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Tender Lightning



Audrey
Godwin

The Magician

Tender Lightning
By
Audrey Godwin

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♣ Carot Gard: The Magician

The mind has exactly the same power as the hands;
not merely to grasp the world, but to change it.

Colin Wilson

The Magician's number is One, the number of creation and individuality; his power is transformation through the use of his will. In his manipulation of the basic elements into all the substances and materials of life, he shows us that from a foundation of the mundane can emerge all that is to come. He can take the Nothing from which the Fool emerged and shape it into Something, making one out of zero. Clearly this is power of a divine sort, and it is true that the Magician is a conduit for a higher power, which commands all of the material world. Since all that we can see in the physical world is the conduit himself, the acts he performs often seem like magic.

The Magician may seem like a strange title for someone who holds real power, because the word 'magician' tends to conjure up pictures of illusionists and escape artists, whose power involves sleight of hand and misdirection. The Magician, however, is similar to the stage illusionist in many ways. He is confident in his skills and his ability to produce the

effects that he wants. His real power comes from sources outside of him, and he is powerless without these sources, just as an illusionist depends on people 'behind the scenes'. Both magician and Magician, however, are as important to their powers as the powers are to them. Without a conduit, power itself is impotent and useless.

With his powers the Magician holds influence over all—theory and practice, logic and emotion, thought and action. Almost every modern depiction of the Magician includes one or more symbols of infinity to denote his limitless power; the snake eating its tail and the lemniscate (horizontal figure-eight) being chief among these. This limitless power comes from sources outside his body yet under his control. And as long as the Magician remembers that this power is his to command, even if he loses all of his worldly power and skill he can never truly be called powerless. For his Will is a power that, while it can be subdued, it can never be destroyed.

Another nearly universal association with the Magician is the red-and-white color scheme. This theme recurs throughout the Tarot and it is very symbolic that it starts with this card and not the Fool. For while the Fool was the potential for positive and negative, the Magician is the union of positive and negative. He creates and he preserves; he destroys and he redeems. His true power is that he not only knows what he must do, but he knows how he must do it, and why he must do it. Then he does it. The Magician reminds us that a wish alone will change nothing, but a decision can change everything. A desire to create is nothing without an ability to create,

and vice-versa.

When the Magician appears, he shows that you are ready to become a conduit for power, like he is. The forces of creation and destruction have always been at your command but now you have the wisdom and confidence needed to use them constructively. Now is the time to act, if you know what is it you want to accomplish and why. Since the powers of transformation are at your command, change your desires into objectives, your thoughts into actions, your goals into achievements. If you have recently met with failure, now you can change that failure into success as easily as the Magician changes fire into water. The only limits you have are those you impose on yourself.

The outward manifestations of such power are as numerous as they are varied, but the most common outer effect of the Magician's influence is unswaying and total confidence. The realization that the world is under your control is what inspires this kind of confidence, and with good reason. So go out into the world, set your mind to whatever goal you are interested in, and then just stand back and watch as everything falls into place under your command. Ultimately, the message of the Magician is a simple one despite his limitless and infinitely complex power. Your life is under your control. Your life is what you want it to be. Your life is what you make it.

Chapter One

I'm late! I'm late! For a very important date! The words from her favorite fairy tale screamed through her head. Damn, she *was* late! So late she didn't even have time to get ready, which is why Dana was using her rear view mirror to apply her lipstick on a dark, vacant road! Her car skidded and rocked while she fluffed her naturally red hair. It was dead midnight now, and she was on her way to the airport to fly out to California.

When her boss had called and told her to get out there on the double, she hadn't wasted a minute. She'd scrambled around like a crazy person, throwing a few essentials into her bag, then run out to her car with her bare face hanging out, and her hair wet from a shower.

Now she looked at it, fluffing it again. Damp like it was, the color looked muted and dark, but when the sun shone on it, she had been told that it looked as if it were on fire. She patted it with approval, and smiled at the reflection in the mirror, just before her eyes shifted back to the road and widened in fright. Looking up into the sky, she saw a sizzling bolt of pink lightning break through the dark clouds and head for her like a flaming arrow. For several wild,

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erratic heartbeats, her feet pumped on the brakes as the column of light came closer and closer.

“Oh, my God!” she shouted when she saw the jagged bolt brutally stab the blacktop in front of her car, swallowing her up in its blinding light. While enclosed in the brilliance, her car fell forward into something...a hole of some sort. She bounced around like a rubber ball, her seat belt the only thing that kept her from being thrown from the car. The last thing she remembered before darkness overcame her was the hiss and sizzle of a dying fire.

Several minutes later she moved slightly, frowning when she felt a throbbing pain travel across her left shoulder and into her head. It settled there, hitting again and again like a fisted hand. Careful not to make any sudden movements, she managed to work herself free of the mangled car.

* * *

“Dammit!” she shouted into the night as she angrily kicked her sporty, low-slung, lipstick red Spyder convertible on its badly twisted fender. “Why me? Why the hell me?” Just then a sudden wave of dizziness hit her, causing her to stagger. Her hands flew out to reach for something and found the smooth metal of her car. She wilted against it, her head continuing to swirl. And then something incredible flashed before her eyes. What was...? My God, cobblestone streets...old-fashioned street lamps... fog...and then it all disappeared with a shake of her

head. When her eyes had cleared, she was looking at the crater that the big flash of lightning had made in the road. The next thing she knew her car had fallen into it, and now that the lightning was gone she was left with spinning wheels, a smoking engine and darkness. The blinding light had vanished as quickly as it had come. Still feeling the aches and pains of a badly bruised body, she made slow, careful movements as she turned and grabbed her bag from out of the car.

No doubt about it, this had been a day from hell, she thought as she quickly pulled her cell phone from a dark corner of her bag. She frantically punched in a familiar number, only to realize she wasn't getting a signal. She shook, pounded and glared at the phone until she realized that the batteries had picked this precise moment to run out of juice. And if that wasn't enough, the excruciating pain in her shoulder had spread and turned into one gigantic headache.

She happened to glance down on the floor of her front seat and saw where her romance novel had landed. She looked at it longingly, wishing she'd had time to finish it. She was looking forward to a quiet evening and had settled down with her book, a Coke and a big bag of potato chips when she got the call from her boss to hop a plane and be there by the next morning to assist in a million dollar advertising campaign. By this time she had come to a really gripping part and hated to quit. Just a few more lines, she had told herself as her eager eyes scanned the written page. Those few lines led to another few lines,

and another, until time was racing by and she was forced to cast it aside. Now she eyed the book critically, glanced around as if she were trying to resist the temptation, but finally lost the battle with what she thought was a sensible argument. Was it fair to leave the heroine hanging like that? Of course not! So like an alcoholic reaching for another drink...an addict reaching for another hit...a starving man reaching for food...she quickly wedged the twisted door open and reached in and grabbed the novel. It'll only take a minute, she told herself as she turned on the dashboard light. Excited, she flipped to the page she had dog-eared, and saw the last lines she had read...

As she walked, the road was dark and lonely, clouds of varying shades of gray gathered in the sky...

The heroine was in a spot! As her eyes moved along the printed page, something inside her snapped, and she looked up. "Jeez, what the hell am I doing? *I'm* the one on a dark and lonely road!" It was a struggle, but she forced herself to close the book, pressing it firmly between her palms. And then she noticed the cover. The heroine looked a lot like her.

Strange that I didn't notice it before, she thought as an icy chill crept down her spine. Finally dismissing the coincidence, she told herself that she had more important things on her mind...like finding a way back to civilization! There was no doubt that she would miss her plane and be fired, but...well, that's the way things had gone today.

She looked down at the book that seemed to be

glued to her hand and felt tempted to open it again. It brought to mind the last date she'd had. He had taken her to a very exclusive French restaurant. About midway through the meal, he excused himself to go to the men's room. Even the exquisite food on her plate couldn't keep her from dragging out her romance novel for a few more scorching lines. She'd read a full fifteen minutes before she realized he had come back and was sitting across the table staring at her. She'd smiled sheepishly while sneaking the novel back into her bag. When she guiltily forked one of the most expensive vegetables she had ever eaten and bit down on it, she gagged. It was stone cold! Needless to say, she never saw him again.

All right, so it was true. She was a voracious reader, and always had a book with her wherever she went, even on a date. She'd been out with so many losers she'd lost count, and was ashamed to say her books had come to her rescue more than once. She looked forward to the day when she would live those sex scenes instead of just reading about them. God, what imaginations some of those authors had! The positions they put their poor characters in...well, she knew they had to be impossible to manage...either that or she wasn't as sexually enlightened as she thought. But who cared? The powerful sex that erupted between these two beautiful people was worth any twist of her imagination. All right, so she had a problem, so what? What was the big deal if she buried her head in a book for a few hours every day? Who cared? She could have worse habits.

After justifying herself in her own mind, she stuffed the book deep in her bag with a clear conscience, and saw her dead, useless cell phone taking up valuable space. Replace the batteries before making this long trip? No, not her! That would be way too organized, and no one could ever accuse her of anything so sensible.

Lifting her head, she looked into the darkness that surrounded her. Anxious to find her way out of this hell, she pushed herself away from her car and began stumbling down the dark road to the nearest phone. *Oh, God*, she thought when she looked down at her new wedgies that must be at least five inches high. Another stupid move! Well, hell, who knew she'd be clomping down a deserted road in heels high enough to send her into orbit? "What else can happen?" she mumbled as she looked up into the sky where dark clouds threatened. "Oh, no," she moaned, slipping a hand up over her eyes to hide the awful sight. "I had to ask."

Just then, through the part in her fingers, she saw something in the distance and quickly lowered her hand. Squinting, she could just make out a looming old structure that reminded her of a page out of her novel. It was too tempting to pass up, so she began a mad scramble through her bag, quickly dragging it out one more time. With a curious look in her eyes she glanced down at the cover, noticing the mansion behind the heroine who was fleeing from it, and then back at the dark old mansion ahead of her. The resemblance was uncanny...as if the novel had come

to life before her eyes.

“Damn, I need rest,” she mumbled, while dropping the novel back into her large bag. “Apparently the witching hour is not the best time to find yourself on a dark road without wheels,” she told herself. “Your imagination can play all kinds of tricks on you.” But since that was precisely where she was, she had no choice but to make her way toward the dark, gothic-type structure that seemed heavily laden with gables, towers and steeples, not to mention climbing ivy and imbedded weather stains. She walked slowly, her ridiculous clicking heels echoing through the trees, making her glance around to see if someone was following her. The wind soughed mysteriously through fluttering leaves that caused the shadows that stretched across the road to move with a peculiar kind of life. Each grotesque limb reminded her of a snake writhing dangerously on the ground. She found herself gingerly stepping over them, and cursed herself for being so stupid.

Just as she stepped up to the wide entrance to the mansion, another sudden wave of dizziness swept over her and she quickly reached for the spikes of the gate to steady herself. And then it happened again. Only a second before her eyes closed, she saw a different scene. The cobblestones were back...old fashioned carriages were tumbling along...and fog...mysterious fog...the kind of fog that would make Jack the Ripper long for a prostitute!

When she opened her eyes again she found herself back on the old road looking at a name written in

extremely ornate letters. Odd name...*Staresini*. She frowned when a dizzying sense of *déjà vu* hit her. Slowly her eyes traveled beyond the gate and saw that the front of the formidable dwelling was made up of large stones of every size and shape, their crevices shadowed with age. "What the hell is an old English mansion doing way out here?" she mumbled, looking closely at the mansion that seemed incredibly unreal...illusory...a shimmering image that seemed to be floating in the fog.

She looked around, seeing nothing for miles but dark trees bending in the wind, and wildly fluttering shrubs. Realizing that this foreboding old mansion was her only chance to get help, she stepped hesitantly past the entrance and onto a wide walkway that was flanked by trees that had leaves which made a strange crackling sound as they quivered in the stiff breeze. She was sure she could hear a faint whisper...as if the trembling trees were talking to each other.

"Enter at your own risk," she translated in a grim mumble, then quickly scooted past them. Just then a corner of the distant sky lit up in heavenly brilliance, drawing her eyes upward to the atmosphere of low churning clouds and grumbling thunder. She had just stepped up on the stone porch when a blast of wind brought with it the pungent odor of rain, and a loud clap of thunder. Within only seconds a deluge began, and she stood trapped under the overhang, looking out at a curtain of rain that almost blinded her to the lawn beyond. From behind her she heard an eerie

squeak and immediately whirled around.

A man stood there, almost as insubstantial as the late night gloom that surrounded him. She could see the steely glitter of his eyes coming from within a shadow that draped his head and shoulders like a shroud. When he spoke, his words were slow, his chilling rasp out of place anywhere except in her nightmares.

“May I help you?” the man said, a scowl creasing his face as his eyes raked her from head to toe.

“I-I’m looking—” Her words faltered as the dark figure suddenly separated from the low-hanging shadow. With a trembling hand pressing her mouth, she quickly muffled a gasp. What little light there was exposed merciless lines of age that were carved into his face. His thin mouth lay in a dry, snake-like twist, his cold glittering eyes were surrounded by a web of wrinkles, giving him a constant scowl. He was dressed all in black, the gray pallor of his face similar to some bloodless creature she’d seen all too often in horror movies. Feeling herself recoil from the sight of this gray, death-like individual, her trembling voice was reduced to little more than a whisper. “—for a phone. The bat—” Her words were stopped by what looked like human teeth marks on his ear that was partially hidden by a fringe of long, greasy gray hair. “—the batteries are dead,” she continued hesitantly, lifting up her cell phone. “I wonder if—” Her eyes shifted and looked past him, the heavy silence and dim lighting inside reminding her of a funeral parlor. “—if I could use the telephone. I had an accident. My

car is in a...well, sort of a...it's difficult to explain. A lightning—" While trying to find the words her eyes happened to drift up to his face which was full of frowning uncertainty, as if he were trying to understand a foreign language. Her faltering words abruptly stopped, and she sighed heavily. "— maybe I should talk to...well, whoever owns this place."

"I'm afraid the master is not receiving at the present time, he is in mourning. Since you do seem to be in something of a fix, maybe I can be of some help." He stepped back. "Would you like to come in?"

The moment she made a hesitant step across the threshold, something happened. She couldn't tell exactly what it was, but a change of some kind seemed to have taken place in the atmosphere. It seemed close, confining...sort of a prim, stiff, genteel kind of feeling. She looked around at the combination of red walls, dark shining wood and red carpet that covered each step of the wide, formal staircase and felt out of place...as if she'd stepped into a different century. Oil lamps were used instead of electric lights, and some strange odor hung in the air, reminding her of her grandmother's old house. By this time the elusive fear that had only nudged her at the door now burst into full bloom, and she turned quickly to leave...but the old man she presumed to be a butler was just closing the door.

She had gotten only a glimpse of the outside, but gone were the rain, the trees, and vacant road, and in their place was a street that resembled a foggy night in old England. The house was surrounded by a tall

spiked fence, there were old lamp posts that cast circles of golden light along the curbs, and she could see a noisy, wobbling carriage as it slowly made its way along a wet cobblestone street.

My God, what's going on? she asked herself as she lunged for the door and tried to open it. When it wouldn't budge, she turned to the butler. "The door...it seems to be stuck," she said. "I think I..."

The man looked at her with worried eyes. "Are you all right?"

She nodded slightly, but she knew she wasn't all right at all. She couldn't think, her mind was muddled, confused. Turning away from the door slowly, she looked up at the strange décor that told her she had somehow landed in a different century. The room had a kind of hellish elegance...so many leaping flames from so many fireplaces. Cold spots... heat...God-awful heat. Hadn't these people heard of central heat and air? Electric lights? All at once the scene before her began to undulate, and her eyes closed. With a suppressed moan, she pressed her hand against her head, trying to fight the dizziness that was causing the garish room to become a spinning, flame-ridden cave. Reaching out for something to hold on to, she shook her head, her mind full of black snakes that coiled and stretched until they obliterated reality, causing her weak body to crumple to the floor.

* * *

"Oh, my word," the butler said, looking down at her as if he didn't quite know what to do. Finally, with desperation nipping at his heels, he shouted toward the back of the mansion for help. A somber looking creature in a gray dress straggled in, her face turning to shock when she saw the woman on the floor.

"Wha' 'appn'd, guv'nor?"

"The poor woman was in an accident from what she said, and passed out. I should think that would be apparent," he grumbled. "Help me get her to the couch." They struggled, getting her into the study, then onto the couch. "Put a wet cloth on her head. I'll summon the master."

* * *

From within the dim regions of a kingdom called The Isle of Tranquility, a man stood before a crowned figure seated upon a throne. The Mighty One was clothed in gold and purple raiment, and the crown on his head was rich in precious metals and jewels. The glittering tunic was arranged in careful folds, and a light shown down from above his head forming a halo. The vast, columned hall was round, with twelve arched doors leading into it, each entrance named after one of the disciples. It was called The City of Olympus.

"You have done well, my son. Without you there, I'm afraid the battle would not have been won."

"I am glad I could be of service, sire."

A frown appeared on the bearded man's face.

"Franz, I was terribly sorry to hear of your dear mother's death. Out of respect for you, I will try not call on you again until your mourning period is over."

"Thank you, sire."

At that precise moment, The Pink Child walked in. "Sire, I have a message for The Magician."

"You have my permission to give it to him."

"Thank you, sire," she said with slight bow, then turned and handed the scroll to Franz.

The Mighty One nodded to The Pink Child, and said, "You have done well. You may take your leave now, and go to The Land of Play."

"Yes, sire!" she said with a big smile.

She turned quickly, and just as she was about to rush off, The Mighty One cautioned, "Go gently...no running."

Her smile was wide as she looked at him adoringly. "Yes, thank you, sire."

Franz was about to unroll the scroll when The Mighty One said, "Don't open it yet, Franz." With a gentle rustling of his tunic, he rose from his throne. "I would have you walk with me, we need to talk."

"Is something troubling you, Sire? Have I..."

"No, my son, you have done nothing. And yes, something is troubling me." He was deep in thought as he led Franz through a wide arch that led to a beautifully manicured garden. From there they strolled down many paths in companionable silence until they came to The Cathedral of the Rose, the ruins of a majestic structure that was blessed by God

with blood-red roses, thought to actually contain the blood of Christ. The shredded walls were covered with these roses, forming a kind of arbor in which The Sealed Books were kept.

Franz' eyes scanned the Cathedral as if he'd never seen it before. "Why did you bring me here?"

"In truth, I'm not sure...and yet..." He looked over at Franz. "Franz, you are very special to me. Not only because of your extraordinary powers, but because I have grown very fond of you. I'm aware of how you came to be one of us, but was hoping in spite of it you might eventually come to feel at home here." He gave Franz a long and reflective look, then lowered his head sadly. "But I know it isn't what you want, and I can't continue to ask you to be loyal to a destiny you had forced upon you."

"Mighty One, I..."

"No need to say anything, Franz. I realize how torn you are between these two worlds. Ties, no matter how old, are hard to break, I imagine." He looked out at the sea of blood-red roses, and after a few moments of silence, he continued speaking. "Because of a certain state of affairs that I am not at liberty to divulge, I find I shall be able to reward you." He looked down, and indicated toward the scroll. "You have been summoned to your household. Being all-knowing, I am aware of what awaits you there. I could take you into the Cathedral and show you what is written in The Book of Fates, assuring the outcome, but I don't think I will. Although I am tempted, I cannot play favoritism, Franz. What awaits you in

your human domicile will be very traumatic for you, but you must prove to me that you deserve the reward I have chosen for you." Putting his hands on Franz' shoulder and squeezing, he said with a stab of emotion, "My son, it would hurt me deeply to see the glowing words of triumph that I know are written there, changed to those of defeat."

"Mighty One, I know it is not your intent, but you are planting fear in my heart."

"No, do not be fearful, my son. But know this. I will be at The Windows of the World watching, and when that moment comes that tells me what I need to know, you will get your reward...or with a wave of my scepter, be doomed to rule The Card for all eternity."

"But that would mean..."

"Yes...that all ties to the physical world would be broken, with no hope of returning."

"But why has this happened?"

"The Fates have decreed it. In doing so they are locking the door between our worlds for all time. When that happens, you will find yourself on one side, or the other. I can only hope that it will be the side that will bring you the most happiness."

With deep concern on his face, and slow, uncertain movements, Franz unrolled the scroll. In only a few thrashing heartbeats he looked up at the Mighty One and said, "You are right, sire, I have been summoned to my household."

"You may go, but remember what I told you, and act accordingly."

Without speaking, Franz stepped back, bowed low, then turned. The Mighty One watched as the impressive figure of The Magician walked down the lane, getting lost in The Mists of Time. When Franz came to The Point of Departure, he descended a long staircase that appeared to go nowhere, and disappeared into an atmosphere of clouds and mist.

* * *

The devoted butler stood waiting, his eyes trained upon a painting that hung over the fireplace. When he saw a glittering mist exude from it, he straightened himself and stood at attention until the faint glow formed and took on substance.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you," the butler whispered, "but I'm afraid something very odd has happened."

"It's all right, Thorn. I know it must be important, since you are not a man easily..."

While Franz was speaking, Thorn moved from his master's line of vision, and watched his reaction.

Franz' eyes widened, and he gasped audibly when he saw a living fantasy...a woman who must have stepped right out of his dreams lying as still as death on his couch. Her pale skin gave her an ethereal glow, and her long glossy, curling lashes caught the light, and glittered like tiny diamonds as they swept down across her high cheekbones. She was very curvy, with long fluid lines that begged to be touched. She had a wealth of long hair that gleamed with rich, red

highlights spread out seductively over the pillows instead of being confined to a bun. He frowned slightly at her scandalous clothing. A woman wearing pants...like a man. An indecent slip of a blouse that didn't even have enough material to cover her midriff. And her shoes...how did she walk in them?

"Who is she?" he whispered, almost in awe of the lovely creature.

"There was hardly time, sir. She simply came in...and collapsed."

"Get a room ready," he commanded.

"Yes, sir," the butler said, then turned to the maid. "A room, Matilda. Immediately."

"Sir," the woman responded hesitantly, "I know it ain't my place and all, but... well, do'ya think it's wise to move her?"

Thorn turned to the impertinent maid. "She only fell to the floor from a standing position. It isn't as if she fell from any great heights."

The maid glowered at him. "She was in an accident. Something could be broken. Poor thing probably needs a doctor."

"She's right," Franz said. "She might be seriously hurt."

Sticking her nose high in the air, the maid looked at the older man triumphantly.

"A room," he reminded her. "We can't keep her on this bloody couch forever. Get a room ready!"

With a quick tilt of her head, and a muttering under her breath, the maid left.

"Dreadful night to be out," the butler offered when

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he saw his master lower himself slowly to gently sit on the edge of the couch. Shaking his head, he followed Matilda to make sure she would warm the bed for the injured woman.

* * *

Franz hesitated at first, his hand hovering in the air above her. She had a slim, wild beauty that was almost mesmerizing, and his palms tingled at the thought of touching her. Lowering his hand slowly, he stroked her lightly at first, the feel of her firm young body causing something to happen inside him. A quickening of his senses below the belt. Try as he might he couldn't keep his wayward cock from stiffening...a fire from gathering between his legs. Still, his hands surprisingly steady, continued to move along her beautifully shaped limbs. His straying eyes anchored on her full, lush lips and he could see his own softly covering them, savoring their taste. The thought caused a hot ache to fill his throat.

He found himself caressing her like a lover, his fingers slow, his wandering eyes feasting on the hollow of her neck as it filled with soft shadows. As his hands continued to move, his heart hammered in his chest. Sharp, almost biting delight filled him when his thumb brushed her breast, and lingered. His senses reeled drunkenly, setting his body aflame.

As his eyes traveled downward, his breath caught at the sight of the juncture of her thighs. He could feel the heat raging inside him, leaping flames that burst

from the furnace of his own body. The tide rose, and swelled inside him, buffeting his mind, drugging his senses. Never before had he been so aware of a woman beneath his fingertips. He could feel himself becoming utterly captivated by her. Each place his hands touched caused her to writhe and moan while giving out exclamations of delight. My God, he had found a wild creature on his doorstep...a wanton in this world of prim maidens, a woman with a beauty beyond anything he had ever seen, or could even imagine. He could tell she was passionate, and liked to be fondled. The idea of having such a willing woman made the fire of desire leap wildly in his groin.

And then his hungry eyes lowered to the soft, white flesh that stretched between her breasts and her pants. The sight of it made him so hot he became increasingly restless. To touch her...to feel...no, he dare not! He couldn't! A man of his stature? But then, with a quick darting of his eyes to make sure he wasn't being observed, his hand moved brazenly toward the exposed area. It crept slowly until at last his fingers touched her. He sighed and closed his eyes at the smooth, velvety feel of her skin. But it wasn't enough! With a cloudy, rapt look in his eyes, his hand moved, his fingers slipping beneath the edge of her pants until he felt her navel and the soft mound of her abdomen. He knew what lay just beyond, but couldn't get to it without undoing her pants.

He looked up at her. What if she woke and found him fondling her? A sinful rash of heat prickled his

neck, slowly moving him forward, his tongue reaching out, tasting, savoring her soft, silky skin. A deep, exotic fragrance rose into his nostrils, the heady scent causing his mouth to open and suckle as it moved boldly upward toward her breasts. When at last his hot, scorching tongue had just barely touched a nipple, he heard a sound. Feeling a jolt of guilt, he lifted himself quickly, wiping at the beads of sweat on his forehead, and pulling at his collar where the heat continued to gather around his neck.

God, what had made him do it? He wasn't a man ruled by his passions. Never had he allowed himself to become so captivated as he was with this woman. With these impure thoughts going through his mind, his quick eyes angled toward his butler who had just walked in. He had never seen anyone that was less welcome in his sight. He wanted him somewhere else, not watching his wandering hands caress her thighs, her arms, her shoulders. He wanted to be alone to touch her breasts, feel their firmness, and see the shiver of delight that he was certain would pass through her. God help him, he wanted to lay his body on top of hers and feel her move beneath him. His eyes closed in rapture when her clean, musky aromatic scent wafted up from her, making him want to devour her where she lay, awake or not! It was torture, but he forced himself to draw his tingling hands away from the young, supple body.

"Apparently there are no bones broken," he finally said, his strange, foreign accent soft and smooth. He slowly rose from her side and approached the older

man who discreetly waited in the background. "What happened?"

"I think she was trying to tell me that she had some sort of difficulty with her—" The butler hesitated. He remembered her saying *car*, which he figured was some kind of young persons deviation of *carriage*, so he improvised. "—her carriage. An accident of some sort, I believe. To be honest, sir, she was quite disoriented... her words strange. I couldn't quite make sense of what she was saying." The butler touched his chin with his fingers as if in thought. "It seems that she mentioned *lightning*, or some such thing."

"Lightning?" Franz repeated, a chill creeping up his spine. He remembered the battle in which he had assisted. It had been between The City of Olympus and The Dark Region. Had a bolt gone awry?

"Yes sir. But not to worry. I'm sure she'll be fine."

"Were there any... uh, servants with her? A chaperone, perhaps?"

"She was quite alone, sir."

"Strange," Franz said as he eyed her curiously. "Did she present a calling card?"

"No sir," the butler said quickly. "A rather unique young woman, to say the least. She wanted to use—" Again the butler hesitated. "—the *tele*, or something like that. I didn't have a chance to find out what she meant."

"Well, judging from her appearance and her language, she must be from somewhere else. America, perhaps. The parts that are settled seem to be filled with barbarians. I've heard all kinds of

stories. I'm sure you have as well."

"Yes, sir."

"In any event, she will have to stay until she is stronger. I'll expect you to see that she is comfortable, and report to me of her condition as you see fit." Just then he saw the dead cell phone lying on the floor, and picked it up. After examining the strange looking object he handed it to the hovering butler, then lowered his voice to a guarded tone, "I'm sure I don't have to remind you that I cannot be disturbed. Think up a plausible excuse for my absence, see that her carriage is repaired, then send her on her way."

"I've already informed her that the house is in mourning, sir. I'm sure that under the circumstances she won't expect too much activity."

"I'm afraid this puts something of a strain on you," Franz said. "I must apologize for that."

"Apologize, sir?"

"Yes. It's possible some mishap of my magick might have brought her here. I can't imagine what might have happened. It will be difficult on you having someone in the house that isn't..."

"Please, sir," the butler said, with a relaxed smile. "Put your fears to rest. Her stay will be short. Nothing to it, really. I'll manage quite capably."

"Good man," he said.

They turned to look at her when they heard a soft moan.

"She's waking up," the butler said in a whisper.

"Try to explain my absence as best you can. Naturally, I don't wish to be rude, but... well, I must

attend to my duties as best I can. A guest at this time is most inconvenient."

"Just leave it to me, sir. I'll handle everything."

Visibly relieved, Franz laid his hand favorably on the older man's shoulder, and spoke sincerely. "You're a good man, Thorn, I don't know what I would do without you."

A thin smile graced the butler's face. "We do our best, sir."

Without the sound of scuffling footsteps, or swishing movements, Franz disappeared into the darkness, seen only seconds later on the landing. Standing perfectly still, he detected her scent on his hands, reminding him she was in the house. He brought his hands upward and sniffed. The scent was glorious, reminding him of musk and flowers. It wasn't a scent he was familiar with, but one that he enjoyed tremendously. It reminded him that he'd been without a woman far too long. Perhaps that was why he'd had such a strong reaction to this one. Was she really as wildly beautiful as he'd imagined, or was he simply so hungry that anything would look good to him? Had her moans ripped deeply into his belly causing him to begin to harden, or had he only imagined it? Was she an answer to a prayer, or had a demon invaded his kingdom? Who was she, and where had she come from? A long way, perhaps since she was a creature with long, flowing hair, and a body blatantly revealed instead of being hidden under hoops and skirts. His hands still tingled from the sensuous touch of her curves, lush curves that

Gender Lightning

were outlined scandalously beneath a thin material that would make a man long for a candlelit room, a bed... and her!

He knew he shouldn't, but his large hand lowered to the balustrade, and he turned slowly toward the study. Yes, he could still see her lying there. Yes, she was beautiful. It was not his imagination. Her hair was as red as he'd remembered, her skin still glowed like porcelain in the dim light, her body round and firm, his fingers still tingled from each caress. He wanted to lean over her and feel her warm, sensuous breasts press against his chest. He wanted... Suddenly she moved and he quickly stepped back into a shadow.

* * *

In the velvety blackness of her void she felt a presence outside herself. A presence that was sensual and warm, giving off a fragrance that was very male, and very feral. Her body instantly reacted to it, her back arching, and her nipples almost painfully taut. She tingled at the clean spicy odor that stole over her like a caress. His touch had soothed her, his quiet whispering accent comforted her. She listened for the drum of his voice that made her feel a passion that inched through her veins.

When the moment of awareness came to her, she lunged forward, the wet cloth falling from her head. "Where am I?"

"You're in the home of Franz Staresini," the stiff

butler offered, coming forward from his position by the door. "From what I understand, you were in an accident." When she made no response, he continued. "Your carriage? Lightning?"

"My what?" she murmured, grabbing her head and frowning. Had he said carriage, or...

"By the way, you presented no calling card."

"Calling card? What the hell is a calling card?"

The butler's brows raised when he heard the curse word fall easily from the woman's mouth. "Well—" he began, his words uncertain as he tried to explain. "—it is customary to present a calling card upon arrival to someone's home, a manner of identifying who you are, of course."

She frowned. What the hell was he talking about? Carriages? Calling Cards? "My name is Dana. Dana Perrin."

"Well, mad—" The man hesitated. "—by the way, you arrived with no chaperone, or servants. Are you a married lady? Is there a *Mr. Perrin* somewhere?"

Chaperone...servants. This was getting weirder by the minute. "No, I'm not married."

His brows raised in speculation, then he simply said, "Very good." With a clap of his hands, a thin woman in a black dress appeared at the door. "Bring tea," he said, then looked at the young woman who continued to hold her head. "And a headache powder, I would imagine."

"Please," Dana managed around the pain. "That's really not necessary."

"I'm afraid it is. The master would never forgive

me if I allowed someone to come into his home without extending the proper courtesies.”

“The master?” She replied while looking down at her snug jeans, ballerina half-sweater and the straps of her wedgies. Reaching upward to smooth her wild red hair, she gave a groan at the pounding pain in her head.

Watching her slow movements and pale face, a frown creased Thorn’s forehead. “Miss, after you’ve taken your tea, I think you need to rest.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fi...” Just then something caught her eye and she quickly turned her head toward a splash of vivid colors. There on the wall, above the fireplace was an extraordinary painting of The Magician Tarot Card. The Magician himself was a husky, tall, and extremely handsome man standing against a black sky full of lightning bolts.

Lightning! Pink lightning!

Mesmerized by the painting, she leaned forward and stared intently at his face. Who was he and why did he seem so familiar? She’d seen him somewhere...knew him from somewhere. And then the sensations she had experienced just before she woke came back to her. The fragrance of a virile male with a deep velvety sound to his voice and a spicy woodsy fragrance wafting around him. She looked at the butler. “Someone was in here earlier. I vaguely recall a man wearing spicy cologne. Who was that?”

“Only the master, Miss. He was here making sure you were all right.”

She looked back up at the painting. “Is that him?”

Thorn followed her eyes. "Yes, as a matter of fact."

She knew him, but how could she? He wasn't anyone she'd ever met, but still, he seemed familiar. At a party perhaps, or in her dreams? With her eyes still on him, she sat up, then rose slowly from the couch. Each step took her closer to the huge canvas of vivid oils, her eyes raking over his painted form. His hair lay in long dark waves to his shoulders, his eyebrows deeply arched, and his lips curved sensuously, revealing their lushness in soft hills and valleys. He had long sideburns, and wore one golden earring in his left ear that glinted in the light cleverly created by the artist. His apparel was strange. A costume, maybe. It consisted of a red cape that was blowing in the wind. Beneath it he wore a golden skin-tight body stocking with red accents. His boots were short, ankle-top, and out of them rose muscled legs that took her breath away. With his hands on his hips, he looked like some kind of super hero about to save the world. On his handsome face just below the edge of his right eye was a small, star-shaped birthmark. It accentuated his flashing blue eyes; beautifully almond-shaped and dangerously hypnotic. Beneath the painting was a gold strip with the words *The Magician* inscribed on it.

The words brought on a strange foreboding she couldn't seem to shake. And then she felt the old man approach her from behind.

As they both gazed upward toward the painting, the old man spoke softly, a certain awe in his voice. "He calls himself a magician, but he is so much more

than that—a *mystic*, if you will. There is nothing he cannot do, his extraordinary fame has spread to other worlds, other spheres.”

“Worlds and spheres?” Dana repeated, cutting her eyes back to Thorn. “Forget the tea, I think I’ll have a little of what you’ve been drinking.”

Her strange reply jarred Thorn out of his reverie, and his shifting eyes cut toward her guiltily. “Did I say...?” He chuckled nervously. “Oh, Miss, you musn’t pay any attention to the ramblings of an old man with a vivid imagination.”

“Pretty powerful, huh?” Dana said, turning back to the painting. “Mystic,” she repeated thoughtfully. “There is something vaguely familiar...”

“You’ve heard of him then?”

“Not in the way you mean, but yes, I think I have.” As she stared, her next words were soft, sounding almost awe-struck. “There’s a certain mystery in his eyes. They’re almost fathomless. Do you see it? He must be very powerful.”

“Yes, but unfortunately there’s a price to pay.”

“A price?” she repeated, turning to the old man. “What do you mean?”

“His gift has made him scandalously rich, as you can see by all that surrounds him, but he’s a tortured soul, I’m afraid. He only comes out at night and frequently walks the cliffs until he exorcises his demons.

She looked into the butler’s dark, mysterious eyes. “Only at night? You mean like a vampire?”

“Vampires are for the addle-brained, Miss. What

he is goes much deeper than that. Let me warn you not to expect much socializing while you're here. His duties are varied and very demanding, and will take most of his time. At other times he will be keeping to himself since, as I said earlier, he is in mourning."

"What exactly is his work?"

Proud to the core, the butler couldn't resist bragging just a little as he elegantly straightened his cuffs. "Let's just say he attends the gods. They use him in battle, to perform miracles."

"You're kidding!"

"Kidding?" the butler said, raising his eyebrows at the unfamiliar term.

She chuckled. "You expect me to believe..."

"Miss Perrin," the huffy butler said, "The master could easily call lightning down from the heavens."

Lightning!

"Pink lightning?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh nothing, never mind," she said as she looked back up at the painting. Even though he did look impressive as he stood surrounded by a sky full of lightning, she didn't believe a word the bragging butler said. His master was only a magician in a costume that did tricks to amaze his audience, nothing more. The fact that the butler was a proud, peacock of a man that refused to allow anyone to think his master was anything but the very best at what he did was only loyalty at work. After all, a magician was not a miracle worker, and if she let him go on bragging he would probably have him walking

on water. Just then his low, ominous voice reached her ears as he continued with his ridiculous dialogue.

"Power such as his frightens people, I'm afraid," the man whispered. "As a result, he hasn't many friends."

"But why? Is he dangerous?"

"Only to himself," he said, his voice becoming deep and ominous. "No mortal man was ever meant to have such power."

Hearing the unease in Thorn's voice, Dana peered at him closely. The look in his eyes as he focused on the painting sent a chill slowly crawling up her spine. She could almost be convinced the old man was telling the truth. His eyes were oddly morbid, as if they could remember each and every unthinkable marvel they had witnessed.

Finally shaking himself free from his thoughts, the old man's face became etched with concern. "You're still shaky, Miss, perhaps you'd like to lie down."

"No, no, I'm fine. Tell me, who just died?"

"Died? Oh, yes. His dear mother just passed." The man's eyes held sadness. "Terrible tragedy."

"Tragedy? What happened?"

Looking around to see if anyone was listening, he leaned close to her. "Drank poison."

"Oh, my God!" When?"

Very recently. In fact, her grave that sits on the small rise in the family graveyard is still fresh. Only days before she was found si—"

"—sitting at the dining room table," Dana finished for him, then continued. "She was darkly beautiful,

her delicate arm outstretched. The hand that held the glass was lying limply, the glass tilted over, the wine glowing as it spread across the table. Her blood-red nails matched the deep red of her lips. The rich burgundy liquid made a long, winding trail until it reached the edge, then dripped like blood to the floor.”

She could see the words in her mind, written down somewhere. Dana shook her head, but the image of the darkly beautiful woman with her arm outstretched wouldn't leave her mind. She could see the woman's pulse slowly pumping, almost feel it, the thick red blood swirling and flowing, and then, right before her eyes...

...it stopped!

Dana gave a start, then gasped, a death-like chill crawling up her spine. The wine, it must have been... Oh, God, the woman had drunk poisoned wine!

Where had this vision of death come from? She didn't know the woman, had never met her, yet she knew every nuance of the scene. The long table, the woman's dark red nails as she held the glass, the glow of the burgundy wine as it spilled across the dark wood grain. She could even hear the heavy strike of the glass against the table! Suddenly she felt close to the woman, as if she'd known her. And then...oh, God! Was it her imagination, or did she smell the pungent odor of wet grave dirt? And the slightest stab of pain at the woman's tragic death?

“That describes the scene perfectly.” The butler scowled at her. “How did you know? How *could*

you...?"

"She must have been an actress," Dana whispered, ignoring his unfinished question.

"Why do you say that?"

"The drama. Only an actress, or someone in show business would think up such a dramatic scene."

"As a matter of fact she was in a couple of plays... only in small parts, of course. Her professional name was simply...Sarafina. Very elegant, don't you think? Like her son, she had great talent. The whole family, in fact, is talented beyond anything that can be imagined." The old man's eyes lifted upward into the rafters, his voice taking an ominous tone. "She walks these halls, you know. At night between midnight and three you can see her floating along the staircase, or playing the grand piano in the music room." His eyes became distant. "The music isn't...well, it resonates as if it's coming all the way from..." He stopped suddenly, realizing he had forgotten himself again.

"Please go on," Dana said, looking at him intently, wondering if he was going to say heaven or hell!

"Please forgive me," he said as his lids lowered, giving her a strange angled look. "You can't go out again tonight. I'll check on your room while you have your tea."

"Oh, no, I couldn't put you out."

"It's no trouble." He departed with a secret smile that chilled Dana right down to her toes. He had walked only a few feet away when he stopped, turned, and with all the grace and culture his position

required, said, "By the way, you may call me Thorn."

Why did the name send an eerie echo around the room?

Later, with the edge of a teacup poised at her mouth, she felt surrounded by a heavy presence that seemed to permeate the study. It was him. He was all over the place. The smells were his—tobacco, port, spicy men's cologne, even the odor of books bound in expensive leather. It was truly a man's room. *His room*, she thought as she glanced up at the hypnotic painting. And then, as if formed by the masculine scents that tickled her nose, he appeared on the landing. Her eyes shifted slightly and she saw him standing there, his hands fisted and resting on his hips, his muscled legs outstretched. Their eyes met, his mesmerizing gaze sending out sparks of blue fire through the dim, murky shadows. He was dressed in a red pirate shirt, the front gaping open almost down to his waist. His black trousers were skin tight, and he wore knee-high boots. The beauty of his form took her breath away, and she felt herself held captive by the burning intensity of his gaze. But all too soon, he was gone.

She simply stared, bewildered. Had he really been there only seconds before, or were her eyes playing tricks on her? Had she really seen him, only to have him mist away into thin air? And then as if to pull her out of her dream state, Thorn, in his somber black attire, appeared in her line of vision, obstructing her view of the darkened landing.

With a slight bow he said, "The master has kindly

extended an invitation for you to stay as long as needed. He feels a few days to rest up will—”

His voice thinned as her mind began to whirl with her own thoughts. Where did the elusive magician go? She stretched her neck to see around Thorn, but the landing was dark and vacant. Had he actually...no...no, it hadn't happened. People, not even magicians misted away while you were looking at them.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Huh? She said, her attention being drawn back to Thorn.

“I say... are you comfortable?”

She looked down at the tea service, and said, “Oh, yes. The tea is delicious.” She looked up at him with a questioning frown. “Were you saying something about my car?”

“I simply stated that your *carriage* would be brought back to the mansion where it can be repaired first thing in the morning. I hope this meets with your approval.”

My Carriage? Well, la-ti-da, she thought. Nothing as mundane as *car*, or *automobile*, but *carriage*. Oh, well. It had been her experience that the English had their own language, and “carriage” instead of car was just one example. While these thoughts danced in her head, she smiled weakly. “Yes, thank you,” she muttered, then continued. “Thorn,” she said with a slight frown. “I thought I saw your master.” She pointed past him toward the landing.

He turned briefly to look in the direction of her

pointing finger. “No, Miss...you didn’t see anything.”

Chapter Two

In the days that followed, Dana learned much about her benefactor. He never came down for meals, and she never saw him except as part of some fleeting shadow. And at night, as Thorn had said, the piano played. Many times she'd left her bed to go to the music room as she did that night, but as soon as she opened the door, the music stopped abruptly, and there was nothing but eerie, ghostly silence. The piano stood vacant, the French Doors open and a raw night wind lifting the sheer white curtains in the gusting breeze.

She knew someone had fled into the night only a moment before, but who? Since she didn't believe in ghosts, she stood at the gaping door looking out at the restless sea, expecting to see someone, possibly the elusive magician exorcising his demons. Had he been the one at the piano, playing? Was he out there now, avoiding her as usual? Walking, maybe running along the precipice to get away from her? She turned quickly and ran back to her room. He'd grown to be such an enigma to her. Why did he keep to himself? Why didn't he want to be seen? Her curiosity was at its peak, and she couldn't quit thinking about him. About how it would be to have him hold her... to feel

his kiss upon her lips, his hot breath on her neck. Maybe she'd never know. He was like a mist that couldn't be caught, a puff of wind you couldn't contain, a drop of rain that dried up when the sun came out. With a sob she fell facedown on her bed, her fears and uncertainty growing until at last she felt herself being gently lifted into The Land of Erotic Dreams.

She stood surrounded by a blue heaven with white mist swirling about her. White crenellated columns soared upward into an open heaven, garden walls that bowed and curved surrounded unbelievable beauty beyond ornate arches. There were staircases that climbed high into the misty atmosphere, and rooms that floated, mirrors that reflected eternity, and endless corridors that went on forever.

And then she saw The Magician, who slowly appeared from out of the mist. He walked like a prowling cat as he crept toward her, his movements slow and dramatic. She was filled with a myriad of voices and feelings she knew came from him. Both of them writhing on a bed of satin, deep probing kisses, the erotic sensation of oil on her skin, his hands, lips and tongue caressing her like leaping flames. She realized quickly that there was no need for words. A transfer of thoughts was possible. She closed her eyes as erotic images of tangled sheets, flailing limbs, writhing bodies and thrusting hips filled her mind. Yes, only sensation ruled his world. Among all the hot, scorching, forbidden thoughts she had, he told her that this was his domicile in another world. She

was immediately reminded of something Thorn had said to her, and the words rang inside her head...

...his extraordinary fame has spread to other worlds, other spheres...

But the words were forgotten as quick as they came, when she felt a gentle grasp of his hand on hers, pulling her toward him until she landed in his arms, her eyes and her senses quickly immersed in his.

A deep, sultry heat reflected in his eyes, and without saying a word, he leaned her backward, his lips only inches from hers, their hot breath mingling. She thrilled at the feel of his muscled body, and drank in his nearness. She could feel the kiss of the mist as he swept her up in his arms and gently carried her to a bed with white, sparkling satin sheets, and lay her down.

Dana felt herself becoming so very aroused, fear turning to fire in her stomach. As each piece of their clothing vanished, he lay down beside her, his mouth and his hands playing her body like an instrument. The thrill of his touch made her sizzle with a host of scorching electric vibrations she'd never felt before. As his face loomed nearer, why did she feel the world would end if she never felt his lips upon hers? Closer they came until they touched slightly, pressing, moving, teasing, until she opened to him, his heat melting away every inhibition she had ever had.

When his hands at last found her breasts, she let out a soft growling moan, and arched upward, feeling the hardness of his muscled chest. She felt such an

intense need for him to know her, to love her, to claim her with his mouth, hands and body. She couldn't remember when she'd felt this wild, this needful. She wanted him to sink into her, to thrust so deeply, bringing with him a glorious delight of pleasure she'd never known. Suddenly his breath became heavy and passionate. He buried his mouth in the soft curve of her neck, his fingers digging into the soft cloud of her hair, his mouth and tongue ravishing her until she felt ready to explode. Wanting more, he moved downward until he began to suckle her breasts. She arched her back like the animal she had become when his mouth covered her nipple, his tongue stroking, caressing and drawing on each one. She could feel his arousal becoming so hard it was almost brutal against her.

And then at a silent command...while he continued to suckle her like a starving man, he told her to lift her legs. Willingly she opened for him, and she felt him settle himself between her thighs. A blast of heat, and raging desire consumed her when his arousal touched her cleft, gently nudging her, causing an explosion of heat to engulf her. Wanting more, she began to buck wildly against him until he reached down and cupped her buttocks with his hands and lifted her, opening her even wider.

He crushed himself against her stomach, and began to rock, his arousal growing so large she had to touch it. Because he knew what she was thinking, he lifted himself so her hand could get between them. She could hear him urging her on, and grasped him

finally, so large she could hardly get her hand around it. And then suddenly she had an urge to take him in her mouth.

Again, understanding her desires, he turned on his back, and she lay over him, her mouth already opening to the large arousal that stood stiff before her. Drawn to it like a magnet, she gave him a gentle lick at first, then a suckle. Growing more bold, she opened her mouth, and with a tongue that licked and drew, she covered him, and began to suckle. He moaned, digging his fingers into her hair while his hips began to thrust.

When she knew he was within seconds of a climax, he jerked her upwards. She cried out when she felt his hot breath on her ear, and his heavy body over hers. With her thighs once more cradling him, her lids flew open when he suddenly thrust himself inside her filling her so full that she cried out. She became dizzy with desire when he began to plunge over and over and over again. She had the urge to lift her legs higher, allowing him to plunge deeper, riding her with wild, untamed abandon that thrilled her until she was drowning in a joyous burst of ecstasy. She clung to him, thrashed beneath him, and moaned his name over, and over, and over again...

Franz...

Franz...

Franz...

Until her eyes opened to darkness, and she found that the hot, exciting swirl of an orgasm didn't come from a dark, handsome magician, it came from the

hand she found between her legs.

Oh, God! What was happening to her? She knew she'd been there. She could describe the setting, his words in thought that he had said to her. It was real! *He* was real! She knew it! But there was no one she could go to... no way she could prove it.

The enigma grew.

Day after day she lived with eyes that glowed in the dark, shifting shadows, distant, obscure forms with shuffling feet. But at night, from the window of her room, she continued to see his dark form walking along the edge of the precipice, a fleeting figure that seemed as light as air. Then came the night that she dared follow him. When she knew he was coming in the back door of the mansion, she quickly found a spot, and waited. The shadows of the old house surrounded her like living beings as she watched breathlessly from a shadowy perch at the top of the stairs. The air was close, the shadows swaying as the candles undulated in a soft breeze. The hush was so great around her that she could hear the nervous heaving of her own breath as she continued to wait.

And then a rustling of feet and a creaking of boards told her that he was climbing the long staircase. Her heart pounded, her pulses thrummed as he stealthily came to the last step, then crept along the darkened hallway passing within inches of her. Did he know she was there? Could he feel her presence as she could feel his? Staying close to the walls, she followed him, feeling a chill when the yellow glow from the undulating lights caused his moving silhouette to

climb the towering walls, creating a shadow of monstrous proportions.

As he moved further ahead, she slipped from one place to another, trying to keep her eyes on him. What made the shadows shift, the space between them to stretch before her eyes? Trying to keep her eyes on him, she ran, a darting of bare feet peeking from beneath her robe, but it was no use. She couldn't keep up. She saw only flashes of him before he disappeared behind a door, or around a corner. And then she stood in shock when he finally misted into a million tiny sparkling lights. She'd begun to wonder, was he a man or a ghost?

While following sounds or movement she thought were his, she found herself in a remote area of the mansion, confused by all the winding corridors. Musty carpet smells tickled her nose, long neglected portraits seemed to emit the pungent odor of grease and paint causing her to imagine the colors melting and dripping as the eyes of dead ancestors bore down upon her. Old oil lamps nestled in dark corners or down a long expanse of wall, the flames flickering and sputtering as they danced mysteriously to some distant music. The smell of hot oil, beeswax, and dust permeated the darkness, lending the house an old world look and feel. She couldn't shake the impression that she was caught in some kind of time warp with an elusive magician who chose to surround himself in an atmosphere of mystery.

Now, as she stood in the middle of a corridor that branched off in so many directions it made her dizzy,

she looked around and saw a room that seemed to beckon to her. She opened the door to find it full of tricks, ghastly masks, even a headless woman that lay in a casket. The horrible sight had her gasping in terror. While backing away in fear, she stumbled, bumping into several pieces of furniture to get out. In her haste she nudged a tall bookcase, only to have the head tumble out of a hatbox. When she saw it hurtling toward her, horror gripped her, and a bloodcurdling scream came bursting from her throat. While making a desperate lunge to get away, she noticed the glassy eyes, the sewn in hair, and stopped. When she could breathe again, she found it was fake. It was all fake...everything. Fake blood, a fake body.

Later, while shadows crowded around her, she found she was in his shadowy rehearsal room. No flickering oil lamps, nothing, not even a candle lent its light. In the radiance of a slice of moonlight she saw a button on the wall and pushed it, thinking it was a light switch. Hearing what sounded like a rusty door opening, she looked around just in time to see a skeleton swooping out of the darkness, soaring toward her. She turned to run, but the hard-edged, bony contraption hit her, knocking her down, then fell with a clatter upon the hard, tiled floor. Her breath caught in her lungs, fear seized her unmercifully, but the sprawling bones made no move toward her. Instead the thing stared at her, through black holes that must have once been someone's eyes.

Slowly she began to inch forward, finding it was nothing more than another trick...an elaborately

constructed box with some kind of spring that made it jump out at the unsuspecting visitor. It hung from a wire that, for whatever reason, had been strung across the long room. She could imagine seeing it coasting above the heads of a screaming audience.

And then it hit her. He was leading her. She had begun pursuing him, but quickly the prey had become the hunter. His thoughts told her in which direction to go. It was true, sensation did rule his world. He had only to think, to nudge, and she followed his every command.

She looked around at the house. At first it was terrifying...this house of horrors...this parade of macabre faces that haunted her dreams, but she had learned that they were nothing but tricks...tricks that couldn't hurt her, and for whatever reason...he was her guide!

That was only the beginning!

He would come to her when she was alone in her bedroom. She could feel a presence around her. A touch, a hissing of breath, the thrumming of an excited heart, the lightly perfumed scent, the exotic spicy, woody fragrance that came with his presence. It was insubstantial, airy, but she exulted in it. Somehow she knew he was close, and his touch sent thrills of excitement spiraling through her. She continued to wait for him to make an appearance, but he remained a mystery in this mansion of shifting shadows.

She could feel him even now behind her, his ghostly image reflecting in the darkened window of

the study. She had grown tired of hot breath upon her ears, airy touches, whispers that echoed around her. Now she wanted to reach out and feel flesh and blood, but the nearest she could get to him was in the painting over the fireplace or in her dreams. She turned and looked at him, at the roguish smile, the compelling eyes, the strange magnetism that was so potent. From the very first moment she'd seen it, she'd had a strange reaction to it, and now she wondered what it was that held her spellbound. As she gazed upon it, in her fertile imagination she saw him take her lips, and then her soul! At night she could hear him whisper to her in subdued tones, feel a ghostly breeze, and... was it a touch? She wasn't sure. How many times had she stood in her bedroom and felt a tiny caress along her arm? She knew it was Franz touching her so intimately in the night... *but how?*

She finally realized that she craved his touch, desired it! He seemed to know it too, his touches, his flame-hot breath becoming so bold she would lose her breath. Her eyes would close, the thrill beginning at her center and burning outward until her whole body was consumed. It started as a misty kiss, or a touch on her breast, between her legs. The sensation that erupted there melted her until she turned boneless, wilting toward her bed, feeling its softness beneath her. And then the words came...from somewhere...to remove her clothes. The desire she felt turned wanton...wicked, and her hands, in a fury of movement discarded them as fast as she could. It

freed her from her inhibitions, making her writhe at his touch... his touch that tormented her, bringing her higher and higher, just short of the summit she longed to reach. She could feel the pressure of his hands on her breasts, a fullness between her legs. And then it came...the plunges that caused a passion to explode inside her, the intense fire that made her hips move. He was there, and yet he wasn't. He teased her lips, her ears, flames of fire burning them, causing her to moan and shift from side to side while her hands splayed out grasping the cover on the bed. Deep in the throes of passion, her breath became labored, she moaned out his name while his presence moved over her, caressing, licking, sucking.

Until at last she shattered.

Her eyes, sultry and lazy, opened at last and looked deep into the shifting shadows, hoping to see him, but his misty form had departed. Would she ever be able to hold him? Would she ever be able to speak her desire, to bring him to such heights as she had reached? The erotic fantasy that made her pulse with such a lush, deep opulence was wonderful, but it wasn't enough! She wanted to touch him...to stroke the body she had seen in the painting. To see the handsome man with the devilish smile that drew her somehow, spoke to her, touched her...night after erotic night.

Now she turned abruptly and walked to the door of the study. Her eyes lifted to the landing wondering where his room was. As many times as she'd followed him, she'd never seen him enter a room.

Instead she'd find only trick doors, revolving walls, everything a deception. Was his existence a ruse as well? Was she the victim of a gigantic hoax? And then a staggering thought hit her. She had no proof that he lived. She'd never actually seen him. He appeared to her only as a wavering form that misted away. Oh, God, was it true? Was he... dead?

But why all the pretense? Why would Thorn want her to believe a lie? No, it wasn't true, surely! But she knew... somehow she knew it was *his* grave that lay out on the rise. Wanting answers, she went looking for Thorn. She found him polishing the silver and cornered him. "Thorn," she said urgently, "you have to tell me the truth."

"Of course, Miss."

"He's dead, isn't he?"

Thorn stopped what he was doing and looked at her strangely. "The master?"

"Yes, the master!"

"Why would you ask such a question?" he asked, returning his attention to his task.

"I've been here for days, but all I've ever seen of him are shadows that float, whispers in my ears, light, airy touches. He never even comes down to meals. Tell me the truth. It's his grave that sits on the rise, isn't it?"

Thorn's lip quivered in a suppressed smile. "Miss Perrin, I assure you, the master is very much alive. He's simply in mourning. His mother passed, after all. What would you expect him to do? He has asked that he be left alone in his grief. He is doing no more

than I would expect of him.”

“But there are clothes in my closet—dresses with yards of skirt and hoops. Things found in romance novels.” All at once her words hit a brick wall. *Oh, my God*, she thought. That’s why all this seems so familiar. They were words written out on a page! She had read them with her own eyes... stepped into the heroine’s shoes! *The Devil’s Cup*... she was the heroine in *The Devil’s Cup*! Playing out each scene, saying the words, feeling the fears, crying the tears, and Franz was the hero! She was reeling with the reality of what had happened. She hadn’t stepped back in time, at least not in the usual sense. She’d stepped into an historical romance novel!

She turned quickly, leaving Thorn staring after her. Flying up to her room, she threw things around until she at last found her bag, stashed high up on a closet shelf. She dug into it until she found her novel. Grabbing it, she looked at the heroine on the front that could easily be her. Turning it quickly, she looked on the back at the blurb that told what the book was about.

*In a house full of shadows and long
buried secrets, a young woman finds passion
in the arms of an elusive magician who loves
her to... death!*

Death!

The word screamed out at her. Opening the book, she leafed to the last chapter and began reading. It was true! The heroine threw herself off the cliff in back of the mansion! The same cliff she’d seen from

the music room door—the same cliff the elusive magician walked nightly. She dropped the book as if it had suddenly caught fire. She had to be dreaming. She wasn't living in a romance novel. That wasn't *her* on the cover. It wasn't possible!

She wasn't going to jump off a cliff and die!

Turning quickly, she ran back down to Thorn. "Thorn, I've got to talk to him. Where is he?"

"The master is indisposed," he said, turning his head and giving her a pointed look over his half-glasses. "I believe I told you that."

"Well, *undispose* him! I have to talk to him. It's urgent!"

"Undispose him?" Thorn repeated, continuing to peer at her from over his half glasses. "Really, Miss Perrin, where did you learn such language?"

"Quit stalling, Thorn! You know what I mean!"

A frown appeared on his face. "I will never get used to your American words. Stalling, indeed. Like you stall a horse?"

"Stalling! It means putting off...wasting time! *My* time!"

"Perhaps you should tell me the problem," Thorn said, as he lifted a bowl and tried to see himself in a portion of polished silver. "Perhaps I can be of some help."

"You wouldn't understand, Thorn. It's something I must discuss with Franz! Please!"

"Yes, well, I'm afraid you'll have to wait until the master is over his mourning period."

"When, Thorn! When will that be? Tomorrow, next

week? When?"

"A decent mourning period is one year." He cut his eyes toward her. "Even you must know that."

"But Sarafina...my God, it's only been..." Her words faded, and she looked back over at Thorn. "Are you saying I'm expected to stay in this...this...mausoleum for the rest of the year?"

"I'm not saying anything, Miss, it's not my decision."

She rolled her eyes and began rubbing her hand along her forehead. "You're about as helpful as a bucket with a hole in it," she complained, then suddenly turned to him. "Thorn, does *The Devil's Cup* mean anything to you? Is all this part of a romance novel? Am I dreaming?"

Thorn looked at her with a sympathetic smile. "Miss, I do believe that bump on the had has done more damage than I thought. Keep talking like that, and I'm afraid it will be some time before you're able to leave."

"There's nothing wrong with me, and I'm not crazy. I'm...I'm just confused!"

"Yes, well, whatever the case, your present arrangements must be taken up with the master. I have nothing whatsoever to do with decisions made here. I simply do the master's bidding. As for the mourning period, I wouldn't worry about that. But the clothes in your room, the ones you think belong in a...what did you call it...some kind of novel? They are the very finest in fashion today, sent over by a modiste in the village."

There was that language again, language that she hadn't understood before, but now was blatantly clear. She had taken up residence between the pages of a book! She looked at Thorn, the drum of his words once again reaching her ears.

"He simply thought that since your stay was longer than intended you would be more comfortable with a change of clothing, so he provided them. Quite thoughtful, I must say. I'm sorry you don't appreciate his kindness."

"My God, Thorn, don't you understand? I don't belong here. I have, or had a life out there somewhere. And now... somehow I've fallen into this trap, this elegant trap with cardboard characters where nothing is real." And then a thought occurred to her. "My car," she said quickly, "where is my car?"

"I'm sorry, Miss, but no carriage was found. You were apparently hallucinating."

"What?" Dana cried. "How the hell do you think I got here? On a flying saucer?"

Again Thorn peered at her over his half glasses, a frown etching his face. "A what?"

"Never mind," she mumbled. And then the truth hit her. It was a modern low-slung lipstick-red convertible that had no place in a historical romance novel. But where had it gone? Sent into oblivion, or still out on that dark, deserted road where she had left it? She felt lost, nowhere to turn.

Thorn cut his devious eyes from the silver he was polishing, and gazed at her with a sly look in his eyes, and a false, insincere ring to his voice. "If you want to

leave, madam, what is to keep you from opening the door and hailing a hackney? I could give you a few coins for the fare myself." Challenge glittered in his eyes.

"I don't want to go out in that world of frilly bonnets and pleated fans. I want to go home, Thorn. Back to good old 2004. Back to electric lights, refrigerators, plumbing, air conditioning, and my car, my beautiful little lipstick red...God, where is my car?"

"Then go! What is stopping you?"

He is!" she yelled, pointing toward the painting in the Study. "He's the key to this whole thing, yet I'm forbidden to speak to him, and he won't make an appearance. Not only that, I can't come and go as I please, I'm a prisoner here. The door isn't locked, yet I can't seem to..." Then a thought came to her. "Thorn, do you remember the night I came here? I couldn't open the door?"

"Yes, I remember. It was stuck."

"That's what I thought, but that wasn't it."

"What are you saying?"

"Don't you see? I'm a prisoner. I've tried opening that door any number of times, but apparently I can only go where the story leads me until it's told in its entirety."

"Everything you're saying is insane. If you can't go through that door, there's a completely logical reason." His voice softened to a hiss. "But only he knows what it is."

"What are you saying?" she urged.

“You stupid little fool,” Thorn said, a gleam in his eyes. “Don’t you understand yet?”

“Understand what? What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re here because he wants you here, and you’ll be here until he decides you can go.” The dim, flickering light made Thorn’s eyes take on a slight dementia. “I knew it from the first, even before he did.” His lids lowered, his steely eyes raking over her body. “The way he touched you. He wasn’t looking for broken bones, the man was aroused!”

“What? You mean...”

Thorn continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “His hands wandered. A touch turned to a caress, a stroke to an embrace.” He turned and looked at her. “He wanted you, and if I hadn’t been there...”

“You mean he would have raped me?” Dana said, fear in her eyes.

“No, nothing like that, but that’s why you’re still here. Don’t you see?”

“No, I don’t see. And how do you know any of this? Can you read minds? Are you as powerful as he is?”

He dropped the silver in his hand, causing it to clatter to the table, then rose, facing her. “Sarcasm does not become you, Miss Perrin. And yes. In my own way I am powerful. I know everything that goes on in this house.” His tall, thin body hunched wickedly as he slowly advanced on her, a long, bony finger tapping his temple. “I know what he’s thinking...what he’s going to say. I’m ahead of him.

He's never done anything that I haven't anticipated. That's why I'm so useful, so needed here. He depends on me, leaves everything in my hands—" Thorn's face turned dark. "—even you!"

"No! Not me! Do you hear? Not me? He can't come into my life and turn it upside down, he can't!"

"He can do anything he wants, Miss Perrin. He is the master, after all."

"Bull!"

"Wha..." Thorn began, then said, "Miss Perrin, I can make no sense of what you say! Perhaps in America..."

"America, my fat Aunt Harriet!" She yelled, watching Thorn gasp.

"Disrespect for your elders on top of everything else!" Thorn barked, indignantly.

"Hey, Einstein, keep up with me here, okay? I'm telling you that he can't command things to happen just like that. He might be a powerful magician..."

"Magician?" Thorn exploded. "Madam, he is no mere magician, he is a mystic, and in my mind, *immortal!*"

"He's nothing but a man with a hatful of tricks, and I'm leaving!" She whirled around and strode quickly toward the door, but stopped when she heard Thorn's voice behind her.

"Are you indeed? You will leave only when he wants you to go, and no sooner. Romance novel, bah! It is his iron will that keeps those doors shut to you."

She turned, seeing his thin form hovering at the foot of the staircase. "You poor misguided fool. He's

got you believing he's some kind of god. Well, he's not! He's a one-dimensional character with some kind of...of...grandiose complex. His mother—I remember her from the book. Beautiful and kind, but trapped! Apparently she had to die to get away from him." She looked up toward the rafters. "When he found himself alone in this...this... mausoleum, apparently he wanted company, which is where I came in. How did he do it? How did he get me here?"

Lightning!

It was as if the pink lightning bolts she'd seen on the dark road, now shot through her brain.

"It doesn't matter how," Thorn said, his eyes sharp and dark as he looked down at her, "the fact is, you're here and you won't be leaving until he gives the command!"

She whirled around, eyeing the door. "Well, maybe in some twisted way he brought me here, but that bastard can't keep me here, not if I want to leave!"

"Your crude language is insulting to the master, and I will not have it!"

She stopped in her tracks and whirled around. "Oh, really? Well, I haven't read the whole novel, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that this is all your doing. The butler did it, right? Very predictable! Ms. Reinhart should think about taking a writing lesson!" she shouted.

"My doing?" Thorn said while following her. "And just how do you think *I* could do such a thing? He is the mystic, madam, not I."

"A mystic, is he—" She placed her hands on her

hips. “—or is he God? Why do you call him *Master*? Do you worship him? Is he Divine to you?”

“Why, I’ve never been so insulted!”

“Do you end your prayers, in Franz’ name?”

“Miss,” Thorn breathed, an incredulous frown etching his ancient face, “I do believe you’ve gone over the edge!”

“No, I’m not crazy, I just don’t trust anyone in this house!”

“Does that include the ghost of Sarafina?” His reply was soft, but heard as loudly as the roll of a drum.

“Why do you ask me that?” she hissed. “She has nothing to do with this.”

“She may have more to do with this than you imagine. She was powerful in her own way, you know.”

A chill raced up her spine. “You’re cruel to bring the dead into this.” She glared at him, and whispered, “You’re trying to scare me, to...”

“If anyone is trying to scare you, it isn’t I.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think. He’s a mystic, it is his job to elicit a gasp, strike fear in the stoutest of hearts. To hear a gasp from a pair of lips as lovely as yours is like a beautiful symphony to his ears.”

She looked away from him thinking about the fake head that had fallen out of the hat box, and then the skeleton that coasted along in the dark. So that was the reason. She’d sensed him close that night... leading her, nudging her, but she had never guessed

the reason. Was it true? Did he enjoy her gasps? Her screams? She looked around at the low-hanging shadows, the strangely carved wood, and the panels of red, and whispered, "I don't know him, and yet I do. He's gone, and yet he's here. He's in the very air we breathe, in the walls. He inhabits every shadow. They heave with his life."

"I knew it the first night you were here," Thorn whispered. "I could tell by the way he handled you. The look in his eyes. Since then he's orchestrated this whole affair. Listening for the intake of your breath, your whimper of fear, your gasp."

"But it sounds...I don't know...sick, somehow."

"Not to him. When he elicits a reaction from you, it's like a touch, or a caress. It's his only contact with you."

She frowned up at him. "How do you know all this?"

"I've been with him many years, Miss. I know him well."

"But why would he go to such lengths?"

"Why? Because he wants you. He's alone. Maybe to you he's only the hero in some ridiculous romance novel, but to him, it's his life!"

She peered at him closely, remembering the surly butler in the novel. "And you, Thorn, what about you?"

"Believe what you will, madam, but do not drag me into this book to which you refer. If I occupy a space at all it is only to do his will and reside in his shadow."

“We’re both prisoners, “ she said with a hint of despair in her voice. “Do you realize that, Thorn? We’re both here until the book is finished! When did you come? One dark night from out of the rain?”

Thorn’s eyes widened, the truth written in his face. All at once his thin lips began to move. “No, not in the rain. But it was a terrible night, a night full of lightning.”

Lightning!

“That must be the way he does it, with lightning.” Dana put her hand up to her mouth. “Oh, my God, it’s true! I’m right. Say it, Thorn!”

“You are *not* right, Miss. You see, I can come and go as I please. I can leave any time I want. You would do well to dispense with this book madness you keep talking about, and realize that you are here until he says you may leave. You are held as firmly as if you were tied with ropes.”

His words were doom, and she recoiled when she heard them. Feeling a desperation rise in her, she shouted, “I can leave! I can!” At that moment she felt her back hit the wall, and turned, grabbing the doorknob. With a hard pull she tried again and again to open it, but it wouldn’t give. She whirled around. “It’s locked!”

“With what? A key? The key hangs on a peg with spider webs covering it. Might I remind you that this is a respectable townhouse on Hyde Lane? The only thieves that would dare come near here are those out of their minds. The guttersnipes surround the whorehouses and gaming hells, picking the pockets of

those that stagger into the darkened streets with their pockets full of money. The most we have to fear is a ghost who walks the halls at midnight... or me... the guilty butler. Remember? I am already here, you cannot lock the door against me, and you cannot lock a ghost out. She walks through walls, haunts the graveyard."

Fear rushed through Dana, and she put her hands up to her ears, refusing to listen to another word. But Thorn's words droned on and on, his face coming closer and closer. To get away from him she suddenly pushed away from the door and ran past him toward the staircase.

He grabbed her arm, bringing her to a halt. She was forced to look up into his shadowy wrinkled face and hear his hated words being hissed at her. "Hear this, Miss Perrin. If what you say is true and we are both trapped here until the last page is turned in that ridiculous novel, or if we are simply at the mercy of a mad man, the end is still the same. You are his now."

She stared at him for a moment, watching the dance of light and shadow upon his grotesque face, her voice trembling. "It's too fantastic, Thorn, I can't believe it. And you're wrong about Sarafina. It's him. He's the one playing the symphony. You said yourself he wanted to scare me."

"You would do well to believe me, Miss. It *is* the ghost of Sarafina that plays that dark rhapsody. Every night from midnight to three, and she'll allow you to see her only when she's ready," he said, his glittering eyes watching her.

"You're all crazy," she sobbed, then turned to run, the vast hall she entered becoming a dark cave of colorful ghosts, their lips stretched upward in haunting macabre smiles.

Dana stayed in her room the rest of the day, her face pressed against the cold glass of her window. When at last the sun was setting she went down to dinner. As usual, the table was set for three, but she was the only one there. She looked up at Thorn when he came in to look over the settings.

"I want to see him. Is he coming down?"

"I believe you are aware that the master is indisposed."

"I'm sick of hearing that word! I can't wait, Thorn! I want out of here. If he brought me here, then he can release me!"

"Release you from a novel you are trapped in? Tell him that and he will likely send you to Bellport."

"Bellport? What the hell is Bellport?"

He looked down at her with snapping eyes. "I've never heard such language. It's..." The words abruptly stopped when he realized his reprimand did no good. "Bellport is an insane asylum. You wouldn't like it there; it's overrun by rats, so I've heard."

"But I have to do something. I can't just sit here and accept all this."

"I would suggest you pick up your fork, Miss, your dinner is getting cold." He turned away, leaving her for his position by the door.

She ate again in silence, the food being served, then taken away by servants that seemed to be mute.

When she spoke to them, they simply cut their eyes toward her, then to Thorn, and said nothing.

She whirled on Thorn as he stood motionless by the door. "What's wrong with them? Is everyone in this house deaf and dumb?"

Thorn looked at her as if she were an idiot. "This is a black house, Miss. When a death occurs, a respectable mourning period is observed, and no one speaks, or is spoken to."

"My God, you people live in the dark ages," she said, throwing her napkin down and confronting Thorn. "They haven't had black houses in hundreds of years. Put a wreath on the door and get on with your lives."

"How very impertinent. In view of the circumstances I would think..."

"I don't care about *circumstances*. If he won't come to me, then I'll go to him. Which is his room?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

She gave him a deadly look. "Thorn, if I have to search this house from attic to cellar, I'll find him!" She watched the look on his face turn from a dignified coldness to one of alarm, but still he held his composure. With an abrupt toss of her head, she turned and started for the door. "I'll be in my room."

Thorn stepped aside, and with a slight bow, he muttered a respectful, "Mistress."

Chapter Three

That night. That dark, foreboding, scary night, she searched the mansion beneath swaying shadows and flickering candles. She went in and out of cold, dark rooms, along endless corridors, both narrow and wide, and finally lost her way.

And then she saw Franz.

He was nothing more than a flickering shadow, but she knew it was him. He had entered a room. She could even hear him moving around inside. Finally, she had him trapped! Determined not to lose him again, she ran toward the door, grabbed the doorknob with a firm grip, and turned it. Not letting anything such as his privacy stop her, she blatantly pushed the door open thinking she would find a candlelit room full of shadows and him! Instead, she found herself rocking on the edge of a drop straight down into the restless ocean. The waves kicked and splashed, the wind roared, and the fog concealed the black rocks upon which she would have fallen had she not held on.

Battling the wind, she finally fought her way back into the safety of the mansion. She leaned against the wall, fear a bitter taste in her mouth as she tried to stop trembling. She breathed deep, her breath

catching in her throat. Finally pushing herself away from the wall she walked back to the shadow she had stood in, turned, and looked at the door. She had thought that possibly she had picked the wrong one, but when she got there she knew. It *was* the right door! Slowly she stepped forward and opened the door again, but the ocean was gone. She saw only a dark room; cold, musty and with a thin layer of dust settled everywhere. Her mind was whirling. Was she losing her mind?

Not knowing what else to do, she at last gave up and found her own suite of rooms. She felt defeated. Why was she wasting her time? He wasn't here—he was in a grave! She knew it! He had to be! And then she thought of the perfect plan. The book! The book would tell her all about the hero. Who and where he was, and why he was so elusive. But when she went to find it, strangely it had vanished along with her bag that had everything in it that she owned. Brushes, combs, makeup, her dead cell phone, they were all gone!

Had someone taken it? No, she thought, a sense of dread filling her. It was missing because it wasn't in the story. Gradually she was becoming more and more ensnared in the story. Soon even her clothes would disappear from off her back... her memories washed away. She wondered where the book was; drifting in some black void, or maybe its pages blew in the stiff wind as it lay on the floor of her car! If she had doubted before, now she was sure, she was held captive in a dark dream from where there was no

escape... not until the last scene had been played.

Until her death!

The only thing left was to confront Sarafina. Was Thorn right? Did the ghost actually haunt the music room and float along the grand staircase between the hours of midnight and three? And if she did, could she appeal to her? Make her understand? It was madness, but she was desperate. Maybe she would see her tonight. She would wait...listen for the music. And when it began to play...to swell...

*That old black magic has me in its spell,
That old black magic that you weave so well,
Those icy fingers...*

But the music never came. No swells, no arpeggios... nothing. Night after night she waited for Sarafina's appearance, but was disappointed. She decided that she must find Sarafina on her own. The thought of looking for a ghost in the midst of these dimly lit hallways terrified her, but she knew she had to. Somehow she had to get help, if only from a ghost. And so, in only her thin cotton nightgown she roamed the mansion, her pale, iridescent presence looking as much like a ghost as Sarafina. Nightly she floated down the staircase, visited the damp, cold music room, but only a dark, empty vacuous space greeted her.

No floating presence anywhere in the mansion.

Sarafina was gone.

And then on a night when all was silent her lids flew open at an awesome sound. Chiming clocks from all over the mansion summoned her. The sounds

were mixed. They called to her with everything from light tinkling chimes to deep bongs, urging her to awake. And when their chimes ended, the music soared forth, reverberating around the cavernous mansion. Lunging up from the bed, she ran down the hall to the grand staircase, her bare feet kicking beneath her light, feathery gown, the silver rays of the moonlight shining through the windows, casting glittering designs on the floor.

And then she saw her.

The dark and beautiful Sarafina was spotlighted by the moon, a glistening iridescence in the night. She wore a white shroud that danced lightly around her while she sat at the piano, her dark head lowered over the keys, her body swaying to the music. A breeze floated in through the French Doors that stood open, the white gossamer curtains billowing in the wind.

The haunting music filled the room, the swells intense, the arpeggios pure magic.

...you're the mate that fate had me created for...

And then, at the highest crescendo in the music, she looked up, her face the very image of her son. Dark and mysterious, and beautiful beyond words. Her pale, gossamer being was eerie, the silver rays of the ghost moon bathed her body, giving her an ethereal glow that caused a chill to dance erratically up Dana's spine. She wanted to run...to escape this madness, but she couldn't move. She was frozen in fear. The sound of the old tune was all around her, the striking of the keys drumming heavily as Sarafina continued to play, the echo ricocheting powerfully off

the cavernous walls and ceiling. Dana was struck speechless as she watched the specter move and sway.

But something was wrong.

Not that she'd ever seen a ghost before, but she'd heard enough about them to know that they floated, their presence too otherworldly to be heavy and severe as this one seemed to be. She stood silent for a moment, then began to slowly walk toward the apparition until she stood before her. She knew you couldn't touch a ghost, but this one seemed all too real, so she boldly reached out and grabbed at her hair.

It fell...along with her shroud, and a mask.

All at once a single striking of discordant keys filled the room and the ghost lunged upward. She found herself looking into a pair of dark glittering eyes stabbing out of a face full of deep cut wrinkles. Thorn!

"My God, you're sick!" Dana hissed, then turned to run.

"No! Please!" came a voice from a dark corner.

She whirled on her heels to see the magnificence of the hero step out of a shadow. He stood before her now, dark and mysterious, and so achingly handsome she couldn't move. She said nothing, just kept expecting him to mist into the shadows. When he didn't she saw the torment that reflected in his beautiful, glowing eyes, and was struck with wonder. How can this man...this *paper hero*...feel so deeply? If past experience was any indication she had expected

a creature that floated instead of walked... a cardboard cutout...perhaps a flat movie screen idol she could only look at. But not this...not a *real* flesh and blood man who took her breath away. And then he spoke. His voice was smooth and deep, his strange accent dripping with sophistication.

"I must apologize for this ridiculous fiasco. I know you do not understand any of this, and when I learned of all the mental anguish you were going through because of me, I...well, I had to try and help. I am afraid I have been remiss. Thorn has kept me informed of how you were doing, conveyed messages regarding your desire to go, but instead of using my magick to get you back where you came from I found I couldn't let you go. I have hidden in shadows, crept around the mansion watching you. It is unforgivable, I know, but I have been so lonely. It is no one's fault but my own. The truth is, when my mother died I became so lonely and distraught I had to have someone. On a night much like this one, I...my magick must have went awry somehow and brought you here. I thought I might tell you the truth, but I didn't know how to approach you, and—"

"—and you thought to have Thorn masquerade as Sarafina would solve the problem?"

"What can I say? I thought you would turn and run when you saw the fake ghost." He shrugged. "I was wrong. You are just as brave as you are beautiful."

Beautiful... he said beautiful!

"And what did you hope to accomplish?"

“To find you...comfort you. To hold your trembling body next to mine, to offer you a dry shoulder on which to cry—many things. In the meantime I intended to make a friend of you, to get to know you, and eventually tell you the truth.”

“Sorry I ruined it.”

“Master...” Thorn interrupted.

“It is all right, Thorn. Go and take those ridiculous frills off, please.” He turned back to Dana. “Do not blame him. Thorn is a very loyal servant whom I would be lost without. He follows orders to the letter, even if they include dressing up like a ghost to keep a certain beautiful young woman pacified until his master finds the courage to unveil himself.”

Beautiful... he said it again!

Looking down at her, his eyes grew soft in the lingering darkness. “The truth is, I have been courting you in my own twisted way.”

“Courting me? What do you mean?”

“Have you not felt touches in the night, a wisp of wind, a subtle whisper in your ear?”

“I knew it,” she whispered. It *was* you, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“But it’s impossible. How?”

“I am very powerful, as Thorn has told you. I studied for years at the knees of an old master of the arts, and learned to separate my spirit from my body. I can roam the mansion at will.” He lifted his eyes toward the rafters of the vast room. “I am the ghost here and yet I live.”

Dana gasped. “I can’t believe it. How is something

like that possible?"

"It is nothing. Anyone can do it, if taught."

"Really?" She replied, giving him a suspicious look. "How do you do the one where I can't go past the threshold of the door?"

"I am afraid I don't know what you mean."

Her mouth fell open, and she was suddenly wrapped in fear. It wasn't him after all. What she had suspected all along, now she knew to be true. She was trapped between the pages of her novel... here until the finish of the book.

She was going to die!

"Are you all right?"

Wiping at the tears that had slowly slid down her face, she said, "Yes. I... I guess it's just all too much for me."

"I am so sorry I made you cry. If you could only understand why I did what I did. That first night when I saw you on the couch, your lovely body, your hair, the beauty of your face...I could not forget you. I fought it, but it did no good" He hesitated. "And Thorn, being the devoted servant he is, simply did as I instructed him." He looked at her, his glittering eyes catching some distant light. "And I was left to skulk in the shadows, watching you...wanting you."

"But why? I begged Thorn to let me talk to you!"

"Yes, I know, but at first I didn't know what to expect of you."

"What do you mean?"

"A man in my position has to be very careful. Because of my extraordinary powers there are those

that would use that power for evil. It is they that I must shield myself from." His eyes softened as they looked at her. "For instance, if I were to find myself in love with a creature as beautiful as you, I might be persuaded to use my powers for evil."

"Surely, you don't think that I..."

He smiled. "Perhaps not, but the spicy tales of temptation grace our history books, even the Bible. I am not above it. No man is. I knew eventually I would approach you, but I had to be careful, that's why I kept my distance."

"I didn't think you were real," Dana whispered in awe.

"Oh, yes, I am very real. I have feelings, emotions. I hunger, I get cold, hot. I also experience loneliness, Dana...may I call you Dana?" he asked, smiling softly.

"Yes, of course."

"You came into my life at a very difficult time, a time when I was left alone, so alone I imagined I could hear the walls speak, the shadows move. I needed someone, and when you arrived, it was like an answer to my prayers. Your charms are very potent...so potent, in fact, that I couldn't stay away from you. In time, after watching you for so long, I boldly began to touch you. It was rapture, Dana, like an erotic dream."

She thrilled at the sound of her name being spoken in his low, warm, sexy accent. "Yes, it was like that," she whispered, her eyes meeting his while the shimmering light of the moon cast a glittering glow

around them.

He gave her an angled look, his voice husky and warm. "When I touched you, did you enjoy it?"

Dana's face flushed. "I'm sure you know how I reacted to your touch."

"Then don't fight it, Dana, stay with me," he urged, taking her hands, his eyes sultry and lazy.

A warm, liquid rush blossomed inside her at the feel of his hands, his intoxicating nearness. He was certainly no cardboard character, and he clearly wasn't dead. His soft breath touched her cheek, his warm hands squeezed hers, and his overt maleness made her quiver inside. She could be so happy here with him, if only...She turned her eyes and looked at the French doors, and knew that only death lay beyond. She was a prisoner in a world that wasn't her own, and nothing he could do could free her.

Or could he?

Why not try? At his own admission he was a powerful man...so powerful that others sought to use that power for their own selfish purposes. All at once she turned to him. "How much did Thorn tell you? Did he mention a romance novel?"

"A romance novel?" He frowned slightly. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You see, I..." Her words stopped abruptly when the memory of Thorn's words echoed through her mind.

I can't wait, Thorn! I want out of here. If he brought me here, then he can release me!

Release you from a novel you are trapped in? Tell him

that and he will likely send you to Bellport...an insane asylum overrun by rats.

Had Thorn been right? He had said that he knew his master well. Perhaps he did know best, she decided, her shifting eyes glancing toward the precipice, the last scene... *the scene of her death!*

"You were saying?"

"Nothing," she muttered.

"May I escort you to your room," he asked suggestively, bringing her out of her thoughts.

As they were leaving the music room, she turned just in time to see the billowing curtains, the shroud on the floor being lifted by a rogue wind, and felt an eerie presence. What she didn't see was the creation of a figure, a blending of light and shadow as wispy as the air and as dark and beautiful as Franz was handsome. An airy creature that blended into the walls, the shadows, and an iridescent finger that seemed to come from nowhere to caress the ivory keys of the piano.

At her door, Franz leaned close and whispered, "Will you invite me in?"

Shivers of delight shimmered through her when she felt his hot breath on her ear. She wanted to say yes. He was undeniably the handsomest man she'd ever seen, but she didn't know him at all. She looked up into a pair of electric blue eyes that glowed out of a face as dark and mysterious as midnight. "Can I trust you?"

"Not at all."

His answer made her body ache for his touch, his

solid touch not visited upon her as air and mist, or in a dream where she woke up in a dark room alone, but real, so very real! She was fully aware of the hardness of his thighs brushing against hers, and eased her hand in back of her, opening the door.

He pushed her in quickly, and she gasped as his lips found hers, causing a charge of electricity to spear rapidly through her body. His kisses were slowly draining all her doubts and fears.

"Please don't tell me to stop," he breathed passionately.

"I was, but somehow I crave your hands. Is this a trick of your magick?"

"Possibly," he whispered, then gave her body a hot, raking gaze. "I will devour you," he whispered. "I will consume you with a passion that will burn through the night."

"You'd better," she whispered, lifting her hands to the glowing image of fire and passion.

His movements were very dramatic, and like all the heroes of all the movies she'd ever seen, he swept her up, then closed the door with his foot just before he placed her gently on the bed. With flames of passion dancing in his eyes, he lowered himself over her. The darkness around them soon became filled with guttural moans, their breath mingling while hot tides of passion raged through them. His tongue, resembling licking flames of fire, moved along the soft curve of her neck, sending gusts of desire exploding through her. While he held her, his enticing words of love fell temptingly on her ear sending

exciting thrills arching through her.

She yielded to the burning sweetness of his touch as his quick hands removed her clothes, then moved downward, cupping her breasts. His mouth opened wide, taking her nipples inside as she pushed his shirt from his muscled chest and arms. With soft, slow movements, he caressed each curve until he at last reached between her legs. She willingly opened her thighs for him, and his fingers plunged inside her, causing a moan of passion to slip through her lips.

She felt as if his caressing hands were flames...flames that ignited a hot, erotic desire that wrapped itself around her. She could feel their mutual need fusing in the soft moonlight that seemed to empower their love. When he touched her, an electric shock scorched through her body, meeting the spurt of hungry desire that spiraled inside her like a ravening wolf. But any man wouldn't do, only the man in the painting, the one she fell in love with.

And now he was here, along with the song that seemed to whirl about in her head.

...the tingle that I feel inside...and when that elevator starts its ride...

The sound of the ghostly piano floated up the stairs and wrapped around her, whirling inside her while he led her down a sensuous path to ecstasy...an ecstasy she'd never known...and would never know except in his arms. All at once gusts of desire shook her when he opened her up and plunged deep inside. His hard cock electrified her, causing her body to jerk spasmodically.

...and when that elevator starts its ride... down and down I go, round and round I go, in a spin, loving the spin I'm in...

"Franz!" she moaned out in erotic pleasure. "Oh, God, Franz!"

His body was hard, and his fingers burned into her tingling skin as he lifted her buttocks to meet his loose, raw plunges. Over and over he delved deep inside her, heating her cunt with his rod from hell.

...I'm aflame, aflame with such burning desire...

She could feel her breasts crush against the hardness of his chest as they came together as one. Man to woman, passion to passion, rolling, sitting up, their passion thundering in her ears like a fiery storm. He bucked and plunged, his wet breath scorching her as he suckled her breasts, chewing until waves of ecstasy throbbled through her lifting her to heights she'd never known.

Her hips became loose, uninhibited as she began to reach for the elusive orgasm. She clung to him, met his uncontrolled plunges as she literally climbed him to find her release. He tortured her with emotions that whirled and skidded, his tongue making a path along her shoulder, across her kiss-bruised lips, up to her eyes, then darting lustily into her ear, causing her to writhe wildly in his arms.

"Oh, God, Franz!" she cried out.

"Come, my love!" he rasped out in gasping passion. "Come again and again for me!"

Feeling her cling to him, his movements became savage and raw. He plunged again and again,

Gender Lightning

wringing orgasm after orgasm out of her until his body jerked like a mad whipcrack and his flaming seed flowed through her like honey.

...and only your kiss can put out the fire.

Just then she moaned, her last orgasm shattering through her like a million glowing stars. By this time she was so exhausted she melted against him, her world filled with a glow and a warmth that sent her into the sweet oblivion of sleep.

* * *

The ghostly presence in the music room looked up past the rafters, and into the bedroom they occupied, and smiled. She remembered the night she had directed, or *misdirected*... that one bolt of lightning to break through eons of time –

1800

1900

2000

– until she'd found the perfect mate for her son.

Maybe now Sarafina could rest in peace.

Chapter Four

The next day while darkness still hovered, she awoke, the handsome magician still asleep beside her. She turned, looking at him as he slept. She could hardly believe he was here with her. Being careful not to wake him, her hands stroked the muscled chest, the strong, chiseled jaw, the soft, lush, pillowy lips. She wanted to steal a kiss, but didn't dare. If she woke him, he would leave her, and she wanted to enjoy this moment as long as possible.

Her dreams that night had been those of a blue night, silver moon... and him! She'd felt his kiss, his weight on her, his thrusting hips and his engorged cock driving into her. She knew now that because of his concern for her he had stepped out of his dark world of mourning, and into hers, bringing her passion she never knew existed. The best part was, she knew this was only the beginning. He would come again. Wrapped in hard, tantalizing flesh, or perhaps he might drift in on a breeze...on a sigh...a whisper. It might be anywhere...in her bedroom, on the couch, by the pool. And she would welcome him any way she could have him. She would feel his arms surround her, caressing her, touching her secret place. Her eyes would close, a moan would escape her lips, and perhaps she would even cry out while his hands

Gender Lightning

moved inside her. As of this moment she was his slave, his victim. She lived for his touch.

* * *

As the long days and nights came and went there was never a question of leaving again. She lived for him, longing for the burning sweetness of his lips on hers, the long, surrendering moans that passed from her lips as he caressed her in the most secret of places. He sought her out many times...finding her in the tub, gazing up at his portrait, reading, sleeping, and each time when he left her she wept. How could she exist until he returned? And would he return? Or was this all just an erotic dream? Sometimes his form was nothing more than iridescent beauty, other times he was solid beneath her touch. Either way she could feel his touch burning her, his breath scorching her neck. A dizzying sensation sent her up, up, up until she was swept up in rapture, the feel of his lips on the nape of her neck, a slight pressure of hands on her breasts. Like small diamonds, her nipples hardened, his nearness making her gasp.

Now, in this moment of time, she felt him at her back and arched suddenly. And then a hot breath tickled her cheek as his tongue of fire licked her face, leading slowly to her lips where she felt a gentle pressure. And then it grew, moving down, down, and down again until she felt herself being turned, her back against the wall. Her hands moved outward, pinned by his, and she was helpless to resist him.

She suddenly felt on fire, the hot blaze burning between her legs. Her eyes were closed, her body limp as she melted toward the floor, feeling his hands, his body. She pictured his handsome form in her mind, and succumbed to his touch, swaying with him as he moved above her. It was the most exciting thing she'd ever felt. He took her with him, his thrills were hers, his heat, his desire tore through her. She felt his hard body beneath her hands as she held him, the two of them loving again and again. She lived for his touch, the plunge of his cock, the delicious push and pull, the teasing of his lips on her breasts, and the passionate draw of his mouth. He was wild, he ravaged her, his breathing labored, his hard body heavy on hers. And when his orgasm flared, so did hers, and a scream burst from her lips as she moaned out his name.

"Franz! Oh, God, Franz!"

And then with a long, passionate kiss, he withdrew.

* * *

This lasted for weeks, the magician coming stealthily, his movements soft and subtle, but leaving her ravaged and spent in the tub, bed, or on the floor. His love was hot, and he took her in many ways. His hands touched her everywhere, causing desire to spiral up inside her to a point where she thought she would surely shatter. And then when she didn't think she could stand another minute without him inside

her, he rode her hard, with her emitting passionate whimpers while she climbed upward into a raging orgasm that left her limp on the disheveled bed. Afterwards her body always ached with the pleasure of being loved completely and thoroughly.

* * *

One day a thought hit her hard... like a slap in the face, sending a shiver over her body. A ghastly picture of trickling water spilling over a pair of cold purple lips lodged in her mind.

Water in the grave.

The thought came to her over and over again, never letting her rest.

"Thorn!" she called out urgently.

"Yes, Miss," he said, striding into the room.

"We have to do something...there's water in the grave."

"Water in the grave, Miss?"

"Yes. Don't ask me how I know, but somehow I do."

"Who's grave, Miss?"

"I-I don't know. Sarafina's, I suppose. All I know is that there's water in the grave. We have to have it removed, dried out...whatever, I don't know."

Later that day she stood at the window watching a crowd of men working over a grave with antiquated equipment that she knew would someday be replaced by sophisticated digging machines. Knowing she'd never been out to see the grave, suddenly she was

curious. The house was very quiet, so taking the opportunity, she walked quietly toward the door and surprisingly it opened, allowing her to slip past it and go out to the family graveyard. While walking beneath the weeping willows, she found a path that wound around through the graves, and followed it. She stopped at each one of the Staresini family, imagining what they might be like until she came to one more...

Willetta Staresini

Known to her adoring public as Sarafina

Her eyes widened. She looked up immediately and saw the men hard at work on another grave. "No, you've exhumed the wrong..." And then a thought hit her. There were two graves in this portion of the graveyard where the most recent of the family had been buried. "If this is Sarafina, who is..." Running toward the men with the large machines, she shoved her way through and fell to her knees before a coffin that sat on a small rise. "Oh, no!" she sobbed, knowing what she would find inside. "Open it," she commanded through tears. When no one moved, she turned and yelled at them. "Open it!"

One man with a crowbar in his hand stepped forward and forced the lid open. When the body within was exposed, Dana clamped her hands against her mouth to try and muffle her cries. A red shirt, tight black pants, boots, dark, wavy hair that hung to his shoulders. It was Franz Staresini, the man she loved, the man who had come to her night, day, touching her, loving her.

The man she loved was a ghost!

She woke up screaming.

When Franz came to her, he held her in his arms murmuring to her while Thorn looked on from the doorway. With a face that gleamed with tears, her hands began moving over him, squeezing him as if she couldn't believe he was real. First she caressed his wonderful face, his broad shoulders. Then they urgently moved downward, feeling his firm flesh, his rippling muscles, and tracing the blue veins in his arms where she knew warm blood rushed through.

"You're alive... tell me you're alive!"

Franz chuckled. "Of course I'm alive."

"But you were dead, in a grave with water seeping in."

"You were dreaming, my love. It was nothing more than a nightmare."

She looked up into his beautifully shaped eyes, but couldn't find comfort in his words. "Maybe it was a dream," she whispered, "but it's true, isn't it? No, I don't mean that you're a ghost, but there is something..." All at once her eyes lowered, and she frowned. "It's past midnight, why aren't you in a robe, why isn't your hair messed up?"

"Insomnia, I'm afraid."

"No, that's not it," she whispered as her eyes continued to search. She could see nothing out of place, not a line or a crease. He never needed a shave, no flyaway strand of hair ever shadowed his forehead. He was eerily perfect. "My God, you never look any different. You never change clothes, your

voice always resonates just enough to sound as if it's coming..." Her hand clasped her mouth. "Oh, God, you *are* a ghost!"

A look of irritation passed over his perfect face as he rose from the bed and began pacing. Finally looking over at Thorn, he said, "I'm going to have to tell her."

"It would appear so, sir."

"Please, leave us alone," he whispered, while turning to look at Dana.

"Yes, sir," Thorn muttered, then turned to leave.

"Tell me what?" Dana questioned.

He turned to her, a look of resolve on his face. "Dana, it's true, I am different."

"Different?" she whispered, almost afraid to ask. "How are you different? Tell me."

After an intense struggle, he gently sat on the bed beside her and took her hands in his and kissed them softly. "I do not know what to say except that I am sorry. I should have told you a long time ago, but... the truth is, I am living under a curse. Such a curse forbids me to come out in the daytime. If I come out at all it is only as a shifting wind, a light fragrance, a whisper, a touch. I am forced to live my life beneath the stars, in shadows. And when the sun comes up I enter back into my domicile in the clouds.

"But that's impossible, it...it can't be."

"Dana, I know my differences are strange to you, but in all other ways I am like any other man. We made love, my seed was planted deep within your body."

A deep feeling of regret passed through her. "But I'll never bear you a child. We can never go among people and live normal lives until our old age."

"But I am a man fully capable of loving you as you need to be loved. My differences, they can't matter that much to you."

"Maybe they shouldn't, but they do," Dana said, jumping up from the bed. "I want a normal life, and I want it with you. Is that too much to ask? I need to know the truth, Franz, all of it."

"But I have told you..."

"No, you haven't. You haven't told me the most important part. The part that tells me how and why. Apparently at one time you were a man like any other, but something happened. What was it, Franz? What terrible tragedy took place that turned you into what you are today?"

"I would not even know how to begin. Perhaps you should ask questions."

She nodded, then began speaking as she paced. "You speak with an accent. Where do you come from?"

"Somewhere very far away, I am afraid. You would not know of it if I told you."

"Franz..."

"Very well. Have you ever heard of The Gates of Troyes?"

"No."

"No, you wouldn't have. You see it was in Northwest Europe, thirteenth century —"

"Oh, my God," she muttered, her hand over her

mouth. "This isn't true, it can't be true."

"I'm afraid it is," he said, his voice a somber whisper. "My family performed in the Champagne Fairs. Twice a year the whole town was turned into a fair. In August it was the *Hot Fair*, and in December it was the *Cold Fair*. It sold bolts of scarlet cloth, kaleidoscopes, spices, skins, metals, many handcrafted items. My father was Thibaut the Trickster, and my mother was Marjan." He watched her eyes grow round as she listened. "Should I go on?"

She could do nothing but nod.

"Her name was Marjan," he repeated. "She caressed, coddled, and played with snakes. My father was known as the father of orphans. My brother Hugo and I were the orphans. There were dancers, jugglers, acrobats, performing bears. Monkeys performed on street corners, and jongleurs sang on the church steps. The taverns were noisily thronged, and provided you with any kind of whore you would want..."

Dana gasped.

"Dana, I don't have to continue with this."

"No, go ahead. It's all right."

"Yes, well, the...uh...*ladies* served bread, broth and beer, and two kinds of meat. It was also an occasion for brawls and bloodshed."

"Franz, perhaps you should uh, discontinue with this part. I'm more interested in what happened. How?"

"The curse? You want to know..."

“Yes,” she said, nodding.

“When I was a young man I had the misfortune to fall in love with a witch. When she tired of me, she put a spell on me.”

“What kind of spell?”

He hesitated, his fearful eyes darting away from her. Then finally, with a look of resolve on his face, his eyes traveled back to hers. “You’ve seen the painting in the study.”

“Yes, a very unusual picture of the tarot card. I admit it’s a cute idea, but why would you have your picture painted to resemble The Magician Tarot Card?”

“I didn’t. *I am the magician in that card.*”

She looked at him, horrified. “My God, what are you saying?”

“It’s true, Dana, every word. I was cursed to exist as The Magician of the Tarot Card until I find—” He hesitated. “—let us just say the *key* that will unlock the door that keeps me prisoner. That card, that painting, is my lair. It is the doorway to a kingdom you could not even fathom. It is true that I am a man of this world, but being The Tarot Magician gives me access to many other worlds beyond this one. While in these other worlds there are no restrictions on me, but in this one I am bound by the limitations I have described to you. I will never be able to leave it behind until I find that one ultimate gift...that *something* that will free me. Until then I must accept my doom as it...”

“Accept it?” Dana cried out. “How can you just

accept something like this?"

"Dana, I have no choice! It is all part of the curse. The only good thing about this is the power I possess. Being the ultimate magician, so to speak, I have powers beyond belief, powers..."

"All except one," Dana said softly, her voice listless and sad.

"Yes," he agreed unhappily. "The power to break through these chains that bind me, invisible though they may be. Other than that, my feats are extraordinary."

"Why didn't she just kill you?"

"Very simple. You see death is too peaceful, too serene. When you are cursed it is not death you experience, it is *life!*"

"Where did you meet her?"

"At one of the Champagne Fairs. She had a Soothsayer's tent. Being a magician, I frequented fairs always looking for a job, an audience." He slowly rose from the bed, walked to a window and looked out. "And then I saw her. She was very beautiful. The fairs were truly mesmerizing. They had everything a man could possibly want—fire eaters, flesh artists, freak shows, fallen angels, haunted castles, and a den of iniquity." He turned and looked at her. "It was there that I took her for the first time. I went back time and again, my only excuse being that I was young, and my body on fire at the thought of having such a beautiful woman."

"My God, you've lived forever! You'll never die!"

"I've been told that only one thing can break the

spell, something more powerful than any magick. I have looked everywhere, and have not found it." He turned back to the window, and looked out, his eyes looking as far into the distance as possible. "But I will," he whispered with resolve, "even if it sits on the highest mountain...or floats at the bottom of the ocean." His eyes moved upward. "Perhaps it winks at me from the moon. Perhaps it is not even tangible, perhaps it appears as dust...smoke...a mist. Even then..."

"Can you make me like you?"

He whirled around, and looked at her as if she'd proposed a liaison with the devil. "Dana, you wouldn't want to be like me! My God, it's misery to live this way. Don't you understand that? To live forever is..."

"Can you make me like you?" she demanded.

"Of course, but I wouldn't even consider it! To be like me would be pronouncing doom upon yourself!"

"Don't you see? We'll be together forever! It's the only way!"

"No! You don't understand what you're asking! I couldn't!"

Suddenly the roar of the ocean filled her ears, and she looked up at him. "Do you love me?" she whispered.

"You know I do, but..."

"Then you won't let me die, Franz," she said, then turned and ran from the bedroom, down the stairs and out the back door of the mansion.

"Dana!" Franz cried out. "Where are you going?"

Without an answer, she ran as fast as she could, her nightgown fluttering around her bare feet. When she came to the windy ridge, she stopped and edged up to it carefully. Below was the restless ocean, the waves crashing against black rocks that rose up along the edge of the beach like the jagged teeth of a monster. They yawned open, inviting her to jump. She felt a sudden dizziness, and weaved along the rocky edge of the cliff. She looked back, seeing Franz running toward her. "I'm going to jump," she called out to him. "If you love me you will do as I asked, and we will live together forever. I will be immortal like you."

"Dana, you're wrong. This is not the answer. If I am forced to use my magick..."

Just then a giant wave splashed against the rocks, drowning out his words, sending them into the tumultuous atmosphere to mingle with the whipping wind and raging ocean.

"Master, is there anything I can do?"

Franz looked back and saw Thorn standing in a strong wind, his robe and nightcap whipping around his thin, hunched body.

"Stay back, Thorn!" he cried out, the sea spray from the turbulent waves, wetting his face. "Dana, come away from the edge!"

Just then a strong gust of wind pushed against her, causing her to lose her balance, and she slipped on the loose rocks and tumbled down the side of the cliff. Her scream pierced the night air. She scrambled madly for a foothold, the jagged rocks cutting her

hands as she struggled to hang on to the edge. She looked down at the sharp rocks while the wind lashed at her body, her hands becoming raw, blood-soaked and slippery. Fear such as she'd never known assaulted her, screamed inside her head, flashed images of her battered body as it lay upon the jagged edges of the rocks below. If Franz didn't save her, she would die! Her hands were slipping from the cold rock, she was going to fall, to plunge down onto the sharp, jutting rocks below that formed a mouth.

Franz leaned as far over the precipice as he could, but he couldn't reach her.

"Use your magick, darling. Make me like you," Dana said, urging him on.

"I...God, I can't, Dana. You simply don't know what you're asking."

"You'll let me die?" she sobbed, the wind whistling around her.

"No, Dana, I'm giving you what you want. I'm releasing you. But in doing so I will be changing destiny and you will be snatched from my hands forever."

"Oh, my God, Franz! Don't do this!" she yelled.

"I have to, Dana, it's the only way!"

* * *

When she slipped a little further, a bolt of fear pierced his heart. He quickly lifted himself up, stretched his hands toward the sky and said the words that summoned help. In only a few erratic heartbeats, the

clouds in the sky parted, and a host of gods appeared on the horizon. Chariots, horses, and armored warriors stood in the pathless sky watching him, ready and waiting to do his bidding. Opposite was Death, a dark, hooded figure on a black horse. Not far from him was the devil and his army waiting for the chance to take her soul. They stood restless, their dark horses snorting, and pawing at the clouds. He then looked back toward the chariots of gold and white that stood waiting, ready to transport the gods across the skies. Invincible warriors, snorting horses and restless chariots seemed anxious to go to battle. He hesitated, knowing if he called on them he might lose her for all time. But if he allowed her to die he would see her cast into flames for all eternity. All at once her pleading voice burned his ears.

“Franz, do it, for me, my darling. Change me, make me like you. Now! My hands...they’re slipping, Franz. I don’t know how much longer I can hold on.”

“No! I will not damn your soul!” he growled, knowing he sounded harsh, but he would not sentence her to the life he led, even if it meant he would never see her again. All at once he threw his hands high, as if he could control the elements. A roar came down from the heavens and lightning leaped from his fingertips. He glowed with energy, his movements powerful. In a blink of an eye his costume changed from the one he always wore to a draping red cape and a body stocking of red and gold. The wind lifted his cape, and his deep voice shouted into the wind...

Gender Lightning

*Mighty Thorr, friend of all humans,
Destroy the enemy with your hammer!*

*I see them even now... the ones that
gather*

to bring unto her a downfall!

Build up a powerful wall against death!

*Surround her with it, oh mighty one, lest
she die!*

*Turn might into magick, power into
spell, oh, mighty Thorr...*

and bring her back to me!

"You know that in doing so she could be taken from you," Thorr cried out.

"Yes!" Franz answered back in resounding tones of power.

"Yet you would do this even though it could mean losing her for all time?"

"Yes, mighty Thorr, I must. I love her too much to hold her here."

"Do you choose to have her remember you and suffer?"

"No! She must have no memory of me! Please, mighty Thorr! Do not let her suffer!" he cried, the pain of losing her reaching deep into his heart, causing tears to roll down his face. "Let her live to love again."

"So be it!" Thorr called, then blew, his cheeks growing fat with the mighty wind from his lungs. The ocean heaved, the trees bowed over, the clouds rolled over the sky.

Franz, feeling the mighty wind in his face lowered his head against the elements as if in prayer while his

hands were still outstretched. When he felt the supreme power surge through him he began to glow, his head jerked upward and his voice rang out against the evil.

*By the power of the Supreme Creator
within me, I command...*

It... is... so!

The moment the last three words were uttered, the skies darkened with anger, and the earth went into battle. Thunder, wind and lightning roared across the skies in the form of chariots. The gods wailed out their war cries and strong winds whipped at his cape. And then suddenly the picture of death and destruction was rent in half, being rolled back like a curtain. What appeared in the midst was a golden throne that descended from the heavens, and sitting upon it was The Mighty One of the City of the Gods. His face shone with the light of a thousand suns. His majestic hair and beard flowed around his face and over his chest like the waters of a mighty river. In one hand he held a scepter, and in the other a sealed Book of Fate. With eyes that glowed like two lakes of fire, he surveyed the scene below, then with determined movements, he lifted his scepter and pointed it at Franz, passing judgment upon him.

What was The Mighty One's decision? Had Franz lived up to his expectations, or had he failed miserably?

Because of him... *an innocent woman had been thoughtlessly plucked out of her own time...*

Because of him... *she suffered great mental stress...*

Gender Lightning

Because of him... *she had been made a prisoner of his lusts ...*

Because of him... *she now hung precariously from the face of a cliff...*

Because of him... *a war waged in the heavens...*

Because of him... *someone outside the Realm of the Tarot had learned his secrets...*

Because of him... *his sins were endless!*

He had only one thing to his credit... *he had fallen in love!*

* * *

While lightning bolts cut through the endless skies, and the celestial war continued to wage Dana could feel her hands slipping...slipping...slipping! And then she tumbled into the empty air, feeling the cold push of the wind on her outstretched arms and legs as she plummeted downward, a spine-chilling scream stretching into eternity...until it sounded no more.

Silence.

Deep, dark, heavy silence.

And then from somewhere came a strange fluttering sound. Like the pages of a book being quietly...closed.

* * *

The road was narrow and dark, cicadas serenaded in the nearby brush, and a woman lay silent and still beside a deep crater with a sporty, low-slung, lipstick-

red convertible lying in it. After a few heartbeats her eyes began a gentle flutter, and slowly opened. Lifting her head, she looked around curiously. She sat up slowly, shaking her head, trying to free it of the oppressive sensation she felt. How long had she been out? She looked around. It was still dark, so she couldn't have been out too long. She finally moved to get up and leaned against the car, trying to get herself oriented. As if on cue, in the distance she saw a pair of headlights coming toward her.

"What luck!" she cried out. She quickly pushed herself away from the car and began wildly waving her arms.

The oncoming car slowed down and a pair of electric blue eyes stared out of a swarthy face. "Need some help?"

"Yes!" she cried out. "Thank God you came by. My car is over there in that hole, and my cell phone isn't working."

He pulled over to the side and got out of the car, looking at the deep hole in the blacktop. "How did a hole that size get there?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

He looked around. "Not a very good place to have an accident. Looks like nothing around for miles."

"You're right," she said, staring at him. "You have a strange accent I can't place."

"Don't try. I am English for the most part, but my family comes from Northwest Europe." He looked at her car. "Well, I guess the first thing we need is a tow truck, then a mechanic." He turned back to her with a

warm smile. "I would be happy to take you somewhere."

"Thanks, I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along. I had a plane to catch, but I'm so late now, I'll probably be fired."

"Actually, we're both right on time," came his strange reply. Knowing she didn't understand his remark, he quickly extended his hand. "My name is Franz Staresini."

She looked down at his hand, then slowly, with some hesitation, she took it, jumping as a small shock of electricity sizzled between them.

Lightning!

The electric shock woke something up inside her, triggering a feeling of *déjà vu*. She looked up at him curiously. "Do you know anything about lightning?"

He chuckled. "A little, I suppose, why?"

"I don't know. I was just wondering," she said, looking him over. "You remind me of the hero in a romance novel I'm reading. Anyway, he's a magician, see, who likes to play with lightning. And the heroine... God, she's beautiful!"

"You mean *mystic*, and she's a redhead."

Dana smiled. "Yeah. How did you know?"

"Mmmm, I don't know. Wild guess, I suppose."

"Come on, now. You may be a man, but I'll bet you're a romance freak," she said, a big smile on her face.

He gave her an innocent look, and a slight shrug. "Isn't everyone?"

She laughed, then gave him a sidelong glance.

"Just for kicks, answer a question for me."

"I guess I can do that."

"If..."

"Is this a test?"

"Yes," she said simply, and continued. "If you took me to a very exclusive restaurant, then suddenly had to go to the men's room, when you came back and saw me reading a romance novel, would you get upset?" She gave him an inquiring look while waiting for his answer.

"I might," he said, with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. "Unless you agreed to share the sexy parts with me."

Dana's eyes widened at his answer. "I think I'm going to like you," she said, and smiled. "My name is Dana... Dana Perrin."

Yes, I know, his eyes said as they met hers and held. I've been waiting for you.

For thousands of years.

As the two slowly walked away, Franz looked around, swearing he had heard a faint snap. He knew it could either be the splintering of a twig, or...*the lock of a door!*

About the Author

Audrey Godwin was born and educated in Dallas, Texas, but today resides in Arlington, Virginia. Her books are filled with dark, mysterious plots and intriguing characters that will have you anxiously turning page after page. Her writing style is highly sensuous and she's known for digging deep inside herself to give her readers everything she has. As a result, her books are filled with deep, sultry romance, beautiful heroines, handsome heroes, and enough conflict and action to have you sitting on the edge of your seats. At present she is working on her next novel, *Beautiful Devil*.