thought she heard someone shout her name. *So much for an encore performance.*

Sam tugged her pants up and threw the blouse on, not worried at the way it hung. "I guess I should get it," she said, giving Alec a sheepish smile and a shrug. She waited for him to finish buttoning up, then released the holding spell. The door rattled beneath her hand as she fumbled with the lock and jerked it open.

"Hi!" Too bright, too cheerful, Twyla's smile looked pained as she stood in the hallway. "Bad timing, huh?"

Sam leaned against the door, her own smile wry. "You could say that. What's going on?"

"Nothing," Twyla answered, too quickly. She was chirping. That was never a good sign. "Yet," she amended a second later. "You need to come downstairs." She made a face and rubbed one hand with the other. "My knuckles hurt. I knocked on every door on the floor trying to find you."

"Trying to find us for what?" Alec asked from behind them. He put his hands on Sam's shoulders as he came to the door, too. "What's happening?"

"Oh. Zombies. Vampires." She waved a hand. As if she'd caught on slowly, her gaze bounced between them a few times, and she smiled slowly. "So this really *is* your room?" she asked Alec. "Sam and you—"

"Why were you looking for us, Twyla?" Sam would keep her friend on track even if she had to resort to pulling hair.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

Twyla blinked mildly. "I wasn't kidding. Vampires and zombies. Oh." She wrinkled her nose. "And werewolves." She grabbed Sam's hand, pulling her out of the room. "Come on. We need your help."

"Get the key," Sam called over her shoulder as Twyla dragged her down the hall. She had no shoes. She had no *bra*, but you didn't stop a faery on a mission. There was no telling what would happen if she interrupted Twyla's train of thought. "Where are we going?"

"Down," Twyla said, leading the way toward the staircase. She paused with her hand on the handle and bottom lip in her teeth. "You can't teleport us, right?"

Sam blinked. "I could, if it's really that bad." She looked at the still closed door. "Are we going to be *able* to get down if I don't?"

"Yes. Probably." Twyla pushed the door open just as Alec caught up. "Nothing's burning," she added with a guilty twitch of her shoulders and started down.

Despite the fact that they had to run downstairs, the trip took less time than the elevator ride up. It felt faster, at any rate. Sam was a little out of breath by the time they reached the casino. The noise from the direction of the bar, though, caught her attention right away. Those weren't cheers or shouts of triumph. Those were cries of fear.

She and Alec moved in tandem. He stayed at her side the whole way. Twyla followed them through an archway into the Crypt's central atrium, and right into the middle of chaos.

Chaos and confusion, as far as Samantha could tell. Her temples started pounding immediately. Her stomach cramped and threatened to rebel as a wave of dark magic swept over her. Not just dark, black. Someone had done dark work here. The floor seemed to dip, and she reached for Alec's shoulder, knowing without looking that he would be there.

And he was. He wound a strong arm around her, and the nausea retreated. She could take a deep breath. "Something's wrong," she told him, looking around the space. "Someone's working bad magic."

Sara Dennis

Twyla confirmed it with a nod, standing on her other side. She twirled a length of bright hair around her finger. "Zombies," she reported. "I tasted them."

"*Tasted?*" Alec sounded as repulsed as Sam felt.

Twyla shrugged, unapologetic. "Faery. Bonzer sense of smell. Everything's got a taste. Even you."

"Which we will not be exploring," Sam said when her friend started to grin and give Alec the up and down. "Concentrate, Twyla. Where are the zombies now?"

The taller woman's gaze unfocused. She closed her eyes and pointed across the hall. "Out that way."

"What are they doing?"

"Nothing." Twyla tilted her head. "Waiting, I guess. It's hard to tell with zombies."

It was true. They were unpredictable. And dangerous. There was no telling when they might move, and for whom. "Where's Scarlet?"

Twyla's eyes snapped open. "What?"

"Scarlet," Sam said again. "If the dead are walking, I'm going to need her help."

"I'm not good with finding people, Sam." She held up her hand, the knuckles still fuschia. "Knocked on all the doors, remember?"

Sam forced a smile. "Try. For me?"

Twyla hesitated, holding her breath. Then she closed her eyes and her brow furrowed. She was the only point of stillness in the open space. A moment passed, then two, and Sam was about to prod her when she lifted her arm to point. "Moving," Twyla told her. "That way."

"Right." Sam took off like a shot, suddenly not worried about her feet or her lack of proper dress. She heard Alec shout behind her and Twyla's voice under his, but there wasn't time to explain, not now. They could follow, but Scarlet needed to be filled in and if she needed time to get ready, Sam would give her all she could.

She made it two more steps when she collided with another moving body. They struck one another so hard that it was all she could do to grab at him and try not to fall, stumbling over and around his feet.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

When they stopped their awkward dance, she pulled away. She knew this scent, too.

"Vampire."

"Spellcaster."

Sam frowned at the man. "*Jake?*" He was out of breath and paler than usual. He was clearly agitated, and that wasn't like him at all. This was a man who almost always had things under control, or so his outward appearance would tell most people. Sam didn't know him well, but she knew enough to know that something big had happened.

It took a second for recognition to dawn. She was about to reintroduce herself when Jake got it. "Sam."

"*There* you are." Twyla and Alec had caught up. "I looked everywhere for you," the fae bartender said. "Things are wrong, Jake. Really wrong."

He nodded curtly. "I know. Look, I'm looking for a woman. About this tall." He held his hand up at his side. "Black hair, curly. Her name's—"

"Arianna." Sam echoed him as he said the name. "What happened to her?"

"She was taken," he answered, jaw setting. He didn't ask how they knew each other. Instead he demanded, "Have you seen her?"

"Twyla." Sam looked over her shoulder at her friend.

Who arched an eyebrow and jutted out her chin. "What am I, a bloodhound? I have rights and feelings, you know."

Sam bit back the urge to snap, putting on another smile. "Please?"

Twyla heaved an over-dramatic sigh, but closed her eyes again. Time passed and she pointed at an angle to the way Jake had come. When her eyes opened, the pupils narrowed to pinpricks. "You're welcome."

"I owe you," Jake said and raced off.

Alec caught Sam's wrist and held it, before she could do the same. He turned her toward him, stepped in close and tucked her hand against his chest.

"Have pity on the new guy," he said, brushing a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "You know these people?"



## Sara Dennis

Sam stretched up on her toes and kissed him, quick and sweet. "My sisters. More or less," she amended. "My best friends."

His brow furrowed. "Then we'll find them. I'll help you. It's good practice, right?"

The faint grin stole Sam's urge to scold him. She kissed him then nodded. "Every little bit helps."

Twyla cleared her throat. "If the two of you are through being kissy-faced?" She paused while they both turned to face her. Her hands were on her hips. "Ari and Scarlet weren't why I looked for you."

Sam frowned. "Then what was?"

Twyla pointed over her head and behind her. "That."

Sam and Alec moved as a unit again. She didn't push him; he didn't pull. He simply turned when she wanted him to. Would it always be like this? Would he anticipate without her saying a word? Would she know when to touch him or lend him a shoulder for support the minute he came through the door? When had she started assuming there'd be a chance for that?

It didn't matter now. There wasn't time to dwell. "That" took the form of Duff and his brutes.

The fight had been going on for a while, judging by the tears in clothing and bleeding rends in skin. Sam recognized the men who were Grant's pack mates. Carlos ducked beneath the wild swing of one of Duff's boys, who was gray-furred and snarling in frustration when he missed. Between one breath and the next, Carlos' form erupted upwards. He threw himself onto the gray, and the two of them toppled in a blur of fangs and claws.

Another wolf shot out of the bar, ears pinned back against his ruddy skull. He was on the run, maybe for his life, with another of the local pack hard on his heels. Lucas paid no attention to the humans who shrieked and scattered out of the way. Long strides became lopes as his body shifted, lengthening into a brindled body as he raced out of sight.

Duff and the other three he'd brought with him jogged after, also wearing furred forms. They had yet to be set on by Grant's brothers. With luck, it was just a matter of time.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

But luck didn't seem to be on their side. People spotted the new trio and another wave of panic swept through the room. There were more shouts of fear, more undirected scattering. Duff caught a terrified woman by the arm, lifted her nearly off her feet by the grip, then tossed her like a ragdoll, unconcerned by where or how she landed. He and his friends laughed at her cries of pain.

Sam couldn't wait. "I need you to do me a favor," she murmured under her breath. She spoke to Alec, though she didn't look at him. She didn't want to take her eyes off the werewolf pack, and she'd need every spare bit of energy when she decided to move.

"Anything."

"Don't follow me."

She felt him flinch more than saw it. She had to look up, then. She had no choice. She met his gaze and nearly lost her resolve at the shock in his eyes.

Nearly. "It's important, Alec," she told him, ignoring for the moment that they stood in the open. That anyone could witness what passed between them, she with her hand on his chest and he with his thumb against her cheek. "I can't concentrate on helping them if I'm worrying about you." She winced. "That sounds cliché, I know, but it's also true. I know how to handle a werewolf." That wince was internal.

"And you —"

"I'm new. I know." He smiled faintly, wry. "That doesn't mean it'll keep *me* from worrying."

Sam slid her hand to his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. She let this one linger a while as she memorized the taste of him and feel of his lips beneath her own. Then she murmured, "Remember that you trust me," and let go to back away. "Twyla," she prompted her friend. "Keep an eye on him for me."

"You know I will."

Sam smiled and nodded. "I do." She winked at Alec. "I'll be back before you miss me."

She squared her shoulders and stepped to the center of the atrium.

## Sara Dennis

Another illusion, another spell. Sure, it was complicated, but it worked the same way. Change her appearance, make the werewolves see what she wanted them to believe. Sam did little tricks like this all the time. It was the fact that lives had never before hung in the balance that made her nervous, she told herself. *Steady breathing, concentrate. Body of a wolf, scent and paws and all.*

It felt like folding in on herself. It wasn't painful, exactly, but it certainly wasn't something that she'd do for fun. She imagined herself small and lean, compact and built to run. She cloaked herself in the mental image of a tawny coated she-wolf, long in the leg, thick fur coat shining with health.

Not too much like a wolf, though. Not a wild and feral thing that had no business being in a casino. No, she left just enough of the human in tact, beneath. Not a wolf, but a werewolf. A female looking to mate. She imagined Alec, standing behind her. She let herself feel his hands on her skin, remembered the way he moved inside her and the low, needy sounds he made. It shivered through, and she forced her lust for him out through her pores.

Then she threw her head back and howled.

Predictably, the muzzles of the four males snapped her way. She turned in a circle, and her projected self pranced, a taunting little show for the hunters. Would it work? Would they follow? She watched them confer. She couldn't hear what they said, but she knew she had their interest. All four kept an ear swiveled toward her.

Then Duff moved, striding forward with long, powerful paces that would have him on top of her too fast.

"Sam," she heard Alec breathe behind her.

"Don't," she snapped. Her echo yipped and snapped at him. He couldn't see the wolf, she knew. The vision wasn't for him. He had to abide by his promise. She held his gaze a little longer, then bolted down the hallway she'd used before. Not outside, though. Not this time. There was another doorway down there, one that lead to the stairway. She slapped the door handle open and leaned. Her imaginary image used her paws.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

The door swung open beneath her weight, and she bounded up metal stairs, two and three at a time. She had to make it to the roof. Up and out and far away.

It had to work. They had to follow. If they didn't, she'd left Alec in there alone. Unprotected, when she knew Duff had a grudge against him. She'd left Twyla and Scarlet and Ari, wherever they were. Safe, she hoped. Safe and out of danger.

"Come on. Come *on*." The door slowly swung shut. She started back toward it, just in case.

A burly figure pushed it open. Duff.

*Finally.*

\* \* \* \* \*

She was gone. He let her go. Alec stopped short of literally kicking himself. What was he thinking? How could he have agreed to let Sam use herself like that?

He'd been stunned, plain and simple, by the way the whole night had gone. From the minute he'd seen her to this second, nothing was what he expected. He'd been stumbling through every minute, trying to catch up with a world moving way too fast. Now he paid the price for it. He'd been too slow to stop her.

Not anymore. Alec squared his shoulders and started moving. He wasn't letting her face Duff alone. So what if he didn't know a thing about werewolves? So what if he had no idea about what to do? He'd be with her. The woman he loved wouldn't face a pack of angry werewolves alone.

The thought stopped him, his heart thudding hard beneath his ribs. It was almost painful. He pressed the heel of his hand to his chest. The woman he loved? Had he really just thought that? He stared down the hallway where she'd disappeared? Was he in love with Sam?

He got his answer loud and clear. It was there in the clench of his stomach and the desperate need for a deep breath. He heard—no, felt—the thrum of connection with her, leaned into the impulse to follow her, and smiled when he thought of seeing her again. It didn't matter that

Sara Dennis

they'd only been apart a few minutes. He needed her. He wanted her. He loved her.

Alec started moving. She'd understand. He would explain that he couldn't let her fight alone, and she'd know he was right.

Twyla stopped him, long fingers tangling in his sleeve. "You can't."

"I have to." He looked down at Twyla's hand, then up at her. He smiled. "I'm supposed to be with her."

"No, I mean it." She wasn't looking at him. Her gaze fixed on something over his shoulder. Her eyes widened.

Alec looked. And wished he hadn't.

Duff and his goons bore down on them like a four-headed freight train. There wasn't time to dive out of reach. He was shoved away, and he stumbled. When he managed to look back, a werewolf had Twyla's arm in his hand. She tried not to make faces, Alec could tell, but he doubted the big creature cared about being careful.

"She wants to play with me," Duff rumbled, "then we'll play. My game. My rules. You." He speared a finger toward Alec. "Stay out of it, or I'll tear off your head. I've had enough of playing nice for one night."

Then they turned and left him there. Stunned again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Duff wasn't alone. She'd expected his partners to follow. They were a pack, after all. She hadn't planned for the fact that they'd drag Twyla with them, though. She kept up a steady stream of complaint until she was told, gruffly, to shut up. So the trick hadn't worked as nicely as she wanted. This wasn't going to end well.

Sam let the illusion fade as the other werewolves filed through the door behind Duff. They rumbled at one another, muzzles lifted to catch a scent of the female who'd eluded them. The trick appealed to their baser instincts. She wasn't proud of leading them on, but sometimes you had to do ugly things.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

"I'm not surprised she ran away," she called, loud enough that they'd hear and look. "You four move like a gang. If I were, well, still her, I'd be scared, too."

Duff's muzzle wrinkled, and he started toward her, voice thick and distorted by the half-beast form he wore. "You're playing dangerous games, little witch."

"And you couldn't help yourself. All Hell broke loose, and you just had to stir up shit."

He sneezed, dismissing her words. She'd spent too much time around the weres to take it for anything else. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think I do." *Don't get too caught up in baiting him*, she reminded herself. *On your toes, Sam. On your guard*. She couldn't let herself forget that she was outnumbered, and more or less outpowered. Spells took time to work and, big as they were, werewolves could move fast when it suited them.

"I saw your buddies," she told him all the same. Pushing. Daring. "Tails tucked between their legs. Worried, Duff? Maybe your big takeover isn't going to be as easy as you thought it would."

"What do you want?" Duff rumbled, coming another few steps toward her. "To see me?" He sniffed toward her audibly. "Your new toy not doing it for you? You reek of him and sex. Come to Duff to have it finished off? Miss the way I used to make you howl for real?"

One throb of temper shuddered through her. Alec was an easy target. She wouldn't rise to the bait. "I miss your sense of honor," she said. It surprised her how much she meant it. There'd been a time when, despite his love for bending the rules, Duff had been a decent man. Not for her, but good enough as a friend.

He surprised her by baring his teeth. "What do you know about honor, spell-weaver? True werewolf honor. You haven't seen it from your buddy, Grant. A real alpha doesn't get rid of you because you question his authority. A real alpha doesn't hide when the challenge is issued again."

"A real alpha doesn't send someone else to pick his fights. If you wanted Grant, you should have gone after him yourself, not resorted to

Sara Dennis

this." She gestured toward the sidekick that held Twyla's arm in a bruising grip. "This is beneath all of you."

The rumble started from somewhere deep inside him. She knew the blow was coming and still she didn't move. He lifted his hand, poised to backhand her, and she stood there, tight-jawed, meeting his gaze to prove her determination. Her hands remained fisted to keep herself from running away.

She almost missed the tug of familiarity beneath the pounding of her heart. She hadn't seen him arrive. When it registered, though, she almost groaned aloud. He was supposed to stay away!

The breeze came a second later, wrapping around Duff and her like a cool embrace. It felt heavy with the promise of rain. It must have smelled like Alec, although Sam couldn't tell. But Duff surely could. His muzzle wrinkled. His ears swiveled.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Alec's voice came out of nowhere.

Duff turned, and Sam caught a glimpse of him. Alec stood with his shoulders back and his feet the same width apart. A solid, fighter's stance. It made him look twice as big, somehow. It made him look formidable, strong enough to hold his own against a werewolf. Sam was proud.

No, more than that. She was relieved, not because he'd come after her when common sense said that he should stay far away. If he'd followed her, it was because he trusted himself. It meant he'd accepted, embraced his powers. He'd truly become her match and her partner in every way.

If he survived.

"Good for us I'm not you then, isn't it?" She had no further warning. Duff turned on his heel and let her have it—one solid blow that sent her stumbling.

He'd pulled it. Sam knew *that* even as the pain spread through her like flame. He could have broken her jaw. She fell hard against the rough gravel surface of the roof, dizzy and mind spinning, but she knew that Duff had used her to make Alec start the fight. "Don't," she shouted. "He *wants* you to fight."

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

It was too late. What had been a breeze intensified to a wind that pushed and tugged at her blouse as it wound around her. *Elemental*. The word echoed through her head. Elemental with no training. There was no telling what he could, or would, do.

"You want her?" Duff taunted. "You'll have to come through me."

"I don't have a problem with that," Alec gritted out. It was obvious that he strained.

Duff's henchmen closed in when he moved. He stopped them with a snarl and a harsh, cutting gesture. "No. This is our fight. If he beats me, then you can tear him limb from limb," he said with an easy, nonchalant shift of his shoulders. It was chilling. Sam prayed it was for show. "But if he's got the balls to face me, we'll do it one on one." He barked laughter. "Matter of fact..."

He shifted down, fur receding and body realigning with a series of pops so deep that Sam could still hear them, despite the wind sweeping past her ears. He pulled off his shirt when the transformation finished. He balled it and threw it to the side. The wind caught it and whipped it past her before it sailed over the edge of the drop-off.

"Come on, then," Duff prompted, holding his arms out to either side. "Man to man. I've more or less evened the odds." He put his fists up in a parody of a boxer and did a few somewhat fancy foot shuffles. "How many rounds do you think you can stand against me?"

"Enough." Alec made no move to peel off his shirt. The sleeves and sides billowed. He hadn't buttoned it all the way. He didn't need to take it off.

Sam remembered every plain, every muscle that it hid in painstaking detail. She wanted to touch him again.

She curled her fingers as if she'd claw through the ground when Duff gave up the game of being patient and charged toward her lover, roaring.

Alec ducked the first blow, weaving deftly around Duff's arm, but a second slashing pass got a little too close for his comfort. Fabric tore with an audible rip, but the werewolf's claws didn't touch skin. Alec



## Sara Dennis

glanced down to confirm that he was whole, and Duff caught him under the chin with a rough upper cut that sent him airborne.

When his feet touched the roof again, he stumbled, overbalancing, and fell. He landed hard, and the shock of it jarred through him. His teeth ached, and he tasted blood. His ears rang.

And Duff came on, a feral grin on his face. "Let's call that round one. Get up, and we'll go for the next."

Maybe the punch he'd taken made the Scot's hands look so big and heavy. Maybe they really were that large. All that Alec knew for certain was he couldn't afford to let the other man land another blow. He'd be no good to anyone snapped in half. He couldn't help Sam if he got injured or worse.

He held up a hand, staying Duff for a minute. He staggered to his feet and spat. When he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, blood stained his skin, dark in the moonlight.

He looked to the other three, lurking at the sides of the fight, watching him with eager eyes and flexing their claws. They wanted a piece of him, too. If he ran, he wondered, would they chase him down? Would they tear him limb from limb as Duff had told them, just for the glee of it?

Sam still sprawled on the ground. Not hurt, he thought. She hadn't cried out. She didn't hold a limb or grimace. She stared at him, worry in wide eyes. Worry and more. Her gaze felt like a tug on his heart, an anchor that bound him where he stood. He couldn't run, not with her lying there. She was his to protect, and that's what he was going to do.

So he reached inside. To that place deep inside that she'd showed him, where the magic dwelled. No, where it roiled, already whipping up a wind. It was easy to make it churn harder, more chaotically. His attention returned to Duff, who postured again. The other man gestured grandly, boasting no doubt at the top of his lungs. Alec could hear nothing but his heart and the wind.

He let it move him. He let it fill his arms, and he thrust his hands out, pushing against the wall of the maelstrom that swirled around them.

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

Nothing moved. His hands passed through. It was almost as if he'd taken a deep breath.

Then it doubled back on itself, surging out of him. He let go of the power that tingled in his fingers. He threw the wall of raging wind at Duff with everything he had and prayed it would be enough.

Prayer failed him. Duff leaned into the wind, holding out against the storm. His hair blew back, he squinted his eyes against the air, but he didn't budge. He made it look easy. For a second. Two. Then, to Alec's combined relief and disbelief, he slipped.

He hadn't changed position. He didn't retreat, but he slid, a few inches at first, then at least a foot. His eyes widened, and he lifted his arms. He made fists, clutching at nothing, and Alec wound the wind around him, trapping his limbs.

He felt a savage sort of glee as Duff skidded again, struggling to step forward this time. Another foot. Another two. He stood beside Sam now, but he didn't look down. His gaze locked on Alec's. He mouthed something. It looked like a plea. It might have been a threat. Alec wasn't interested in listening. He pushed harder.

A streak of blue-white light appeared, whipping around him, blinding Alec briefly. It zipped away in the next instant, carried in swirling patterns by the wind. A glowing tail traveled behind it, showing where it had been but not where it would go. The will-o-the-wisp!

The wind sent it hurtling toward Duff, and the werewolf's gaze followed it. It darted between his legs and wrapped around a thigh. It buzzed his head and skimmed his throat and stuck under his arm, as if it sought shelter.

Then the wind whipped it away, arcing it high over Duff's head. It seemed to hover there briefly, and then it dove, heading straight for Duff's eyes. He shouted, and this time Alec heard it. Duff yanked his arms together to wave the thing away.

His balance shifted. The wind lifted him. It turned him, feet above his head. His hands shifted, nails lengthening to claws. He reached for purchase on the asphalt and found nothing. He lashed out to catch anything he could.

## Sara Dennis

Sam's ankle.

There was no time for Alec to stop what he'd started. He watched in horror as the werewolf dragged her with him. She didn't even reach for a handhold as she disappeared over the edge of the roof.

"No!" His shout sounded loud in the oppressive silence left behind by the sudden stop in the storm. He ignored Twyla's shout from behind him as he raced for the edge himself. He barely heard the mutterings of Duff's henchmen. He didn't hear what he most wanted. A whimper. A cry. A sign that Sam wasn't really gone.

It was a long, dark way down to that side parking lot. There were shapes down there, certainly, but they were impossible to make out. Where was the moonlight that had lit the scene a minute before?

"Shine, damn it," he shouted, lifting his head. "I need to see!"

But the moon hid behind a thick bank of clouds. Silver light leaked around the edges but it wasn't enough to help him. There was a flash of lightning and thunder rolled, an unhappy grumble that echoed through the sky. Alec closed his eyes as a single drop of rain fell on his face and streaked toward his jaw.

He heard the rumble of conversation, muted by the storm and the wind. He could feel the roof vibrate beneath his feet as heavy bodies moved, not at all gracefully. The door to the hotel stairway banged open and slammed shut again. No one grabbed him; no one tore him open. He'd cut the head off of the serpent, so to speak. The threat had been eliminated, and Duff's henchmen fled while they still could.

"Alec?" But Twyla had stayed. Her voice was closer than he expected. He didn't turn toward her. He didn't need to hear what she meant to say. She touched his shoulder, hand warm even through his shirt. "Alec. It's raining. We should go inside."

"You go." He hardly recognized his own voice, rough and raw, as though he'd been shouting. He wanted to shout. He wanted to curse at himself for using powers he didn't understand. He wanted to yell at Samantha for teaching him that they existed in the first place. "I'm not leaving her."

"But—"

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

"I said no, Twyla. Go if you don't want to get wet." He opened his eyes to look at the sky. "I'm going to let it rain."

She pulled her hand back, hesitated behind him, and then she moved away. "You did a good thing," she said so quietly he shouldn't have heard her. "She'd be proud of you."

*Proud.* That was bittersweet. Yes, no doubt she would be, now that he wasn't balking at magic or telling her it wasn't possible. He'd more than proved that it was.

He would never use it again.

The rain fell harder now, hammering his head and shoulders like a punishment. Because of the pelting drops, he bowed his head. Because he bowed his head, he saw the light.

It was a pinprick at first, far below him and dim. As he watched, though, it grew and brightened until he knew that it was the will-o-the-wisp. Was the damned thing coming back to see who else it could lure over the edge where Sam had fallen? He didn't know how to get rid of it or send it away. He didn't want it near him, reminding him of her.

Not that it cared about what he wanted. The annoying reminder zipped out of the darkness and hovered at his shoulder. He swatted at it, but it darted out of the way, then settled at his other shoulder. He grabbed for it. Maybe catching it would irritate it enough that it would go away.

The chase led him a few steps away from the roof's edge. The wisp hovered always out of reach, but catching it had become a need now. Maybe he wouldn't let it go after all. Maybe he'd keep it to remind him of her. One last try and—triumph! His fingers closed on the ball of light. He clapped his other hand around it and laced his fingers, making a cage the way Samantha had.

"It looks like you've made a new friend."

The will-o-wisp sped out of Alec's hands when they fell open as he spun toward the voice. Her voice. Sam's voice.

She stood on nothing, feet solid on what looked like thin air. She moved toward him, stepping onto the roof as he stared. She was moving. Talking. She appeared unhurt.

His heart started pounding again. "Are you *real*?"

Sara Dennis

She laughed. "I'm real. Do I look ghostly?"

"Yes," he said with too much enthusiasm. He hardly dared to reach for her. "I saw you fall, Sam. I thought—"

She made the decision for him, not stopping until her hands met his chest. Solid. Warm. Very real. "I know," she murmured, but rose to her toes rather than explaining. She kissed him, lips eager against his. Their mouths lingered together until they were both aching for breath.

Alec folded her close, tucking her against his chest. He tried not to crush her, but his arms shook. "How," he breathed when he found his voice. "You fell."

"There's a ledge." She kissed the underside of his jaw and tucked her nose against his neck. "And I have magic of my own, you know?" She sounded tired and amused all at once.

Alec kissed the top of her head then slid a hand beneath her chin and made her look at him. "Duff?"

She nodded. "There, but unconscious. You didn't kill him. No one died," she promised. "No one will." She grinned. "Did you miss me?"

He laughed despite himself. "Like you wouldn't believe." He sobered, stroking his thumb beneath her bottom lip. "But you should know. I love you, Sam."

He felt her flinch when her breath caught, more than he saw it. He thought for an instant that she might pull away.

But she reached for his hand and threaded her fingers through his. "I've been waiting for you to say that all night," she teased and kissed him again. "I love *you*."

When they'd both run out of breath and were soaked to the skin, she nudged him with her hip. "We need to find Grant and get someone to come get Duff. The pack will want to talk to him, I think. You and I, on the other hand, want to *warm* up."

"We do?" Alec teased. "Have any ideas on how?"

She nodded, eyes dancing. "One or two."

He shook his head. "How did you do it?"

"Do what? Teleport Duff and me to safety?"

"No. Get under my skin so fast?"

## **Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck**

Sam grinned. "A good magician never gives up her tricks."

**Sara Dennis**

### **Author Bio**

Like many authors, Sara put stories on the page as soon as she knew how to write. She made up epics to pass the time on moves across country and back again. And she spent many hours having adventures. She even got the dogs involved, assigning them roles as sidekicks and foes!

Now she lives in northern California with her husband, cats, and horses, dreaming up heroes and heroines who can (and do!) overcome impossible odds.

Visit her Web site at <http://www.saradennis.com>.

## **Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck**

**Also Available from Cobblestone Press, LLC**

**Dragon Undone by Sara Dennis**

### **Chapter One**

*Dragon!*

The cry echoed through the early morning air. It drifted through the streets of Weld. It settled in the shadowed place where Berdhan's heart had been and shook him awake.

He closed his eyes tighter and reached for numbing dreams.

"Berdhan, are you in there?" Gyldan shouted, her voice accompanied by the whimper of a frightened child. "Berdhan, I know you're in there. This is no time to be asleep." There was silence, and then the heavy door rattled in its frame. "Berdhan, open this door!"

He groaned. If he lay here another few minutes, maybe she'd go away. He could pretend he'd never heard a word. Then again, if he ignored her, Gyldan might knock his door in.

So he pushed the blankets back and swung his feet out of bed. He closed his eyes to stop the room from spinning, and wobbled to a standing position. Heida had filled his mug with ale from her special stock last night and kept it full to the lip all night long. She set bottles of the potent brew aside just for him. Thick, heady stuff that banished memory. Strong stuff that left him regretting every sip the next day.



Sara Dennis

"Please, Uncle Berdhan? It's me. It's True. I think Mum hurt her hand. Can we please come in?"

*So she had the boy begging for her, now?* Berdhan grimaced.

"All right, all right." He shuffled across the room to lift the beam that barred the door. "Just give me a moment—"

The door swung in, too fast for Berdhan to catch. He staggered back, and the crossbeam barely caught the edge. A little slower and he'd have had a nice black eye.

With bright-eyed Isham clinging to her shawl, Gyldan bustled her trio of older children through the still-humming door. True came marching in first, leading Adda and Maaten. They held one another's hands tightly.

"Did you hear?" Gyldan trembled. "How could you be asleep?"

*So the scolding had started already.* Berdhan rubbed a hand over his face.

"They've seen another dragon. You promised Deorward that you'd keep us safe." Wisps of dark hair had come loose to frame her face, emphasizing her pallor. Now and then, they came to life, stirred up by her frantic gestures. "Now this? What about my children?"

Berdhan stared. She stared back, as she shifted Isham to the other hip. "You've been drinking, haven't you?" she asked.

There was the disapproval that had become so familiar, right on cue. It straightened her shoulders and stiffened her spine.

"Gods save us. Have you even heard a word I've said?"

Berdhan closed the door, summoned a wry smile, and started back toward his bed. "Every word."

"Then what are you going to do about it? You can't mean to keep hiding in here. It's a dragon. You can't just turn your back."

"Can't I? And why is that, Gyldan? Why can't I do as I see fit?" He gestured at the walls surrounding them. "Maybe I'm happy staying hidden here."

Gyldan's expression softened, but only for an instant. "You're not happy, Berdhan. Everyone knows that." She spat the words as if they'd wound him. She had no idea how deeply. "As for why, you have a duty."

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

She paused for breath; he braced himself. "Deorward would have gone out in your place."

Berdhan flinched as if he'd been slapped. The ache he drank to drown returned, stealing away his breath. It lodged in that same empty place, and then crept out to his fingers and down to his toes until every bit of him filled with muted rage.

Rage that led him nowhere and that he'd never vent. She was right. Deorward would go out. He *had* gone out, and Berdhan had been too slow, too late to save him. It'd gotten him killed.

"You're welcome to stay." Berdhan pulled a tunic from the trunk at the foot of the bed and shrugged it on. "You'll be safe here."

"How can you say we'll be safe? If there's a dragon coming for Weld—"

"*Gyldan!*" She flinched at his abrupt volume, and he heard her gasp. He took a breath and forced the ache away, then stooped to get his boots and shoved his feet inside them. "The dragons won't come here. They never do."

She sniffed. "Never's a fine thing to claim after all we've seen. You know that just last week Cailan Tanner's roof caught fire."

"When a lantern tipped and caught in the loft where the children sleep."

"Then who destroyed the wall 'round the old stone paddock?" She was undeterred. "Surely you won't tell me that was the wind."

Berdhan let himself smile a little. "It wasn't the wind," he agreed, and glanced up to see Gyldan looking very smug. "It was Euan's horse, trying to get to the tinker's cart mare. Sit down, will you?"

Her chin lifted, and her shoulders straightened. The spark of defiance in her eyes flared. She wasn't giving in, it said—she was just going along. Still, she moved toward a place at his table.

The children followed after her like chicks to a mother hen, and then nestled around her feet while she arranged Isham on her lap. "It's not for me, you know? If Deorward had left me childless, I wouldn't be such a goose. It's just that they're all I have. I can't bear the thought of losing them."

## Sara Dennis

Berdhan hadn't been ready to lose his brother, either. Deorward was younger, the one who'd gotten married and carried on the family. He'd been a good man, if a little lost in his thoughts now and then. He could be relied on if the weather wasn't too warm, or the sun shining too brightly. On pretty days, however, he'd forget his chores and spend time with his wife and children.

Berdhan missed him, too.

"I want to keep them safe every bit as much as you do," he admitted wearily. "But you can't go around blaming every little thing on dragons. Sometimes, things happen."

"And sometimes," Gyldan argued, "dragons do those things. You heard the call. Someone saw one of them. If it was close enough to be seen from Weld, that's far too close for me."

He studied her and the children a long while. She met his gaze briefly, then glanced away, brushing her hand over Maaten's hair. Maaten nudged Adda with his foot, and made a face that caused her to giggle. True, Deorward's eldest, stared at him. He clenched his jaw stubbornly. Just like his father.

Berdhan ground his teeth. "I'll go to Heida's. I'll see what's being said." He crossed the room without giving Gyldan time to speak. "Stay here until I'm back. Bar the door if you like, but no more worrying. It's probably nothing."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wondered when you'd get here." Euan knocked Berdhan off-balance with a slap on the shoulder. The smith was used to bending metal to his will. Now and then, he forgot his own strength.

Berdhan managed a smile in return. "You were expecting me?"

"Waiting for you, more like. I saw Gyldan heading your way. Told the rest you might be a while." Euan shook his head. "She's like a chicken with no head, that one. Always flapping her arms and racing around without the first idea why."

Berdhan chuckled. "I'll tell her you were thinking of her."

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

Euan spluttered, cheeks gone fiery red, then stabbed a thick finger toward Berdhan's waist. "Lost your courage?"

Berdhan's hand dropped unerringly to his side, to the place where a sword hilt might be. It was a practiced gesture, and it felt wrong to find nothing there. "That sword hasn't seen the light of day in a while. I thought I'd let her rest before I dragged her out."

Euan drew back his hand. "You sparing her feelings or mine?" Amusement sparked in his eyes.

"She's still wrapped. She isn't even clean. I'd never bring her out to embarrass her like that."

Euan cocked one bushy eyebrow upward. "It'd be a good time for me to inspect her, then. You wouldn't be able to get away with any tricks."

This was Euan's way of shifting attention from himself, and Berdhan knew it, but he played along. "If we need her, then I promise I'll bring her to you first, hey? But if you find a flaw, go easy on me." He patted the burly smith on the arm. "I only just woke up."

Euan mumbled something noncommittal, and Berdhan laughed. It was the first time in a long time he'd let himself give in to the urge. No, the first time in too long that he'd even wanted to laugh. Maybe Gyldan had been right about leaving the house.

"I heard about you and the drink last night. You'll want Heida to give you something to clear your head. And you're going to need your sword if what Tomas saw is right."

"Tomas. He's the one who made all that noise?"

Euan nodded solemnly. "He's been making more since then. Go on. Just go on and see."

Berdhan shook his head and plunged deeper into the back room of the inn, following the sound of voices to the group gathered around the hearth.

"You missed the story," Tomas called when he arrived. He stood on a bench in the center of the room, eyes and grin bright as he waved from the crowd. All eyes that had been on him before now turned toward Berdhan, and relief washed across many a face. "I could tell it again, I suppose."

**Sara Dennis**

"And how many times would that be?" Numbers rang out around him as Berdhan settled onto a bench. He was thumped good-naturedly on the shoulder and jostled by those glad to see him.

Heida appeared from somewhere and set a plate of sausages and fresh bread on the table in front of him with a wink. A mug followed, and she murmured, "Drink it all. You're welcome." Louder, she added, "Too early for you to have eaten, and you're going to need your strength. Clean that plate." She was off before he could thank her, even if the words could have carried over the rumble of conversation.

"Berdhan, do you want to hear it? Do you want to know what I saw?" Tomas crouched on the table above him. "You'll want to know what you're up against this time. You won't believe it!"

"All right. Tell me while I'm eating. Those of you who're tired of it, plug your ears."

A chorus of good-natured groans went up from the men around the room, but no one voiced a real complaint.

Tomas sat up straighter and theatrically cleared his throat. "I had the flock out early this morning, letting them have a feed before the dew had gone dry. It was just the usual business, counting heads and that sort of thing. Everything as you'd expect it, until the sun came up.

"Then there he came, dropping down out of nowhere. The biggest blessed dragon I've ever seen." Tomas glanced at Berdhan, eyebrows almost invisible beneath the fringe of his hair. "Not that I've seen more than that one last fall, mind you. But I've seen paintings and heard more stories than that. And I swear to you, Berdhan, none of them were half as big as this one."

Another rumble went up from the men around the room. "What color was he?" Berdhan paused with a bite of sausage on his fork. "What'd he do when he saw you?"

"Bright and shiny silver, brighter than the polish on Euan's swords. And I don't think he saw me. He didn't bother with me anyway. Just swept down over the field. I guess he was looking for something to eat. He went right over my head, Berdhan. The wind from his wings knocked me flat. Down he came, right on top of a couple of ewes, then he's off

## Vegas Magic: Stacking the Deck

again with a sheep in each foot, headed toward the mountains, easy as you please."

Berdhan set the fork down carefully on the edge of his plate. "You're sure he went toward the mountains?" The sausage he'd eaten already cooled into a knot in his stomach; his appetite disappeared.

Tomas nodded, locks of pale hair shagging over his eyes. "As sure as I am that I'm sitting here. Off toward the mountains where that other dragon was."

The dragon that killed Deorward. Berdhan's hands fisted.

"And you're *sure* you saw a dragon and not something else? Not the shadow of a bird running off with your imagination? Not a daydream that seemed too real?"

Tomas reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cloth while he shook his head. "If that was a daydream, I hope I never have another. That sort of daydream leaves things behind."

He thrust his hand at Berdhan with the cloth draped over his fingers. What lay in the center of the bundle could be mistaken for nothing else.

Firelight flickered in the reflection on the curve of an ebon dragon's claw.

Berdhan's stomach lurched, and he swallowed hard to keep breakfast down. "Who made this?"

"Made it?" Tomas frowned and glanced at the other listeners. "No one made it. I told you. A dragon came."

"And left a claw where you could pick it up?" Berdhan leaned away from the thing in the cloth. "A silver dragon, you said. Why is this black?"

Tomas drew his hand back and refolded the cloth. "I don't know the way their colors work. I only know what I saw." He glanced around the room and raised his voice. "I didn't make it up. I wouldn't do that." His gaze met Berdhan's again, darkened by resignation. "You don't believe me."

"Toss it in the fire."

## Sara Dennis

There was stunned silence on all sides. Berdhan shoved to his feet. He snatched the cloth-covered bundle out of Tomas' hand and crossed the room to pitch it into the fire before anyone else could move.

"Hey! My mother gave me that!"

"It's just cloth, boy. It can be replaced." Berdhan watched while the fire peeled fabric away from the claw inside. *Burn*, he willed it. *Catch fire. Prove yourself a fake.* If it would burn, it might be wood. It might be one of many things.

But a dragon's claw, the legends said, could withstand any fire. It could crack stone and never break, spill the blood of a thousand men and never dull.

Someone jostled him, and Berdhan looked over his shoulder to find himself surrounded by a ring of curious men. Tomas fidgeted beside him, waiting.

"It's real," Berdhan announced when the last ashes of the cloth drifted away.

"I told you," Tomas murmured, "but you didn't believe me."

"I didn't *want* to believe you, boy." He turned from the fire and faced the circle of nervous men. "Get your swords, your axes, and anything you need. Kiss your mothers and your wives. We're going to fight a dragon."