

# **LOVE TIMES SEVEN**

By  
Beverly Rae

## *Dedication*

To Terese Ramin, Kristi Studts, Gail Northman, and Valerie Bongards—Thank you for believing in my writing. Terey, you will always have a soft place in my heart as the editor who said “Yes” to publishing my first book.

To Jerry, the love of my life, the man who gives me all the magic I could ever ask for, thank you and remember, I love you always and forever.

*Beverly Rae*

## Chapter One

“Oooh, please. Keep it up. I love what you’re doing to my tit.”

Colin MacLaughlin glanced up, noted the pleasure on the woman’s face and returned to her breast. Continuing to bite and suck her nipple, his hand slid down her stomach, gliding over the smooth area. He inched his fingers closer to her heat, and stopped, knowing what her reaction would be.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“No! Don’t stop now. Please. Don’t tease me.” She thrust her hips higher, encouraging him to go on.

Colin obliged, sinking his middle finger into the waiting wetness. He rubbed her clit, making circles around her treasure. She moaned, arching up for more. Grabbing his hair, she forced his mouth to hers.

His tongue entered her mouth and began matching the rhythm of his finger. Soft, slow circles escalated to vigorous lashings, making the moist warmth of her mouth match the burn between her folds. She exploded, releasing his mouth as she threw her head back to scream.

But he wasn’t finished yet.

Twisting her on top of him, he positioned her over him, letting her large, heavy breasts fall to his face. Again, he attacked her hard nipples, pulling them into his mouth, licking as fast as he could. His hands rode along her back until they found her rounded buttocks and he grabbed her cheeks, forcing her to allow him entry.

“Take me rough. I like it rough.”

Keeping his smile inside, Colin replied. “Whatever you want, baby.”

Pushing her body down, he thrust up, ramming into her as hard as he could. Pumping stronger, he felt his release coming, but wouldn’t allow himself to climax before she did.

Again—he didn’t have to wait long.

Her cry erupted with her body’s shudders, sending sweat droplets falling to his chest. With a low growl, he let go, mixing more moans with hers.

Once the sighs receded and she fell to rest beside him, he turned to face her.

“Say, Jen, I’ve got a proposition for you.”

Her drowsy eyes peered at him and she smiled. A very satisfied, happy smile. “I think you already made me a proposition and I accepted. Do you mean you’re ready to go again?”

He chuckled, pleased with her assumption. “No, this is a different kind of proposal. I know we’ve only dated a few times, but I want you to be my wife.”

Her eyes jumped wide open, hurrying him on before she could say anything. “Whoa. I’m asking you to be my temporary, pretend wife.”

Confusion brought furrows to her brows. “What do you mean by pretend?”

Lifting up on his elbow, he forced a bigger smile. “I’d like you to move in with me and my brothers. See, I need you to help me change them into guys women will want to get involved with. I need a woman like you to teach them how to get... and here’s the tricky part... keep a woman. You know, make them presentable. Maybe even find them wives.”

Her laughter didn’t reassure him.

“You’ve got to be kidding. Those animals? No way, no how. No self-respecting woman would ever want to be with any of them.”

He frowned at her even though he knew the truth when he heard it. “Come on, Jen. They’re not that bad.”

“Oh, get real. They’re Neanderthals. Granted, they’ve got some looks, but once they open their mouths, women will realize how crude they are and they’ll run for the hills. I don’t understand how you turned out civilized and they didn’t.”

He played with a long, blond strand resting on the pillow and planned his next move. “I guess I was too busy keeping a roof over their heads after our dad died to worry about manners and socialization. By the time they entered school, they were set in their ways and I didn’t bother trying to fix them. But I bet you could tame them.”

Her glower said she didn’t buy his flattery. Still, he didn’t give up.

“Okay, so maybe they are complete savages. But I know we can change them, make them into decent men. You know, sort of like an extreme makeover times six. Come on, Jen. Say you’ll move in with me for awhile. Say you’ll help me.”

Jen sat up and pulled on her t-shirt and panties. Turning back to him, she placed a hand on his shoulder and shook her head. “Colin, I really like you, but birds will fly upside down before I’d get involved with your brothers. Why do you think I never come to your home? Because they’re there, lying in wait, ready to pounce on any unsuspecting female.”

Colin fell back on the bed and groaned. “Yeah, I didn’t think you’d go for it. Mary and Courtney turned me down, too.”

Sometimes he just didn’t know when to keep his mouth shut. If her eyes could propel daggers, he’d be an oversized pin-cushion right now.

“You asked other women before me?”

He cringed at the tone of her voice. Hoping to avoid the brewing storm, he flashed his dimples and reached for her. “Hey, babe, I was saving the best for last.”

Snatching up his jeans and hurling them at him, she cursed him as he raced for the door. “Get out, Colin, you bastard. Get the hell out!”

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“Oh, good goddess! Why can’t you leave me alone?”

Kat Carlton glared at her older sister, Lila, while their younger sister cowered by the door. Leave it to timid little Maddy to skulk away when tempers flared. They so often did whenever Lila brought up the subject of marriage.

“Because, my dear sister, I care about you.” Infinite patience resonated from Lila even though her emerald eyes blazed with anger. “I want you to be happily married to a good, powerful wizard. Is that so wrong?” Throwing her strawberry-blond hair off her shoulder, Lila shot Kat a smile brilliant enough to melt icebergs.

Frustration flowed through Kat as she worked to restrain her ire. How many more years could she put up with Lila’s persistent nagging? How many disastrous blind dates could she endure before her sister stopped playing matchmaker? Should she get married to end Lila’s daily harangue?

Well, enough was enough! Now was the time to stop her sister’s constant intrusion into her life.

“Look, ‘my dear sister’, if I’d wanted to get married just to be married, I would have already done so. Instead, I wanted to focus on my company and my career. Besides, lots of women my age are still single. So back off, you b—abe!”

Okay, so maybe “babe” wasn’t the word she’d wanted to use. But “babe” was a whole lot safer.

Lila continued the attack. “Oh, yes, and what a fine career for a witch. Running a dating service for sad, lonely mortals, seeking other pathetic mortals. My own sister, who could choose any of the wonderful wizards we’ve introduced her to, insists on throwing her life away helping lovesick

barbarians. It's positively humiliating." The disgust Lila exuded could knock a Sumo wrestler off his feet.

*Romance Magic, Inc.* was Kat's dream come true. After working for one of the large, national dating services, she'd decided a more intimate, personal service would be a better way to help people look for love. Plus, owning and running her own service allowed her to use a touch of magic whenever two potential soul mates needed a little push. After all, her slogan was *Where Love is Truly Magical*. Yet business had fallen off for the past year, even with her magical help to bring in customers. Now only an immediate influx of cash could divert disaster.

Kat groaned as she ran a hand through her copper locks. "Mortals are not barbarians."

"Of course they are. All you have to do is look at the way they live to know the truth. Besides, Kat, you're over thirty, darling, and not getting any younger. Or better looking."

"What? Thanks a lot!"

Oh, how she wanted to use the other "B" word!

"Well, sometimes the truth has to be said. I mean, sure, you're a pretty woman now, but time and its ravages don't stand still for anyone. Not even a witch. Well, perhaps a bit more for a witch. But sooner or later, we all get older. Time's flitting away, my dear."

"*Hmph.*" Kat threw the list of recently matched dating partners she'd held across the room, letting it bang against a wall. Shuffling over to retrieve it, she bent her body forward and placed her hand on her hip. She added an elderly voice and quipped, "Oh, my. Where is my cane when I need it?"

"Very amusing, Kat. Perhaps your back is hurting because of those extra pounds you're carrying."

The shame and hurt hit her before she could steel herself against the insult. Lila winced, clasping her hand over her mouth.

"Low blow, Lila. Really low." Maddy's tearful eyes jumped from sister to sister.

"Kat, sweetie, I'm so sorry. I wish I could take my words back. You know I would never intentionally hurt you, don't you?"

Fighting to swallow her pain, Kat raked Lila with a vicious glare. "Do I? Can I help it if I wasn't blessed with the same gorgeous body you and Maddy have? You know I've tried to lose weight time and time again. This is me and I'm not going to change. I'm tired of you throwing my weight problem in my face. I have to hide my insecurity about my weight around others, but I shouldn't have to around you. Back off and get used to me being fat and single."

With all the appearance of remorse gone, Lila returned to the offensive. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic. You’re not fat—exactly. You have more to love. Or so the saying goes. But couldn’t we work on the single part?”

Kat turned to Maddy, hoping for help. “Can’t you get her to leave me alone? After all, once she gets me married, it’ll be you she’ll want to fix up.”

Without waiting for the response she knew would never come, she whipped around to face Lila again. “Besides, seems to me you keep forgetting you’re not currently married either. So what’s your excuse?”

Lila examined her fire-engine colored nails before answering in a voice dripping with acid. “Perhaps. But at least I’ve been married twice before. Why, as we speak, two more delectable young males are yearning to sit at my feet. They would jump at the chance to marry me if I that’s what I wanted. So you see, we’re in much different situations.”

“Delectable?” Kat’s snicker sounded harsh to her own ears. “Gee, Lila. I knew you chewed up men on a regular basis, but I didn’t think you actually ate them.” She smiled wider. “Or do you?”

Maddy giggled, but quieted when Lila shot her a cold, hard stare. In a split second, she resumed her subservient manner, ducking her head causing her red bangs to cover her eyes.

“Don’t be crass, darling. You know what I meant. Although, the idea does bring some entertaining images to mind.”

Frustrated, Kat couldn’t even laugh at the sight of Lila’s tongue flicking over her lips with her eyes cast in a faraway haze. But the moment—and the reprieve—didn’t last long.

“Let’s not get sidetracked from the discussion at hand, Kat. Marton is an absolutely fabulous young wizard who’s dying to meet you. He’s very rich, very powerful, and very good in bed.”

Kat’s jaw dropped open. “Are you kidding me? Are you trying to set me up with your leftovers? Eeww!”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. He’s not one of mine. And I don’t recycle my lovers. I’ve been *told* he’s marvelous in bed. Of course, I wouldn’t mind giving him a whirl if things were different. Picture him. Long black hair, bottomless eyes, and a body to make all the witches wiggle in their panties.”

“Gee, thanks a lot for the offer. But, hey, since I’m not snapping him up, feel free to add him to your trophies.” Kat narrowed her eyes at her sister, hoping to reinforce the intensity behind her words.

“Oh, I would, darling. But I’ve already got too many men on my plate. Or should I say in my bed?”

Determined to get her sisters to leave, Kat tried a different tactic. “Well, goody for you. But, if you’ll excuse me, I have a business to run. In fact, I’m expecting someone any moment now. Say ‘bye, ‘bye, girls..” She wished she had an appointment scheduled. But no clients were expected for at least three hours.

Maddy turned to leave, but Lila remained where she stood. “Certainly, darling. Just as soon as we’ve told you about your lunch date.”

“What? What date? Please don’t tell me you set me up again.” But the expression on Lila’s face said it all. “Oh, no. Uh, uh. I am not going on a blind date with this Marton person.”

Kat grabbed her cell phone and shoved it at Lila. “You get on the line and cancel lunch right this instant. Or send him a telepathic message. Do whatever you have to do. Do you hear me, Lila? I am so fed up with you. Who do you think you are? Why do you think you have any right to keep meddling in my life?”

Her stomach churned with indignation. Indignation mixed with a horrible suspicion of impending doom. She could not, would not, let Lila do this to her again.

“Well, I’m sorry, but Marton’s expecting to meet you in one hour at the cozy little Italian restaurant you like so much. An hour should give you ample time to freshen your make-up and slip into something else. Perhaps something a little more appealing?” Lila scanned Kat’s gray slacks and simple white blouse, clucking her tongue in disapproval.

Kat’s mind raced. She’d get out of this date and get her sister off her case. But how? Without thinking, she opened her mouth to speak, not caring what words would come out next.. She’d say anything to get out of this trap.

“But Lila, I can’t. It wouldn’t be right. And it wouldn’t be fair to Marton.”

“And why not? Cut the excuses, Kat. Why can’t you meet Marton?”

Words and thoughts fumbled around in her head. “I—I just can’t.”

Crossing her arms in front of her, Lila stood her ground. “Not an acceptable reason. Tell me why you shouldn’t be walking out the door right this minute.”

“Because I can’t. Because I’ve got another commitment.”

“Not good enough, Kat. You don’t have a real reason, do you? So why can’t you meet with Marton for a bite of lunch and friendly conversation? What harm could it do? Hmm?” Lila’s lips inched wider, reminding Kat of Sylvester right before he pops Tweety Bird into his mouth.

“Because...I’m engaged.”



The following silence would have been deafening if not for the thoughts tearing through Kat's mind. Where did that idea come from? How could she say something so ridiculous? Engaged? Oh, good goddess, what was she thinking?

"Liar."

The tension swirled in the air between the two sisters. Maddy, all too familiar with her sisters' powers, moved quickly and quietly behind Kat's desk.

Trying to bank the fire raging inside her, Kat crossed over to stand inches from Lila's face. Lowering the pitch of her voice, she hissed, "Are you calling me a liar?"

Lila's face was a stone mask. "If the shoe fits..."

"No one calls me a liar."

"No? Then prove it. Let's meet this mystery fiancé."

For a moment, Kat forgot she *was* lying. But she'd die before she ever admitted it to her sisters. "Fine, you will. But it'll take awhile since..."

"Oh, ho! Sounds to me like there's another excuse coming up."

Gee, how she'd love to wipe Lila's smug grin off her face.

"No, no excuse. He's been away on business for awhile and I'm not sure when he's expected to return."

Taking her sister's arm, Kat motioned for Maddy to follow. But Lila cut off her attempt to lead her out of the office.

"Well, then. There's no reason for you to stand up Marton. Until you can produce this so-called husband-to-be, you can take an hour or so for your rendezvous. Your future hubby will never know."

"I told you. I can't. It wouldn't be fair to Marton or to..."

Lila cackled, enjoying Kat's predicament. "Not fair to whom, dear? To your imaginary lover? Really, Kat, aren't you too old to be making up fictitious playmates? At least you could be more resourceful and give him a name. Come on. Don't you even know his name?"

"Of course, I do. His name is—"

"Pardon me, ladies, for the intrusion. My name is Colin MacLaughlin."

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Three pairs of green eyes turned in his direction.

Enjoying the sudden attention, Colin switched on all the charm he possessed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to barge in, but I was looking for...”

“Me, of course.”

The pretty auburn-haired lady flashed a beautiful smile at him as she swept across the room. Grasping his arm in an intimate hug, she gazed up at him. However, the smile on her face didn’t match the anxious glint in her eyes. Still, he wouldn’t mind staring into those eyes for a long, long time.

He placed his hand on hers, hoping to keep her from breaking her hold. Plump mounds of flesh pushed against his arm as she cuddled up to him. His body responded, waking to immediate attention.

Breathing deeply, he caught the fragrance of her, sending more heat through his abdomen. If he didn’t watch out, things could get down right embarrassing.

Who was this gorgeous creature getting so cozy with him? He didn’t mind, of course. Not at all. She could cozy up to him as much as she wanted. No one would hear him complaining.

She broke the connection between them, sharing her attention between the two ladies and him. “Great! Talk about timing! You’re back.”

Again her attention focused on him, making rational thought difficult.

“Sweetie, why didn’t you tell me you were back in town? I wasn’t expecting you at all. Did you stop by to take me to lunch? Or did you have something else in mind?”

The urgent signal she sent him caught him off guard. He answered with the safest response he could think of, unsure of what she expected from him. “Lunch? Sure, we could do lunch..”

Even though he knew he shouldn’t, he couldn’t resist the temptation to speak his thought out loud. “Or would you like to go somewhere more private?”

She blinked once, then twice, but seemed to recover in record speed. Slapping his arm in a coquettish manner, she laughed and quipped, “You are such a dog, aren’t you? Behave yourself before you get me into trouble.” Her eyes narrowed, sending him an unmistakable warning.

Ah, he could see steel in those cool, green orbs. He was a pushover for a lady with spunk. Colin grinned, recognizing a challenge when he saw one.

“But, baby doll, you know a man has to keep trying. After all, how can I resist you?”

Now with the warning in her eyes came the threat in her thin smile. “I’m asking you to be nice.”

“I thought I was being nice.” Colin reinforced his grin, knowing he was getting under her skin.

“I thought you appreciated my attempts at humor. Or do you appreciate my other skills more? Ow!”

Insincere concern plastered her face. “Oh, I’m sorry. Did I accidentally nick you?”

While rubbing the skin above his elbow, he kept the charm going. “Seemed more like a bite than a nick. So, if you’re wanting to bite something, I can suggest a better place on my body. But remember, two can play at that game. Would you like...”

She grimaced, making her face scrunch together, and he coughed to cover his chuckle.

Wheeling around to face the other two women, she interrupted him, speaking a bit louder than necessary.

“Lila, Maddy, I’d like you to meet my fiancé, Colin.”

Did she say fiancé? His mouth dropped open to respond, but those lush green pools locked onto him, pushing away his surprise. Wonderful, fantastic, pleading eyes. Eyes any man would find tempting. Eyes that could make a man say anything.

“Uh, hi.” He stretched out his hand in greeting. “I’m Colin. Colin MacLaughlin. And you are...?”

A strange, tight giggle escaped the woman beside him. “Colin, you silly. These are my sisters, Lila and Maddy. You remember my telling you about them, don’t you?”

“Um, yeah. Sure.” His hand remained in the air until he realized neither woman offered hers.

He swallowed as the stunning woman sending him penetrating looks moved closer. Too close. One long fingernail traveled down his chest, pausing right above his belt buckle. The heat he’d felt earlier evaporated as her touch left him cold.

This woman made him uneasy. The way she examined him made him feel less like a man and more like a lab specimen. Of course, becoming anyone’s fiancé, especially a total stranger’s, should make him uneasy. Yet, for some strange reason, it didn’t.

“So you’re Kat’s future husband.”

Her attitude made him want to defend the woman she’d called Kat. “You heard the lady.”

“I don’t recall Kat ever mentioning you.”

What was with this woman? Who did she think she was anyway?

“No? Well, we haven’t been together very long.”

Her scrutiny doubled. “And how long have you known each other?”

This woman ticked him off big time. The more she said, the less he liked her.

“Long enough.”

Good. He’d hit a nerve with his answer.

“Lila, back off.” Kat’s voice resonated irritation.

“In a minute. But first, let’s have a see.” Moving with deliberate casualness, she circled around him, giving him the impression of being a bull at auction. A bull she wanted to castrate. “Hmm. Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“Wow, thanks, Lila. You’re not so bad yourself.” Speaking about her appearance and not her personality, of course.

“Damn, Lila, you don’t have to be so rude.”

His future wife’s grip on his arm began to hurt.

Lila stopped in front of them and raised a questioning eyebrow. “I grant you, he’s not hard on the eyes. But I don’t sense anything at all magical about him. So what spell did you use?”

Magical? Sure, he’d been called a lot of things before—hot, devilish, amazing—but never magical. Who did she think he was? David Copperfield?

Perplexed, Colin glanced at the curvaceous woman clinging to his arm, and watched as a myriad of expressions zipped across her face. Kat? An unusual name. He liked unusual names and unusual women. Still, he remained silent.

“I don’t know what you mean. Colin is a nice, normal, average man. You know, Charleston’s Mr. Nice Guy on the street. Not anyone special.”

“Hey, thanks for the high praise. You two are doing wonders for my ego.”

A pale pink hue crept across her cheeks. The sprinkling of freckles that ran over the bridge of her nose made him want to reach out and touch them.

“I’m sorry. You know what I meant.” She patted his arm, trying to placate him.

He started to say more, but the atmosphere between the two ladies changed, like a block of ice cracking open to expose a roaring blaze. In fact, if he didn’t know better, he’d swear he’d seen something—a blue sizzle?—pass between them. Lila’s demeanor grew even more hostile and the temperature in the room jumped ten degrees higher.

He flinched as Lila grabbed Kat’s arm and pulled her to the other side of the room. Yet, although he could tell they still argued, they kept their voices too low for him to understand any of their exchange.

## Chapter Two

“Are you telling me he’s *mortal*?”

Kat scowled at her sister. “Calm down. You’re going to blow a fuse if you don’t take it easy. And yes, Colin is mortal.”

Maddy squeezed into the huddle. “Kat, what are you thinking? A mortal? Granted, he’s gorgeous, but really, have you lost your common sense?”

“So it would be better if I’d used a spell to conjure him?” She lowered her voice even more. “Keep your voices down, you two. He doesn’t know I’m a witch and I’m not telling him. Not yet.”

“You’re kidding me. He’s mortal and he doesn’t know you’re a witch? Please, Kat, how long do you think you can keep such vital information secret? Until the wedding? Or when you’re in bed on the honeymoon? Or how about when the kids begin changing apples into puppies? Lila clucked her tongue in disapproval.

“Quit clucking your tongue at me. I’ll tell him when I darn well think he’s ready. And don’t you two go squealing on me!”

“Maybe we should. We’d get rid him fast, I’m sure. Then you could get your head straight again.” Before Kat could stop her older sister, Lila waved at Colin and shouted, “Oh, Colin, dear. You do know what Kat is, don’t you?”

Slapping her hand over Lila’s mouth, Kat shook her head at him. “Never mind. She thought you didn’t know I’m a Methodist. But I’m open to other religions, too.”

Lila thrust Kat’s hand away from her, spitting her words in anger. “Don’t you ever touch me like that again, little sister.”

“Then watch what you say to him.” Her shoulders tightened, sending shooting pains up her neck. She’d have a migraine in no time.

Lila grasped her hand and squeezed hard. “Darling, I know I’ve been riding you for years to get married, but I never meant you needed to stoop so low as to marry a mortal. Even a hottie of a mortal.”

Exasperated, she saved her hand from Lila’s death-grip and shook it to restore some of the life in it. “There’s nothing wrong with marrying a mortal. I don’t happen to believe the way you do about

them. In fact, I often prefer socializing with them over the company of witches. And as far as Colin is concerned, he's handsome, funny, intelligent, and a good—"

A gasp from Maddy stopped her short. "You had sex with him? Before the wedding?"

Both Lila and Kat rolled their eyes at Maddy.

"Oh, grow up, Mad. Mortals are fine for a little harmless dalliance. Sometimes they're even quite inventive in bed. But marry one? Never in a thousand years."

Lila's nostrils flared, making Kat think of a dragon on the verge of spewing flames. "For your information, I was going to say, 'a good man.' Face facts, ladies. I'm marrying this mortal and there's nothing you can do about it."

Shoving her sisters aside, Kat strode back to Colin. Yet her determination evaporated into thin air. Was she nuts? Why did this stranger keep going along with her charade? And more to the point, what now?

Deciding any action was better than no action, Kat reached for Colin's shirt and yanked him forward, slamming her mouth against his. Strong arms wrapped around her, crushing her body close to his.

"Oh, my! Lila, do something!"

Maddy's cry echoed in Kat's ear. As if in a dream, she heard her sister's response.

"I most certainly will do something. Let's go, Maddy. We have work to do."

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"Wow, this is some dating service."

The fog drifted away from Kat, allowing her brain to function again. Now if her heart would step back into normal rhythm, she might be able to think clearly. At least her headache was gone.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I said I'm loving the service so far. Tell me, what do I get when I hire you?"

Crystal blue eyes sparkled down at her while dimples fought against the dark stubble on his chin. Darkness ran along the side of his strong jaw, drawing her gaze back toward the thick, black hair framing his face. Lowering her eyes, she wondered where a different trail of darkness might lead her.

"Look, Mr. MacLaughlin..."

“Aw, Kat, why so formal? After all, we’re engaged to be married. You know, husband and wife, white picket fence, two-point-five kids?” Pearly teeth glistened when he grinned at her. “You do want kids, don’t ya, dear?”

“Yes. No. I mean, keep your nose in your own business.”

She pushed away from his chest, stepping back several paces. “Look, Mr. MacLaughlin, I appreciate you going along with the joke on my sisters, but you know it was only a joke. Your involvement is now finished. So let’s get down to business. Can I help you find a date?”

Shoving her blouse back into her skirt—now how had her shirt become untucked?—Kat moved behind her desk and picked up a New Client Application form. “If you’ll take a moment to read and complete this application, we can get started.”

Distance. She’d better keep her distance from this man.

“I think we’ve already started, haven’t we?”

Damn that twinkle in his eyes. Maybe distance wouldn’t be enough.

Keeping her eyes diverted from his, Kat continued, determined to ignore his remark. “Mr. MacLaughlin—”

“Colin.”

“All right. Colin.” She cleared her throat and kept talking. “I’m sure once you’re enrolled, you’ll find the whole process very easy and quite pleasant.”

Did he move closer without her realizing it? His presence next to her sent off alarms, while the heat radiating off his tall, muscular frame beckoned her nearer. Chancing a quick peek up at him, the force of his expression caught her off guard. She squirmed under his intense scrutiny and coughed, trying to dislodge the lump in her throat.

“Kat, put the paper down.”

Her hand drifted down, releasing the paper to float to the floor. Taking her hand, he guided her to the nearby couch.

“Kat?”

She nodded without knowing why.

“It’s apparent you’ve got a situation on your hands. For some reason, you want your sisters to think you’re engaged. And lucky me, I happened to walk through the door at exactly the right moment. Have I got it straight so far?”

Again, she nodded. Both her brain and voice went AWOL, missing in action when she needed them the most. He appeared not to notice her lack of response and continued talking.

“Okay, then. I am more than willing to be your pretend fiancé. I’ll even do all the things a groom should do like accompanying you to parties, lunching with your sisters, whatever. At least, everything except actually getting married, of course.”

“You will?”

She didn’t want to think about later. Her lie satisfied her sisters today, but what about the next day, and the next, and so on. Should she continue to lie? Could she continue to lie? For a second she imagined a day without Lila’s constant harping.

“I take it your happy expression means you like my idea?”

Something clicked in her brain and her mind snapped back to attention. She needed to take charge of this situation before things got out of hand.

Scooting to the other side of the couch, she swiveled so she could look straight at him. “Why are you so eager to help me? What’s in this for you?”

He chuckled, a deep, throaty kind of laugh sensual enough to make a woman’s knees weak.

“Other than getting to spend time with you? Kat, I’m glad you asked that question.”

A nervous tickle ran up Kat’s spine. “I knew you’d have an ulterior motive.” Figures. This type of man, even a mortal one, didn’t spend time with girls who looked like her.

“Well, yes, I did come here with a purpose.” He leaned forward, capturing her curiosity.

“I assumed you came here to get matched with a date.”

“Yes and no.”

Curiosity warred with wariness, tearing Kat between the two emotions. “I think you need to explain.”

“I came to find a wife.”

Her furrowed brow told him he needed to clarify.

“Let me explain. I came here hoping to find a lady to do a special job for me.”

“What?” Kat jumped up from the couch and wasted no time in getting away from him.

“Wow. You’re fast for someone—”

“Someone like what, Mr. MacLaughlin?” *Like a fat woman?*

Who was this guy? Good goddess, she wished she’d never lied.

He sensed they weren’t on the same wavelength. “For someone walking backward. What did you think I was going to say? And the name is Colin, remember?”

She knew her surprise showed on her features, and wished she could bring back the scowl she’d sported moments earlier. Scowls were always better to keep odd people away from you.



If only her face wasn't an open book. Wearing your emotions out in the open for anyone to see led to problems in life. Especially in business. Especially when dealing with a strange man.

But she rallied and moved the discussion back to safer ground. She knew she needed to keep this conversation professional.

"Oh. Okay. Then what sort of 'special job' did you have in mind? I run a legitimate dating service and not one of those other places. Our services do not include questionable activities such as late-night booty calls or anything else you can get down in the red-light side of town."

"Hold up. Booty calls? Red light side? I didn't have anything so exciting in mind. 'Though the booty call idea isn't half bad."

Talk about being fast. He enjoyed this conversation more than she did. Not to mention the entertainment he got watching her reactions. She decided to set the record straight.

"As I said, we are not that kind of business." Kat sat down again and leaned back against the cushion, putting more space between them.

"Sorry, my sense of humor isn't always appreciated. So, back to being serious. What I need is a woman who can help put my house in order. You know, someone to handle some light housekeeping and pose as my wife. This would be a business situation with no fooling around in the deal."

She paused, not sure she'd heard him correctly. "I run a dating service, Colin. If you need a maid, I suggest you call a cleaning service. You don't have to be involved in a relationship to get your house cleaned."

"I agree. But I'm needing someone with more skill than wielding a mop and dustpan. I figured this type of agency was as close as any to the kind I'm needing. After all, I realize my request is rather unique. So here I am."

"Mr. MacLaughlin—"

"Colin."

"Colin, I don't think any of my agency's female clients would be interested in what you're proposing. In fact, I don't think I could, in good conscience, even present this to them."

"No problem. You see, I'm thinking we're in similar predicaments. I need a woman to pretend to be my wife and you need me to pretend to be your fiancé."

Confused, she waited for more information. She was sure she'd misunderstood him.

Not giving her more time to mull over his words, he continued, "This would be a platonic situation for which I will pay all expenses and a hefty roll of cash for your trouble. However, this

situation warrants full time, round the clock attention, so I'll need you to live in my home and be on call at night. For business purposes only, as I said."

"This all sounds very intriguing. But I don't see my situation as a continuing problem."

Raising one eyebrow, he pressed on. "Really? Seems to me your sisters were intent on getting you hooked up with some guy named Marton, and you were doing your best to get out of the situation. And not doing a very good job of it until I came along. Which is how I became your hubby-to-be."

With every ounce of control in her she tried to keep her emotions hidden. However, she knew distrust flickered across her face. "How long were you standing outside my door before you decided to make your presence known?"

"Not long. But I couldn't help overhearing something about an imaginary lover. I felt guilty about eavesdropping, so I popped into the room."

Kat twisted a lock of hair around her finger, resorting to a nervous habit. Could this scheme of his work? His money would give her business the positive cash flow it so urgently needed. Plus, she wouldn't be defenseless, especially against a mortal.

"True, you did save me from Lila's latest set-up. But I don't know if I could play wife to a total stranger. What sort of situation is this?"

He paused, preparing what to say. "I think you'd be great at playing pretend." The corners of his mouth curved a bit. "After all, you seemed to handle playing my lover quite well a few minutes ago."

Kat shot him a look, making certain he'd keep to the business at hand.

"As for my problem, it's a personal one. You see, my brothers require an education I can't give them. Our mother hasn't been around for a number of years now and they've grown a bit lax in the manners department. Okay, more than a bit lax. What they need is to see how a man and a woman should relate to each other. Plus, I figured you could use your expertise to find them dates which would, hopefully, evolve into serious relationships. In fact, I'll pay you a nice, big bonus for each one you can get to an altar."

"But I could help them with their, uh, problem right here. I guess I don't understand why I have to move in with you."

He cleared his throat and continued, "Working from here would be okay, but we have a limited amount of time. I'm planning on moving out of town in a month and I want them settled. Think of it as a boot camp for the love-challenged."

Flashing her a million dollar smile, he waited for her answer. If the business wasn't in such bad shape, she'd never consider his proposition. Still, her situation was dire, too, and desperate times called for extreme measures.

Glancing around, he added, "Your business appears to be rather slow right now, so maybe your associates could handle the office while you're helping me?"

He'd hit the nail right on the head, all right. With the scant one or two possible clients a day showing up, Melanie, her assistant, could handle things.

"Besides, you can always come to work during the day if you want."

Taking a deep breath, Kat forced herself to think through his offer. She needed the money in the worse way. And again, being a witch, she could handle any unforeseen events. She loved her job and finding happiness for others made any hardship bearable.

"Hey, all I want you to do is to act like you're my wife. I want to send a strong, clear message. You know, a message of solid relationship, respect, and marriage. But once you complete your mission, so to speak, then you go your way and I go mine. And in the meantime, I'll play the dutiful fiancé and convince your sisters to let you live your life the way you want. You'll get your sisters off your back and make good money, too. What could be better?"

She could hear the urgency in his voice. "Well, maybe..."

Colin leaned closer to Kat and took her hand in his two. "Please, Kat, you'd be doing me a tremendous favor. I'd be in your debt forever."

She'd always been a sucker for a pair of big, blue eyes and a set of dimples. But play his fake wife? Sure, she would love to stop Lila and her schemes, and no doubt she needed the money. Money to keep *Romance Magic, Inc.* alive and kicking for awhile longer. Didn't she always say she'd do anything to make her business a success?

Sighing, Kat returned Colin's unwavering gaze. Staying with an unknown man, a very desirable man, spelled trouble. But she could handle him. Right?

She bit her lip, trying to gauge his trustworthiness. Of course, she knew she could handle any bad circumstances if they occurred. But could she handle the *good* circumstances? Like living with such a yummy hunk of a man?

His hands squeezed hers prompting her to give an answer.

"All right, Mr. MacLaughlin, you've got yourself a wife. But I'm not doing any housework."

"Great! Wonderful!"

He startled her by hopping up and taking her along with him. Grinning at her now, he hugged her close, almost squeezing the breath out of her.

“Honey, you’ve got to remember to call me Colin. So can you move in tonight?”

## Chapter Three

“How did I ever let you talk me into moving in with you?”

“I guess I cast my spell on you.”

She laughed at the thought. Maybe he could work a spell, but she doubted he’d used magic. Unless she counted the magic of his charm.

“To be honest, I think you took pity on me.”

How could you pity and lust for a man at the same time?

His house was amazing. Amazing, but not in a good way.

Kat and Colin stood outside the two-story Tudor. He held her one suitcase while she got her first view of her new, temporary home. Green paint peeled up in spikes from the rails on the porch where dried-up ferns hung drooping overhead. Unattended shrubs surrounded the house on both sides, while a planter filled with hardened dirt sat by the side of the garage. An enormous crack ran the length of the driveway.

She wished she were back in her new, albeit tiny, studio apartment. She longed to be back home, curled up on her sofa, sipping tea, and watching her favorite television show. Instead, here she stood ready to enter Horror House.

“So, shall we go in?”

Without waiting for her response, he started up the steps to the front door. She waited while he tried to twist the key in the door.

“Uh, the door gets stuck sometimes,” he said with a sheepish grin.

She nodded, accepting this little delay. Good or bad, she was now a part of this crazy scheme.

At long last, the door swung open and he turned to her with open arms. “I’m ready to carry my bride across the threshold.”

Kat gulped, imagining his powerful arms around her as he carried her into the house.

*I wish.*

“Sorry, but you’ve got to be kidding. Even if the idea wasn’t ridiculous to begin with, I wouldn’t allow you to lift me. What are you trying to do? Hurt yourself?”

He cocked his head to the side and said something she’d never forget. “What? You? I could carry you for miles.”

A butterfly fluttered in her stomach while she studied his face. Was he serious? Did he not have twenty/twenty vision? Good goddess, he *was* serious.

“No, thanks. I’m a liberated woman. I’ll walk across on my own steam.”

An expression—disappointment?—flashed across his features. Bowing down, he picked up her suitcase and started to go inside. Catching his arm, she smiled at him, hoping he’d understand.

“Really, Colin. I do appreciate the offer.”

A few early laugh-lines crinkled around his eyes. “Sure, no problem. Well, no time like the present. After you, sweetie.”

Kat surveyed the living room before her. The room was the messiest room she’d ever seen with empty pizza cartons, beer cans, clothes and God knows what else scattered on top of and underneath every piece of furniture.

“Sorry it’s such a mess. I didn’t have time to pick up before you got here. Everything under control at your place?”

Taking her eyes off the disorder was almost impossible. Like trying to ignore a ten-car pile-up on the highway. She didn’t want to see the wreckage, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away. Somehow, though, she managed to face Colin.

“I’d suggest getting a backhoe and taking the whole room to the dump.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s a pigsty, but it’s home. Did you hear my question?”

Kat answered, shaking her head in disbelief. “All taken care of. My neighbor is going to look after my cat, Scarlett, at night. I’ll check in on her whenever I pop over during the day.”

The amused expression on his face was hard to miss.

“What’s so funny?”

“You and your pet. A Kat having a cat as a pet. Funny, isn’t it?”

“Not when you’ve heard it a zillion times.”

“Kind of an unusual name for a cat, though.”

She shrugged at the too-familiar comment. “I’m a big *Gone With the Wind* fan.”

Colin nodded as he threw his cap on top of a nearby lamp. “Okay, got it. No more cracks about your cat or your name.”

Frowning at the cap, she added, “By the way, Kat is short for Kathryn.”

“Right. Kathryn. Both are pretty names for a pretty woman.”

Surprised, Kat cast him a suspicious look. Was this another compliment? No. She preferred to accept his remark as a polite statement. Better to stay on safer ground, even if it was a whole lot dirtier.

“I’m almost afraid to ask, but how about showing me around the rest of the house?”

Dimples flashed at her. “That’s what I like. A girl with guts.”

Watching where they stepped, they picked their way through the rest of the house. She wouldn’t have believed it, but here was the proof right in front of her. The whole house was a disaster. The authorities should condemn this house. Or at the very least, put it on a television show where they’d send in a crew of specialists to clean up the mess. Where was Oprah when you needed her?

“What are you thinking?”

His velvety voice jerked her back from her thoughts. Twice she tried to speak and twice she failed.

But her silent judgment didn’t seem to bother him. “That bad, huh? I guess I’ve gotten used to it. But don’t worry, you’ll get used to all the clutter, too.”

She frowned, wrinkled her nose, and imagined the expression on her face. But, of course, he didn’t have to.

“I guess I didn’t realize how bad the place looked. But what with working fifty or more hours every week, I don’t have time for housework.”

“You never did tell me. What sort of business are you in?”

Maybe she should have asked the question before now. Being near him scrambled her brain, discarding her usual rational nature. She concentrated on him, hoping to block out the disarray around her.

“My brothers and I create software, animated computer games, for various companies.”

His answer astonished her. With his muscular physique, she’d assumed he worked with his hands. The thought made her heart skip a beat. She’d always thought techno nerds were off-beat and weird. Weird, but safe. Yet this guy was nothing like any nerd she’d ever known. Before she could question him further, he continued the tour.

“Let’s keep going.”

“Lead on, Colin. I don’t want to get lost in this jungle. Not when—”

Her shriek and pointed finger spun him around to see behind him. A large, gray mouse sat munching on a piece of hamburger bun. Unperturbed by the humans, the mouse continued eating, his black, beady eyes watching the ruckus they were creating.

“There’s a rat in your house.” Kat tried backing away, but ran into an enormous pile of newspapers. “No way on Earth am I staying in a place with rats.”

“Chester!” Colin dropped her luggage and scooped the mouse onto his palm. “Chester’s not a rat. He’s a pet. Here, say hello to him.” He thrust the rodent closer to Kat.

“Get it away from me!” She held her purse in front of her, making shooing motions. “If the rodent stays, I go. Make your choice.”

“How about a compromise? If Chester stays in his cage in the garage, will you stay?”

She considered his suggestion and decided she should meet him halfway. “Okay. But he stays in the cage whenever I’m here, right?”

“Agreed. Sorry, Chester, but you’re going to have to stay in the garage for awhile.”

Afraid of what she might see, she peeked over the top of her purse. “In a very secure, escape-proof cage?”

Colin shook his head at Chester before agreeing. “As tight as a prison. Sorry, Chester. Into the slammer for you.”

She followed them out to the garage, wanting to see Chester confined, and regretted it the moment she stepped into the room. She gawked, amazed that the garage was a bigger mess than the house. Kat scanned the atrocity and walked in with great care, hoping to avoid running into any more “pets.”

“I’m sorry, Colin, I don’t mean to be rude. But I have to ask? Don’t you and your brothers ever clean the place? By the way, how many brothers do you have?” Again, she perused the scene, putting her back to Colin.

He was gone when she turned around.

Muttering to herself, she again contemplated how anyone could live in all this disorganization. Maybe, just maybe, the upstairs would be cleaner.

Kat ascended the stairs and walked straight into more clutter. The disaster in the hallway included items ranging from various sporting equipment to one huge dog crate. “Whew. How big was that dog? I hope he’s not around.”

Not wanting to inspect all the rooms—could her stomach take any more?—she stood and listened for any sound Colin might make. After a moment, she heard shuffling noises from the room to her right and walked toward it.

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“Hey, what happened to you? One minute we’re talking and the next, you’re gone.”



He jerked his head around to find her standing in the doorway. “Sorry, I figured I’d bring your luggage up and get you settled. Then we can have a talk about the finer points of our arrangement.”

Anything to avoid telling her about his *six* brothers. At least for a little while yet.

He watched her walk around the bedroom, taking in everything. Occasionally, she would pause, pick up a book or knick-knack, and then replace it without a word. Her red-copper hair glistened, bouncing in the perky way short hair sometimes does. The dress she wore was loose, but her many attributes still showed through. Her body, a body made of softness and curves, was perfect for grabbing hold and hanging on.

“Thank you for cleaning this room. I wouldn’t have pictured you as someone who would have knick-knacks, Colin.”

He forced his mind on her words instead of her shapely form. “I’m not. Those are some of my mother’s things. I thought maybe they’d make the room seem more inviting for a woman.”

She stopped for moment as if contemplating his remark. “That was very thoughtful of you. Does your mother live in the area?”

He hated this conversation. Hated explaining about his past. Somehow it never got any easier even after all these years.

“No. My mother left us a long time before my father died. He died in car accident years ago.”

Seeing the sympathy on her face, he hurried on. “It was my eighteenth birthday and the worst day of my life. But I survived. The past is over now, dead and gone.”

He swiveled away from her, not wanting to see her reaction. Instead, he concentrated on the crammed closet, moving clothes aside to make room for hers. The sound of her voice, gentle and filled with emotion, rocked him to the core.

“Oh, Colin, I’m so sorry. Those times must have been hard for you. So did you go to live with relatives?”

Wincing, he stalled yet again. “Uh, you know what? If it’s okay by you, I don’t want to talk about this any more.” For emphasis, he turned back to her, pitching the full force of his smile at her.

Taken back by his sudden change of mood, she paused, took a breath, and then nodded. “Sure. I understand. Let’s talk about our arrangement now, okay? I mean, we should get our story straight before I meet your brothers.”

He wasn’t sure how he kept his smile in place, but somehow he did it. Gesturing to the bed, the only piece of furniture in the room they could sit on, Colin sat on the cover and patted the spot next to him.

She glanced around, searched for another place to sit, and then settled next to him. Laying her hands in her lap, she appeared to be waiting for instructions.

“Okay, then. Here’s how I see this arrangement working. As I said, my brothers are here most of the time because we work out of the house. So we’ll tell everyone we got married by a judge last weekend after a whirlwind romance. Since we met and got hitched so fast, people will understand if we don’t know each other very well. Our quick marriage will help cover up the little mistakes we may make. Sound good so far?”

She nodded, her eyelashes fluttering as she looked him up and down. Damn, he loved those eyes!

“Agreed. But once I’ve helped your brothers, I get paid in cash and I’m on my way. Plus, whenever we’re around my sisters, you act the part of the caring fiancé. Correct?”

It was his turn to nod. But he knew the hard part of the discussion was coming. “I guess now we need to decide on the sleeping arrangements.”

Friendly green eyes erupted into emerald lava. “Nothing to decide there. You’ll be sleeping in another room.”

“Now take it easy. Let’s talk about this. We’re supposed to be the perfect married couple, right? My brothers might find separate sleeping quarters a bit strange. I mean, after all, they know me well.”

He could see the volcano in her eyes bubbling closer to the surface while her luscious lips drew together in a thin line. Yet, he couldn’t refrain from touching them. Laying his finger on her lips, he shook his head.

“Now hang on a second and let me elaborate. We have to sleep in the same room. Otherwise, the others might have questions. However, I’ll sleep on the floor. Trust me, your virtue will remain intact.”

*Or maybe not.*

The errant idea broke his train of thought and he tried to bring his mind back to business, but failed.

His gaze shifted from her eyes to where his fingers remained, roaming lightly across her bottom lip, pulling them apart. She opened her rose-colored lips a bit more, bringing her tongue out to graze his fingertips. The touch sent pleasurable pain running up his arm.

He brought his mouth to hers then, whisper-soft, as the tip of his tongue began playing with hers. She sighed, giving him encouragement. He no longer cared about his promise.

Placing his hand on her shoulder, he pressed, asking her to lie back with him. As she did, her coppery locks flattened against the bedspread, sending a spray of color against the blue background. His heart jumped, along with his sudden intake of breath.

“You’re beautiful.”

The words, so effortless and true, appeared to surprise her.

He stroked her cheeks, wondering how such a creature could not know her own beauty. “I’ve wanted to do this from the first moment I saw you.”

Moving his hands down her throat, he paused, inches away from her breasts. He searched her face for any signs to stop, knowing he was ready to break his vow. Finding none, he lifted her dress away from her chest, allowing his hand room to explore.

She moaned a small, sweet sound that made his pulse pound harder, but made no move to hinder him.

He slid his hand over the top of her bra, resting when his fingers found her nipple. He played with her nub moving his thumb in slow tender circles, wishing his mouth could replace his hand.

Wide eyes turned a darker green, but again, she didn’t resist.

He kissed her again and tasted her moist breath. This time she returned his advances more with her own eager lashings. His tongue explored hers and she sucked, drawing him in. Candy never tasted as sweet.

Yet, even as he reveled in her, he allowed his heart an opening, giving access to a place he kept sealed deep within his soul.

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She’d started to protest, but couldn’t. Maybe he possessed a magic all his own, after all. Try as she could, she couldn’t get the words out of her mouth.

When he placed his fingers on her lips, she lost all ability to think, to reason. And the incoherence continued.

She opened her mouth, pushing her tongue to his fingertips. His hand shook, giving her a small thrill of victory.

However, the conquest became his when his mouth closed on hers, his tongue seeking hers, capturing hers. She no longer cared about his promise.

Lying back with him, her hands glided over his hardened shoulders, pulling him closer. Strong, muscles rippled under his shirt, making her throat tighten at his response. She moved her breasts in reckless abandon, silently pleading with him to move his hand lower.

“You’re beautiful.”

His words stunned her, making her think unwanted thoughts. *He thinks I’m beautiful? How can he? I bet he says the same thing to all his women.* Ruthlessly, she shoved the suspicious part of her aside, preferring to believe the unbelievable.

She closed her eyes when he began stroking her cheeks and listened to words she’d longed to hear.

“I’ve wanted to do this from the first moment I saw you.”

Smothering the argument inside her, she welcomed the husky voice, delighting in the cocoon of silk surrounding her. His hand skimmed downward and paused above her breasts. Her breathing stopped, not wanting to discourage him with any movement. *Please, don’t stop.*

She held her breath until he moved on, slipping under her dress and on top of her bra. She gasped and prayed the sound wouldn’t dissuade him.

Sparks of lightning burst in her chest at the roughness of his thumb on her nipple. Even the fabric of her bra couldn’t temper the heat coming from his palm lying against her breast. Slow, firm pressure gave rise to her nub, sending waves of warmth speeding through her body.

She opened her eyes and found him watching her. But not for long.

Bending to her, he kissed her, not giving her time to exhale. He entered her mouth again, taking what he wanted.

Still her heart wanted more, but was afraid to ask. Afraid to want. Afraid to hope.

Her mind began screaming, almost as if she’d been gone and only now returned.

Pushing him away, she tried to inhale and found it difficult to get air.

“Stop.”

The command came out weak and breathy, more a plea than a demand.

Her reason struggled against her desire, and finally won.

“We’ve got to stop. We can’t let this go on.”

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“Well, look here, guys. I think we’ve got a party going on.”

Shock sent Kat jerking upward, shifting her attention to the bedroom door.

Six very big, burly men grinned back at her. Six young men all with dark hair and dimples. And three of them looked exactly alike!

Whipping her head back to Colin, she started to speak, but wasn't fast enough.

"Colin, bro, so who's your playmate? And when do your brothers get a turn?"

Were all these men his brothers?

Fearing the worst, she turned back to Colin, expecting an answer to her unspoken question.

Annoyance filtered through his calm features. "Luke, keep your trap shut."

The one called "Luke" guffawed, ignoring Colin's instructions. "Oh, come on, bro. That's no way to treat your brother. Besides, never hurts to ask. No harm done."

"Maybe so."

Yet Colin's whole demeanor changed. He stood now, legs apart and fists on his hips.

An uneasiness crept through her.

"You guys weren't supposed to be back yet. What happened to heading up to the lake?"

A different one answered this time.

"Weather may be taking a dive up there, so we decided to wait until next weekend." He sent her a wicked, sly smirk. "Besides, I think we could have more fun here."

His brothers howled and snickered in a very disturbing way that sent a warning through her.

She readied herself for what might come. Rising to Colin's side, she gripped his arm to steady herself.

"Do you want to introduce me to these, uh, gentlemen?"

A couple of them actually giggled at her.

"Nope." But seeing her look, he continued. "But I guess I'd better. Kat, I'd like you to meet my brothers. Guys, do your roll call."

One of the biggest men of the group started, assuming a leadership role. "I'm Luke. Kat, did you say? Neat name. You Colin's new babe?"

She ignored his question and waited for the rest to speak. One by one, the men introduced themselves.

"I'm Adam. I'm older than Luke, but younger than Nick and Colin. Nick doesn't talk much." He indicated the larger man standing next to him who grunted his greeting. Both would have made outstanding linebackers for any pro football team.

A smaller version of Colin raised his hand. “I’m Jack. Me, John and James are triplets.” At a push from the man identified as John, he added, “Pretty obvious, huh?”

She tugged on Colin’s arm, still holding out a whisper of hope. “All of these men are your brothers? All six of them?”

Most of the six laughed, while a couple tried to cover their amusement with coughs. Tearing her eyes away from the group, Kat stared up at Colin, with their laughter ringing in her ears. His glower gave her the answer she sought.

Adam shot Colin an unmistakable signal. “Colin, man, from the expression on her face, I think you’ve got some explaining to do.”

## Chapter Four

“Yes, Colin, start explaining.”

The hairs on Kat’s neck rose, sending a shiver along her shoulders. Why didn’t he tell me he has six—*oh, good goddess!*—six brothers? The pain of deception and betrayal, mixed with a myriad of other not-so-pleasant emotions, raced through her mind.

Colin’s expression was unreadable. It wasn’t the countenance she expected to see from a liar. She wanted regret or remorse, or *something*. But Colin appeared to be unperturbed.

“Yes, Colin. The lady deserves some explanations. Start talking the slick talk, bro.” Nick chuckled and crossed his arms. “We’re gonna enjoy this.”

“You never once told me about your six brothers.”

“Maybe we should get my brothers out of here before we start this discussion.” Colin jerked a finger at his siblings. “Out, guys, Kat and I deserve some privacy.”

One of the triplets—was it James?—started to leave until Adam grabbed his collar and dragged him back. “No way, Colin, we’ve got a right to stay and listen. Besides, this story’s going to be good.”

Colin growled at his brothers. “I told you animals to get the hell out and I mean it. I’m going to have some time alone with my wife whether you like it or not.”

A bomb would have made a softer explosion than the clamor set off by the men. All six began speaking at once.

“Wife?”

“No way.”

“What? Where? Why didn’t you say anything to us?”

“This is hysterical!”

“Oh, my God. Hell must have frozen over.”

“Shit!”

*My thoughts exactly.*

Kat surveyed the scene before her and settled on Colin. She waited to see what he would say next.

Letting out an enormous breath, Colin continued. “Yeah, you heard it right. Kat’s my wife. We got hitched last week in a quiet ceremony before a judge.”

The noise in the room suffered a quick death as six mouths fell open. In her mind's eye, Kat envisioned herself tossing paper basketballs into the holes their mouths formed. However, John broke her daydream.

"I can't believe it. You always said you'd never get married."

"Yeah, Col, tell us what happened." Nick, who'd remained quiet until now, shook his head, still stunned and in denial.

"Don't bother, man. He's making this whole thing up."

Everyone focused on Luke who went on to explain. "I'm not buying your lame story. No way you'd get married without telling us first."

Kat exchanged a nervous glance with Colin. "It was one of those impromptu things. Colin and I didn't plan on getting married, but we fell head-over-heels in love and decided to tie the knot." Why she'd jumped to Colin's aid, she'd never know.

A couple of them murmured, while the rest reflected on what she'd said. Yet just when she thought she'd dodged a bullet, Luke aimed another shot.

"Don't you mean you're heels-over-his-head in lust?"

While Kat shot Luke an icy stare, she listened in dismay as her fake hubby laughed. Switching her glare to him, he stopped, and adopted a mocking tone.

"Come on, guys, be civilized. We're in love and in lust."

"Damn, man, is she pregnant?"

Now it was Kat's turn to drop her mouth. The clenching of his jaw told her John wasn't joking. The other two triplets, James and Jack, mirrored him. "Are you all insane or just genetically deficient?" Trying to get her brain to function, Kat wasn't sure what she'd said, but at that moment she didn't care if she had insulted them.

Again, Nick seemed to hit a little too close to home with his questions. "So why didn't you bring her home last weekend? Why a week later?"

Kat froze, realizing their mistake. Thankfully, Colin was more on the ball than she was.

"Last week was the best time for us to get married. But then Kat was called out of town on family business."

Ending the conversation, Colin strode toward his brothers and began pushing them from the room. "Enough questions. She's not pregnant. We're in love and we're married. Now get the hell out and leave me alone with my wife."



He slammed the door in their faces and wheeled around to Kat. “Hey, that went well. Much better than I’d anticipated. Now, where were we?”

With his intent quite apparent to her, she rose, moving out of his reach. “Hang on, hubby dear, explain why you didn’t tell me you have six brothers.”

He drew up short and sighed. “Two, three, six. What’s the difference?”

“What’s the difference?” Was he serious? “Oh, I don’t know. Say about double what I was prepared for. My God, getting six brothers, not to mention *those* brothers involved with women, much less married, is going to be a Herculean task. Damn, I’ll be lucky to persuade a female impersonator to go out with them, much less a regular girl.”

“Are you saying you’re not up to the task? Because if you aren’t, then I’ve misjudged you. Plus, if you’re about to bolt from this job, I’ll be getting my advance payment back.” He held out his hand to her and wiggled his fingers. “In cash, the same way I gave it to you.”

She’d almost forgotten about the money. Money she’d already used to pay some of the company’s outstanding debts. She frowned at him, wishing she was anywhere else.

“I’m not saying it can’t be done, but the work’s going to take more than I thought.”

“Are you hitting me up for more money, lady?” Anger threatened in his voice.

“No, and keep your cave man attitude in check. I’m not listening to you beat on your chest.” Were blisters forming on her forehead? From the searing glare he’d thrown at her, she should be melting in a blob at his feet. Like the wicked Witch of the West. “Okay, okay. Let’s not let the situation get out of hand. I said I’ll do the job and I keep my promise.” *Even if it kills me.*

He appeared to be mollified. “Good, because we’ve got to find them solid relationships and soon.”

Still, she wouldn’t let him slip anything by her again. “However, from this point on, no leaving out any pertinent information. And I’ll judge what’s pertinent. You tell me everything. Agreed?”

The touch of his hand shaking hers, sent her flashing a peek at the bed. When she brought her eyes back to his, she knew he’d caught her in the act. She blushed, recognizing the twinkle in his eye.

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Kat stayed in the bedroom after Colin left, putting away her clothes and toiletries. In truth, however, she spent most of the time trying to calm her jangled nerves. Colin’s brothers were nothing like she’d imagined. Granted they were all very handsome men under their roughness and pitiful

grooming, but she'd assumed they'd be more like Colin. Charming, funny—at least socialized for human interaction. And sure, she'd known they lacked skills with the opposite sex, but preparing them for a long-term relationship was going to prove more difficult than she'd ever imagined. Talk about changing sows' ears into silk purses! She'd rather change maggots into world-class show dogs.

Sighing, she stood up, smoothed her clothes and started for the door. Reminding herself to be polite, firm, and the epitome of a lady, she opened the door, ready to start her challenge.

A hand gripped her by the arm and thrust her forward into the hallway. Hoots and cat calls assailed her ears as more hands poked and prodded her body.

“Hey, baby, time to share you with the rest of the family.”

“Nice rack, huh guys?”

More rude descriptions of her body followed, but Kat barely heard them. Shocked, she struggled to stay upright between the two lines of men. She pushed back, hoping to get away, but the force sent her falling against the other side. A circle formed around her, blocking her escape.

“Let go! Stop touching me!”

She beat against Jack's chest, causing no damage or reaction. Instead, he drew her to him, bringing his mouth down on hers. His tongue raked her mouth as she fought against him. She cried, but his mouth muffled the sound.

“Hey, little brother, pass her on. Everyone gets a chance to kiss the bride.”

They shuffled her, brother after brother, each taking his chance to kiss her. Still fighting, she managed to tear herself from Luke's grip and yell. James yanked her to him, taking her mouth with his.

This time, however, she was ready.

Using all the strength she could find, she bit down on his lower lip. Her reward was instantaneous. “*Argh!* Crap, she bit me!”

James clung to her, bringing one hand to his bloody lip. “Why the hell did you bite me?” While the others paused to view his wound, she broke free and stood alone inside the circle.

“Don't you dare touch me again! I swear if any of you ever lay a limb of any kind on me, I'll chew it off. Or worse.”

She scoured her brain, trying to remember a spell. Anything to drive them far, far away. But with her body bruised and her mind stunned into inaction, she couldn't think of one. Pain, more from shock than from any physical hurt, rocked through her.

John flew backwards, striking the wall with a loud *thud*. Colin stood over him, his eyes blazing.

"I ought to kill the whole lot of you. Kat is a lady and my wife, not some hooker I picked up for a night's entertainment. She's your new sister-in-law, you meatheads."

"About time you showed up." Kat stepped closer and he drew her into his arms. No one's arms ever felt so good.

"Aw, gee, Colin. We gotta give her a MacLaughlin welcome to the family. Like the Tailhook initiation."

"Yeah, bro, we're just trying to make her feel at home. You know, let her get to know us, personally."

"This is not how you treat my wife. Each and every one of you will apologize. Now!"

Kat lifted her gaze to meet the brothers who came to stand in front of her. One by one, they mumbled their apologies.

Until Jack came forward. With a smirk, he stepped closer. Close enough to smell his foul breath.

"Sorry, Kat, but we figured you wouldn't mind. Hey, if you're wanting a more lady-like welcome, John, James and me would be happy to have a little romp in the sack to welcome you to our family. Our own special three-some. We promise to be very, very good. What ya say?"

Colin raised his hand in the air, but Kat stopped him before he hit Jack. "No, Colin, please. You can't hit him."

Jack swallowed, relief flooding his face. "Thanks, Kat."

"I should be the one to smack him." Swinging her hand back, Kat whipped her arm around, stopping mere inches away from his face.

Jack opened one eye and peeked. Seeing the still raised hand, he grinned, cocky and disdainful. "Whew! I really thought you were going to let me have it."

Kat returned his smile and placed her hand on his cheek. "I'm not going to slap you."

"No?"

"No. I'd much rather do this."

Using all her strength, Kat grabbed his crotch and squeezed.

"Oh, God! Make her let go! She's breaking my balls!"

Howls of laughter erupted, yet Kat ignored them, retaining her vise on Jack.

"Colin, make her let go! Please, man, get her off me."

Laughing, Colin placed a hand on Kat's shoulder. "Honey, I understand what you're doing, but you'd better set him free. You're liable to neuter the boy."

Kat shrugged, pushed her lips out in a mock pout, and released him. “Oh, all right. There wasn’t much to hold on to anyway.”

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After her earlier encounter with them, Kat spent time alone with Colin while he apologized for his brothers’ behavior. Shaken, but with Colin’s promise of protection, she agreed to stay. She vowed not to let them scare her away, recounting all the reasons she’d taken the position in the first place. If not to save *Romance Magic, Inc.*, she would stay and change the men for Colin’s sake. Heck, for the sake of the entire female population. No wonder he’d sought out help. Yet, most of all, she’d stay for her pride.

Under strict orders from Colin, the brothers gave Kat a wide berth the rest of the afternoon. Aside from a few off-colored remarks aimed at Jack, they remained quietly ensconced in Game Central, a small office on the backside of the home. Kat, in the meantime, sat alone in the cramped living room.

She waited a few hours, planning what her first move would be. Having come to a line of action, she rose and walked toward Game Central.

Inside were six computers, a few faxes and other equipment Kat didn’t recognize. The men were immersed in their work, occasionally raising their heads to mumble to each another. On an opposite wall hung an enormous monitor. She stood at the door, not wanting to interrupt their work, until Colin spotted her.

“Hey, Kat, come on in.”

She paused a moment, unsure of how to progress, and cursed herself for being frightened. Colin, noticing her hesitation, murmured something under his breath to his brothers, and then waved for her to join him. “It’s safe, I promise. Right, men?” Grumbled responses came from bowed heads. Only James acknowledged her by lifting his hand in greeting.

Kat straightened her shoulders and walked over to Colin, inspecting the computer screens as she passed. A simulation-type program filled each one.

“So this is what you do for a living? Play computer games?”

Every dark head popped up and stared at her.

“What? What’d I say?” From their attitudes, she feared she’d be ejected from the room before she could find out why. She huffed a sigh of relief when they did nothing more than moan and sneer at

her. Probably, she surmised, because Colin made a point to hold her hand. Yet, she knew even he fought to control his scorn.

“We are not playing games. We’re creating highly integrated, online simulated environments for those wishing to be immersed in an alternative reality. These are the newest in the *War Lore* series of strategy games. They’re the top of the line in gaming software.”

Perplexed, Kat tried to appear interested. “Ah, of course. Right. That’s what I said. Games.”

Even more grumbling ensued, and Colin returned to his station with a smirk. “Yeah, okay, whatever. This is how we make our living—a damn, fine living, by the way—so when we’re in here, do not disturb us.”

“Oh, right. I’ll try to remember,” she countered. “However, can everyone take tomorrow off? I’ve got a list of chores stretching a mile long.” She raised her eyebrows at Colin, hoping he’d get the message.

“Uh, sure. We’re self-employed, so we decide when we work or not. I guess we can all pitch in.”

“Great. So do I have your word you’ll help me tomorrow? The whole crew?”

Colin swept his eyes over the heads still bent over their keyboards. “You can count on us, Kat.” She flashed him a smile, hoping he’d keep his promise.

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Lila shoved Damon away from her.

“Damon, pay attention.”

Damon’s white hair glistened in the sun. Cool, gray eyes examined her from top to bottom, lingering a moment longer on her naked breasts. “Lila, my love, I am paying attention. Can’t you tell?” His hand cupped her breast, bringing her nipples to his mouth.

Lila relaxed, enjoying his tongue as he ran it around her taut bead. She leaned back, making her chest arch forward, allowing the sun’s warmth to echo his. The man did know how to please her.

“Lie back on the blanket and let me taste you.”

“Ah, you do know how to tempt me, don’t you, dear?” She sighed, knowing what he was about to do. Closing her eyes, she reclined more.

“Not half as much as you tempt me.” Moving his tongue across her skin, he slid from her breasts, licking his way to the strawberry-blond mound below.

“Open for me, Lila. Let me taste you.”

She obeyed and offered him access to the fountain between her legs. His tongue lashed at her, giving her little chance to think. Now, what was she going to discuss with him?

Sucking her in, he nipped her clit until her juices ran freely over his mouth. Moaning, she urged him on. “Lick me, Damon. Make me come again.”

Pausing, he replied, “Your wish is my command, my queen.”

She raised up long enough to grab his hair and force him down. “No talking. Just eating.”

He continued, his enjoyment evident in the sounds she heard. She exploded not once, but twice, but would not allow his head to rise.

He continued to drink her, shooting sweet delight throughout her abdomen. After her quiet sighs, he looked up and said the words she loved to hear. “Lila, let me enter you. Let me show you real pleasure.”

Diva-like, she laughed a full-throated laugh and shook her head. “You pleasure me well this way, Damon.”

“But I can give you more enjoyment the other way. Let me show you how much. I dream of the day when I can give you my shaft. Let that day be today, my beautiful one.”

Both excited and aggravated, she stopped him from rising and pushed him back down between her legs. “I said no. Didn’t you hear me? Are you going to argue with me?” She lifted up on her elbows, sending him a clear message. “If you are, then we can stop this. After all, you are not indispensable. A simple toy can finish the job you’ve started.”

Damon’s eyes flared at her but, without another word, he lowered his head. Lila leaned back, pleased with his obedience. His tongue became the weapon of his frustration, driving into her, around her, over her.

Her moans grew louder until, unable to restrain her ecstasy any longer, she allowed herself the freedom she sought. Writhing under his attention, she came. Anger was often an invaluable tool when having sex with Damon

Once Damon finished satisfying her, Lila sat up on the blanket and began getting dressed. Her lips curved upward, remembering the elderly woman who’d happened by them during the height of their passion. Her shocked face still gave her amusement. Humans, she knew, were so easily upset, even by the most natural of acts. Which, of course, was part of the fun.

“Damon, stop squeezing my buttocks.”

Lila shook off his hands and tugged her sundress over her head. “We’ve got a serious matter to discuss.”

Stretching his arms wide, he yawned. “Why, Lila, can I never have you?”

She licked her lips, admiring the muscles working in his arms and shoulders. “You do have me, Damon, in the way I desire.”

“Lila, my love, you know I live to give you what you wish. Yet, the true power of my love can only be shown with my manhood. Let me show you my love, my darling.” He reached over to take a strand of her hair in his hand. Bringing it to his lips, he breathed in and sighed.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, Damon, quit pestering me. I require your assistance with a project more vital than mere sex.” Shaking her head to bring her mind back to business, she continued, “My sister has gotten herself involved in a problem and I, of course, must rescue her.”

“What did Maddy do?”

Irritation threatened to make her frown. She fought the urge, knowing frowns would cause wrinkles. “Not Maddy. She’s too timid to ever cause trouble. Kat’s the one with the problem.”

The side of his mouth quirked, making her question his thoughts, but she didn’t have time to worry about what he was thinking. “Kat got mixed up with a mortal man. Granted a gorgeous man, but a mortal one. I can’t have this. And you’re going to help me correct her mistake.”

Damon played with the end of her dress trying to trail his hand beneath it. He didn’t bother to glance up. If he had, he might have seen her reaction. It would have given him permission to go further.

“What do you wish me to do, Lila? Change him into something vile and nasty? You have but to say the word, my passion lips.”

Lila tossed a clump of grass at him, making him look up. “No, nothing so obvious. Although the idea does have merit.” She paused a moment to consider his plan. “No. This calls for an act of subtlety. You will play Romeo to my sister, seduce her, and break them apart. Of course, I’ll place a spell around you to hide your powers from her. Otherwise, she’ll never accept you.”

“My seducing her will end her union with this mortal?”

“You know how silly mortals can be about infidelity. Romance her. Let her see a real male in action. Then take her to your bed and feast on her. Make her realize a wizard can give her more than any mortal man ever can.”

Aghast, Damon grasped her hand in supplication. “You can’t be serious. You’re asking me to bed Kat? Please, my dearest. Tell me you jest.”

Lila blew out a breath in exasperation. “I never jest. And what’s wrong with my request? Don’t you find my sister attractive?”

Picking the blades of grass from his slacks, Damon agreed. “Yes, Kat’s attractive enough, although a bit plumper than I prefer. But, my treasured one, she’s like beer to your champagne.”

Lila preened under his flattery. “I suppose so, but you’ll be doing me a great favor. Helping me is your reward.”

She tensed when he reached over to cup the back of her neck in his hand. Pulling her close, he whispered, “Will this reward be the one thing I’ve yearned for? Will I finally have you, oh, luscious pet?”

Regarding him under half-closed eyes, she gave him a morsel of the cake he craved. “Perhaps, dear Damon. Perhaps.”



## Chapter Five

“Oh, good goddess!”

Kat stood next to the bed, staring at The Intruder. The unwanted visitor in her bed, lifted his nose to her and twitched. Kat took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself. She wouldn't let them get to her with their childish pranks. Now how to deal with The Intruder?

“Chester, I know I shouldn't blame you. Even if you'd escaped on your own, which I'm sure you didn't, finding your way into my bed is too much of a coincidence. The food scattered around you proves that.”

She bit her lip, contemplating her options. She couldn't let them get away with this. But should she confront them, or ignore the prank and let them wonder?

“I'm going to have to use you to teach those barbarians a lesson.” She flinched, realizing she'd used Lila's word for mortals. “I promise you won't be harmed.”

Gathering her wits about her, she pondered which spell would be best. Within seconds, she settled on one and began her incantation.

Once she was finished, she picked up Chester and cuddled him next to her chest. “Everything's going to be all right.” Plastering a big smile on her face, she marched to the door. “Let's go find our pranksters, shall we?”

Hoping her new friend wouldn't cry out on the way, Kat tiptoed down the stairs, following the sounds of laughter and roughhousing.

She found the seven brothers lounging around the living room. On a giant television, a football game went into overtime. From the cheers and booing, she could tell four of the brothers were fans of one team, while the other three supported the losing team.

“Excuse me?”

Not one head swiveled her way, not even Colin's.

“Gee, married for less than a week and already being ignored. Doesn't say much for our future.”

Colin moved his head in her direction without taking his eyes off the game. “Kat? Did you say something?”

Shouting in her strongest voice, Kat responded, “Yes, I did!”

Still, no one even glanced in her direction.

But at least Luke managed to speak. “Sugar, can’t you tell we’re watching a game, for Pete’s sake?” Not waiting for her to answer, he joined in on the shouts for the winning team.

Colin, at least, had the decency to punch him for his language. “Don’t call Kat ‘Sugar.’ Show some respect for my wife.”

Wow, did she have to scream bloody murder to get their full attention? Well, a girl has to do what a girl has to do. If a scream was required, then she’d give them one.

“Hey, pay attention! Sorry, but I came to thank you for the sweet homecoming gift you left on my bed.”

Now she had their attention. Seven pairs of expectant eyes locked on her. Irritation lost out to curiosity as Jack voiced what all the brothers were dying to know.

“Where’d you get the cat? What’d ya do with Chester?”

Nick whacked him on the head. “Shut up, stupid.”

Some victories were meant to be savored. And rubbed in. “Chester? You mean the rat in the cage in the garage? Is he missing?” She hoped her voice contained enough concern. Enough concern to sound somewhat real, but not enough for them to miss her point. From Colin’s squinting eyes, she figured he’d noticed. “Oh, my gosh, I do hope he’s okay. Scarlett is a great mouser.”

“You brought your cat here? I thought your neighbor was watching her?”

“Oh, I thought you’d brought her over, Colin. After all, this is where we’ll both be living, right?” She hoped he caught the watch-what-you-say warning in her tone.

“Wait a minute. You mean your cat’s been around here for awhile? You can’t have a cat in the house. Not with Chester missing.” John jumped up and raced from the room.

On television, the quarterback executed a long pass resulting in a touchdown, but only Kat heard the roaring crowd. Instead, the brothers watched in growing horror as Kat stroked “Scarlett.”

A minute later, John reappeared. “Oh, man. Chester’s not around, guys. The food we left him in her bed is still there, and you know he wouldn’t leave food unless—“

Adam filled in the gap. “Unless something bad happened to him.”

Kat adopted a confused attitude. “You mean you left Chester in my bed? Whatever for?” Timing his part to perfection, “Scarlett” chose that exact moment to lick her lips.

Several of the brothers leapt up, their expressions ones of torment. James spoke their thoughts, giving voice to their fears. “Your damn cat ate Chester!” Smacking Colin in the back of the head, he ranted on, “Why the hell did you bring her cat here, man? You’ve killed Chester.”

The turmoil escalated with everyone yelling and attacking Colin. Kat decided to tell the truth, or at least part of it, thus saving Colin more undeserved treatment. “Relax, guys. Unless I’m mistaken, I saw Chester a minute ago, eating his little whiskered heart out. I’ll go see if I can find him.”

She left the room with the entire clan lapping at her heels. She climbed the stairs in rapid succession with the men in hot pursuit, pushing her forward. Once having reached her bedroom, she blocked the door, while they craned their heads past her to get a glimpse of the possible murder scene.

“Okay, let’s stop right here, and get the first new rule of the house understood. From now on, no one except my, uh, husband comes into my room. Understood?” She studied the worried faces one by one as they all answered at once.

“Agreed.”

“Sure.”

“Anything you say. Let’s find Chester before it’s too late.”

“Fine, but get in there and find Chester.”

“Whatever, lady. Please, save our rat.”

“Yeah, understood.”

Satisfied with their responses, she slammed and locked the door, keeping the men out. Leaning against the wall, she held “Scarlett” up and whispered, “From now on, they’ll reconsider trying any pranks with you as their pawn. Now, let’s get you changed back to Chester before they break the door down.”

Closing her eyes, she whispered the reversal spell. The soft down of the cat morphed in her hands, replaced by the smooth silkiness of shorter fur. Scrunching her face in anticipation, and steeling her nerves against the revolting fact of what she now held in her hands, Kat looked down. Chester peered up at her with small, dark eyes.

“I will not scream. I will not scream,” she whispered. “He’s a cute, little creature. Not like other rodents, he’s a pet. A cute, adorable pet.”

Her nerves quieted, and she gazed down on Chester. He wasn’t so bad after all. In fact, he seemed quite happy in her hands.

“Well, how about you? You’re not such a horrible creature after all, are you?”

Surprising Kat, he raised up on his hind legs and wiggled his nose. She laughed and petted him with one finger. “You know what? Their concern for you proves they can care for someone, doesn’t it? Not such gruesome savages, after all. Well, I guess it’s time to let the boys know you’re okay.”

The relief the brothers exhibited when she handed Chester to them was palpable. In fact, guilt almost overwhelmed her for the lesson she'd played on them. Almost, but not quite.

Closing the door again, she changed the bed sheets and disposed of the remaining food in the wastebasket. Then, after laying out her clothes for tomorrow, she tossed her sleep t-shirt over her head. Yawning, she slid under the sheets, grateful the long day was at an end. She closed her eyes, ready for sleep to come.

"Hey, babe. Ready for bed?"

Kat shot straight up in the bed and drew the sheets around her, covering her body up to her chin. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Take a wild guess. I'm going to bed."

Her retort died in her throat the minute he drew his shirt over his head. Strong arms connected to stronger shoulders. Big, wide shoulders. Shoulders to make her mouth water. Shoulders accented by a smooth, hard chest she trembled to touch.

Colin, intent on his own night time preparations, didn't notice her trance. Instead, he rolled out a sleeping bag and plopped down a pillow. "Man, I gotta get some sleep, big time."

Noticing her silence, he stopped, and cocked his head. "You all right? You do remember we're sharing a bedroom, don't you?"

She nodded, the single movement her body could make. At least the only movement happening outside her body. Inside, everything flopped, swirled and boiled.

"Good." He flipped the button on his jeans open and began to unzip. "You know, I like to sleep naked, but in your honor, I've put on a pair of briefs. I hope you appreciate my consideration."

Again, all she could was nod.

"Cat got your tongue?" He chuckled at his joke.

"Maybe we should share the bed?" Where did that come from? She knew she was letting her libido tramp all over her logic, but she didn't care. He'd think she was suggesting more than simply sharing a bed. And wasn't she?

He tapped a finger to his temple, pretending to take her suggestion under consideration. "If you're sure, then yeah. Let's share the bed."

She nodded up and down again like one of those bobble-head dolls. *Was* she sure?

But Colin didn't waste any time. He hopped into his side of the bed before she could drum up a good defense. Coherent thought broke through her brain fog.

"Um, you promise to keep to your side, right?"

“Oh, sure. Promise. I’ll do anything not to bunk on the cold floor.”

She nodded again—why couldn’t she quit nodding?—and flipped her back to him. Keeping her eyes open, she waited for him to fall asleep. Like most men she’d known, sleep overtook him in a matter of moments.

But what was with the snoring? His snores sounded like a thunderstorm right in her ear. Of course, the benefit of having his arm slung over her waist and his chest resting against her back made up for the racket.

She sighed and decided to put up with the snoring for now. Snuggling closer to him—after all, the room was a bit cold—she closed her eyes again and tried to sleep.

But sleep would not come. Not with something so hard pressing against her buttocks.

*Good goddess, is that what I think it is?*

Scrunching her face together, she tried to ignore the pressure against her rear. Her good intentions, as they so often did, failed her, and curiosity won out. Sliding her hand behind her, she gently probed the area in question.

*Yep, that’s his penis. And a nice, healthy one, too.*

Why didn’t she stop? Groping a man while he’s asleep? She’d been without sex way too long.

“You having fun down there?”

Snatching her hand away in record speed, he still managed to grab it and put her hand back.

“Hey, I didn’t say I minded. I’m thrilled to know you’re having a good time.”

Thankful he couldn’t see the redness covering her cheeks, she allowed him to mold her hand to his penis. In a second, the thick shaft grew bigger, rounder, and she began sliding her hand up and down its length.

Warm, wet kisses smothered her neck, running up to nibble at her ear. Soon, his hand lifted her t-shirt and sped to her breast. Kneading her nipple, she fell into his rhythm, stroking his dick harder and harder. Hot breath blew in her ear and the ember glowing in her abdomen burst into flame.

Pivoting her to him, his tongue found her lips and pushed through to the prize. She drew him into her mouth, hungering for more, delighting at his taste. He stripped her panties down and she kicked them off, eager for his touch. She released her hold on him so she could throw her leg over his, allowing him access to her heat.

His strong hand gripped her throbbing nub, thrusting his finger deep within her. “I want to put my dick here and hear you scream, Kat.”

She didn't answer, preferring to enjoy the way his hand massaged her clit. Yet even in her excitement, rational thought prevailed.

"No. I'm not ready yet. We have to be careful. I won't have intercourse with you. Yet."

He increased the pressure on her and she opened her legs wider. "Come on, Kat, we're not kids. Don't tease me like this."

She recognized the truth in his words, yet held her ground. Maybe, a compromise was in order.

"Don't stop. Please, don't stop. You make me come and I'll do you the same favor."

His low laugh was her answer. "Whatever you say, babe."

Stroking her harder still, she rubbed against him, against his hand, against his penis. Tensing, she allowed herself to climax, moaning with the release. He continued kissing her neck while more, smaller orgasms racked her body.

Happy, she turned to face him. "Payback time."

Flinging the sheets over her head, she scooted down to his manhood. He laid back and spread his legs now, giving her room to lie between them.

Using her hand first, she ran her nails along the side of his penis while cupping her other hand under his balls. Listening to his moans, she knew he wouldn't last much longer..

His hands gripped her head and drew her down on him. She opened her mouth, taking him in, while her hair tickled and tempted. Her mouth slid up and down, up and down. She worked on him, alternating between slow and quick strokes until he could restrain himself no longer. Soon his groans grew to one, tortured cry as she brought him to completion.

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"Mmm, I like waking up next to you."

The smooth tones of his voice drifted into her ear. "Uh, huh. Me, too."

He urged her closer, spooning her, flooding warmth through her. "So how about we continue what we started last night?"

She sighed and gave the idea serious consideration. Then decided to stick to business. Facing him, she placed her palm on his cheek, enjoying the stubble on his chin. "Sorry, but we've got a lot to get done today."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Well, you seven are going to clean the first floor, while I clean up here."

His eyebrows tilted, questioning her. “You’re going to clean this entire top floor by yourself?”

She stretched, breaking his hug. “Sure. No problem.”

“I thought you said you didn’t do housework.”

She prodded him, trying to get him to stir, and gave up. “I did. But no one should have to live in squalor. Your main job is to get your brothers started and keep them working. Can you handle your part?”

“If you can clean this mess up here all by yourself, then I believe I can manage the six slob.”

He jumped when she tossed the covers off, and hopped out of bed. “Then let’s get busy. Daylight’s burning.”

“Do you always leap out of bed in the morning?”

She grinned and ripped the rest of the bedspread off him. “Yep. So up and at ‘em, big guy.” Hiking on her jeans in one smooth motion, she yanked on a fresh t-shirt, and brushed her hair and teeth.

“Hang on, tiger. Give me a chance to catch up.”

However, she was out of the bedroom before he’d even started getting dressed. “Gotta stay up with me, old man.”

Kat stalked up and down the hallway, frustrated and perplexed. Pounding on their bedroom doors would be ineffective in getting these hibernating bears up. She’d have to use tougher measures.

She opened the first door to find Nick and Adam sleeping in twin beds. Their snores vibrated through the air.

Marching over to the bathroom, she grabbed a large cup and filled it to the brim from the faucet. Then, moving to stand directly over Nick’s head, she raised her arm in a mock toast, and dumped the water on his sleeping head.

“Holy crap!” Nick bolted up in his bed, knocking over the lamp on the table next to him. Adam, startled awake by his brother’s outburst, rolled several times, and fell off the end of his bed.

“What the heck is—“

Speaking between gritted teeth, Nick glowered, “What are you trying to do, b—“

“I’d caution you not to finish your sentence.” She smiled her warning, as if dealing with a disgruntled child. “Time to get up and get busy. Right after you scrounge up breakfast, you and your brothers will clean the downstairs. Including the garage. Cleaning materials are on the counter in the kitchen.”

Astonished, Adam sat watching the whole exchange. Kat blew him a kiss and spun on her heel.

Darting into the room next to theirs, Kat found yet a similar scene. One of the triplets, Jack, rested on his back with one leg and arm dangling from his bed. On an opposite bed, Luke lay on his stomach, free of any coverings. For a moment, a brief indulgent moment, Kat considered running her hands over his butt pointing so enticingly toward the ceiling.

“Be good, girl. Remember, you’re supposed to be married. Now, how do I get these bears out of hibernation?”

A Playboy magazine, tossed on the floor, caught her eye. The article, claiming firemen laid the hottest chicks, shouted out to her. Scanning the page, a diabolic idea formed.

“Uh, huh. Like they read this for the articles. Well, let’s give them a taste of the firefighter’s life, shall we?”

Using images she’d seen in a movie, she brought the vision to mind, building the illusion in slow agonizing increments, tending its growth. With the image perfected, she walked over to Luke and placed her hand on his forehead.

Luke shot up in bed, screaming, “Fire! Everyone get out. The house is on fire!” She stood so close to him, she could almost hear the rapid beating of his heart.

Jack, already half out of bed, jumped up, slipped on the magazine, and fell. “Damn!”

“Morning, you two. Time to get moving. Busy, busy day ahead of us. If you’ll join Nick and Adam downstairs, they’ll explain everything to you.”

Casting an appraising glance in his direction, she couldn’t help but add, “Oh, and Luke? Two words for a civil future together: sleep shorts.”

Laughter threatened to overflow, but she restrained her humor by biting her lower lip. Striding to the next room, she entered, feeling quite pleased with herself. There she found the remaining two triplets, John and James, snoozing unaware of what happened in their brothers’ room.

Kat lifted her chin and prepared to wake the pair. Closing her eyes, she thought of an image. Again, the vision appeared and she placed her palm on John’s forehead. But never expected what came next.

John yanked her to him, pitching her on top of his prone body. He grinned a mischievous, slanted grin at her. “Guess you didn’t know I was awake, did you?” Before she could shout, he clamped his hand over her mouth. “Shh, now. If you promise to be a good girl and not holler, I’ll take my hand away.”

She inclined her head in compliance and said a silent spell.



“Good girl. Behave. I’m going to let go now.” Bending his head toward hers, he started to release her mouth.

“Oh, John? You’d better check behind you. A rather fierce dragon is about to pounce on you.”

He scoffed, “Yeah, right. How stupid do you think I am?”

The low growl stopped him cold. Twirling around, John screamed.

James woke up in a hurry. “John, what is it, man? John? Answer me.”

Kat stood next to John’s bed, patting him on the shoulder. “Maybe it was a bad dream.”

John smothered a pitiful moan, pointing toward the other side of the bedroom. “A dragon. There was a dragon by the dresser. I swear, James.”

James glanced in the direction John was pointing and shook his head. “Wow. No more vodka shots for you.”

“James, I’m telling you the truth. Besides I was awake when I saw it. Ask Kat.”

James glanced at Kat, who shook her head in sympathy. “Must have been one heck of a party last night. Well, no matter. The nightmare, er, big, bad dragon, is gone now. If you two boys will join the group downstairs, I’m sure Colin will fill you in on today’s chores. Have a nice day.”

Kat exited, chuckling low, and ran straight into Colin. “Oh, I thought you’d be downstairs by now.” But his penetrating look wiped all the humor from her. “What? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, I guess. Seems rather strange, doesn’t it? Both John and Luke having nightmares on the same day. And right after you went into their rooms.”

Did he suspect? But how? The images she placed in each person’s mind were for them and them alone. No one else could have seen them. “Quite a coincidence, I guess.”

“Yeah, I guess. Say, whatever happened to Scarlett? I haven’t seen her since you found Chester.”

She bowed her head, trying to avoid his inquisitive stare, and shrugged. “Oh, she’s around. She comes and goes as she pleases.” She hurried on, changing the subject. “Colin, if you’ll get your brothers started on their work downstairs, I can get started up here.”

“Okay. Will do. Aren’t you going to eat breakfast first?”

Swinging away from him, she rushed down the hall, flinging her answer back over her shoulder. “No thanks, I’ll get food later.” She crossed into their bedroom, sidestepped out of sight, and rested against the wall. Hearing Colin’s footsteps thudding down the staircase, she breathed a sigh of relief.

She must keep him in the dark about being a witch. Meaning, she'd have to be more discreet with her magic. She'd have to get the whole upstairs cleaned and straightened up without getting caught.

Closing the door, she leaned back against the frame and concentrated. This would take a major spell, or several smaller ones in each bedroom. Deciding the latter was best in case Colin came to check on her, she walked from bedroom to bedroom, reciting the words of incantation.

Although she'd finished with her cleaning almost an hour ago, she could hear the men continuing to work. At times, she'd hear John proclaiming his sanity and demanding someone believe him. Eventually, though, the others convinced him he'd still been asleep and dreaming.

After waiting what she hoped was a reasonable length of time, she decided to check out their progress. Holding her breath and hoping her pounding heart wouldn't give her away, she crept down the stairs and was surprised to find a clean room.

"Hi. How's everything going down here?" Scanning the living room again, she clapped for joy. "Wow, this room is great. Are the other rooms this spotless, too?"

Lounging in various places on the furniture and the floor, the men glared at her, none too happy to see her enthusiasm. Only James appeared to appreciate her excitement..

"Kat, I've never seen these boys work so hard." Colin rubbed the back of his neck. Several grunts echoed his statement before he asked, "So, how did you do upstairs? You giving up?"

"Nope. I'm all through."

Heads lifted off floors and cushions to gawk at her. "How in the world did you clean all those rooms by yourself?"

"Oh, the rooms weren't as bad as they looked." Grinning, she couldn't help but tell a bit of the truth, especially since she knew they wouldn't recognize it as such. "Plus, I used a little magic."

Stepping over the long legs of those sprawled on the floor, she walked around the room, testing for dust. Amazed, she held up her finger and showed them. "Super job, guys. I mean, I expected you'd pick up the clutter and trash, but I never expected you to dust." Lifting up a bowl, she tested the wood underneath. "And such a great job of dusting, too."

Without bothering to open his eyes, Luke answered her next question before she could ask. "James is your happy, little duster. Of course, he's always been a little weirdo."

James tossed a cushion at his brother, and bopped Luke in the head.

Pleased with the boys' results, she hugged John because he was closest to her. It was a big mistake. He grabbed her waist with his grimy, sweaty hand, and tugged her closer. His foul breath

choked her, making her faint from revulsion, and she tried not to breathe until the stench was gone. “I know I didn’t dust, but don’t I get a reward for all my hard work, babe?”

Caught off-guard, Kat didn’t have time to respond. Yet, rescue came before she realized she was in trouble.

Digging his hands into John’s filthy shirt, Colin picked up his younger brother and hurled him across the room. Other brothers jumped to John’s defense, holding Colin back.

“Hang on, Colin. Take it easy, man.” Nick shoved Colin against the wall while Luke and Jack held his arms. “He’s joking. You know John.”

John rolled with the attack, crawled to the couch, and flung himself on top. “Bro, chill. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Thunderclouds blanketed Colin’s face. Kat, hoping to stem his furious flood, took his hand, and begged him to stop. “I’m okay. John was playing around. No harm done. Really, Colin, I’m okay.”

“Listen up, John, and all you other morons. I told you yesterday to treat Kat with respect and I meant it. The next one to treat her like anything less than a lady will get his head twisted off. Am I understood now?”

Fear swept through Kat, sensing the rage rippling within his body. “They understand. Don’t you, boys?”

The six brothers nodded, and lowered their heads. Colin, taking in gulps of air, thrust his brothers away from him. “Good. Be sure you do. Now Kat’s going to tell you what she has in store for tomorrow. Kat?”

A couple of the brothers groaned, but a cold glower from Colin subdued them. All eyes fixed on her.

Gulping, she laid out the schedule. “Well, your brother and I agree you could all use some freshening up in the manners and grooming departments. So we’re going to teach you how decent men groom themselves and how gentlemen act. When we get through with you, you’ll be socially acceptable and, God willing, woman-ready.”

Nick couldn’t take the announcement without sharing his opinion. “Oh, come on, Col. You’re punking us, right? You going to let her turn us into girly-men? I know how to shave my beard and sit at a table when I want to. Besides, I’m fine the way I am. Count me out.”

Colin kicked out with his foot, landing in the center of Nick’s back. “I’m counting you in. Now shut up and listen.”

Scowling at him, Kat continued, “Wow, I think Colin could use some polishing around the sharp edges, too.” She ignored the guffaws ensuing from her remark although, from the dark mood settling on Colin’s features, he didn’t. “First things first, there will no longer be any hitting, kicking, punching or roughhousing. Everyone understand?”

A mumbling ascent was all she was given. Recovered from his disgruntlement, Colin helped her out. “Knock it off. Starting tomorrow, Kat’s going to start converting you vermin into gentlemen. And I’d better not hear one complaint from any of you.”

With a curt nod of his head, Colin wheeled around and left.

“Right, big brother. Unless we have something to say about it.”

Kat swiveled to face Nick, but he’d already ducked his head, causing her to question if she’d heard him at all. She hurried to catch up with Colin.

## Chapter Six

“This is so annoying.” For the fourth time, Lila extracted her boot heel out of the mud. “Why does Kat work in this foul dump? Why couldn’t she work in a building of her own? Or out of her own house?”

Maddy walked behind Lila, trying to step in the grassy areas. “Kat doesn’t live in a house. She lives in a very tiny apartment.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Besides, the rent for this office space is all she can afford. And since you placed the spell to ruin her business, she can’t even afford this place.”

“Ha, then let’s hope she doesn’t stay here much longer.”

Lila came to a stop in front of the building housing Kat’s dating service. The rectangular, gray brick building wasn’t much on appearances. Low rent was its attraction to the various small businesses occupying the two floors. Unattractive signs hung from metal hooks, hoping to entice more than the few customers each would get in a day. One sign alone boasted any appeal. Italicized white lettering on a red heart captured the attention of people passing by. In fact, some would say they could see the heart beating. An illusion, people said, sending love-seeking people right through the front door of *Romance Magic, Inc.* Or, at least, it used to.

Frowning, Lila wished she could obliterate the annoying sign. “I’m going to reinforce my spell. Plus, Kat mustn’t sense the spell’s been cast, so I’ll strengthen the cloaking spell, as well.”

Lila continued her pace around the building, chanting the repulsion spell. Soon, the one or two clients the business still drew in would be down to none. Zero. Just like the company’s finances.

“Maddy, I believe it’s time we pay a little visit to Kat’s new home.”

The small, red-haired sister stopped in her tracks. “Why? You swore you’d never enter a mortal’s home. Except for sex, of course. Why do you want to go there?”

Lila squinted and used her hand for shade. “To pay our respects to the engaged couple, of course.”

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Kat leaned against the door jam, sizing up the cleanliness of the room. She never thought the men could do such a good job. Since the house was in shape, she could concentrate on grooming the men for their prospective dates. Deep in thought, she began writing lists.

The knock on the front door sent her pulse into flight. Regaining her composure, she grabbed the knob and swung it open, ready to greet the visitors. Immediate regret swept through her.

“Kat, dear, we’ve come to visit you and your hubby-to-be.”

Lila and Maddy blew in, embracing Kat. Honey would have a sour taste compared to the sickly-sweet tone of Lila’s voice.

“You came to see Colin and me? Here?” Kat’s distress grew when she noted the strained expression on Maddy’s face. “Why?”

Lila pooh-poohed her and pretended to ignore her blatant suspicion. “How many times must I tell you how much we worry about you, dear sister. You can’t expect to cohabitate with a man without my making sure your surroundings are suitable, can you? After all, I want the best and nothing less for you.”

Surveying the room, Lila snarled, “And this, of course, is not the best. In fact, it may be the worst.”

Kat was about to respond with a sarcastic remark when Colin came in from Game Central. “Uh, oh. Company.” Glancing Kat’s way, he grinned, “Good thing we picked up the place this morning, huh?”

“If you knew Lila, you’d know how lucky we are.”

“Lila. Maddy. What do we owe for this unexpected, yet delightful visit?”

Kat had to hand it to Colin. He could sling insincerity with the best of them.

Lila sidled closer to Colin, making Kat’s skin crawl. She grimaced when her sister ran her hands down his arm, squeezing his muscles along the way. If she hated mortals so much, why couldn’t she quit pawing him?

“I thought we should make certain our Katty dear was being well-treated. Besides, we’re here to ascertain the date of the wedding. We’ll be maids of honor, I assume.”

“Why would you assume you’ll be in the wedding party?” Kat rolled her head, hoping to ease the growing tension in her neck. “Besides, Lila, you’re no maid. Matron, maybe, but not a maiden.”

Lila feigned innocence in both appearance and word. “Why, because we’re your beloved sisters, of course. Who else would stand with you on your glorious day?” Lila inhaled, preparing to go on, but stopped, her eyes growing wider at something behind Kat and Colin.

“Did I hear people talking about a party? Is it party time?”

Kat and Colin swiveled in sync toward the voice. Nick, Adam and Luke stood near the hallway, waiting for an answer.

If Lila’s words were unclear, her tone was unmistakable. “And who are these—people?”

Adam strode forward, running his gaze up and down Lila. “Is this your sister, Kat? Whew, I guess hot babes run in the family. How about you introduce me so we can get to know each other? After all, we’re family now.”

Adam reached for a golden curl, but Lila slapped his hand. “Don’t touch me, you mole. We are in no way related.”

Although addressing Lila, Adam smirked and indicated his brothers. “Seems to me when Kat married Colin, we all became family.”

The color draining from Lila’s face was almost worth the onslaught Kat knew would be coming. Still, the sight was worth it.

“Married?” Lila whirled on Kat and grabbed both her arms. “What’s this creature talking about? Have you already married this—this animal?”

Colin’s glare should have scorched the earth around her. “Animal, am I? Well, I guess this animal is good enough for your sister ‘cause we were married last weekend. Chew that up and swallow it, lady.”

Lila stared at him, fighting to breathe. When the triplets entered the room, her breathing worsened, causing her chest to heave with each labored breath.

“What’s going on in here? We could hear the shouting all the way back in the game room.”

Finding her voice, Maddy took over for Lila. “Oh, my! There’s more of them. Triplets! Who are these men, Kat?”

Lila stammered, but could get nothing coherent out. Amused by the scene, Kat added salt to Lila’s wound. Besides, how many chances like this came along in a lifetime?

“Lila, Maddy, I’d like you to meet Colin’s brothers. All six of Colin’s brothers. All six of my brothers-in-law.”

Saying those words for the first time was pretty darn nice. Saying them to Lila made her day. Heck, she got a tiny buzz of excitement just running those words through her mind. Kat planted her feet to the floor to keep from doing a Happy Dance.

But maybe she’d gone too far. Lila’s pale face alarmed her. Was she about to faint? Oblivious to her sister’s condition, Maddy was nowhere near quieting down.

“Six brothers? You have six brothers-in-law? Don’t tell me they all live here?”

Kat gave her sister a curt nod and tried to keep from laughing out loud. “Oh, my. Lila, are you all right? Lila, speak so I know you’re all right?”

Lila shook her head, grasped her throat, and shook her head again. In slow motion, she reached out to Kat, her eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted, falling like an ungraceful sack of flour to the floor.

Kat stood stunned into inaction. She’d never seen Lila loose control before, much less faint.

“Oh, damn. Guys, help me get her to the couch.” Colin lifted Lila’s head and shoulders, while Adam took her legs. Using extreme care, they lowered her to rest on the cushions.

“James, get a cold rag. John, get some liquor.”

James dashed from the room and returned carrying a dripping cloth. Maddy, sitting next to Lila, took the rag, wrung out the extra water, and placed the cool cloth on Lila’s forehead. “Lila, please wake up. Lila, do you hear me?”

Maddy’s high pitched voice pierced Kat’s brain. Jerking back to reality, Kat scooped up Lila’s head, placing her on her lap. Using a soothing tone, she spoke to her sister. “Lila? Snap out of it, Lila. Everything’s going to be all right. Open your eyes, honey. Come on. You can do it. Open your eyes and look at me.”

Lila’s eyelashes fluttered, yet seemed too weak to stay up. Gradually, though, her eyes began to open.

Joining the group, John offered a small jigger of amber liquid to the awakening Lila. She drank the liquor in one gulp, sputtered, and, lashed out, pushing Maddy off the couch. Surprised and humiliated, Maddy sat on the floor, blinking up at her sister.

James, nearest to Maddy, reached down to her. “Here let me help you up. Maybe you should rest over here.” Pulling her to her feet, he smiled and led her to the other side of the room.

Unfortunately for everyone else, the liquid must have solved Lila’s temporary speech problem. “Kat, you’ve gone insane. First, you marry this—man—and now you’re living with his six brothers? What next, a stint on Jerry Springer? This is not happening. Get away from me, you horrible brutes.”

Struggling to her feet, Lila refused assistance, pushing away both Colin’s and Kat’s attempts to assist her. Whipping her head back and forth, she searched the room for Maddy and found her, wrapped in James’ comforting arms.

“Maddy! Maddy, what are you doing with that gorilla? We’re leaving right this instant.”



Unheeding her demand, Maddy stared hard at Lila, allowing Lila's frustration to mix with hurt. Hysterical again, Lila's voice reached higher decibels. "Maddy! I said we're leaving!" Maddy didn't respond and laid her head on his chest. Infuriated, Lila stomped across the room, wrenched Maddy from James' side, and dragged her to the door.

Flinging them both around to confront Kat and the men, Lila fired at them in a strangled voice. "Kat, you've gone too far. Do you hear me? Too far! I *will* set this abominable marriage aside." Tossing her hair in a defiant manner, Lila burst through the door, shoving a disgruntled Maddy before her.

Jack was the first to break the deafening silence. "Wow, I bet it was a blast growing up with her. She's so prickly, she'd make a porcupine seem fluffy."

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The rest of the day passed without incident. Kat even managed to give the brothers some lessons in manners, eating decorum, and more. To their credit, they were all very cooperative and learned, or relearned, in a short time. James, one of the triplets, went so far as to be helpful, and asked several questions regarding Maddy.

After having checked in with her assistant, Melanie, at *Romance Magic, Inc.*, Kat was assured her presence at the business was unnecessary. However, Melanie's report was both good and bad. On the one hand, the news was good because she could place her full attention on the task concerning the brothers. On the other hand, "unnecessary" meant no clients were in the office.

Sighing over the catastrophic state of her business, Kat focused her attention on the part of her life she could control. She spent the remainder of the day, hiding in her room, devising her next steps in The Plan. The Plan, as she now called her agreement with Colin, was about to step into high gear.

She decided on the best stylist and personal grooming guru in town for changes to the brothers' overall appearances. She contacted Treva DuBois and found Treva available, ready to start the next day after promising her double pay. Triple pay when Kat asked her to come to the house to perform her brand of magic. But Kat didn't mind. She shrugged, remembering Colin's agreement to pay all expenses. And pay he would.

Next, she contacted Keven Hightower, her favorite salesperson at the very exclusive, *Max's Men's Wear*, a high-end clothing store. Keven, always happy to see Kat, agreed to help her in her project without much persuasion. Even though Keven wasn't the sort to ask, Kat wanted to be fair, so

she decided to pay him the triple rate, too. Both Treva and Keven were ecstatic to be a part of the charade.

Kat leaned back against the bed frame, running over all the details in her mind. Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice when Colin entered the room. At least, not until he kissed her.

His soft kiss was so sweet and tender, she couldn't help but sigh. Oh, if only all kisses could be so sweet! Well, maybe not all kisses.

Pushing away her papers, she brought him back to meet her lips. They continued to share the kiss, his hands cradling her head, while he held her in a gentle embrace, her hands clasped around his neck.

Without warning, she tugged, pitching him over her to land on the bed beside her. She scrambled on top, forcing his arms above his head so she could grip his two hands in both of hers. "Now I've got you! What are you doing trying to sneak up on a woman?"

Colin grinned, amused by her game. "You going to try and stop me, huh? How? By ravishing me?"

"Hmm, now there's a thought."

A sexy glint sparked in his eye. "Oh, big talk from such a little lady."

*Little lady?* Good goddess, sometimes what he said was sexier than how he looked.

"Shall I prove it, big guy? How about a contest?"

"What kind of contest?"

Kat licked her lips and enjoyed the reaction she got from him. "A simple contest. You keep your hands above your head while I do as I please. But no touching or you lose. Want to play?"

Oh, how she wanted him to play!

Colin inclined his head and eyed her with speculation. "So what do I get if I win?"

She smiled and lowered her tone in a suggestive seduction. "Me. All of me."

The gleam in his eye told her he liked the prize. Then he wanted to know more. "What happens if I lose?"

Kat shook her head. "Afraid you're going to lose, huh? Well, if you lose, you get nada. Nothing. No fondling, no sex, no nothing."

"Well, I guess I'll have to win."

She laughed a low, sexy laugh. "Then let the game begin."

Getting off him, she walked over to the desktop radio. “How about some music?” Tuning in several stations, she settled on one playing R & B. An alluring song spilled into the room as Kat began moving to the rhythm, swaying her hips in an undulating tease.

Making sure his eyes were on her, she drew her hands in front of her shirt, lifting it bit by bit, to reveal the bottom curve of her breasts. To tempt him further, she tucked her hands under her breasts and jiggled them at him. Laughing, she began gyrating, rotating so her back was to him.

“No, babe, don’t. Let me see.”

Kat glanced back over her shoulder seconds before she tore the shirt from her body with a burlesque wave of her hand. He growled low in appreciation.

“Show me, Kat. I’ve got to see.”

“Are your hands above your head?”

“Yes, yes. Now show me.”

Holding her arms behind her head, she slowly turned to face him. In a perfect imitation of a stripper, she shook her shoulders, causing her voluptuous globes to bounce with the movement. He swallowed hard when he saw her firm, large breasts dancing before him. Gritting his teeth, he uttered more endearing words, “Damn, I love your tits. I don’t know if I can win this game.”

She giggled, running her hands over her chest, squeezing her nipples. “Do you like big ones? Maybe you want me to come...closer?”

“Oh, babe, don’t torture me. Give me a little lick.”

She danced over to him and leaned forward. “Here. Take a quick nibble. But only a short one.” She lowered her breasts to him and rejoiced in the texture of his tongue on her rosy tips. In the corner of her eye, she saw movement. “Uh, uh. No using your hands.”

He groaned again, but placed his hands back into position. Kat moved a step backwards. Swiveling her hips to the music, she unzipped her jeans until they slinked down her legs. Seeing her naked womanhood, he gritted, moving his hips up and down, inviting her to come nearer. His shaft shot higher, and she smiled, enjoying his predicament.

“Let’s make this harder,” she said. “Pun intended.”

Spinning around, she bent over, and wiggled her buttocks at him. “Do you likey?”

“Oh, God, how I likey. Come closer. Please.”

“Are your hands still above your head? Promise?” She bent lower still, bringing her hand between her legs to waggle her fingers at him. “Enjoying?”

“You bet.”

She cried out as he grabbed her from behind. But her scream was gone in the next instant, replaced by her howls of laughter. “Hey! You said your hands were still above your head.”

A low chuckle wafted into her ear. “I lied.”

Colin picked her up and threw her on the bed.

Continuing to play the game, Kat warned, “Now wait a sec. You lose. No touching or anything, remember?”

His smile a crooked, naughty-boy smile. “I quit playing this game about two minutes ago. Now it’s my game.”

“Bastard.”

“You got that right.”

With a low growl, he buried his face between her breasts and shoved each against his cheeks. Bringing them together, he rubbed the stubble on his chin against her distended buttons. Kat let out a small cry, hurting, yet loving the roughness against her sensitive nipples.

A strong hand spread her legs wide and she complied, opening them as far as she could. He fondled her, exposing her clit to his work. Her wetness ran between her legs, echoing the river of passion running through her.

“Colin.”

Relishing the growing heat on his hand, he rubbed until he knew she could stand it no longer. Her legs wrapped around him, forcing him down on top of her.

“Do you want me, babe? Are you ready?”

“Yes, I want you.”

Pulling back, he eyed her, mocking her with his smile. “Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to give it to you until you’re—”

“Shut up and give it to me, Colin. Now.”

With her spoken invitation, he heaved her legs higher, up to his shoulders, and thrust into her. She cried out and pushed against him.

Matching his rhythm, she rolled her hips to grind with him, driving him to go further, harder. His teeth closed on one firm bud while her fingernails dragged along his back.

“Now, Colin!”

Like a dam breaking apart with a flood, he exploded, letting loose with a strangled shout. She erupted with him, holding him close to her.

Exhausted, he fell on her.

She luxuriated in the weight of him on top of her. Running her hands over his back, she struggled to remember every sensation, every touch, every emotion.

*Don't forget. This is temporary. This joy won't last.*

He kissed her on the cheek in a sweet, unexpected gesture, rolled onto his side, and exhaled. "Wow."

She bit her lip to keep from chuckling, and agreed. "Wow is right. I'm glad you cheated."

Snuggling up to his side, she laid her head on his shoulder, content to let the silence and darkness fold over them. Content to let his breathing deepen. Content until a twinkle of green caught her eye. A green light, almost hidden behind a silk plant, blinked at her.

"Colin, do you see that green light?"

"Hmm?"

Sitting upright, she poked him, bringing him wide-awake. "I asked what the green light was for."

His attention riveted on her. "What green light?"

"Over there, behind the plant. In a place where no one would hang a smoke alarm, or set an alarm clock." Dread filled her as she yanked the sheet up to her chin. "Please let me be wrong."

Colin was up and moving toward the light. The tension in his body gave her the answer before his words did. "Those shits! It's our video camera."

"Oh, my God, I knew they were depraved, but this is disgusting. They're filming us." Her face flamed remembering her dance. And oh, how she'd bent over, too. Good goddess, they'd gotten everything on film?

Colin brought the camera out while she wrapped more of the covers around her. She waited while he peered through the lens to view the footage.

Again, his actions spoke even louder than his words. "Uh, everything is on here. Including some things before I came in the room." He peered over the camera and wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You do some quirky things when no one's around, don't you? Do you always do talk to yourself in the mirror? Wow, I didn't know you could use a vibrator like that."

My God, what about her vibrator? Then she remembered and blood rushed up her neck, coloring her red.

Colin threw the camera on the bed, retrieved his pants and headed for the door. "Be sure not to come downstairs for awhile. The bloodshed's going to be horrific."

"Wait!"

He slowed, but didn't stop.

"Colin, wait. I have a better idea."

He frowned at her, but stopped and waited. "What kind of idea? Tell you what. Let me knock them around awhile, and then we can do whatever you have in mind."

She smiled a wicked, mean smile. "No, let me take care of this. You play it cool and send your brothers to visit me at my office tomorrow morning. Trust me. When I get through with them, they'll beg me to destroy the video."

## Chapter Seven

Kat left before the brothers were up the next morning. After instructing Colin to be prepared for a major surprise, she hid the camcorder in her purse and set out for her office.

Once inside, Kat locked her door and placed the video in the player attached to her television. She watched Colin make love to her. Love? She wondered if he would use the same term.

“Too bad. It’s kind of a shame to erase this. I might like to watch it later, when our pretend marriage is over and the nights get lonely.” Bending her head to the side, she watched as Colin performed a complicated maneuver requiring a very limber body. “Whew-ee. Talk about inventive in bed. I bet Lila would enjoy this.”

She decided she should stem the flow of emotions beginning to surface. Besides, the men would be here soon. Still...

Running a shaky hand through her hair, she brushed her rising passion aside, and closed her eyes. Concentrating, she chanted the words she’d written last night. Power ran through her, making her tremble, and she knew her magic was working. A golden light glowed from the video recorder, growing brighter with each passing word. Soon, the changes were made.

“Good. I can’t wait to see how the voyeurs like this movie.”

The front door slammed and Kat finished the spell. Opening the door, she gave them a wave and motioned them into her office. “Come on in, boys. I have something for you to see.”

She heard the rude comments they made, but allowed them to roll off her shoulders. They wouldn’t be making jokes for much longer.

“Take a seat, gentlemen. I’d like to show you a video. Colin and I found a camcorder in our room last night. I don’t suppose any of you could tell me how it got there, could you?”

Luke coughed when Nick hit him on the back for chuckling. John, Jack, and Adam tried unsuccessfully to hide their smirks. James bowed his head, avoiding eye contact with Kat.

“No matter. But since a video was taken, I thought you’d like to see it.”

A couple of the brothers applauded, while the others laughed. Luke, not bothering to hide his guilt any longer, spoke for the group. “Gee, Kat, you’re very open about this. From all of us, let me thank you in advance for the show you’re about to provide.”

How she wished she could smack him. What a jerk he was.

Instead, she ground her teeth and forced herself to speak in a sweet, innocent tone. “Why, thank you, Luke. You’re very kind to say so. But really, I should be thanking you.”

Some reactions went beyond priceless.

Grinning, she placed her back to them, leaned over, and punched the “Play” button.

The brothers guffawed and jabbed each other in anticipation. Metal chairs scraped the floor as they jostled closer to the set. But their jeers and comments soon evaporated into thin air.

Kat leaned on her desk and waited for her one-two punch to kick in. Luke choked, stunned into silence. Adam worked his mouth, attempting to speak, but no words came out. Nick was the first to stammer out any sound at all.

“Holy shit. That’s me with Luke. And crap, what’s Adam doing to John?”

“No, this is a bunch of lies. It’s a trick of some kind.”

“Nick, fix this.

“Luke! Nick! *Crap!*”

“I think I’m going to be sick.” Jack retched, threatening to vomit. “No. I can not be seeing this.”

Horror spread throughout the room. Most of the men swiveled away from the screen or tried to hide their vision. But they peeked, unable to believe what they were seeing.

Kat glanced at the screen, feigning a confused attitude. “I don’t get you guys. Why would you tape something like this if you didn’t want everyone to see it?”

John pointed at the television, shaking his head violently. “You, bitch. Who? How?” Jumping up from his chair, he stalked to the door, opened it, but could not force himself to leave. Instead, he fell against the wall, shaking his head in denial.

For several minutes, no one spoke. Instead, they watched, eyes wide, mouths working in twisted, tortured ways. Several minutes passed and Kat feared she may have gone too far. Were they unable to speak?

Their speech centers reactivated and all six brothers started talking at once.

“Shut the door, John, before anyone else comes in.”

“Turn it off!”

“I didn’t do any of what you saw.”

“What happened? How can this be? The video was of them, not us.”

“I am not a pervert and I don’t like guys. And that goes double for my own brothers!”

“For God’s sake, someone pull the plug!”



James, who sat apart from his brothers, caught her eye. He nodded, giving her acknowledgement of her victory. "I don't know how you rigged the video to show those images, but we never did any of those revolting acts. Please, Kat, press the button and stop this."

He slumped in his chair, tucked his chin and shook his head. Mumbling unintelligible words, he raked his hand through his hair. Watching James' tortured reaction, a strange pity overtook Kat and she reached to stop the video.

Groans and mumblings replaced the outbursts. In fact, not one brother could keep his eyes leveled with hers.

Yet, her revenge wasn't complete.

"Gentlemen. And after having seen the video, I use the term loosely. I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse. Remember *The Godfather*? Consider this your horse's head in the bed."

Nick glared at her and said, "I don't know how you manipulated this, but you know that video's bogus."

Kat tapped her finger to her chin. "Sure, I know. But will anyone else?"

John's pleading tone almost won her over. "Oh, man, Kat. Please tell us you're not showing it to anyone else. Not even Colin, okay?"

Sitting on top of her desk, she clasped her hands in her lap. "Whether anyone else sees the video is entirely up to you. Oh, and by the way, I have copies."

Nick's neck was red from fury threatening to blow sky high. "Blackmail, Kat? You're blackmailing us?"

She narrowed her eyes at him before answering, "I'd much rather be called a blackmailer than a voyeur or Peeping Tom. Or a bunch of other names I believe would fit you guys."

Jack choked at her statement. "What do we have to do to get rid of it? What do you want from us?"

She tossed her head in a confident manner and continued. "Okay, boys, this is what you're going to do. From now on, you will not make any disparaging remarks about me, my body, my sisters, Colin and me, or anything else personal. You will, from this point on, do as I say no matter what I say. For instance, I've arranged for two very expensive and important people to visit you this afternoon. One will be giving you personal grooming advice, as well as decent hairstyles. The other will teach you how to dress like men of the new millennium. I suggest you adhere to their recommendations without one complaint. Understood?"

The resulting grumbling was less than she'd expected. But she wouldn't tolerate anything but full cooperation from this point on.

"If you have any problems with our new arrangement, then expect to see the video on late-night cable television. I may even distribute *Brothers' Booty*—nice title, don't you think?—through a porn studio. Does everyone get my message?"

If anger could strangle, she'd be gasping for air right now.

"I don't believe I heard an answer. Does everyone understand our deal?"

Music to her ears resounded loud and clear. "Yes, ma'am."

"Now there's my good boys."

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Kat hummed, busily cleaning up her office. After coercing the MacLaughlin brothers into submission, she'd sent them home with strict orders to straighten up the home, inside and outside. Everything should be perfect for her visiting experts due to arrive later in the afternoon.

After they'd left, she'd dived into files and reports, getting caught up with all the details of the business. Thanks to Colin's down payment for her services, she'd be able to keep *Romance Magic, Inc.* alive for another month. Things were looking up.

"Ms. Carlton, I presume?"

The rich, sultry voice swept over her. When she faced him, she knew his voice fit him. Handsome. Debonair. Suave. Impeccably dressed in an Italian suit. Perfect descriptions for the perfect man.

"Yes, I'm Kat Carlton. May I assist you?" Somehow, the word "help" didn't seem fancy enough for this man. This gentleman.

*His teeth should be in a commercial.* The thought hit her, almost making her giggle. *Or, with his gorgeous white hair, he could be in a shampoo advertisement.*

Focusing on him now, she tried to catch up with what he was saying.

"...yearn to meet someone special. Someone extraordinary."

He said the last word as though it were two separate words.

She tried to appear serious, but her thoughts kept running to the absurd. Why did he seem so out of place? Like a man who belonged in a different year. Or a different century. "I understand. And you've come to the right place, Mr.—?"

Gliding across the floor, he took her hand and placed it in his. He ran his eyes over her body and dipped his head to kiss her fingers. A shiver ran through her. But not a good shiver. Not at all the kind of shiver Colin gave her.

“Forgive my lack of manners, Ms. Carlton. My name is Damon Alexander. Please, do me the honor of calling me Damon. I can but dream you’ll allow me to call you by your first name some day soon.”

*Eeww. This man reeked of ickiness. Ickiness to the tenth degree.* Kat slid her hand from his and fought the urge to wipe her palm against her jeans.

“I seek a woman of beauty, intelligence, and charm. A lady much like yourself.” His too-bright smile stretched wider. Gray eyes studied her, devouring her alive.

Shaking off her queasiness, she gestured to the chair opposite her desk. “I’m sure I can help, uh, assist you, Mr. Alexander.”

“Please, I beg you. Call me Damon.”

Most of the time she didn’t have a problem calling clients by their first names. Yet this time she couldn’t. Wouldn’t. “I prefer my clients and I to address each other by our last names, Mr. Alexander. Professional appearances, you know.”

Irritation flickered across his features, breaking the brilliant allure of his smile. “Of course, Ms. Carlton. I meant no offense.”

“Thank you. Shall we get down to business? What sort of attributes do you desire in a woman?”

Where did the word “desire” come from? The quick lift of his eyebrows told her he’d noticed the word, too.

“The woman I *desire* is attractive, like yourself, with hair the color of the setting sun. Much like your own. She’ll have eyes the hue of emerald I see in yours, leaving me hoping to gaze into them forever. My love will have lush, full lips, to tease every man, driving every man to seek nothing more than to kiss her breath away. As I am being teased by your lips this very moment. Her body would be full, heavenly endowed, a body no sane man could resist. A body like your own.”

Okay, so the man could talk a good game. If a woman liked a lot of flowery talk. Still, Kat couldn’t shake the uneasiness settling in her stomach. Something wasn’t right about him. But a client was a client, and she couldn’t afford to be choosy.

“The mate I search for will have ambition and drive. She’ll possess more from her life than working for others. She’ll be a leader, an entrepreneur. Yet, though she’ll be tough in business, she’ll

also have tenderness about her, a tenderness prompting her to aid others however she can. Attributes you possess.”

Kat ignored the direct references to her. “Wow, you seem to have quite a list, Mr. Alexander. I’m not sure I can find a lady who can fit such high expectations. I’m not certain any woman can.”

“Ah, but I have already found her.”

Kat tapped her pen, beating an off-rhythm cadence on the desk. Why did this guy make her nervous? More nervous than she’d been in a long time.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand. If you’ve already found this woman, why did you come to me?” With sudden clarity, she wished she weren’t alone in the office with this man. Why couldn’t the brothers have stayed around a little while longer? How she wished Colin would walk through her door right now.

He leaned forward, his features tight with his intensity. Kat struggled to keep from backing away.

“I didn’t know I’d found her. At least, not until I walked into this office.”

Kat scanned the area around her. Were there any client pictures lying around? Finding none, she returned his stare. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, Mr. Alexander.” Yet the pain in the pit of her stomach told her she knew what he was about to say.

How could a smile seem so sinister? Or was her reaction a result of her imagination?

“The woman I want is you.”

Kat sat unmoving, certain she’d misunderstood him. Please, let her have misunderstood him. “I beg your pardon?”

“You, Ms. Carlton, are the woman of my dreams. My soul mate. My eternal love.”

She waited, letting her emotions settle. She knew she’d best keep calm in case the man sitting in front of her proved to be more than simply delusional. “Of course, I’m very flattered, but I believe you must be mistaken.”

“There is no mistake, my love.”

*My love?*

Silent alarms coursed through her body. This man was trouble. Taking a deep breath, she made her voice resonate in quiet and reassuring tones. “Mr. Alexander, we just met. You don’t know anything about me. Although I appreciate your, um, attention, I am sure once you’ve given this more thought, you’ll realize I’m not the woman of your dreams.”

He shook his head, patronizing her. "I am already sure. You have all the physical qualities I require. Plus, being the owner of your business, you demonstrate you have spunk, intelligence, and ambition."

Running ideas through her mind, she brought up any argument, true or false, she could muster. "Perhaps physically I'm what you're attracted to, but I don't have all the qualities you're asking for. You mentioned tenderness. Believe me, Mr. Alexander, I am not at all a tender person."

His laugh was full and low, reminding her of Colin's. Yet there was something else, a tone, a distinction, an oddity, making her want to be far away from him.

"You don't give yourself credit, my sweet. You are undoubtedly tender-hearted. Who else would spend her life striving to provide love connections for other people?"

*My sweet.* He'd called her yet another affectionate name.

Fear made room for anger. Together, they made a powerful force. This man was leaving and leaving now. One way or another.

"Mr. Alexander, this meeting is at an end. You're wrong about me. I'm asking you politely to leave my office, or I'll forget my manners and call security."

Kat prayed he wouldn't call her bluff. If he did, she doubted she'd be able to conjure up a security guard on such quick notice. Maybe a neighbor would hear her if she screamed?

His entire demeanor changed. Slumping in his chair, he appeared to be deflated. Disappointed, yes, but more. Shocked would be a better word.

To her relief, he acquiesced without further debate. "Kat..."

"Ms. Carlton."

"Forgive me, Ms. Carlton. I apologize from the depths of my soul. I lost my head for a few minutes. Please, accept my sincerest apologies. I didn't mean to cause you any alarm and I assure you I'm harmless. You're so much like the woman I have pictured for inclusion in my life."

He seemed different now, as if he'd altered into another man. Timid, submissive, likeable. Yet, Kat remained careful. "Very well, Mr. Alexander. You may take an application with you, but I would prefer you find another agency for your search."

Striding past him, she left her office, heading for the front exit. Holding the door open for him, she nodded once, giving him a curt farewell. He bowed a strange old-fashioned bow, and walked out into the street.

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Watching his reaction, Kat knew Colin could not believe the change in his brothers. He watched, stock still, a perplexed frown knitting his brow.

Kat was ecstatic. They were being polite to her. Hell, they were downright solicitous. She'd not heard one off-color remark in the two hours since they'd been home. James even helped her transform the kitchen into a make-shift salon. But how to explain the difference to Colin? In the end, she didn't have to.

Colin tried several times to get her to explain how she'd managed this incredible transformation. Yet each time he tried, she changed the subject or avoided answering. Frustrated at her lack of help, he gave up and sought the answers from his brothers.

Attempting to fly under their radar, Kat stayed close by, ready to intervene. Besides, the closer she stayed, the easier she could eavesdrop on their conversations.

Colin stopped Luke in the hallway, blocking Luke's entry into the room. "Okay, bro, spill your guts. What went on over there?"

She could see the anxious glint in Luke's eye, and hoped he'd be able to keep quiet.

"Nothing, man. Nothing happened."

Colin shifted again, keeping Luke from edging past him. "Uh, huh. Tell me another fairy tale, Luke. I can tell something big went down. Something big enough to cause a major attitude shift. So kill the con job and spill."

"Your imagination's blowing smoke, man," he replied, ducking his head.

"Then why are you guys behaving like gentlemen?"

Luke rubbed the back of his neck and rolled his shoulders. "No big deal, man. We got together and talked this morning, that's all. Then we decided we should treat Kat with the respect she deserves."

Colin shoved his hands in his pockets. "You talked? Nothing else went on? I'm supposed to believe you became decent human beings from one private talk with Kat?"

Luke's tone lowered several notches. "Damn it, Col, I don't care what you believe. Now get off my back."

Knocking Colin out of his way, Luke carried chairs into the living room. Colin inclined his head in an inquisitive manner, bringing his attention to Kat. "One talk and you've got them jumping at your command? Must have been one helluva talk. What happened with the video?"

She busied herself with lining up the chairs in two neat rows. “We agreed to dispose of it. I guess I can be persuasive when the situation warrants it.” She fluttered her eyelashes at him, trying for a come-hither look. “But of course, you should know by now how very persuasive I can be. Right?”

He knew a detour when he saw it. Yet, he didn’t prod her any further.

“Well, whatever you said, I hope you never have the same talk with me. You’ve got these boys so nervous, they’ll do anything for you.”

She shrugged, letting him draw his own conclusions. Saved from further questioning by the doorbell, she crossed the floor to welcome her first visiting expert.

Treva DuBois, top hairstylist, bypassed Kat and marched into the middle of the room. “So, Kat, kiddo, where’s my fresh meat?”

John, James and Luke stopped in their tracks at the challenge in her voice. All three slitted their eyes at the woman before them, and stepped closer to each other.

Biting her lip, Kat knew they were right in being leery. She’d known Treva for seven years and was used to her abrasive manner. Underneath her rough exterior, Kat knew the real, kinder Treva. However, people meeting her for the first time were often understandably reticent about getting close to her.

Part of their reaction was due to her appearance. Spiky blond hair topped with a Mohawk streak of black—“My skunk-do. Shows people I know the world stinks.”—was cut short, shorter than most men’s hair. Her lean body was covered with tattoos, while her clothes hung loosely on her tiny frame. Her t-shirt was tattered and she wore black jeans hanging well below her silver metal belt. But her blunt, get-them-before-they-get-me personality was what kept people at a distance.

“Um, Treva, let me introduce you to three of the MacLaughlin brothers. This is John, James and Luke.”

Treva circled the three men, reminding Kat of a tigress circling three defenseless antelopes. She hoped the men could hold their own.

“Three? You mean there are more of these sorry-ass men?” Treva shook her head in disgust. “Are you telling me these are the dudes you’re hiring me to style?” She slid her orange sunglasses down her nose, and peered over the top at Kat. “Damn, woman, I’m a stylist, not a miracle worker. You’re not paying me enough for this shit. Now cough it up. How many more of these lame dames are there?”

Luke couldn’t take any more. “Now wait a minute, you she-man. I don’t care who you are or what Kat’s hired you for, you’re not touching me with a pole.”

Luke didn’t know what hit him.

“She-man? Who the hell are you calling she-man?” Treva’s finger jammed against Luke’s chest. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say this big, ole’ brute was afraid of me. Afraid I’m going to cut off all your hair, Sampson?”

John and James cracked up, even though Luke whacked John on the shoulder for a warning. James, busy laughing, didn’t notice when Treva placed him in her sights. Luke, however, did and scampered out of the line of fire.

“And what do you find so funny, little boy?”

James blinked down at Treva who stood at least a foot shorter than he. “What? I didn’t say anything.”

Grabbing a chunk of his hair, Treva started towards the back of the house, dragging James with her. “You can be my first victim, little boy. Lead me to the kitchen. We’re going to duck your hair in the sink and get busy.”

James’ howling brought the rest of the clan to see the show. Adam spun around the corner, knocking into Treva who didn’t loosen her hold on his younger brother. She grunted and wheeled to face Kat.

“Six? Are there any more? I’m going to have to quadruple my fee, Kat.”

Shrugging, Kat motioned toward Colin. “Fine with me. He’s the one you’re collecting from.”

Colin opened his mouth to complain, but Kat waved him off. He shut his mouth without saying a word.

Still holding on to the whining James, Treva nodded at Colin. “Glad you agree. And you appear to have seen a stylist in the past year, so I’ll let you be. Once I’m finished with this one, send the next right on in.”

With Treva gone, the brothers grouped together.

“Colin, are you part of this?”

“What’s happening? Who is that wildcat?”

“She’s here to cut our hair? Who called her?”

Kat started to answer, but Colin beat her to it. “Kat hired them at my request, and each of you will do whatever she wishes. When the, uh, lady calls for the next one, you’ll go in according to ascending age. Am I right?”

Five heads bobbed up and down.

“Good. Make sure that you do.”



Not bothering to hide her satisfaction, Kat leaned over and gave Colin a kiss. “Except you, of course. Since you passed Treva’s inspection, you’re free.”

Colin grinned back, pleased he’d escaped Treva’s clutches. “Sounds like you have everything worked out.” The doorbell interrupted his next sentence and he cocked an eyebrow at Kat. “More visitors, Kat?”

She clapped, delighting in the way her scheme was falling into place. “Oh, good. My next expert has arrived.”

Kat rushed to the door, flung it open and trapped the man standing before her in a bear hug. “Kevey, you’re here. Thank you so much for coming.”

His light, airy tone was day to Treva’s night. “Katty, baby, you are so be-u-tee-full! Emphasis on the ‘full.’ Where have you been hiding yourself? I haven’t seen you in ages, you bad, bad girl.” Taking hold of her shoulders, he tugged her back to him and planted air-kisses on either side of her face.

Keven Hightower was the one person in the world who could talk about Kat’s weight without getting her upset. In fact, she enjoyed his funny remarks about her size. One reason, of course, was because Keven was much larger than Kat. Larger than most anyone else. Keven Hightower wasn’t just fat, he was huge. At least on the surface, that never seemed to bother him.

The brothers watched in fascination during the exchange. Nick, speaking in undertones, whispered to Jack. “Damn, he’s got to be the biggest gay I’ve ever seen.” Nick’s whisper, louder than other people’s regular voice, echoed around the room.

“Well, I’m glad I’ve made your day, sweetheart.” Keven pranced up to Nick and crushed him to his chest. “I hate to burst your bubble, honey, but I’m not gay. And you know what else is weird? I’m not fat, either. This...” Keven waved his hands up and down his rotund form. “This is a fat suit I wear to amuse small children and lame brains. Are you amused, yet?”

Nick was so flabbergasted, he couldn’t respond. Jack, however, sought more information. “Why are you here? To give us a show?”

Glowering at the boys, Kat decided she’d better take matters into her own hands. “Enough, both of you. Keven Hightower, resident fashion god of the top clothier, *Max’s Men’s Wear*, is here to repair those wardrobe malfunctions you call clothes.”

“Oooh, good one, girlfriend. Now, let’s see what I have to work with. Hmm.”

Keven sashayed over to each brother, making gushing noises once in awhile. Every time one of the brothers attempted to speak, Keven would shush him with a flamboyant wave of his hand.

“Well, Kat, we certainly do have our work cut out for us here, don’t we?”

“I know, Kevey, but you can help, can’t you?” Kat held her breath while she waited for his decision.

Smoothing his curly hair away from his shoulders, Keven scrunched his features together. “As I recall, you said money was not a problem. Does my memory serve me well?”

Colin seemed to wake up from the daze he’d been in. “Hey, I never said anything of the sort.”

“Well, then I guess I’d better be leaving. After all, Poppa needs a brand new pair of shoes and this Daddy likes imported. And they ain’t cheap, ya know.” Keven started for the door, but Kat held on to his arm, and got dragged along with him.

“Colin, do you want me to get the job done, or not?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t mean for you to break the bank.”

Adam, overhearing them, jumped in. “What job is Kat doing for you?”

## Chapter Eight

Colin stammered for a second, trying to backpedal. “Uh, no job. Poor choice of words. I asked Kat to straighten out some of your rough edges, is all. Haven’t we already gone over this?”

“Well, Colin? Does Keven stay or go?”

Colin glanced back and forth between Kat, Keven, and his brothers. “Keven stays.”

“Fine, then. Let’s get some measurements, shall we?” Keven produced a pad and pencil. “Once I have your measurements and noted your coloring, which all seems to be about the same, I’ll get to the store and put together a few outfits. You boys will be debonair in no time.”

Jack and John flopped on the couch. Waving their hands in an imitation of Keven, Jack laughed a cold, humorless sound. “You first, sweethearts.”

Being closest to Keven, Nick was automatically volunteered.

“What’s your name, handsome?”

“Name’s Nick,” he growled.

“Well, listen to you. Aren’t you a toughie. Well, Mr. Nick, let’s see just how big a tree trunk you have, shall we?”

Colin watched as Keven wrapped a measuring tape around Nick’s waist. Nick tolerated Keven’s touch, which, in itself, seemed a major victory to Colin. However, Nick began complaining when Keven got a little too close to his crotch.

“Whoa, buddy. Where do you think you’re going? I only let females near the family jewels.”

Huffing from the exertion of bending over, Keven was in no mood to tolerate any problems. “Oh, don’t get your panties in bunch, princess. You haven’t got any better than any one else’s I’ve been around, and I wouldn’t care if you did. So, relax, and let me get my numbers.”

Grumbling under his breath, Nick closed his eyes and stood still. Keven made quick order of getting the information he required, and jotted it down on his pad. “All right, buckos, who’s next?”

Colin shoved Adam forward to take Nick’s place. “This is Adam.”

Keven hummed as he went to work. In short order, measurements were completed on Adam and Luke. When Colin motioned for John to stand up, James entered the room, followed by Treva. James’ thick mop of unmanageable hair was now short, cut to resemble the styling of a well-groomed executive.

Colin was impressed. In fact, he almost wished for his own haircut. Almost, that is, until he gave Treva another perusal. The mere thought of letting that little tornado loose with scissors scared the idea straight out of his head. Even though she'd improved James' style.

"Treva, you bee-atch. How you doing, you little slut?" Keven whipped his tape off John and picked the hairstylist up in one easy sweep.

"I was okay until a mountain of flab rolled over me." Although Treva still wore her irritated mask, her eyes shone with affection. "Are you here at Kat's request, too?"

"I am, I am. And I can tell you've already been busy." Keven ran his hand over James' haircut. "Very nice. Very n-i-c-e, nice."

"Thanks. I'm glad to see someone who knows his shit's going to be dressing these slobs. Well, back to it." Treva pointed at Jack. "Let's go. You're up."

Colin viewed the interaction while trying to hide a grin. Kat certainly knew some unusual characters. But, if Treva's work was any example, his brothers were in good hands, and Kat seemed pleased.

He let his eyes work up and down Kat's frame. Without warning, his body's heat zoomed higher while sending an alert to his lower half. But more was there than plain old-fashioned sexual attraction. He liked this woman. Maybe even cared for her. And that thought sent him reeling.

"Colin? Are you all right?" Kat eyed him with a soft light in her eyes. Walking in fluid movements, she moved closer to him.

"Uh, sure, I'm fine. I was..."

Again, the doorbell interrupted him.

"Are you expecting anyone else?"

Her concern was gone. "Nope. But I'll get it."

Her tush caught his attention when she headed for the door. *Baby's got back.* Shit, he'd better get his mind back on business before he hauled her upstairs for an afternoon quickie.

Kat's words shook him out of the fantasy and back to reality.

"Flowers for me?" She held the dozen red roses he'd ordered this morning. Satisfied about his decision, he enjoyed the smile lifting the corners of her mouth. Her warm, lusty mouth.

*Get a grip, man!*

While the deliveryman waited, she took the card from its holder and read, "'Kat, thank you for all you've brought to my life. Thanks for being my wife. Colin.'"

The tears in her eyes left him struggling for air. If he'd known a few flowers could get such a great reaction, he would have sent them sooner. "Aw, Kat, it's nothing. A simple thank you of my appreciation."

Keven shuffled over to smell the bouquet. "Nice, lover man. N-i-c-e, nice."

The waiting deliveryman coughed to get their attention.

Kat handed the roses to Keven and picked up her purse. "Oh, I'm sorry. Here, let me get you a tip."

"Yeah, good idea, lady. But wait until we get the rest of them first. Tips are based on what we have to haul inside."

"The rest?" Kat swung to Colin, expecting him to answer her unspoken question.

Confused, Colin shrugged, "Nope, I didn't send those. I don't know what he's talking about. Maybe it's a mix-up."

The deliveryman was back with a large bouquet in each hand. "No mistake, pal. These are for Kat Carlton, too."

Kat took a large crystal vase filled with tulips, while Keven happily possessed a similar one filled with an assortment of spring flowers. Peering over daisies, he quipped, "Lovey, when the man sends flowers, he sends flowers."

Even though he tried to keep it out of his tone, Colin could hear his irritation seeping through. "No, I don't. I didn't. I sent Kat the roses. Nothing more. I don't know anything about all these other flowers."

"But there's no card attached." Kat put her vase down on the coffee table. "Sir, who sent—"

But the delivery man was gone.

Peeking through the window blinds, Treva located him on the path up to the house. "Wow, Kat. The guy's carrying in more flowers. This is going to cost you one major tip." Treva stepped back to give the man more room.

This time, he carried in another two vases, each with different types of flowers. The first was an elegant bouquet of white lilies. The second was more playful, with more daisies and mums mixed with baby's breath. A large, heart-shaped balloon rose above the creation.

Breathing in the fragrance of the flowers, Kat reflected. "Lila would love this bouquet. Lilies are her favorite."

A slow fire burned in Colin. Where were all these damn flowers coming from? And why did Kat look so dreamy-eyed?

“Kat, the man’s going back for more.” Treva grinned at Colin. “If you didn’t send these, then someone’s blowing your pitiful bunch of posies straight to hell.”

Colin gritted his teeth. His anger was fast becoming a scolding fury. Catching the deliveryman after he’d set yet two more bouquets on the table, Colin spat out his words in a frustrated huff. “How many more do you have? And who sent them?”

Startled, the deliveryman took a few steps back. “Listen, mister, I’ve got at least four more bunches to bring in. I don’t know who sent them and I don’t care. All I care about is doing my job and getting a tip and according to the boss’s call a minute ago, that’s been taken care of. So don’t kill the deliveryman. Or however the saying goes.”

The man stomped back to his van and began carrying in more bouquets, each one containing a different arrangement. When he’d deposited the last one, he placed his hands on his hips and said, “Okay, they’re all here.” Glancing at Colin, he added, “Good luck, guy. Looks like you’re going to need it.” He chuckled at Colin’s reaction and left.

The living room resembled a florist shop. Or maybe a mortuary right before a funeral. The last thought made Colin smirk. He’d like to get whoever sent these flowers and put them in their grave.

Kat, however, appeared to be relishing the whole fiasco. He’d never seen her being so girly before. Why, she was acting downright goofy over this other guy’s flowers, making his stomach flip and churn. Even Treva and Keven, who’d smelled the flowers, too, were acting strangely. This, he mused, was saying a lot considering how wacky their personalities were.

“Here, Kat. I found this card on the last bunch.” Keven handed a cream-colored envelope to Kat while he edged closer and peered over her shoulder. “This is so exciting. Read it out loud, sweetheart, before I wet myself.”

Shaking her head as if to clear her mind, Kat opened the envelope and removed the card. She took a big breath and read the note.

“To my Dearest Kat. When two hearts meet and fall in love, mere mortal beings can not keep them apart. You are my Love, my Queen, my Soul Mate. Open the door to your True Destiny. Signed, Damon Alexander.”

Keven rubbed his hands together. “Oh, goody, you’ve got a real romantic. Who’s Damon Alexander? A new boy toy?”

Nick burst in before Colin could. “Yeah, Kat, who is this guy? And why is he sending flowers to my brother’s wife, anyway?”

Keven flapped his hand in dismissal. “Oh, pulease. Don’t be so American. A little la-di-da on the side is done all the time in Europe.”

Colin put an end to the banter, quick and sure. “This isn’t Europe and we don’t have affairs a week after getting married. So shut your trap.”

Treva and Keven gruffed a moment, but decided not to get in Colin’s way. Which, Colin suspected, was the wisest choice they could have made.

Even though Kat didn’t budge during the conversation, the odd little smile grew, driving Colin to take action. Praying his interpretation of the note would be mistaken, he, nonetheless, strode over and opened the door. Standing on the threshold was a tall, lean man dressed all in white, holding out yet another group of roses. Long-stemmed roses wrapped with a gold ribbon, in a long, gold-embroidered box.

“Who the hell are you?” Colin demanded.

The white-haired gentleman raised an eyebrow at Colin and answered. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I, sir, am calling on Ms. Kat Carlton.”

“Like hell it isn’t.” Colin scowled at the stranger with every fiber of his being demanding he deck him. Only Kat standing nearby kept him from following his urge. “She isn’t in.”

“Is that so? Well, then the vision over there must be her twin. Which would, old boy, be impossible because perfection is never duplicated.”

“Oooh-la-la. This one’s a charmer and a half.” Keven edged Kat closer to her visitor. “You go, girl.”

Striding past Colin, Damon made straight for Kat. “Kat, my love, you are absolutely stunning. I hope you liked the flowers.” Winking, he presented roses to her. “Of course, they’ll soon wither next to your beauty.”

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Kat was trapped. Somehow, she’d become caught between a very angry Colin and an effusive Damon, and she couldn’t remember how she’d gotten there. The last clear thought she could remember was right after the arrival of the flowers. She remembered taking a whiff of a bouquet, but nothing after that was clear. Kind of like when she drank too much and the world got dizzy. Could smelling flowers make her light-headed?

With her mind lifting out of its fog, she tried, but couldn't remember anything after her first sniff. She couldn't remember the deliveryman bringing in so many arrangements, much less Damon's arrival. Yet, here he was, standing before her spouting all sorts of flattery.

How did he know where she lived? What did he want? To woo her? The old-fashioned word seemed appropriate when applied to Damon. But what should she do now?

"Mr. Alexander, thank you so much for the, um, virtual florist shop, but you're much too extravagant."

"Please, call me Damon or you shall forever break my heart. And all this..." He swept his arm around the room. "...is nothing. I didn't know your favorite type of petal, so I thought it best to send you as many varieties as the florist could find. A mere token of my love for you, my passion dove."

Colin uttered a low, mean sound. Did he just *growl*?

Butterflies reduced her stomach to mush. But, unlike when she kissed Colin, the experience wasn't a pleasant one. Something didn't seem right about this guy. He's was too...wrong. Yet, until she could place her finger on the problem, Kat wished she knew how to get rid of him. For her sake. And, from the appearance of the dark storm brewing in Colin, for Damon's sake.

Too bad she couldn't use a spell. But she couldn't risk attempting one with so many people around. She'd have to handle this situation the good, old mortal way.

"Mr. Alexander, as I explained in my office, I believe you've jumped to an incorrect assumption about me. And as I suggested before, it would be best if you found another service to handle your search."

His clammy and cold hand slid over hers. Not caring if she hurt his ego, she slipped her hand out of his grasp. The urge to wipe her palm overwhelmed her, but she kept her hands to her side. Now if she could stop his fawning over her.

"Kat, dear heart, I realize this is happening faster for me than it is for you. But not to worry, I will be patient, because I'm positive you'll soon discover what I know already resides in your heart."

Kat's internal alarm went off when she noticed all seven brothers forming a circle around them. As she knew from prior experience, this group of guys encircling you was not good. Arms were crossed and glares burned from blue eyes. She'd better end this soon.

"Mr. Alexander..."

"Please do not hurt me so. You must call me Damon."

"All right." Anything to get him out of here. "Damon, I appreciate the sentiment and all the kind words, but I have to ask you to leave. I'm a married woman."



His laugh was short and brittle. “What does marriage have to do with love? You are the love of my life. No law, no meaningless piece of paper, nothing can keep us apart.”

The hurricane in Colin broke free and spun out of control. Sinking his hands into the shoulders of Damon’s suit, Colin almost sent Damon flying backwards. Instead, he kept him upright and shoved him toward the door, followed by his six brothers. “You’re out of here, you jerk. The lady is my wife, and you’re invading another man’s property. In other words, get out and stay out. And don’t let me hear you’ve bothered her again, or you’ll live to regret it.”

Wrapping one hand around Damon’s belt, Colin pitched him headfirst out into the yard while his brothers hooted and hollered, slapping each other on the back. “Farewell, sweet prince. Don’t go turning into any old frog, ya hear?”

Colin slammed the door, and brushed his hands together. His wicked sneer spread to his brothers. “We won’t be seeing him around here any time soon.” Grinning at her, he added, “You’re welcome, honey.”

Kat allowed the boys to enjoy their humor for a few minutes. Colin high-fived Luke while Adam and Jack patted him on the back. Testosterone rippled through the air.

“Please tell me I didn’t hear what I thought I heard.”

Damon may make her stomach turn, but Colin made her furious.

Oblivious to his transgression, Colin leaned against the wall, forehead creased in confusion. “What’d I say? About Dashing Damon changing into a frog?”

Dropping the box of roses on top of the table, Kat lowered her head and her voice. Her voice cracked with the effort to contain her anger. “Are you going to stand there and tell me you don’t remember referring to me as ‘property’?”

“Okay, boys, there’s incoming. Time to head for the shelters.” Treva headed for the kitchen, signaling the rest to follow. “Trust me. You do not want to be around when Kat lets loose.”

The room cleared within seconds. Kat, pacing up and down, continued to fume.

Seeing the danger ahead, Colin tried to take a preemptive strike. “Never mind what I said. You owe me an explanation. Why did your new boyfriend have the impression that you’re available? Huh? How about telling me what’s going on?”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Kat wagged one finger at him. “You are not getting off the hook, you sexist pig.”

“Answer my questions,” he demanded.

Kat clenched her hands trying to stem the flow of rage. “I do not respond well to commands. And I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, your property.”

He crossed the room, heading for Game Central. Kat, however, wasn’t ready to let the conversation drop.

“Oh, no, you don’t. Stop right there, Colin MacLaughlin.” She wrenched him around with her grip on his arm. “In case you can’t remember, our arrangement is a pretend one. You don’t have any rights when it comes to me or what I do.”

“Keep your voice down. The others will hear.”

She lowered her voice, but not her intensity. “Besides, I thought your goal was to show your brothers the correct way to treat a woman. I thought you were going to lead by example. If so, your performance a few minutes ago was terrible. Not only did you act like some chest-beating cave man, you added sexism to your downfall.”

“I’m surprised you noticed. You took one whiff of those posies and your eyes clouded over like a love-sick kid.”

Was he right? Were the flowers the reason she’d become so light-headed? So forgetful? But now was not the time to worry about the flowers.

“Never mind about me. My, uh, brief lack of attention doesn’t excuse your remark or your actions. Tossing a man out on his ear! Talk about a bad example for your brothers.”

He slumped, giving her words consideration. “All right, I apologize for the property remark. It slipped out. Besides, I wanted to make sure your boyfriend knew you’re taken. At least, temporarily.”

Kat studied him. His words sounded sincere, and his attitude appeared to be repentant. So maybe he was sorry.

“Okay, apology accepted. This time. Be sure you don’t use those kinds of terms around your brothers again. And knock off playing the jealous husband, too. Women don’t like men who attack people. In fact, you should explain your mistake to your brothers so they don’t get the wrong idea.”

Jealous? Could Colin be jealous? No, it was all an act, his part in this charade.

Running his hands down her arms, he took hers in his and quipped, “Your wish is my command.”

“Very funny, Colin. What are you doing?”

She started to say something else, but when he began kissing her on the neck, all thoughts evaporated. His lips caressed her skin, his light touches reaping havoc with her senses, while his warm

breath tickled her neck. His tongue, skimming upward, traced a path up to her ear, where he paused, teasing her with anticipation.

“Should we go upstairs for a little make-up sex?” His whisper was a seductive siren.

“Hmm. Upstairs?”

Was she one of those women? Easily swayed by kisses? No, not yet.

Breaking away, she shook her head. Even if her heart yearned for nothing more than to stay in his arms, her head knew what needed to be done. “No, Colin. We have no time for this. You hired me to do a job, and I’m going to do the job right.”

Heading for the kitchen, Kat heard his low chuckle. Damn, he must have heard the lack of conviction in her voice.

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“Melanie, I’m glad you could join us tonight.”

Kat, Colin, and his brothers sat at a large, round table in *The Blue Whale*, one of Charleston’s finest restaurants. Her office assistant sat between the brothers with three on either side of her. Kat glanced at the men while she fiddled with her spoon, and prayed they would continue to act like gentlemen. So far, so good.

“How could I pass this up? Six dates in one evening? All at the same time?” Melanie fanned herself with her menu, playing the part of a Southern Belle. “Why, I’m so flattered, I might faint at any moment.”

“All right, Melanie, enough of the dramatics. You know I appreciate your assistance. Giving the guys a practice date was essential before I could feel safe in setting them up with any of our clients.”

Melanie waved her comments away. “Hey, with a husband and two kids at home, I’m happy for any excuse to get out. Especially on the client’s dollar.” She smiled at Colin, and took another sip of her very huge, very expensive cocktail.

Kat surveyed the brothers. Other than acting uncomfortable in their new attire, the brothers were sitting, behaving like gentlemen, in clothes personally selected by Keven. Luke tugged at his collar, while Adam wrestled with his jacket. Jack kept sending her pleading looks, but she wouldn’t relent. She’d almost tackled him trying to put on his tie, and she wouldn’t let him take it off now. Each one sported a new hairstyle, compliments of Treva’s mastery. Yep, she admitted, they cleaned up good. Now if they remembered her lessons on table manners and social situations, she might be able to relax.

“No offense, Mel, but I’d have liked a single woman, instead of an old, married lady. After all, we already have a wife at the table.”

Kat glared at John. The way he’d used the term “wife” left a bad taste in her mouth. Plus, leave it to him to insult both women in one swift stroke. “John, do you realize what you said? You called Melanie old, and made it sound like being married is a death sentence.”

His expression left no doubt he’d not meant to offend. “I did? Sorry, I didn’t mean to. But I’d still rather be sitting across from a hot babe.”

Kat and Melanie exchanged a meaningful glance. “Great. So now, not only am I old and married, I’m no longer hot. For your information, John, my husband thinks I’m hot and I have two kids to prove it.”

“You having two kids proves you’re not hot.”

“John, you’d better close your mouth right now.” Kat’s fists clenched the napkin in her lap.

The rest of the meal was stiff and uncomfortable. However, Kat counted their effort a success. Other than fumbling a few times over which fork to use, the biggest problem they’d encountered was Nick’s refusal to place his napkin in his lap. He kept trying to tuck it into his shirt collar, and Kat kept yanking it off, putting it back where it belonged. In frustration, she resorted to mumbling a soft spell and, from then on, his napkin slid out and came to rest on his lap every time he tried to stick it back inside his collar. Finally, Nick accepted the inevitable.

Kat breathed a sigh of relief when the waiter placed the desserts on the table. Nothing could go wrong now.

“Kat, hi!”

She answered, adjusting her chair to see the person behind her.

“Maddy? What are you doing here?”

And where was Lila? Kat’s eyes scanned the room, prepared for the worst.

“Eating dinner, of course.” Maddy’s smile blazed.

Surprised, Kat queried, “Alone? You’re here eating alone? Isn’t Lila with you?”

James jumped at the opportunity. “Hey, how about joining us? As you can see, we’re a little light in the female department.” Remembering John’s earlier faux pas, he cast an apologetic glance at Melanie and added, “Of course, Kat and Melanie are great company, but I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you ate dessert with us.”

Melanie was more than happy to include Maddy. Scooting her chair sideways, she motioned for Maddy to occupy the empty space beside her. But, again, James took charge of the situation.

“Uh, how about we spread the women out a bit more? Here, allow me.” Jumping up from his seat, he snatched up an empty chair, and carried it over to his side of the table. “Sit here beside me.”

Maddy fluttered her eyelashes and sat in the chair James held out for her.

“Would you care for some dessert? Or would you like to share mine?”

Kat’s eyebrows shot up. She couldn’t believe her eyes and ears. James holding out a chair for Maddy? James offering his dessert to her? James being the epitome of a true gentleman? He even seemed to be enjoying paying attention to her sister. Maybe her lessons were paying off after all. But why was Maddy at a restaurant for mortals?

Disconcerted, Kat sat back and watched. Now James was hand-feeding Maddy. In fact, anyone watching them would assume they were a couple. A couple in love. But the idea was impossible. No, this scene smelled like a rat and Chester wasn’t anywhere around. Maddy must be part of some diabolical plan of Lila’s, and she made up her mind to find out if she was correct.

“Maddy, let’s go to the ladies’ room.” Kat stood over Maddy, tapping her repeatedly on the shoulder.

“Oh, I’ll join you two.” Melanie began to rise, but Kat stopped her short.

“No, Melanie. I mean, would you mind staying here? My sister and I have to discuss a private matter.” Not waiting for a response, Kat tugged Maddy away with her.

Standing beside the entrance to the restroom, Kat crossed her arms and demanded answers. “Maddy, what’s going on? Are you and Lila scheming together? Since when do you frequent a mortal restaurant?”

A man dialing the nearby payphone glanced her way and winked. Kat inhaled, trying to calm her nerves. “Go on. Confess. You’ve performed a spell on James, haven’t you? Perhaps a love spell to get him interested in you? The thing I don’t understand is why. How does making James fall in love with you help Lila?”

Maddy laughed. “Kat, you are so suspicious. Lila has nothing to do with this. I heard the food was good here so I thought I’d check it out. No ulterior motive, no schemes, and no spells. Can I help it if James is infatuated with me?”

They swiveled toward the phone when the man banged the receiver on the hook to get their attention. Or, more specifically, to get Maddy’s attention. “Hey, baby, how about working out a scheme with me. We can put spells on each other in my bed.”

Kat caught Maddy’s hand in the nick of time. “No, Maddy, don’t. You can’t do anything here.” She held on to Maddy’s wrist, waiting for the tension to subside.

“Aw, come on, lady.” The man stumbled closer.

She could smell the stench of alcohol on his breath. Great. He’s drunk. What else would she have to deal with?

“If you’re horny, you can join us, too. You’re sort of cute, and I don’t mind doing a chubbette every once in awhile.”

Kat’s eyes met Maddy’s, while her lips curled into a copy of Maddy’s own mischievous smile.

“Aw, hell, go ahead.” Again, she stopped Maddy’s hand in mid-stroke. “Though, nothing too ugly.”

The red light nearly blinded Kat, making her close her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, the man was bent over, examining his growing stomach. Incredulous, he clapped a hand over his mouth, breaking off a silent scream.

“Maddy, what did you do?” Kat bit her mouth, trying not to laugh.

“Nothing too bad. I gave him the illusion of adding a few pounds to his weight, that’s all. I figured he could learn how unflattering the term ‘chubbette’ can be.”

Ripping his shirt open, the drunk stared at his stomach, mesmerized, his face contorted by what he saw. Dropping his glass, he ran into the men’s room, uttering a strangled cry.

Kat fought the pity trying to replace her initial revulsion. “You aren’t making him think he’s growing too large, are you? I mean, he won’t imagine himself blowing up into a blimp, will he?”

Arm in arm, they headed back toward the dining room.

“Of course not. He’ll picture being about thirty pounds heavier. And even those pounds will fade away when he starts sobering up. In fact, he should thank me. I may have fixed his drinking problem.”

Satisfied, Kat nodded. “Okay, Maddy. You can stay for your dessert. Then you’re leaving, and not coming home with us. Agreed?”

Maddy’s grin faded in an instant, and she pursed her lips together. Before she turned her head away, Kat saw a glimmer of disappointment in her eyes. Was Maddy upset that she couldn’t go home with them? *What interest would she have in socializing with the MacLaughlin brothers?*

“Agreed.”

A loud cry sent the restaurant’s manager running to the men’s room.

“Maddy, you are so bad.”

“Wrong, sister dear. I’m good. I’m very good.” Grinning at her joke, Maddy hugged her closer.

## Chapter Nine

“So? What happened? You went to her office, didn’t you?”

Lila pushed Damon backwards, away from her breasts. “Answer me, Damon. How is your seduction of my sister going?”

Damon, always persistent, reached out again to tweak her nipple. “My love, you know I do my best at whatever I’m doing. Come. I’ll do my best at getting you excited.” Snagging her around the waist, he tumbled her into the bed.

“Argh! You oaf, you’re hurting me.” Lila pretended to struggle against Damon’s weight resting on top of her. She allowed him the privilege of overpowering her.

“Ah, ha, but I know how you relish my devouring your lovely rosebuds.” He dipped his head to her nub again, while his hand pinched the other tit.

Tugging his shirt over his head, she bent upward, urging him to continue. “I must have your skin next to mine. Take your clothes off. Now.”

He stood and followed her demand.

He was wonderful. She loved the white hair capping his head, but the hair of the same color trailing down his chest to his abdomen and below, was her favorite. His long, lean frame slithered out of his clothes in short order.

“Lick me between my tits. Then you may take pleasure in doing what you like there.” She knew all too well what he would do. She, too, craved him between her breasts. But she would never tell him. To tell him would give him power over her.

Damon straddled her and hid his penis between her succulent globes. Rubbing back and forth, he played with her nipples and watched her.

She sighed, enjoying the warmth of his shaft on her chest. Long, smooth strokes ran up and down, sliding deliciously within. Wanting to tease him more, she ran her tongue over her lips, knowing what such a sight would do.

“Ah, Lila, please. Take me in your mouth.”

She grasped his shaft in one hand and pumped. “Why should I? Are you hot for me, Damon? Do you want to please me, Damon?”

His breathing was more ragged now. He wouldn’t last much longer.

“Is this what you would have me do?” Touching the end of his penis with her tongue, she flicked her tip around and around his shaft.

His groan tightened her belly, sending desire shooting through her. “Very well. For a short while.” Raising her head, she took him in her mouth, running her tongue in slow, easy circles. The fullness of him grew and she withdrew.

“No, my treasure. Please do more.”

“Not today. I have no wish to taste you today.” Placing him between her again, she squeezed her breasts together, closing him in. Violently, he pounded her until he could hold on no longer. She closed her eyes as he pressed his hands down on her, keeping his milk contained between her tits.

Once his moans were over, she pushed him off her, taking the nearby towel to wipe her chest. He lay next to her, playing with her hair.

“Now, lick me, Damon.” A ripple of excitement ran down her belly at the thought of his tongue on her wetness.

“Again? Do you wish me between your magnificent breasts, again?”

“No. I command you to use your tongue for me now.”

“Not command, my wondrous witch. To do as you bid is my happiness.”

Damon stroked her clit with his hand, shifting her body so he could angle his head closer. Running his tongue over his teeth, he lowered his head and began feasting on her. His tongue stabbed inside her, while his thumb continued ravaging her hot little sex. She moaned the whimpering sound she knew would serve to make him lash at her harder.

“Good, Damon. Keep going.”

He murmured, moving to lie between her legs. Spreading her wider, his tongue hardened and drew in and out of her, sending tremors through her legs.

“Now. Send me over the edge, Damon.”

Obliging her, he bit on the hard, taut bud atop her slit. He alternated, first sucking and then biting, until she knew her end was near. Rotating his thumb against her clit, she bucked and arched with each release, her muscles quivering against him. Sucking in eager laps, he teased and stroked her until she climaxed, spiraling to a blissful conclusion.

Moments later, she lay in his arms, half-dozing. Stretching, she sat up, trying to wake up Damon in the process. She tied her robe around her and shook the snoozing wizard again.

“Wake up. We must discuss your progress with Kat.”



He sneered at her, and she wondered if he was upset for awakening him, or for having to deal with Kat.

“Fine. The seduction is going along smoothly.” His hand shot out to take her, but she twisted away. Rising from the bed, she crossed the room to the dresser, picked up the pearl-embossed brush and stroked her hair.

“Really? Then you’ve started luring her away from the mortal? Have you taken her to bed yet?”

His eyes darted away from hers, answering her question. “You haven’t slept with her yet? What are you waiting for?”

“Kat is proving to be more difficult than I imagined. I met her in her office and made my intentions clear. However, she wasn’t as taken with me as I assumed she would be.”

She batted a strand of hair away from her forehead. “So? Then what? Surely you’ve done more since your first meeting?”

He went on. “Yesterday, I sent her scads of flowers, bouquets a-plenty, and arrived at her home moments after their delivery, ready to be welcomed into her arms. I’d even scented the flowers with a spell to make her more accepting of my advances. However, her husband and hordes of other mortals were there, blocking my path to her.”

“And?” She waited, knowing more would be following. Her heart sank when he again diverted his eyes from hers. “That’s all? All you’ve done was to send her some puny posies?”

In a defiant toss of his head, he answered, “Puny posies? I’ll have you know those twelve bunches of puny posies cost me a small fortune.”

She allowed her derision to flow through her words. “You pitiful fool. You have done nothing.” Picking up the crystal vase on the dresser, she aimed for his head and missed. The vase shattered against the wall behind him.

“Go to her now. Win her over. Sweep her off her feet. Be forceful. Be a man. No, better. Be a wizard.”

Damon ran from the room, ducking the champagne bottle she sent flying after him.

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Kat rolled her eyes at James. “Maddy is not your type. Trust me.”

James, glowing from his time with her sister, took another drink of wine. “Why? And how would you know what my type is?”

Mortals. Those were his type. At least as far as she was concerned. Or if his types included witches, then no problem. But not her sister.

“You don’t know my sister. I do. She wouldn’t handle your lifestyle for two days. She’s used to being pampered and spoiled, and you’re used to treating women like meat. The two don’t mix.”

“Hey, I’ve learned, haven’t I? Wasn’t I great the other night?”

True, his performance earned him a gold star. Much better than she’d expected, and loads better than the rest. Including Colin.

“Still...I think you’d be better off with someone else. Someone you’d have more in common with”

“But I like Maddy.”

“But I haven’t run my evaluations with her. I don’t know if she’s compatible with you.”

Chugging the last of his drink, James shrugged at her. “I don’t care about your evaluations. Maddy is wonderful and I’m going to see her again.” Getting up from the floor, he took Kat’s empty wine glass and stalked from the room.

Kat scowled, aggravated. “How in the world did those two ever hit it off? I can’t have an errant sexual fling happening here. Too much is riding on these matches. I’ll have to find him a different woman.” She knew she was right, no more Maddy for James.

Whoever was knocking must have been going at it for awhile before she noticed the sound. Nick, Luke and John reached the door before she did.

“Man, you don’t know when to give up, do you?”

Kat stood behind the brothers, appalled to see Damon standing on their porch. “Damon, what are you doing here? I thought we understood each other.”

He bowed a ridiculous, flamboyant bow.

“Kat, my dear, I will not give up on fate so easily. Why else would I have selected your place of business? Why else would you have been free at the very moment I arrived?”

A vision of Colin walking into her office at exactly the right time filled her mind. The image transformed, replacing Colin with Damon. A shudder ran through her. Damon might be her pretend husband right now. Except he would have wanted the relationship to be real.

“Uh, huh. Well, I’m sorry, but fate’s going to have to take a backseat to reality. I don’t mean to hurt you or anything, but I’m not interested.”

He reacted—or should she say didn’t react—to her words. She wondered if he’d heard her, or did he think he could ignore her?

“Kat, I’m asking you for one simple favor. Come have dinner with me tonight. I realize it’s short notice and I ask you to forgive me that. But have pity on me, too, and say you’ll come. You choose the venue. Anything you desire is yours.”

This was a one-track man. The wrong track.

She opened her mouth to decline for the last time, when Colin pressed up behind her. His solid chest next to her shoulders gave her the security she needed. Too bad his words didn’t do the same.

“Aw, for Pete’s sake. Can’t you get it through your head? The lady’s taken. Married. Hitched. One man’s woman and I’m the man. So get lost.”

Had Colin not heard her the first time? He’d gone from calling her his property, to claiming her as his woman. She could hear feminists the world over shouting in the background. Where did he get off?

Granted, she was pretending to be part of a happily married couple, but there were limits to what she could stand. And she’d reached her limits.

Playing her role, she adopted a loving expression and gazed into Colin’s eyes.. Kat patted him on the chest and explained. “Colin, honey, you’re right. We are married. However, don’t you remember agreeing to an open marriage?”

A lightening bolt couldn’t have struck him harder. She wondered if she could knock him over with a touch of her finger.

“Open marriage?”

Kat laughed a light, airy, fake laugh. “Come on, Colin, we discussed this several times before we got married. During the first year of our marriage, we’re allowed to see the occasional person outside our bonds of matrimony.”

She scanned the stunned faces around her, delighting in her momentary victory, and continued explaining. “Oh, no sex is permitted.” She glanced at Damon, making sure he heard her. “But if I choose to have a male friend, then I’ll have a male friend. Purely platonic.”

Or, maybe the naughty witch inside her should teach Colin a lesson. Tilting her head at him, she batted her eyelashes, and added a twist to the knife in his back. “Well, sort of.”

Colin’s speech center must have clued back into the conversation. “Sort of platonic? Now wait a sec. I don’t remember any of this.” He glared down at her, his eyes shrinking to blue slits.

Kat squinted at him, daring him to cross her. “Yes, Colin, it’s in our prenuptial contract. If you’d like to review it, I can get you a copy from my office tomorrow. Because, of course, you wouldn’t want to break the contract and void our marriage, would you?”

Colin's jaw clenched, a sure sign her surprise hit home.

Kat paused, steeling herself for her next bombshell. "So, Damon, on further consideration, I accept your invitation to dinner."

"Glorious!" Damon shouldered past the men to take Kat's hand.

She fought the urge to yank her hand back, and copied his mega-watt smile. "I'll go change and be ready in a second. Until then, make yourself comfortable."

Breaking free of Damon's sweaty grip, she sent Colin an unmistakable message. "Now you boys play nice. Understood?" Without a backward glance, she hurried up the stairs.

What now? Did her agreeing to go out with that slime ball Damon have anything to do with Colin calling her his woman? And what was so wrong with his declaration? In fact, the word now sent a wave of excitement through her body. Would a man claim a woman as his when he didn't care for her? Was something happening with Colin? Something potentially wonderful?

Hugging the red dress next to her, she let her imagination float away. She envisioned Colin with her, together forever. Together as a real man and wife. Together with a child of their own. Maybe even lots of kids, some mortals, some witches.

"Oh, good goddess. I'm in love with him."

She fell against the bed, floored by the realization. "Here I thought I was playing house with him, and I've gone and fallen in love with the big goof. The big, frustrating, handsome, sexy goof."

Her mind whirled with emotions and thoughts all tumbled up, leaving none of them clear. Her heart, however, burst open with the wondrous conclusion, ready and willing to give all the love she'd held trapped within her.

Colin was her man. He was the one she'd waited for all these years. After so many couples she'd introduced, all the clients' weddings she'd attended, she'd finally found love. Kat wiggled her feet in elation and jumped up.

Yet questions still remained. How would Colin react to this development? Did he love her? His actions showed he was jealous, but was this an indication of love? Or merely a primitive, territorial trait? How could she know the difference?

"I have to get Colin to realize I'm the one for him. But how?" She glimpsed herself in the mirror, still holding the red dress to her body. With a cat-ate-the-canary grin, she tossed the dress on the bed and flew down the stairs.

"Colin? Colin? Where are you?"

Scanning the room, she found no one. No Colin, no brothers, and no Damon. “Where did they all go?”

A low laugh brought her attention to the front door. “Uh, oh.”

Running to the door, she burst onto the scene. On the yard outside, Colin stood over a fallen Damon, while his brothers watched from the steps. She moved toward them, but Luke caught her from behind. “No, Kat. This is between Colin and your visitor. We didn’t interfere and you’re not going to, either. Besides, it’s already over.”

“I don’t care what Kat said earlier, you’re not taking her to dinner or anywhere else. Leave now before I get rough.” Colin held a boxer’s stance, towering over Damon who rose up in slow, deliberate movements.

Damon’s gray eyes darkened to black coals, radiating an immeasurable power. She gasped, terrified of what lay in those depths. “Colin, please, leave him alone. He’s dangerous.”

Pivoting to face her, Colin cocked his head, not understanding her. “It’s okay, Kat. Damon is leaving.”

She held her breath, fearing the worst, when, without warning, Damon raised his arm, hand extended outward as if to strike. Thunder rolled somewhere nearby, while black clouds tumbled together in the sky. Rippling heat rose from the ground surrounding the two men.

Unable to speak, she pointed, alerting Colin, and he swung back around. “Go ahead, man, give it your best shot. But don’t blame me for what happens afterwards.”

The heat surrounding Damon dissipated in an instant, and the atmosphere returned to normal. The threatening storm raced across the sky, leaving a cloudless horizon in its place.

With his hand still raised, Damon stopped, and glanced from Colin to Kat. His eyes bore into hers as he lowered his arm. “I will not fight in front of my lady. Kat, are you ready to depart?”

Her body trembled, shooting dire signals to Kat’s brain. Damon’s aborted attack reminded her of the way Maddy conjured a spell. But, if Damon was a wizard, why didn’t she sense any magic surrounding him? She’d realized the power, seen the power, but within seconds, it was gone, leaving her uncertain as to its validity. Was it just her imagination?

Damon tried to pass Colin to reach her, but Colin blocked him with his outstretched arm. “Kat? Did you hear me?”

Studying his imploring face, Kat shook her head, reversing her decision yet again. “I’m sorry, Damon, but this can’t happen tonight.”

A relieved expression lifted Colin's scowl. "You heard my wife, buddy. Head on out and don't come back. She's mine."

Why couldn't Colin be silent? Again, irritation flitted down Kat's back. Yet, through her vexation, a devious idea arrived. "I said this can't happen tonight, because," sensing all eyes on her, she struggled to continue, "tomorrow night is better."

A slick, too-big smile curved Damon's lips. "Very well, my pet. I will arrive tomorrow at dusk with my chariot." With a low bow, he stretched his lips wider, aiming his smile straight at Colin, and stalked into the night.

Colin glared at her with burning, reproachful eyes. "Why did you say you'd go out with him? Haven't I made my feelings clear?"

Part of her ached to reach out and soothe his furrowed brow. The other part, however, would have liked nothing better than to punch his lights out. Why did he have to be so brutish? It was his fault she'd accepted the dinner invitation with Damon.

"If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I'm going to retire for the evening. Husband?" Her tone made the title sound base and unworthy. "You can sleep somewhere else tonight." Lifting her chin, she met his gaze straight on, and stomped into the house.

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"What the hell did I say?"

"Gee, I don't know, Colin. Maybe it was the way you tried to control her, force her. I couldn't tell if you were trying to be father, brother, or jealous lover to her." James rolled his eyes at his big brother. "If I were you, I'd start apologizing now so you don't have to spend the night on the couch."

Grumbling under his breath, Colin knew his brother was right. But he couldn't help the way he felt, could he? Every time Damon showed up, his blood ran hot. Hot in a dangerous way.

James thrust a magazine at him. "If you tell anyone else I gave you this, I'll deny it to the day I die."

A glossy picture of Tom Cruise smiled up at him. Headlines ran across Tom's chest, promising the secrets to a woman's heart. Colin tried to hand the *Cosmo* back to James.

"Hey, I'm trying to help you, man. I read this magazine and I learned a lot. You know, how women think, how they act, and their desires in life. Read the top headline. Your redemption back into Kat's arms may lie in this article."

Colin perused the cover again, and read the biggest headline, *Romance, the Way to a Woman's Heart — and her Bed*. Snarling, he flipped open to the article. After reading a few moments, he asked, “Are you kidding me? I’m supposed to shower her with affection, run a bubble bath for her, and sprinkle our bedroom with rose petals? Crap, why not take her to moon?”

James slapped him on the back. “Now you get it. She wants to be taken to the moon and back. All women go nuts for this kind of junk. But, I ask you, Col, isn’t the end result worth it?”

Colin grumbled again, but found it hard to argue. “Yeah, it is.” He glanced around the flower-filled room. “I suppose getting rose petals wouldn’t be difficult. But how am I supposed to do the preparations while she’s already in our room?”

James winked at him and rubbed his hands together. “Leave the diversion to me. I’ll ask her to teach me a few more things to get me ready for my date. Once she’s out of the room, you’ll have time to set your trap.”

Colin nodded, still unsure if this plan would work, but ready to try. While he gathered petals, he could hear James talking with Kat. Soon, he heard their footsteps going down the other stairway into the kitchen.

With a bag full of rose petals, Colin entered their bedroom. Consulting the article, he lowered the lights, changed the linens on the bed, and placed blossoms on and around the bed. Leaving a trail of blooms to the bathroom, he dumped a huge supply of bubble bath into the large tub, and adjusted the water. He changed into his new silk robe, another addition by Keven, and surveyed the room.

“Not bad if I do say so myself.”

A few moments later, he heard her saying goodnight to James. Sitting on the edge of the bed in what he hoped was a casual manner, he waited for her.

Kat came through the door with her head down, and sighed. Seeing a petal at her feet, she picked it up, and examined it.

“Hi, honey. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Surprise filtered away, replaced by annoyance. “What are you doing in here? You’re sleeping on the couch, remember?” Her voice oozed exasperation, but her eyes, sparkling from the candlelight, scanned the room, taking in all his preparations.

“You did, but you could change your mind. You changed it a lot when your friend was here.”

Her glare warned him not to head down that path.

“Besides, changing your mind is a woman’s prerogative, you know. So I thought I could try to get you to reverse your decision concerning my sleeping arrangements.” Remembering the tips he’d read in the magazine, he continued, “I can’t bear the thought of not lying beside you tonight.”

His remark hit home. She stopped in her tracks, mouth open, and stared at him. In fact, she appeared so astonished he almost chuckled.

“You acted like a king earlier, ordering me around like some kind of peasant.”

Rising, he crossed to her. “I swear, I didn’t mean to.” He grazed her cheek with the back of his fingers, and ran the other hand down her arm. “If I’m a king, Kat, then you’re my queen.”

“Are you apologizing? And, if so, will you promise never to tell me what I can and can’t do?”

Taking her arms, he bent, leveling his eyes to hers. “I swear I will never order you around again. Am I forgiven?”

Her body relaxed, and she leaned into him. “Well, I guess you’re forgiven. This time.”

Lifting her chin, he brushed a thumb across her lower lip. “Thanks, Kat. You won’t regret your decision. Now, how about a bath?”

“A bath? I don’t know. I mean, I always take showers.” Despite her words, he caught her eyeing the bathroom door.

“Perhaps you’ll enjoy this bath. Come, let me show you.” He kissed her hand once, and led her to his next surprise.

“Oh.” Bringing her hand to her mouth, she paused, entranced by the roses and candles. “You did all this for me?”

Good, the plan was working. He’d have to take out a subscription to *Cosmo* after this.

“Here, let me help you into your bath.” He caught a glimpse of hesitation when he began unbuttoning her blouse, but she didn’t stop him. With deliberate slowness, he drew her blouse apart, exposing the simple, white bra underneath. Placing his palm on her heaving chest, he slid his hand under one strap and eased it off her shoulder. A tremor passed through her, yet she remained as silent as before.

His breath caught in his throat at the sight of her exposed breasts. Smoky, green eyes gazed up at him, asking him for assurance. “Kat, you’re wonderful.”

Slipping off his robe, he knelt before her, nuzzling his head against her abdomen. A small sound escaped her, so small he barely heard it, but, nonetheless, it was powerful enough to send shivers down his spine. Leaning back, he unfastened her pants and tugged, bringing both slacks and panties down to



the floor. He rained kisses from her navel to her mound, while her fingers dug into his neck. His goddess, his woman, stepped from her clothes into the steaming bathtub.

“Ah.”

Her low approval was all he could bear. Lowering himself into the tub behind her, he let the warmth of both water and woman spread over him. Bubbles flowed around her globes, hiding all but the tops of them from view. He kissed the nape of her neck, allowing his hands to wander to her breasts. Already taut nipples welcomed him, and he groaned in her ear. “God, you are so sexy.”

She attempted to face him, but he stopped her. “No. Stay. I like having my shaft against you this way.” Her breathing quickened, tempting him to progress further, faster. Fighting the urge to sink into her from behind, he fondled her, tweaking her nubs while he kissed her shoulders.

“Colin, please. Put your fingers inside me.”

Leaving one hand to cup her breast, he slid the other down her stomach, searching for his waiting treasure. Spreading her folds, he gained access and stroked her. Her head fell back to lie against his chest and she twisted her head, seeking his mouth. His mouth fell on hers, gaining access, and stroked the inside of her mouth with his tongue.

“Wash yourself.”

She obeyed him, gathering bubbles to use as soap. He licked his lips, relishing how she ran her hands over her breasts teasing him. Red flowers drifted up to rest on her chest and arms. His hand between her legs worked faster, harder, until she lay panting against him.

“Please.”

Again, she tried to turn to him. This time he let her.

She straddled him, sitting on his legs, taking him into her hands. Using long, smooth strokes, she washed his member, gliding her hands up and down, again and again. Her hair, wet and tangled, dripped bubbles down her chest. Licking his lips, he watched, mesmerized, while a fat droplet ran down her smooth skin, to the tip of her pink bud, and dropped to the water below.

“Kat, I can’t stand it any longer. I have to have you.”

She smiled a womanly, self-satisfied smile. “Then take me.”

Lifting up a bit, she cupped his shaft in her hand and guided it into her.

“God. Oh, God.” The whole room dimmed before his eyes. Had the candles gone out?

Shoving the thought from his mind, he closed down, shunning everything but her. He knew one reality. One world. One Kat.

Thrusting upward, he rammed into her, splashing water over the sides. She arched, tilting her head back, gripping her fingernails into him.

Together they pumped, harder and harder. Flesh pounding flesh. For minutes, he didn't know where his cries left off and hers began. The world outside the room no longer existed. No other people existed. Only Kat. His Kat.

She climaxed with him, mingling her moans with his. Falling forward, she lay against him, wet from water, wet from sweat, wet from sex.

Joy, more powerful than any emotion he'd ever experienced, enveloped him, and rushed to the surface.

He got her attention with his laughter.

"What's so funny?" The anxiety mixed with annoyance in her eyes touched his heart.

"Nothing. You. Me. Everything. Never even making it to the bed. I'm happy for once.."

Her smile started at her lips and spread to her eyes. "I'm glad. Me, too."

He pressed the issue, hoping he was right to do so. "Kat, don't go out with Damon. The idea of him with you drives me crazy."

Her face, flushed from pleasure, brightened. "All you had to do was ask. I won't. How can I?" Her eyelashes fluttered, dark velvet against her pale skin. "Can I be honest with you?"

He drew her face down to his. Kissing the tip of her nose, he answered, hoping she didn't notice the catch in his throat. "Of course, you can."

She paused, reflecting, and he feared she'd decide against opening up to him. "I'd planned to go out with Damon to get you jealous. Even though I can't stand the man. Colin, I want to be with you."

His heart stopped a moment. Flabbergasted, ideas fumbled around in his head. How should he respond to her confession? A side of him rejoiced, elated by her admission. Yet, another reaction filled him with panic. His image of an open road spreading out before him began to dissolve in his mind. Claustrophobia hit him square in the gut with responsibility closing in a fast second.

Kat didn't notice when his hands dropped away from her.

"Colin, I'm with you. I don't want anyone else."

She paused again, locking him to her with her sea-green eyes.

"Colin. I love you."

His stomach dropped. Emotions rushed through his brain, leaving him dizzy and stunned. He saw his future freedom whisked away, forever trapping him.

She loves him.

The intensity of her scrutiny jolted his awareness, and knowing she probed him for a response, he ducked his head. He struggled within, and didn't know where, or even if, the correct response could be found. Trying to figure out what to say left him reeling, empty, unable to stabilize his equilibrium. Miraculously, she gave him what he searched for. A way out.

"Don't worry about it, Colin. You don't have to feel the same way. I understand. We're a pretend couple. Take it easy, I'm caught up in the moment and not realizing what I'm saying."

He reached for her, started to speak, but what he saw, stabbed him, piercing him to his core. Her face, once glowing with trust, slammed closed, shutting him off from her thoughts. Cold, cat-eyes stared back at him, daring him to cross their fortress.

Could he ever forgive himself for hurting her? Would he ever forgive himself if he didn't?

A forced grin broke her hardened features. "Hey, how about we go and try the bed now? I've never slept in roses before."

Without waiting for a reply, she rose, grabbed a towel, and ran for the bedroom.

## Chapter Ten

The next evening, Kat sat perched on a stool in front of Colin's six brothers. Colin, the only one not dressed in a suit, leaned against a wall, away from the group.

"Here's the plan." Kat inclined her head, gesturing toward her audience. "On the bright side of events, you all have dates for tonight. And to help the dates go without any problems, you're all double dating, or whatever you call a date with six couples."

"You could call it a miracle."

"Naw, man, a world record."

"Yeah, we could be in the *Guinness World Records* book."

"Nope. More like *Ripley's Believe It or Not*."

"Or *The Twilight Zone*, depending on how the dates go."

Trying to exude a confidence she didn't quite own, Kat tossed her head and laughed. "Ha, ha, you guys. Very funny. But I have faith in you. All of you. Besides, you already met the ladies at my office and managed to make good impressions."

John coughed, covering up a rude remark. "Sure, Kat, but we saw them for maybe five minutes. Even an ape can behave well for a short time period. Now we're talking about a whole evening."

Jack couldn't resist ribbing his brother. "Yeah, an ape can, but he's a step up on the evolutionary scale from you."

John started to hurl his body at Jack, but Nick grabbed his shirt and hauled him back in his seat.

Yet, John did have a point. The brothers had met with their future dates, ladies Kat personally matched to them, long enough to exchange names and approve of each other's appearance. She'd hoped the brief interlude would serve as an enticement for the upcoming evening. Then she'd whisked them away from each other before any of them could make a mistake.

"I know this will be harder, but you can do it. Trust me. Remember what you've learned and don't give in to your first inclination. Think before you say or act. Or, in other words, pretend I'm sitting there with you and ask yourself, 'How would Kat tell me to behave?' Plus, being on a date together, I figured you'd be able to keep each other in line, too."

She hoped they bought her false bravado. Yet how could she pump them up when her stomach was torn apart with anxiety?

“The first date’s always the roughest. But remember, I picked these ladies with you guys in mind. They are your perfect match. So, relax to a certain degree, and have a good time. From here, we’ll go on to solo dating. Now get out of here and go meet your ladies.”

She hopped down from her stool and began shepherding the men out the door. Fixing John’s tie, she whispered in his ear. “You are a terrific man, John MacLaughlin. Now go out there and sweep that girl off her feet.”

He smiled wanly at her and followed his brothers out the door. Standing guard like a mother hen, Kat watched as the men loaded into various cars and drove off. “God, I hope this goes well.”

“As well as can be expected, my love, when dealing with uncivilized dolts.”

She jumped, her pulse doubling in speed. Damon walked into the light from out of the bushes.

A cold, prickly itch scratched at the back of her neck. This man was just plain creepy. “Damon, were you watching us? Spying on us?”

His fake smile shifted into a perplexed mask of insincerity. “Of course not. I would never stoop to something so low.”

Eeww, how she disliked this guy. Before meeting him, she’d never understood how skin could crawl. Now, however, she knew this man made her skin do just that. Even more, he made her wish she could shed her skin like a snake, replacing her contaminated one with a new skin. He made her sick with his sloppy smirk.

“Damon, I wish I’d gotten your number earlier. I would have called you. Things have changed, and I won’t be going out with you. Not tonight, not ever. I’m sorry for my indecisiveness, but things are complicated.”

Her throat tightened when she saw his eyes go black. This was more than a mortal standing before her. How else could he give off such power? But why didn’t she sense his power all the time, and not just when he grew angry? Could she be confusing strong emotions for power?

She coughed, trying to dislodge the invisible clog from her throat. “I’m sorry, Damon. I didn’t mean to string you along. I’d planned to go out with you, but I can’t. I’m in love with Colin.”

“You’re in love with him?” His words dripped with venom. “I can’t believe you, a lady, could debase yourself by loving him.”

“Watch it, Damon.” She may not be Colin’s real wife, but she wouldn’t let this oddball disrespect the man she loved.

“You heard the woman.”

Colin stood behind her in the doorway, sending out an aura of rage and power. Yet, his power seemed so different from Damon's.

Kat held out her hand to the silent Damon. "I hope we can be civil to one another, if not friends. And I do wish you well on your search for the right woman. Don't settle for less than real love, and don't give up until you find her."

He hissed his words through gritted teeth. "I've already found the woman of my dreams. She is the reason I'm here."

Did he still mean her? Of course. But then why did she have the impression his mind was on someone else?

Colin, however, didn't give her time to follow through on her reflections. "Well, sorry, man, she's already taken. Now act like a gentleman and leave the lady alone."

Damon seethed with hostility, causing the air to curve around them, cloaking them, choking them. "Very well, my dear. I'll leave for tonight, but I'm not giving up." Hurling one last glare at Colin, Damon swirled and marched into the night.

"Damn, he doesn't give up, does he?"

Colin's hands warmed her shoulders, reminding her of the warmth they'd shared in the bath. She shook her head at the idea, determined to rid her mind of those memories. She wouldn't hold on to someone who didn't love her. The advice she'd given Damon rang in her ears.

"Colin, go in the house. I need to be alone."

"I don't know, babe. He might come back."

Her heart ached as she peered into the darkness, one lost soul searching for the other. If Damon and she belonged together, things would be so different. Instead, they were both holding on to a love that didn't exist.

"No, he's gone. Leave me, Colin."

Trying to stem the tears threatening to flow, she kept her back to him. Standing straight and firm, she listened as the door closed behind her.

For several minutes she stood on the porch, staring into the night. At times, through bleary eyes, she believed she saw a darkened shape, hiding in the trees surrounding the house. Could Damon be watching? She didn't care. She imagined she knew his heartache. After all, weren't they alike? Weren't they both in love with someone they couldn't have? Someone who didn't love them back? A clearer understanding of him washed through her, forming an odd kinship to Damon.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she waved a small wave in case Damon saw her, and entered the house.

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He couldn't believe how low he'd sunk. No excuses, he was a jerk.

Colin watched, helpless, as Kat dashed into the house and ran up the stairs. He asked her to talk but, instead of responding, she shook her head and continued her flight to get away from him.

"Crap, this really stinks." He glanced upstairs, waiting to hear her. However, silence was all he heard.

Why did he care what happened to her? His future of traveling the world, free to do as he pleased, stretched out before him. Yet, the anticipation, the excitement of adventure no longer thrilled him. Instead, his mind hovered around a cute, perplexing vixen. Muttering aloud, he tried to find a solution.

"Okay, let's keep glued to the goal. Kat's done her part. She's remade my brothers where I almost don't recognize them. She's gotten them dates, and they're on their way to getting fixed up with companions. Everything's progressing right on track. So why do I feel so rotten?"

He flipped the lid on the coffeepot and filled his cup to the brim. Bringing the mug to his mouth, he blew, sending the steam upward to roll over his face. He closed his eyes and remembered.

Warm steam from soapy bubbles. Her lush, firm skin under his hands. The soft little cries she made when he was inside her.

Rejecting the memories, he sipped his coffee and burned his tongue. "Shit." He touched his tongue, testing the area of the burn. "It's sex. Nothing more. Plain, old sex. Okay, maybe fantastic sex, but no reason to get hung up on a woman."

A woman with cool green eyes. A woman with a boisterous, contagious laugh. A woman of wit, spunk, and charm.. A woman who, frankly, knocked his socks off. A woman who loved him.

"Damn, she's gotten under my skin." Why else would he be daydreaming about her all day, every day? Why else did he imagine having kids with her? Could he be in love with her?

"No. Not happening. This is pure lust. See?" As proof of his statement, he sucked in his stomach, pulling his jeans away from his body. "Yep, lust. All I have to do is think about her and my dick gets hard."

*What the hell is that?*

A pink, mold-like growth spread from his testicles upward. A bolt of fear jolted through him and he unzipped his jeans to get a better look.

“Holy shit, I’ve got a fungus growing on me.”

Fear gripped him, breaking sweat out on his forehead. He yanked his jeans and briefs down, letting them puddle on the floor at his feet. Holding the tip, he angled his penis to examine himself better.

“What the hell can this be?” Folding the dishtowel over his hand, he reached down and rubbed the area with soft, gentle strokes.

“Ow, ow, ow, shit! Ow!”

Rubbing the pink stuff off was not the right thing to do. Not if he wanted to keep any of his penis. “This is not good. Not good, at all.”

He took a deep breath and exhaled. Keeping calm was imperative. But what was this stuff?

“Maybe it’s a bacteria. Alcohol. Maybe disinfectant. I’ve got to kill the bacteria.”

He yanked cabinet after cabinet opened, searching. “Where did we put the disinfectant?” Sweat poured down his back while tension screwed his neck into a knot. “We’ve got to have some around somewhere. Ah, ha!”

Almost giddy with the promise of help, he lunged under the kitchen sink, and found rubbing alcohol. With shaky hands, he poured the liquid over the rag, swamping both the cloth and the countertop.

“Please work. Oh, God, let this work.”

Biting his lip, he applied the cloth to his penis.

“Argh! Oh, God, oh God, oh God. It hurts! It hurts!”

The alcohol burned his shaft and ran down his leg. The pain, more terrible than any he’d ever experienced, blocked all sensible actions from his mind. In desperation, he jumped up on top of the counter, turned on the faucet, and tried to maneuver his private part under the stream of water. But he couldn’t reach the cooling liquid.

Giving up on the faucet, he slid off the counter, scraping his back, and flung the refrigerator door open. He grabbed the water dispenser, almost letting the large jug slip from his hand, and dumped the contents over his mid-section, clothes and all.

“Ah...thank God.”

He closed his eyes, stationary, enjoying the absence of pain. After a few seconds, however, he peeked one eye open, ready to inspect the damage.



The growth was still there. A little pinker, a little larger.

“Okay, Colin, stop and consider what you’re going to do next. No more painful mistakes.”

He considered his options. He could leave it alone. Maybe it would go away. Or he could try to scrape it off. No, he definitely didn’t want to go that route.

He stared at the growth and his jaw dropped to the floor. “Oh, my God. Is my thing starting to glow? Please, oh, please, tell me the pain’s making me imagine this.” He sucked in large gulps of air, trying to calm his jangled nerves. “Don’t panic. Attack this with logic and think. What do people do when they have an unusual growth on their body?”

His eyes darted around the room, searching for any reasonable answer. The telephone book resting next to the phone was a beacon of hope. “What an idiot I am. I need a doctor. Call the doctor, dumb ass. I have to call the doctor.”

He swiped the pages, seeking the physicians’ section. Once there, he ran his finger down the listings until he found Dr. Hastings’ number. “Good old doc Hastings. He’ll know what to do.”

The line rang, every moment lasting an eternity, until the receptionist finally picked up.

“Dr. Hastings’ office. May I help you?”

“I’ve got to speak with the doc. Right now.”

“Sir, I’m sorry, but the doctor is with a patient. Could I have a number to call you back?”

Colin ground his teeth together, trying to force himself to sound calm. “No, I’ve got to talk with him right this minute.”

The voice on the other end personified patience. “Is this an emergency?”

Should he tell her the problem? Hell, no.

“Yes, it’s an emergency. Now can you get the doctor for me?”

“Sir, if this is indeed an emergency, I suggest you call nine-one-one or go to the nearest emergency room.”

*Please, God, let him reach through the phone and strangle her! To hell with calm.*

“It’s not that kind of an emergency, but it is urgent. Please, I’m begging you. Let me talk to the doctor.”

The silence on the other end gave him hope. “Very well, I’ll see what I can do. Will you hold, please?”

Yes, dear God in Heaven, he would hold. “Please hurry.”

Music. Now was not the time for music.

“Hello, this is Dr. Hastings.”

Relief flooded through him, making his knees weak. “Doc, this is Colin MacLaughlin. I’ve got a major problem.”

“What is it, Colin? I’m with patients right now.”

Inhaling as much air as he could, he let loose, giving an auctioneer a run for his money. “Doc, I’ve got a fungus growing on my penis. Or at least I think it’s a fungus. But it’s pink, and it’s growing. And it’s glowing, too.”

The doctor’s laughter echoed through the phone. Colin glared at the receiver, wanting to yank the doctor through the phone and into the kitchen, to punch that laughter right out of him.

“Wow, Colin, you’ve come up with some wild pranks in all the years I’ve known you, but this is a good one. A glowing pink penis. What a whopper. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to my real patients. But thanks for the laugh.”

The dial tone hammered against his head.

What now? Go to the hospital? He could already hear the hilarity echoing down the hallways. They’d drag medical students and nurses in to sneak a peek at the Incredible Pulsating Pink Penis. No, no hospital for him.

Did he dare ask anyone for help? He had to get help some way. Maybe Kat? Could he trust her with this? Holding his pants at his waist, he bounded up the stairs.

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Drying her tears, Kat stared out her window. Colin’s mind was made up. His plan of a life alone was final and that was that. She may as well get him out of her head and her heart.

“Yeah, right. Easier said than done.”

She held up the mirror to her face and studied her reflection. “You stupid girl. Letting yourself fall in love with a man who couldn’t possibly love you. Why should he? You’re fat, ugly and stupid.”

She saw the teardrops forming again, and shook her head, fighting for control. For a second, she allowed herself to imagine a spell to make Colin love her. “No. You are not ugly or stupid. What you shared was real, but sometimes, in this world, love isn’t always returned. I deserve to have a man who loves me, without a spell forcing him to do so.”

She swallowed hard, lifted her chin, and stared boldly at the red-eyed woman in the mirror. “You, Kat Carlton, are a good, honest, and considerate person. And you have others to take care of. So get with it, girl.”

She smiled, secure in her proclamation, and closed her eyes. Speaking in a low, sing-song manner, she spoke the spell of the mirror. When she glanced at it again, her image disappeared and, in its place, she saw the six brothers and their dates.

The six couples sat in the theatre, watching the latest chick flick. A couple of the brothers wrapped their arms around their dates, and leaned their heads together, enjoying each other's company. Too bad she couldn't see anything but the back of their heads.

"This is wonderful. Everyone survived dinner and got to the movie. They even let the ladies choose the film. Good job, guys." Kat ran her fingers over the mirror. "Now let's add a little help to make this night special." Chanting the soft, melodious words, she spread a bit of magic to aid in love's progress.

Her age-old contradiction surfaced again. Why was magic okay to use to help these couples fall in love, but not to get Colin to love her? And again, she knew the difference. She'd used scientific methods to make these matches. Plus, she'd cast a spell or two to see into their hearts, and knew love was not only possible, but desired by all involved. Okay, maybe Luke fought the idea at first. Colin, on the other hand, wasn't open to any suggestion of love. Not that she'd looked into his heart. She didn't have to. She could tell by the way he'd acted during their bath together. And she never used magic on a couple who didn't already have love blossoming in their hearts.

"Now, let's see your faces." The vision in the mirror shifted, allowing Kat to see them clearly, one couple at a time. "Wonderful. What a great sight. There's John smiling at Amy. Nick is leaning toward Lois. Adam's listening to Karen. Is Jack kissing Cassie? Way to go, Jack! Luke is snuggling with Paula. I'm so glad they've opened up to each other."

Kat tingled with excitement. "So far, so good. Now for James. Ah, there he is. Whoa, James, you're really laying one heck of a kiss on Char—"

Her voice caught, snagging her words in mid-air. Coughing, she peered deeper into the mirror. "Oh, good goddess. How did this happen? James, what did you do to Charlotte?"

She stared at the mirror, astonished at what she saw. "What is Maddy doing with James? James and Maddy, together on a date?" Was this for real? Or a trick of Lila's?

Passing her hand over the mirror, she summoned their emotions to her and knew. "I don't believe this. They're in love." Memories flooded back to her. Memories of James helping Maddy off the floor, James asking questions about Maddy, and the two's behavior at the restaurant emerged. "Why, Maddy and James. Aren't you two the sneaky ones? I guess this means Maddy does like mortals, after all. Or at least, one special mortal."

She watched awhile longer, secure in the knowledge of her plan's success. If she tried, she could see into their futures, but she didn't have to. She knew true love when she saw it.

The door banging against the wall, startled her, causing her to lose her grip on the mirror. Her hand shot out, almost catching the handle, but the mirror slipped from her fingers and crashed to the floor. Shards of glass scattered everywhere.

"Kat, I need your help. Bad."

She opened her mouth to shout at him—after all, an enchanted mirror isn't easy to find—but stopped when she saw his face. Flushed and sweaty, his features scrunched up, contorted, and grew rigid in apprehension.

"What's the matter, Colin? You scared me half to death."

He ran a shaky hand through his hair. Nodding toward the broken mirror, he apologized, "I'm sorry, Kat. I didn't mean to frighten you and make you drop your mirror. I'll get you a new one as soon as I can. But, right now, I need your help and your promise to keep quiet."

A quizzical expression passed over him as he stared at the broken mirror. But in seconds, his features contorted, changing back into the mask of anxiety.

Alarm rushed through her, bringing her to her feet. "You have my promise. Tell me what the trouble is."

Following his gaze down to his unbuttoned jeans, she paused, a cold, bitterness filling her. "You've got to be kidding. You treat me like some kind of stranger, not good enough to love, and then you expect me to help you because you're horny? I'd rather have sex with a rutting bore."

He stood frozen, eyes darting between his pants and her, before what she'd said managed to sink in. "No, God, no. Believe me, having sex with you is the farthest thing from my mind."

She'd thought it impossible for him to hurt her any more than he already had. But she was wrong. Now he added insult to her injury. What a scumbag!

"Great to know. Thanks a lot." She drew all the sarcasm she could muster into her next words. "You know, being your wife has done wonders for my ego."

"No, Kat, you don't get it. I'd like nothing more. But no sane woman would make love to me with my dick like this."

She stepped back in a natural response when he whipped out his penis. Yet the sight she saw drew her closer, squinting to see better. "Wow. A pink penis."

He grimaced, averted his eyes, and she wished she could take back her words. "Aw, Colin, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. What happened to your penis?"

His words were a strangled cry. “I don’t know. I’ve tried rubbing alcohol to disinfect it, but I couldn’t stand the pain. And I tried calling my doctor, but he laughed and hung up on me. Please, Kat, do you have any ideas?”

She inclined her head and frowned. A pink penis. Now there was something she didn’t see every day. In fact, if she didn’t know better, she’d swear someone made this happen by casting a spell. Or more precisely, a curse. But what kind of a witch would do this to a person?

“Can you help me, babe?”

She shushed him, trying to consider every angle. No honorable witch would do this to a mortal. No, someone would have to be very enraged to cast a spell this personal. Someone like an angry wizard.

Damon. Was he behind this?

“Babe, please. Tell me if you’ve got an idea.”

Watching Colin’s agony, she knew she’d do anything to help him. Not only tonight, but any time, any place. She had to break this spell.

“Colin, come lie down on the bed.”

Colin fell on the bed and lowered his jeans to his knees. “Can you hurry, Kat? I can’t stand this much longer.”

“Be patient and follow my directions to the letter. Close your eyes and don’t open them again until I say.”

“What are you going to do?” Although strained, his tone sounded hopeful.

What could she do? She couldn’t let him hear her chant the spell. Plus, she’d have to do something to the penis. Otherwise, he’d wonder how she’d gotten rid of the fungus.

Reaching over to the clock radio beside her bed, she punched a button, filling the room with loud music. “Listen to the music, Colin, and try to relax. I’m going to put some special lotion on you. I’m certain the lotion will clear your problem up right away.”

“Will this lotion hurt?”

“No, trust me. It’ll be soothing and cool. Now keep your eyes closed and concentrate on the music.”

Once she was confident he would do what she’d asked, she leaned over and retrieved her hand lotion from the dresser’s drawer. Squirting a large dab in her hand, she began the spell, speaking too low for him to hear. In seconds, the spell dissolved the fungus, and she began rubbing the lotion on his shaft. He sighed, tension easing throughout his tense frame.

“There. All gone.”

Lifting his head, he peered down at his shaft. He glanced over at her, sat up and examined his penis. “Amazing. A little lotion took the fungus away?”

She nodded, happy to see him so relieved. “Yeah. It was a temporary rash of some kind. But it’s gone now.”

He rose, pulled up his jeans, and gave her a hug that almost broke her ribs. “Kat, you’re the absolute best. Is there anything you can’t do?”

She batted her eyelashes, embarrassed by his flattery. “Aw, shucks. ‘Tweren’t nothin’.”

“Like hell. You saved my life. At the very least, my sex life and my dignity. You’re terrific.”

Their gazes met and she waited for him to kiss her. His hand swept a strand of hair off her face, and he leaned toward her mouth.

Knowing she shouldn’t let him, she, nonetheless, bent toward him, eager to taste his lips on hers. She traced the tip of her mouth with her tongue, tempting him, coaxing him.

“Kat! Hey, Kat. Get down here.”

The connection between them severed, jolting her away from him. Hoping to hide the blush creeping up her cheeks, she started toward the door. “Your brothers are home from their dates. Let’s go see how they did.”

His hand on her arm prevented her from leaving, keeping her where she was. The bewilderment she’d seen earlier returned, stronger than ever.

“Kat, what were you doing when I walked in?”

Her stomach leapt to her throat. “Nothing. Combing my hair. Why do you ask?”

He kicked a piece of glass with his toe. “This’ll sound crazy, but I thought I saw one of my brothers in your mirror.”

She knew the color drained from her, yet, somehow, her voice came out steady and sure. “One of your brothers? In my mirror? Kind of impossible, wouldn’t you say?” A tight, thin sound escaped her; a poor substitute for her intended laugh.

“Yeah, strange, I know. But I saw James in there.” He squeezed her hand, making her wince at his strength.

“You saw James in the mirror? Be serious. You weren’t seeing clearly. You were upset from your, uh, problem, and suffered a momentary hallucination, that’s all. I wouldn’t worry about it, though. Once you calm down, you’ll be all right.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” His lips quivered upward. “Of course. I was so freaked out I saw weird stuff. But I’m okay now.”

“Yes, you are. Come on, change your jeans and let’s go check out how the dates went.”

After he’d slid on some dry jeans, Colin and Kat hurried down the stairs, with Colin taking the lead. When they neared the bottom, Colin lurched forward, arms flailing in a vain attempt to stop his fall, and tumbled down the last three steps. Grunting with the impact, he landed with his head on the floor, and his legs propped up on the stairs.

## Chapter Eleven

“Colin, are you okay? Talk to me.” Kat fell to his side, taking care to cradle his head in her lap. Checking his body, she saw no signs of bleeding, but feared the possibility of internal damage. “Come on, you hard-headed, clumsy oaf. Open your eyes and look at me.”

His brothers crowded around them, asking her questions she couldn’t comprehend. Their voices were distant murmurs to the panicked screams going off in her brain.

He moaned and twisted his head to her. Befuddled, blue eyes gazed up at her. “What happened?”

She consulted the men around her, hoping for answers, but they shook their heads. “I guess you fell. Any other ideas, anyone?” At their negative responses, she shrugged. “I suppose you tripped on the carpet runner. Or over your own big feet.”

“I’ve never tripped down those stairs in all the years we’ve lived here.”

Nick helped Colin to his feet. “Maybe you’re getting unsteady in your old age, bro.”

“Right. I’m getting older, and you’re getting dumber. No way, I didn’t trip. In fact, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear someone pushed me.”

Did he think she pushed him? She shot him a mean glare and he jumped to head off any misunderstanding.

“Of course, I know you wouldn’t push me. You were too far behind me, anyway. It was very weird, that’s all. I swear I felt a hand on my back.” Holding his head in his hands, he added, “Man, I’m having one helluva rough day.”

Colin stumbled to the couch and flopped down, groaning with the effort. “Well, never mind, I’m okay. Tell us how the dates went.”

The others gathered around him, allowing Kat to take the seat beside Colin. He took her hand in his, sending a tingle up her arm. At least, they acted the part of a happily married couple. If only they were.

Luke answered first. “Speaking for the group, the dates went great. I, for one, am happier than a dog at a cat convention. No offense, Kat.” He winked at her. “Even without getting any sex.”

Kat clamped her lips together, stifling a grin. “So, how about everyone else? Adam? Jack?”



Adam stuck his hands in his pockets, a picture of modesty. Seeing his brother's behavior, Jack offered their information. "Adam and his girl got along well. And I had a blast. At least, after Maddy got the wart on my nose to go away."

A wart? What wart? Kat searched her brain for any memory of Jack having a wart. "I've never seen a wart on your nose. And I bet I'd have noticed before tonight."

Jack touched his finger to his nose. "I know, I know. This huge wart, or whatever, popped up during the ride to the restaurant. You could have bowled me over when I saw this thing in the rearview mirror. Here's this wart, or whatever, growing on the side of my nose. You know, like the kind of wart you see on pictures of witches."

Kat cringed. Why did mortals always put warts on witches? She'd never yet met a witch with a wart on her nose. Maybe a cute, little mole. Freckles, sure. But never a wart. Mortals could use more education in what real witches were like. Filing the future education of mortals away for now, she continued, "So this growth appeared out of nowhere?"

"Yeah, it ballooned up on my nose like some sort of alien disease. Like magic."

Magic? Now there was a possibility. "And you said Maddy made it go away? How?"

His face lit up at the mention of her sister. "Yeah, Maddy was wonderful. I was stressed out about people seeing me, but she took it all in stride. Said she could pinch it off without any pain or blood. And she did."

Kat's brain went into overdrive. No pain, no blood. Could anyone pinch off a wart? No, not likely. But Maddy could make it go away.

"So she pinched off the wart? Did you see her do this? Did you watch?"

"Yeah, she got it off. But funny you should ask if I watched, because she didn't let me see what she did. Nobody else got to watch either."

Kat's suspicion grew. His wart was too similar to Colin's fungus. First, they mysteriously appear within minutes, and then they're removed without any problems. By a witch using magic.

"Strange. But I guess it was nothing since she took care of it so fast. And it didn't come back, right? It won't come back?" Colin looked to Kat for confirmation. "Right, Kat?"

"Hmm? Oh, right." Yet she wasn't so certain. Two mysterious growths were too coincidental.

Colin, however, brought the conversation back to the women. "But the dates went okay? Are you guys happy with the ladies Kat introduced to you?"

Nick spoke up this time. "Are you kidding? They're all knock-outs and great women. We'd be crazy not to like them. And, believe it or not, they like us even with all the bad luck, warts included."

“Bad luck?” No wonder the hair on her neck jumped to attention. “What do you mean?”

Chuckling, Nick explained, “Well, let’s see. First, Jack gets this growth on his nose. Then Adam has a run in with a girl he can’t remember, but who hates his guts and slaps him. John, the clumsy idiot, manages to bump into our waiter, spilling all the food and drinks everywhere, including on his date’s dress. And James? Well, James started getting jealous when Maddy helped Jack.”

James scowled at his brother. “I couldn’t help it. Besides, I don’t trust Jack.”

“Well, I am sexier than you.” Jack grinned at James. “You should be thankful I hooked up with Cassie, or Maddy would be in my sights.”

The two brothers half-heartedly punched at each other until Nick broke them apart. After curtailing their antics, he continued, “Even with all our disasters, they’ve accepted dates for next weekend. But I, for one, am not going to wait until next week. Lois is amazing and I’m going to see her before then.”

The other brothers were in agreement. They all wanted to get closer, sooner, to the ladies. Taking the lead, Adam caught Kat’s attention and asked, “So, Kat, what do we do next?”

Glad to have her plan working so well, Kat began outlining what each brother should do. The men listened, giving her their full attention, while Kat’s own mind wandered and worried.

Could these strange growths be related? What were the odds of two brothers developing a fungus and a wart on the same day? She’d be willing to bet the odds weren’t high.

Why would men who are physical and capable, change, without any reason, into clumsy, accident-prone people, unable to stand upright without falling down stairs, or bumping into unfortunate waiters? The whole situation just didn’t add up.

Kat left the men ordering flowers and calling to meet the girls the next day. She’d have enjoyed the sight, but a sense of uneasiness weighed down on her. Walking through the house, she detected an added pressure to the air around her, a sinister presence she at long last was able to identify. Shuddering, she strode to a window and stared out into the darkness. She could sense him, watching, spinning his spells of trouble.

“Damon.”

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She had to tell him. Kat bit her lip, re-evaluating her decision. Yet, one more time, she came back to the same conclusion. If her plan was to work, then Colin would have to be a part of it. He would have to know the truth.

She would tell Colin she was a witch.

But how would she tell him? How would he handle such information? Would he believe her? And if he did, would he continue to be near her? Would he help her?

The now-familiar questions raced through her mind. Still no answers came.

“I have to tell him. Damon has to be stopped or his spells will continue to get more dangerous.”

Should she ask Maddy or Lila for help? Or could they be involved? No, she thought. If Maddy was involved, she wouldn’t have removed the wart from Jack’s nose. But would they help her? She doubted it. In fact, if she told her older sister, Lila might join forces with Damon. No, she’d have to do this with Colin and no one else.

How did she get herself into this mess? She remembered her initial goal of raising cash flow for her business. Helping Colin was secondary. Now things were different. She liked these men and wanted to keep them safe.

Knowing no one else would hear, she confessed her real reason. “I have to expose Damon to keep Colin safe. Nothing else matters at this point.” Confident in her decision, she left her room, and hurried to Game Central.

“Colin, may I speak with you?” She poked her finger at the others. “In private?”

Raising his head, he met her eyes and a sizzle of awareness flew between them. “Sure. Guys, give us a minute.”

What a difference a few days made. Not long ago, the brothers would have grumbled at being interrupted. More, they would have assaulted her with sexual innuendos. But now, the group smiled at her, and respectfully exited the room.

Colin leaned back in his chair and regarded her. “What’s up, Kat? Problem?”

She took a big breath, steadied her nerves, and began. “Yeah, you might say so. I don’t think the wart, the fungus, or the clumsy accidents were coincidences. I believe you and your brothers are being cursed.”

He chuckled until he saw the stern face she shot him. Then he fought to appear serious. “Cursed? As in *Curse of the Mummy*? Like some kind of modern day voodoo? Are we talking black magic?”

“Yes, in a way.” Maybe she should have used a different word. She picked at her fingernail and hoped he’d believe her. “Someone’s put spells on you. And I know who’s doing them.”

The dimples in his cheeks disappeared. “Is this a joke? Or your idea of amusement? Because if it is, I’ve got a program to finish. I don’t have time for stories.”

She swallowed and pushed on. “This is no joke, Colin. I know what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah? Okay, I’ll bite. How do you know? And be forewarned. If you don’t have a straight answer, I’m getting you some psychological therapy.”

Sometimes he was such a prick. Why did she love him so much?

Jutting out her chin, she narrowed her eyes at him. “I know because witches, or wizards, put spells on mortals. The mortals, of course, being you and your brothers.”

“So you’re telling me we’ve been bewitched? You’re saying a witch cast a spell on us?”

She wiped her sweaty palms on her pants. “A witch, or in this case, a wizard.”

“And you know this because...”

“Because I can do spells, too. I know because...I’m a witch.”

He didn’t move or speak. Instead, he stared at her as if she’d just grown two heads and one of the heads boasted three noses. Worry ran along her shoulders, stiffening her neck.

He shifted, cast her a sideways glance, and laughed. “Gee, Kat, good for you. A witch, huh? Your life must be easy. Whenever you twitch your nose, you make magic. Cool. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to call a doctor friend of mine. He can be your friend, too.”

Hot irritation flashed within her, threatening to spill out. She strode over to him, placed her hands on her hips and forced her next words through gritted teeth. “Don’t patronize me, Colin MacLaughlin. I have enough to put up with without taking flack off of you.”

His body tensed as his defensive wall encircled him. “Kat, you can’t go around telling people you’re a witch. Those people are going to lock you up and forget the key.”

“I can prove I’m a witch.” Her anger fueled the power within her.

“Then prove it.” His whole demeanor dared her, egged her on.

Kat considered her options for a moment, then settled on a spell. One positive to get his attention. One hitting close to home.

“Are all the computers working on the same program?” She began strolling around the row of machines.

“No, but computers aren’t what we’re discussing. Are you trying to change the subject?”

“And you guys would be devastated if you lost the information stored in these hard drives, right?”

“Yeah.” He drew out his response, making the single-syllable word stretch forever.

“So you probably wouldn’t like it if I did this.” Walking along the row of computers, Kat tapped each monitor, spouting the spell. One by one, the monitors flipped from the scene of an animated battle to one exact screen image. On each screen a picture of her face smiled out at Colin.

“That’s it? So what? You probably rigged the computers in advance.”

Kat placed a finger to her lips and nodded toward the machines. Kat’s image in the first monitor waved at Colin, smiled, and began speaking. “Hi, I’m Kat One. Colin, don’t be a fool. You know programming when you see it. And you know I don’t have the expertise to mastermind such a program.”

“Yeah, so maybe one of my brothers is in on this gag.”

From the second monitor, Kat Two laughed and answered. “Uh, huh. So while I’ve been busy remaking your brothers and setting them up on dates, I took my loads of free time to bypass your security measures and create a voice-activated program.”

He kept swiveling in his chair to watch whichever “Kat” spoke next. “Maybe. It’s possible. Improbable, but who knows?”

Kat Three blew him a kiss. “You’re so cute when you’re being dense. I’d have to be a master programmer to generate voice-activated images of me who, by the way, are answering all your non-programmed questions.”

The bewildered Colin tapped on his keyboard. “How did you do this? This is amazing.” Used to the sequence, he waited for the next “Kat” to speak. The image on the fourth monitor giggled, and batted her eyes at him.

“Hi, Colly, baby. Kat Four here. The real Kat already told you. She’s a witch and this is a spell.”

He shook his head, and started punching more buttons. Nothing changed on the monitors.

Fed up with his stubbornness to believe her, Kat slammed her hand down on the table. The computers flipped back to Colin’s battle game.

“Here. Let me prove it to you once and for all.”

Kat raised her hand and slashed the air with her arm. Colin’s chair jerked off the floor and began rising into the air. His mouth dropped open and he gripped the sides, while his feet dangled below. Rotating clock-wise, his chair began spinning, increasing in speed with each passing second.

“Oh, damn. Get me down, Kat.”

Kat laughed, her frustration at him gone, and waved her hand. Slowing down, the chair lost its momentum, and lowered him to the floor. “Are you all right?” She reached over, covering his hand with hers.

Colin shot out of the chair, and staggered to the wall. “Oh, wow. I can’t believe this. You *are* a witch.”

“I told you so.” Now how would he react once the initial shock wore off?

A frightened glint shimmered in his eyes. “Are you a good witch or a bad witch?”

Oh, good goddess, not again. “This isn’t *The Wizard of Oz*, Colin. Witches are like everyone else. There are good people and there are bad people. Same for witches and wizards. There are good ones and bad ones. I like to believe I’m a good person at heart, so I’m a good witch at heart. Understand?”

“Okay, okay. No reason to get all riled up. I didn’t mean any harm.”

She huffed out a breath. “Fine. Sorry. Don’t worry, I’m not going to change you into a slug or anything. I gave you the demonstration to prove I was telling you the truth.”

Colin ran both hands through his hair, and began pacing from one end of the room to the other. “So what you told me is true? Some witch or wizard has put spells on me and my brothers?” He glanced up to confirm his information.

“Correct. And I know who’s been doing the spells.”

A fierce determination joined the natural strength already outlined by hard muscles. “Who? Who is the creep?”

Pausing, bracing for the effect her words might have on him, she answered. “Damon.”

“Damn! You mean your unwanted suitor?”

“The one and only.”

“But why? Because you wouldn’t go out with him? Bit extreme for being jilted, isn’t it?”

“Maybe not. Damon doesn’t seem the type to take rejection well. At least, not by me.” She walked over to Colin and laid her hand on his chest. “I don’t know for sure, but I’ve got a scheme to find out. And you’re a vital part of my plan. Can I count you in?”

He wrapped her in a cocoon of strength. “You can count on me, my sexy little witch.”

*His sexy, little witch?* The man did have a way with words.

“What are you doing here?”

Kat slid out of her car and headed toward Lila. Lila spun around, and started to speak, yet nothing came out.

“Lila, didn’t you hear me? What are you doing hanging around outside my office?” Kat scoped out the area around her. “Is Maddy with you?”

Lila guffawed, her tone strained and harsh. “Maddy’s never around any more. She’s always running off to visit a friend or do errands. I don’t know what’s gotten into her lately.”

Discretion being the watchword, Kat pretended to ignore Lila’s remarks. She was pretty sure Maddy was with James. Yet, she’d rather shape-shift into a weasel than tell her older sister.

During the past several days while Kat worked on her plan to catch Damon, James and the other men spent every moment with their girlfriends. Colin and she stayed together, playing the happy husband and wife, and watched the love progressing between the couples.

“I came to see you, darling.” The usual Lila was back, full of syrup and as untrustworthy as a bunch of Africanized bees.

Lying. She’s definitely lying. But why? Lila’s sickening sweet attitude worried her almost as much as her presence at Kat’s office. “If you’re here to talk me out of my marriage to Colin, you can forget it. The deed’s been done and I’m quite happy.” She wished with all her heart that her marriage to Colin was real. Then she would be happy.

“No, dear sister, I’m not here to badger you. I came over to visit you. You know, without my having to deal with those bar—your husband and his brothers.”

Kat entered her office with Lila trailing behind. “Good save. For your information, they’ve changed. You wouldn’t recognize the guys now. They’re groomed, well-mannered, caring gentlemen.”

“Still hot I hope?”

Twirling around, Kat searched her sister’s face, scanning for interest. “So you noticed they were hot, did you? Not too barbaric for you to notice their sex factor, huh?”

Lila shrugged. “Sex with mortals does have its merits. In fact, I took a mortal to bed the other day. But I wouldn’t dream of bringing one home to the family.”

Her sister would never change. “If you found a mortal who was caring, loving, and a great person, you couldn’t overlook his lack of powers? God knows he’d have to forgive all your many faults.”

“My faults? What’s wrong with me?”

Did she honestly believe she was perfect? Kat chuckled. Of course she did. Typical Lila mentality. “Oh, excuse me. I forgot how magnificent you are. Way better than the rest of us.”

“If you’re going to insult me, then I have no choice but to leave.” With a toss of her golden hair, Lila stalked from the room.

“Lila, I’m sorry. Don’t leave.”

On further consideration, she decided to let her egotistical sister leave. She didn’t have time to stroke Lila’s ego. Watching her sister drive away, she couldn’t shake the worry growing in the pit of her stomach. Kat checked around the office, looking for any signs indicating a problem, but found none. Still, she trusted her instincts. Lila was up to no good.

Forcing Lila from her mind, she hunted for Damon’s application and hoped he’d listed his phone number. Then she could call him and put her plan into action. Locating his file on the computer, she noted the number and dialed.

He picked up on the second ring.

“Damon? This is Kat.”

The icky-sweet voice oozed through the receiver. “Kat, my love! I’m delirious to hear your voice.”

Why did he always make her feel so scummy? Or get the urge to pour a vat of cleanser over her body? Anything to get his stench off her.

“It’s good to hear your voice. Damon, you’ve been a naughty boy.” Yuck! How low would she sink?

“However do you mean, my candy cane?”

Good goddess, if he called her another pet name she’d puke right into the phone. “You said you’d never give up on our love, yet, you haven’t dropped by the house for ages. Don’t you love me any more?”

His silence unnerved her. Why didn’t he answer?

“But I have been by. Uh, of course, I love you. I desire you more than ever.”

She steadied herself for the worst. If he bought this performance, she should go headline on Broadway. “Damon, I realize now how much you love me. And, I love you, too. Let’s skip all the nonsense involved in dating and be together now. Tonight.”

He softened his voice, making her struggle to hear him. “Tonight?”

Gulping down some bile, she continued, “Yes. Could you come to my house later?”

“I’ll be counting the minutes, my dear. Will those barbarians be there, my sweet?”



Did everyone describe the MacLaughlin men as barbarians? Or only Damon and Lila?

“No, they’ll be out for the evening. And, Damon?”

“Yes, my nectar.”

Oh, good goddess, could she do this?

“Don’t bother to knock. Come up to my room, left door down the hallway.”

“I’ll fly to you, my darling, on wings of passion.”

Unable to force out another word, she hung up, and shook herself. “I must be insane.”

Snatching up her purse, she fled from the office, terrified of what she’d set into play.

## Chapter Twelve

“My queen, our scheme is working. I’ll go to Kat’s boudoir tonight where she will undoubtedly fall under the spell of my many charms. I will bed her tonight.”

Lila cast Damon a scornful look. “Our scheme? I don’t recall your assistance in devising my plan.” She slapped his hand away from her hair.

“But, my cuddles, without me, nothing would have happened. After all, she succumbed to me, not anything you did.”

Did he dare bait her, trying to rile her into heated sex? She knew how he enjoyed rough play.

“You, my pet, are no more than a tool. A pawn on my chessboard. Any other wizard in your place would have succeeded. Remember, Kat is naive in the ways of men. I venture attention from any man would have seen her bedded soon enough.”

Ah, she experienced a rush of power seeing the hard glitter in his eye. Now who baited whom?

He wrapped her hair around his fingers, and tugged her to him. “I was the one who sent her the flowers. I was the one who courted her, and made her see the difference between a wizard like me and that lout she married. It is I who has her craving for the touch of my hand, the heat of my skin against hers.”

She leaned her head back, giving his teeth access to her throat. “You best not praise yourself too much.. Your head might become too enlarged to fit between my legs.”

Reaching down, he tore her panties from her. The ripping sound sent shivers through her.

“Not to worry, sweet meat. If my head swells, my hand will always be the perfect fit.” He massaged her, working his fingers around her hot pearl.. Her body responded, trembling with each new burst of passion.

Lying on her back, Lila spread her legs, guiding his head away from her breasts. “Well, just in case, let’s make certain your head hasn’t swelled too much already.”

With a rough push, he lifted her legs over his shoulders. “Good idea. One must be careful to never outgrow their favorite places.” His warm tongue glided over her lower abdomen, teasing her, making her shiver as the cool air hit the warm, wet trail he laid.

She tried to grasp his hair, but he avoided her. “Damon, stop teasing me. Kiss me where I love to be kissed the most. Do it now.”

She gasped when he answered with a slap to her buttocks. “I’m not ready yet. Be patient. Allow me to feast as I wish today on ambrosia, for tonight I starve on your sister’s juices.”

Her mouth curved upward at the comparison, and she lifted her hips to him. Again, he frustrated her, licking around her mound, but not between her lips.

“No more, Damon. No more.”

He paused a moment to wiggle his tongue at her. “Are you asking me to stop?”

“Damn you. No, don’t stop. But do cease in tormenting me.”

Growling, his stiffened tongue plunged into her being, shooting tremors through her. In ecstasy, she gripped the sheet under her, writhing in exquisite anguish.

“Damon. Oh, Damon. Make your magic on me. Yes. Faster. More.”

He complied, diving deeper within her folds. Fire raced through her and she groped for his hands, yanking them to her nipples. Together, they hardened her nubs, changing firmness into steel.

Again he halted, raising his head to her. “Tell me you want me, Lila. Say the words I long to hear.”

“If you stop again, Damon, I will never forgive you.”

“Tell me, Lila.”

Squirming, aching, she could resist no longer. “Yes, Damon, I have to have you. Satisfy me. Please.”

He sucked, pressuring her clit with both tongue and finger. Heat soared through her bucking, wiggling hips until she could hold back not a second more. Wrenching her head from side to side, she cried, wrapping her legs around his head.

Shouting a strangled curse, he rose up and plunged his shaft into her, bringing her back into the heavens. Harder, stronger he thrust, and she opened wider, welcoming him to the riches she’d never given him.

“Lila, my darling, my love.”

Pounding her against the sheets, his mouth found her buds again. When he nipped her, she arched in a silent request for more. He tore at her breasts, and she rejoiced in the pain.

“Damon, my Damon. Take what is yours.”

She matched her rhythm to his, hoping to allow him further into her nest. He pumped stronger still, splitting her in two. Kissing him on the neck, she murmured encouragement, begging him to come with her.

His moans mixed with hers until, in complete abandon, they cried out together.

For the first time ever, she let him lie on top of her while she wrapped her arms around him. Listening to his labored breathing, she ran her hands over his back, loving his hardness still encased inside her. Sighing, she hugged him closer.

She cared for him. Loved him, perhaps?

Half in shock, half in wonder, she rolled him off of her.

How could she care for him? She'd made a vow to never care for another wizard. Not after her first two horrendous marriages.

"Damon, get up. You have to get ready."

His sex-clouded eyes gazed into hers. "What? How can you expect me to jump from your bed and run to hers? How can you ask this after what we've shared?"

Fighting the urge to scream, she rose, wrapping her robe around her sweat-soaked body. "What are you talking about? The sex?" She laughed, a cold, hard sound causing his eyes to change from soft gray to the blackest depths of his soul. "I gave you what you've been asking for in reward for a job well done. Perhaps I rewarded you too soon?"

His face fell, twisting her heart.

"I see. Well, thank you for the prize, my love. I will do my best to merit it tonight. Although why I should care is beyond me."

He tossed her a disdainful sneer, climbed from the bed, and stalked out of the room. Her hand reached out, unbidden, and almost stopped him. Almost.

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"Okay, Colin, here's what we're going to do."

Kat paced her bedroom, organizing the details in her head. "I'm going to place a spell of illusion on you. You'll be in my bed, pretending to be me, when Damon arrives. He'll see me, instead of you, and will assume I'm ready to make love."

"He's going to believe he's the luckiest bastard in the world."

Colin's praise wiped away the nervousness plaguing her. Why did he bother flattering her again? After all, he still planned to leave and be on his own. Confused, Kat brushed the negative questions from her mind and concentrated.

"Then when he gets in bed with you, the illusion will last for several minutes. Remember, you will appear to be me, but anything he touches will be all you."

“Huh?”

“I mean, he’ll see you as me. But once he touches your body, he’ll know he’s touching a man’s body. So try to stay under the covers as much as possible.”

“Gotcha. Trust me, he’s not copping a feel on me, if I have any say about it.” He shook himself. “Shit, the possibility is too disgusting to imagine.”

She scrunched up her face at his description. “I’m sure he’d not like it any more than you would.”

“Say, when does the spell wear off? I wouldn’t like walking around town having everyone, every man, seeing me as you. The consequences could be very disturbing.”

The vision of Colin being accosted at a bar by an obnoxious drunk tempted the little devil in her. Yet, she waved her hand and dismissed the idea. “No? Too bad. Could be quite entertaining to others, don’t you think? Like your brothers.”

“Very funny. And by the way, we do not mention the illusion part of this set-up to them. Not now. Not ever. Agreed?”

Kat pretended to pout. “Aw, no? Oh, all right. I agree.”

“Again, how long will this spell last? Not for hours or days, right?”

The mischievous twin buried in her psyche itched to be let out. Oh, how she could wreak revenge for his not loving her. But she knew she could never do anything to harm or humiliate him. No matter how much he hurt her. “Not to worry. The illusion will vanish the minute he touches you and compares what he’s seeing to what he’s feeling.”

With a I’m-going-to-have-some-fun grin, Colin added, “Then I get to break every bone in his body.”

Even though she found the idea appealing, she cast him a scornful look. “Remember, Colin, I’m sure he’s a wizard. And a powerful one. The spells he’s placed on you and your brothers so far have been minor ones, but I’ve sensed a great power emanating from him.”

“You knew he’s a wizard?”

Frowning, Kat continued, “No. I couldn’t figure it out at first. He must have blocked my senses, keeping me from seeing his power. I glimpsed his power when he became very angry and dropped his shield.”

Colin leaned against the bedpost. “You mean those times when we threw him out of the house.”

“Right. So remember. If you don’t catch him off guard, he could cast a spell on you. And trust me, he might be a very poor sport about this and throw a big one your way. You wouldn’t have a chance.”

He held a hand to her face and brushed her cheek. “I’ll remember. You be sure you’re ready so you can slap your spell on him first.”

She flushed, exhilarated at the change in her skin. If she could enjoy his touch for the rest of her life, she’d never ask for anything else.

“Are you certain your brothers are okay with this? With me? I mean, they were pretty stunned when we told them I’m a witch.” Her next bite took a sizeable chunk out of her fingernail.

Taking her hand in his, he ran his thumb over the ragged nail. “If you don’t relax, you’re not going to have any fingers left. It took a little doing, but I’m sure the spell you performed convinced them. Luke’s still recovering from the display. On the other hand, Jack’s delirious. He can’t wait for you to conjure up a load of cash and an expensive sports car. For him, of course.”

She could see Jack now, scoping out cars for her to copy and leave waiting on the driveway. Thinking about one triplet brought her mind around to another. James. “What about James? I couldn’t tell whether Maddy being a witch upsets him or not.”

“The news kind of blindsided him, but he’ll get over it soon enough. Finding out you know three witches can give anyone a punch in the gut. But don’t worry. They’re with us and keeping low right now, and they’ll be ready to aid us if we call.”

She puffed out a shaky breath. “Okay, then. The time has come to cast my spell.”

Before she could begin, Colin reached out and drew her closer. Heat swept through her body, setting her hormones raging inside her. His hands ran down her back, gripping her behind, while he buried his face in her hair. Yet, his words shook her more than his touch.

“Kat, you put a spell on me the first time I saw you.”

For a minute, she let his words sink in, daring to believe them to be true. Her heart sang, sending her pulse pounding in her ears. He seemed so sincere. But how could he be when he’s never told her he loved her?

A cruel whisper floated across her mind. He’s using flowery words to weaken her. Sex is all he wanted from her. He’ll never say the three words she yearned to hear the most.

Crushed to his chest, she struggled to break his hold. She saw his perplexed expression, knew he didn’t understand, and saw him withdraw. Tucking her head, she prayed her voice would sound firm.

“We don’t have time for a romp in bed. We have to get ready.”

His subdued attitude steadied her nerves and she wheeled away from him, unwilling, unable to trust her resolve. His all-business voice raked her heart.

“Right. No fooling around. Oh, by the way, it seems you’ve accomplished your goals. Luke, James, and Nick are serious about their girlfriends. And I see the rest following close behind. In fact, I see a wedding in the near future.”

He paused, waiting for her to respond, but she couldn’t. Since she’d succeeded in her goal of finding women for the brothers, then she had no reason, no excuse to stay with Colin any longer. Their pretend marriage would be over soon.

“I’m sure the guys will understand when we tell them about our fake marriage. After all, they’re very happy with the situation now.”

A large tear rolled down her cheek. Thank goodness, she’d kept her back to him. “I’m glad I helped to make their lives better.”

He coughed, clearing his throat. “Tomorrow, I’ll deposit the rest of the money into your bank account. Which means, I guess, you’ll be moving out in a few days?”

She hiccupped, inhaled air, and tried not to cry. “Sounds good.” Tugging her shirt down, she swallowed, and assumed a professional manner. “Well, then. Let’s get this last business taken care of.”

He smiled a quick, curt smile, determination stiffening his frame. “Yep. I’m ready when you are.”

She paused, taking him in, placing a photograph of him in her mind. Later, in the days ahead, she would use this image to remember him and what might have been. No matter how much it would tear her apart.

She chanted, forgetting she didn’t need to hide her words from him. He bent his head toward her, trying to understand the words she spoke. Bit by bit, he changed. Shrinking, morphing, until his true image melted away and an illusive copy of Kat stood before her.

She gasped, amazed at the incredible transformation.. “Freaky. Very freaky.”

He opened one eye and blinked. “Are you finished? I don’t seem any different.” Marching across the room to the full-length mirror, he stared at the astonished image of Kat reflected back to him. “Oh, my God. I’m you.”

Pleased with the result, she grinned. “No, you’re you. You’re seeing the reflection of the illusion. Underneath, um, my appearance, you’re still in your own body.”

Colin pinched his cheeks and then grasped where he saw breasts. “Damn. I see you in the mirror, but the body’s still me.”

“Exactly. Now you’d better hop into bed. Damon should be here any second.”

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“Yoo, hoo! Love of my life. Where are you, my precious?”

“He’s here. Hurry.” Kat shoved Colin toward her bed. He pecked her on the cheek, flopped on the bed, and flailed his arms out across the sheets.

The sight of him as her, stretched out on the bed, still unnerved her. Colin, in the illusion of Kat, lay on the bed, and adopted a scintillating pose. “Are you trying to be alluring? Is this how you see me? Believe me, I would never pose like that.”

Colin leaned up. “What? No good? Am I not the picture of a woman ready to be ravaged?”

“Slaughtered, maybe. Ravaged, perhaps. Seduced, no.” She waved her hands in front of her, wiping the scene out of her mind. “Try lying on the bed in a natural position. You’re — I’m — asleep, remember?”

Grumbling, Colin did as she requested. “Should I snore, too?”

“Yeah, that would be attractive, wouldn’t it?”

“Just trying to appear realistic, babe.”

“You are beyond hilarious.” Pausing, she listened. “Wait. Be quiet. I hear him coming up the stairs.” Kat gave him the thumbs-up signal, and dashed inside the closet to hide.

Seconds later, Damon burst into the room. “Aw, my sweet, asleep? Am I so late?”

Peeking from inside her hiding place, Kat noticed an abrupt change in Damon’s demeanor. His earnest expression evaporated, sliding away with the sneer crawling over his features. No one would mistake him for an excited lover now.

“Oh, Lila, what would you have me do for your love? My heart and body aren’t into this escapade, but I will do my duty, fulfilling the promise I made you.” He shrugged, a picture of a resigned, reluctant man.

So Lila put Damon up to this? Why?

The answer came to her quickly enough. Damon was Lila’s latest pick for Kat’s wizard-to-be. Yet, Damon didn’t relish the part and wanted to bed her in order to fulfill a promise. Anger, coupled with embarrassment, swept through her

“When I get hold of you, Lila, you’re going to beg me to change you into a slimy snail,” she whispered.



“Well, a wizard has to do what a wizard has to do.” Slithering over to the prone “Kat”, Damon began discarding his clothes. “My guess is you’ll enjoy a surprise attack. No matter, it’ll all be over soon, and I can return to my lover’s arms. Perhaps I’ll receive yet another reward.”

Disrobed, Damon straddled the sleeping “Kat” with his arms and jumped. Landing next to her, he jerked off the cover. “Wake up, my darling, your prince has arrived.”

When “Kat” didn’t stir, he snapped his fingers inches from her face. “Wake up, my darling. My, but you’re a sound snoozer.”

The real Kat watched, mesmerized. Oh, how she wish she’d brought a video camera!

“Hmm, perhaps I should awaken fair maiden the same way her sister prefers to be aroused.” He chuckled, amused by his choice of words. Wiggling his fingers, he slid his hand between “Kat’s” legs and latched on to what he found. In an instant, the illusion disappeared.

Kat clapped a hand over her mouth, hoping to stop the giggles bubbling up.

Damon’s face contorted, flustered by the bulk in his hand. Colin yanked his body free, breaking Damon’s hold on him.

“Holy crap! Get your stinking paws off my dick, you freak.”

Stunned, Damon’s mouth dropped open, and he yanked his hand away. “What the hell is this?” “Oh, my word!” Damon flung himself away from Colin, but couldn’t get out of bed fast enough.

Lurching after him, Colin snagged Damon’s hair, and hurled Damon over him, onto the floor. “Kat! Quick, get him.”

Kat burst from the closet, speaking the words she’d rehearsed, and waved her hands over the stunned Damon. A bright light flashed and he stopped his thrashing on the floor and went ramrod straight.

“Good job, babe. He’s as stiff as a preacher in a whorehouse.”

“Thanks, I do my best work under pressure.”

Damon’s eyes went wild, fear and rage fighting within them.

Taking her aside, Colin searched her face. “Kat, you have to promise no one will ever hear about...you know, what, er, where he touched me. Promise?”

Not listening to the devil on her shoulder, Kat nodded. “I’ll never tell.” Glancing at Damon, she grinned and added, “And I’d bet Damon’s not going to blab it around either. Besides, who would believe it, anyway?”

Relief spread over Colin’s features and he heaved a great sigh. “True enough.”

“Now, let’s get back to poor Damon.”

Colin choked and coughed. “Poor Damon? Are you kidding? The jerk about raped me, er, you.”

“It can’t be called rape, when I invited him to my bed. And yes, ‘poor Damon’. Lila’s behind this whole mess. I’ll bet she has him wrapped around her finger. From what he said, he seems to be in love with her. So, yes, ‘poor Damon’, indeed.”

“I see your point.”

She marched back to Damon on the floor and squatted down beside him. “Damon, forgive me for paralyzing you, but I did it to keep you from attacking Colin. However, you have a chance to redeem yourself. If you promise to be good and tell us what’s going on, I’ll release you from the spell.”

She waited, but got no reply. Then she remembered he couldn’t move anything except his eyelids. “Oh, sorry. Blink once for no and twice for yes.”

Damon blinked twice.

“Good.” Closing her eyes, Kat spoke the spell to reverse the paralysis.

Damon erupted into motion and scrambled up from the floor. “How dare you trick me! Keep away from me, both of you.” Standing with his back to the wall, he ran his hands up and down his body, pulling his clothes on as fast as he could. “I can’t believe you would do such a thing to an admirer.”

Kat crossed her arms, tired of his melodramatic antics. “You’re no admirer, and you know it. Stop avoiding the truth, Damon. Tell us about Lila or I’ll put another one on you.” She raised her arms, adopted a threatening expression, and began to intone the same spell she’d used to capture him.

Fear rippled over him, sending no doubt of his emotion. “No, stop. I’ll tell you everything. Since I failed, Lila’s going to shun me anyway.”

He stumbled over and sat down on the bed. “Lila planned to break up your marriage by using me to lure you away from the mortal. Plus, she hoped you’d prefer making love to a wizard and would change your mind about marrying one. To help push you into marriage, she’s been sabotaging your company for over a year now. With no mortal husband and no business to fall back on, marriage to a wizard would be inevitable. There, now you know.”

A wicked gleam glowed in his eyes. “Oh, dear. I hope I didn’t let the cat out of the bag. Get it? Kat? You know? About Kat being a witch?”

Colin laughed, reducing Damon’s jeer to nothing. “You’re not the brightest snake in the grass, are you? Of course I know. Why else would I have called for her to zap you with a spell?”

Hoping to stay on track, Kat interrupted. “Okay, you two. Enough. Damon, tell me about Lila and my business. What did she do?”

“She placed a curse on your building. Customers who drew near the door became violently ill and left. She also placed a protection spell over the first spell so you wouldn’t detect any wrong-doing.”

Hurt, fringed with anger, coursed through Kat, roiling in her stomach. “What a bitch. No wonder business has been so bad. If it weren’t for Colin’s help, I would have lost *Romance Magic*.”

Yet, if it weren’t for Lila’s meddling and sabotage, she would never have met Colin. Never have known what real love is. Never have loved him even when he didn’t love her back. Still, she wouldn’t change loving him no matter how much it hurt.

“Damon, do you love Lila?”

He ducked his head, avoiding her scrutiny. After a bit, though, he answered. “Yes. Yes, I’ve adored her for years. But she doesn’t care for me, I’m afraid.”

Before the past few months, Kat would have agreed. However, she’d noticed a change in Lila’s behavior.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Damon’s head jerked up and his face filled with a brightness, an optimism not seen before. “Why do you say so? Kat, don’t tempt with false hope.”

She smiled, glad to see his reaction. “Let’s examine the facts. Lila has never, ever, held on to one man for more than three months. At least, not since her last marriage failed. You’ve been around much longer, haven’t you? Plus, whenever she talks about you, she seems happier somehow, lighter. I get the impression she cares for you a lot.”

Damon leaned forward, closing the gap between them. “Do you really believe so? But if what you say is true, why doesn’t she say so?”

Kat took his hand in hers. “You know Lila. She’s been hurt twice before, so she’s built this barrier around her. She’s the sexy, wizard-eating witch, right? Well, maybe there’s another Lila dying to get out. The Lila who loves you, but doesn’t know how to let her walls down.”

Damon kissed her hand, a desperate longing obvious in his expression. Although she fought to maintain her anger toward him, her heart filled with tenderness. How could she not help him? How could she not help her sister?

Colin’s jaw dropped opened and he threw up his hands. “So what if she does? We’ve blown her little scheme apart. I, for one, couldn’t care less about Lila’s emotional problems. I’ll be happy to forget about all this and move on with my life.”

Did he mean their situation? Or her going home? Or perhaps his leaving on his travels? At this point, what did it matter? He wasn’t in love with her, and she shouldn’t expect anything more from him.

But she could do something about Daman and Lila. “Damon, with your help, I’m sure we can get Lila to admit her affection for you. And in addition, we’ll get her to admit sabotaging my business, too. It’s the one way I’m ever going to forgive her.”

Damon shifted in his seat and ran a hand over his face. “Then you’re going to have to confront Maddy, too. She knew everything and did what Lila told her to do.”

Kat reeled at the news. Maddy? Maddy was in on this? Without another word, she strode from the room and headed to the bedroom across the hallway. She could hear Colin and Damon following closely behind her.

Slamming the door wide open, Kat glared at the two in bed. “So, Maddy, I hear you’ve been helping our big sister plot to destroy my company and get me married. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Maddy sat up in bed with the covers clutched under her chin. Her frightened eyes stared back at Kat. Getting out of bed, James stepped between the two sisters and prepared to protect Maddy.

“Hang on, Kat. I don’t know what you’re so pissed about, but Maddy and I are in love.”

Spitting out her words, Kat drew close to Maddy. “I don’t give a flip about your involvement. Anyone with any brains already knows about you two. I want to know about Maddy and Lila. Maddy, you’d better start explaining.”

Maddy gulped and answered in her usual timid tone. “I’m so, so sorry, Kat. I didn’t have a choice. You know how Lila is. At first, I agreed with her, but then I met James. I haven’t helped Lila in ages because I like Colin, and know you’re happy married to him. Please, Kat, forgive me.”

Kat took the hand Maddy extended. The joy on her younger sister’s face demolished her turmoil, and changed the tears of hurt into tears of sympathy. “I’ll forgive you, sis, if you promise to do something for me.”

“Anything, Katty.”

Kat took in everyone around her. “We’re going to get Lila to admit she cares for Damon. The way I figure it, once Lila has her own love, she’ll leave me alone. So, everyone, get ready. Here’s what we’re going to do.”

The others closed in around the bed, listening to her outline each of their roles in her new plan. Once she finished, she pointed at each and asked, “Do you understand? If so, let’s get busy, people. We have a witch to trick.”

## Chapter Thirteen

The knock on her bedroom door jolted Lila out of her reverie. “Come in.”

What could she do anyway? By now, Damon’s mission of bedding her sister was a fact. A foul taste rose in her throat whenever she imagined Kat and Damon, lying in bed together, arms and legs intertwined. Would he do to Kat what he did to her? Would he whisper sweet names in her sister’s ear? Would she be his second trophy tonight? The idea left her reeling with nausea.

Why second-guess her plan now? The deed was done, and she couldn’t change it. Even she didn’t have the power to alter the past.

Yet, she’d be damned if she’d let him see her like this. She would maintain her image and her dignity at all costs. No matter how much her heart ached.

She raced to her ruby-colored lounge and stretched out, the vision of a woman without a care. He would crawl on his knees to her, begging to lick her feet, when he saw her like this. Regal. Aloof. Breathtaking.

“Back so soon, my pet? Was my sister not entertaining enough to stay the night? Come in, Damon, and tell me the news of your tryst with my sister.”

Lila lowered her lips to sip the imported wine, eyes fixed on the bedroom door. The door creaked opened an inch. “Really, Damon, why do you hesitate? Hurry in. I’m dying to hear every single detail.” She paled at her words, realizing details were the last thing she wanted to know.

Maddy swung the door open and stepped inside. Something flickered across her features, but Lila couldn’t place the emotion, one she’d never seen on Maddy.

Sputtering, Lila choked on the velvet liquid, and rose from her seat. “Maddy? I wasn’t expecting you. Run along, dear sister. Damon should be here any moment to report on my victory.”

Her younger sister cleared her throat. Oddly, Lila couldn’t seem to keep her eyes focused on Maddy. An wariness crept over her, spreading its insidious tendrils throughout her. “Do tell what’s on your mind, little sister. I can see something’s bothering you.”

“Lila, I don’t know to tell you this.”

The apprehension upsetting her deteriorated into irritation that stiffened her neck. No, more than irritation. Panic. She pulled her lean frame straighter, determined to face her fear.

“Tell me what? Spit it out, Maddy, before I have to squeeze it out of you.”

Maddy fidgeted and averted her eyes from Lila's intense gaze. But why? A dire premonition drugged Lila's heart. This would not be good news.

Shy Maddy slunk backwards, positioned for a quick exit. "Please, Lila, don't get upset. At least, not at me."

"Now why would I get upset at you?" Lila ran her fingers along the gold rim of the goblet while the other hand clenched the stem. She must maintain her cool.

Maddy's nose crinkled, her sister's tale-tell sign of nervousness. "Because Damon sent me to tell you the news. Now remember, Lila, blame the game, not the players."

Lila ran her tongue against her crimson lips. "Do stop wasting my time. I'm getting very annoyed with this game you're playing."

"Oh, believe me. I'm not having any fun, either."

"Well, he must have a reason for not delivering the news himself. I'm sure he has." She chuckled, but even she noticed the lack of humor in it. "For instance, he may be bogged down, and unable to free himself from a sticky situation."

"I'd say not so much sticky as sexy."

Lila flicked the crystal hard, while the muscles in her abdomen tightened painfully. Gritting her teeth, she managed to keep a level tone. "Well? Has he slept with Kat and shown her the error of her ways? Has he driven the mortal from her in a fit of jealousy? Is their union now an unfortunate misjudgment in Kat's past?"

"Uh, no. Not exactly." Maddy plucked her bangs down to cover her eyes.

Lila couldn't remember her sister making the timid gesture in weeks. Her newfound confidence must be the influence of a new man in her life. She made a mental note to invite this mysterious stranger to dinner in the near future. After all, she should meet this man who possessed such influence over Maddy. Something must be wrong for Maddy to revert back to her old mannerisms.

"I mean, Colin was fit to be tied at first. He tried to fight Damon but, of course, Damon took no time at all to defeat him. Eventually, though, Damon made him see reason."

"Ha! I'll bet Damon hit him with a spell to make him forget he ever cared for our sister."

Her back tensed, and she fought the growing dread inside her. "Well then, tell me. Why did he send you instead of returning to my side?"

Maddy stared at the floor and twisted her toe in the lush carpet. "Um, he said he doesn't fancy you any longer."

Lila bolted from her seat, her ire propelling her toward Maddy. Seizing her arm, she spun Maddy around, forcing her to lift her head. “You lie! Damon would never say such a thing.”

The new, stronger Maddy lifted her chin in defiance. “Why would I lie? Believe what you will, Lila, but those were his exact words.”

Lila searched Maddy’s eyes for any hint of betrayal. Finding none, she let her go. “He actually said those words? He doesn’t fancy me any longer? Are you certain you heard him correctly?”

Maddy was mistaken. No other possible explanation was acceptable. How could Damon not yearn for her, crave her any longer? The idea was ridiculous.

But Maddy nodded and continued, “I’m positive. You see, Kat and Damon have been having an affair, right under your nose, for several days. He’d leave your bed to go to hers.” Maddy paused at Lila’s gasp. “In fact, he’s with her now. In her bed. I eavesdropped so I could report back to you. They’re getting married tomorrow right after Kat has her marriage to the mortal dissolved.”

Lila flung the crystal goblet across the room, splattering wine everywhere. “Married? Damon married to Kat?”

“But Lila, this is what you’ve always pestered her to do. She’s marrying a wizard. And Damon’s a great catch, isn’t he? So strong, so powerful. He’s the best of the best. You said so yourself many times.”

Lila glared at Maddy, unwilling to confirm her own words.

“Why do you care? He was nothing but a plaything to you.”

Lila whirled on Maddy. “Is he crazy? Are you crazy? Has the whole world gone crazy? I sent him to break up a marriage, not create one. She can not, will not, marry Damon.”

Maddy stepped back from Lila’s vehemence and shook her head. “But I thought you’d be pleased she’s marrying him. You’re acting very weird, Lila. Kat’s doing what you’ve always wanted her to do. She’s marrying a wizard.”

“But she’s not supposed to marry *my* wizard!”

Lila snatched up her shoes, not bothering to stop and put them on, and scurried out the door. “No one, not even my own sister, is going to steal my man away from me. I’m getting my Damon back.”

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“Damon! Damon, where are you?”

Kat, Colin and Damon glanced at each other, then swiveled in the direction of Lila's voice. Her furious tone echoed up the stairs and into the bedroom.

Rushing to the doorway, Damon stuck his head around the edge, peering down the hallway. "Oh, my word. She sounds mad enough to behead a lion. Or a wizard." Straining his neck to see them, he asked, "Are you sure this will work? Because if it doesn't, we'll all be transformed into dust before we can blink."

"Good goddess, Damon, trust me. We tricked you, didn't we?" Kat joined him at the doorway.

"Yes, but Lila's much smarter than I am, and crueler when she's mad. And a whole lot quicker with her spells, too."

Colin, the only one not going to be in direct fire with Lila, laughed. "If you stand there much longer, you two, you won't have to worry about whether the plan will work or not. She'll see you and zap your heads off."

"Zap our heads off?" Kat hesitated, baffled at his ignorance. "Once this is over, we should talk about what real witches can and can't do. Zap our heads off. Please."

"Well, whatever you call what she can do. But in the meantime, I'd suggest we get in our places, people."

Saluting, Colin scooted out the door, while Kat and Damon reclined on the edge of the bed. Locking together in an embrace, they waited.

Kat held her breath and prayed they didn't have to wait long.

Lila marched into the bedroom, took one look at the couple, and started shouting. "What are you doing? Have you lost your mind?"

Kat and Damon swung their heads in unison toward Lila. Kat giggled, and sported a smile sweet enough to fill all the candy factories in the world. "Oh, Lila, I'm so glad you came. Come celebrate with us. Your wish has come true. I'm going to marry a wizard. *Your* wizard-friend." Hugging Damon closer, she placed a large smack of a kiss on his cheek.

And then fought with her stomach to keep her food down. Would she survive this ruse?

Damon, however, appeared to be loving his role.

"Lila, my sugar. How good to see you."

Kat held up her chin, allowing Damon to shower her with kisses. Muffled against her neck, Damon replied in a casual tone. "Kat, you know Lila and I are old friends. I told you about our relationship. We've known each other for ages."



The infuriated Lila found her voice again. “*Old* friends? Friends, my ass. That’s bull considering how often you’ve played with my ass. And all my other body parts, too.”

Kat slapped Damon’s arm in a flirting way. “You’ve known my sister well, haven’t you, you sly boy.”

Pausing between nibbles on her ear, he sat back, and feigned a worried expression. “Does this bother you, my queen? If so, I beg your humble forgiveness. Tell me you forgive me and will love me forever.”

How sappy could this guy get? Kat tried to keep from rolling her eyes.

“Of course, I forgive you, Damy.” Casting a sideways smirk at Lila, she added, “I’m sure you were a victim of one of her love charms.”

Kat tried to watch Lila while pretending to reciprocate Damon’s affection. Could Lila be about to explode? Judging from her red face and contorted features, the possibility was a distinct probability.

“You are the one who has to use spells to get men. Isn’t that how you found your mortal?” She leveled her glare at Damon. “And you! You call her by my pet name? I am your queen and always will be. Damon, I demand to see you this minute. Alone.”

Damon waved his hand at Lila. “Go away, Lila. I have nothing to say to you. Besides, Kat and I would like a little privacy, if you don’t mind.”

Kat heaved a theatrical sigh. “Damy, talk to her. Why not clear the air? You know, get rid of your old baggage—or should I say, bag—before we start our new, wonderful life together.”

“You won’t run away while I’m stuck in here with her, will you?”

Lila stamped her feet. “Knock it off, you sappy sickies. Damon, you and me alone. Now.”

Saying a silent thank you to Lila, Kat exhaled in relief. Now she could get away from his clammy mitts. If she suffered his kisses another minute, she’d pass out in a dead faint. As it was, she’d spend at least a couple of hours in the shower scrubbing his handprints off her body.

Kat and Damon held onto each other as Kat began to rise. Damon clutched her to him, holding on maybe a little stronger than he should?

“I can’t stand to part with you, my precious,” said Damon.

“Don’t worry, my love, I’ll be right outside the door.” Kat blew him a kiss, sneered at her sister, and sashayed to the door.

Kat swung the door almost closed. Blocking the door, she left a crack big enough to peek through, and pressed her back to the adjoining wall. Using the compact mirror she’d hidden in her pocket, she angled for a view of Damon and Lila. Colin, seeing her in position, tiptoed out of the

bedroom across the hall to come over to her. She placed a finger to her lips and shook her head. Nodding, he leaned closer, ready to eavesdrop, too.

They watched, hypnotized, as Lila sat beside Damon. Her hand rose in an arc, causing Damon to flinch. Instead of striking him, however, she brought her palm to rest on the slant of his jaw. “Damon, I can’t believe you’re doing this. You’re actually leaving me for my sister? Tell me this isn’t true.”

Tears streamed down Lila’s face, surprising Kat with unexpected remorse. Didn’t Lila deserve everything she got? If anyone should feel guilty, it should be Lila. Shouldn’t it? Still, she wanted her sister to be happy. If possible, with Damon.

Damon, swayed by Lila’s tears, reached out to her. His face began to crumble when he lifted her hands to his lips. “Oh, my darling, Lila. Would you care so much if I spoke the truth? Tell me, Lila, what is in your heart.”

Lila bowed her head and sobbed. “I can’t. I’ve fought so long to keep my emotions in check. See what you’re doing to me? I’m afraid...”

Who were these two people? A Lila Kat didn’t know stroked Damon with loving, gentle, strokes. Equating amazing, the smug Damon vanished, replaced by a caring, tender man.

“Lila, my pumpernickel, what are you afraid of? Me? How can you be afraid of the one soul in this world who loves you the most?” Damon kissed her fingers, one after the other.

Behind her, Kat heard Colin whisper. “Man, he sure knows how to lay on the crap.” Kat narrowed her eyes at him, warning him to be silent. Or was it for his undue criticism?

“You love me, Damon? Promise?” Lila tilted her head, questioning him.

Damon glanced at the door, and beckoned with lifted eyebrows. “I do love you, Lila. With every breath I take. But Kat...”

On cue, Kat flung the door opened and barged in. “You love her? *Her*? Why you little scumbag, you bastard, you dog, you—you—wizard! A few minutes ago, you were begging me to be your woman. You promised you loved me, not her.”

Kat screamed and threw a vase in Damon’s direction, purposely missing him. “How dare you lie to me! Why I ought to—“

Lila held up both hands in front of her. “Now, Kat dear, calm down. Damon should be able to choose who he’s going to spend his life with. I’m sorry for you, but he’s chosen me. Haven’t you, Damon?”

Damon stammered, his eyes jumping from one sister to the other. “I—I do love Lila.” Gaining more nerve, he continued, “I’m sorry, Kat. I have to say the truth. I love Lila. There’ll never be another woman in my life.”

Kat scrunched up her face, made her features a mask of fury, and shouted at Damon. “Do you think you can get rid of me like this? By making a fool of me? By showing everyone what an idiot I am? Well, let me show you who the idiot really is!”

Kat gritted her teeth and mumbled the words she’d practiced. If her calculations were correct, Lila wouldn’t be able to understand the words, but would interpret the meaning behind them. She waved her hand in a huge arc, brought her arm downward, and pointed at Damon.

Damon’s face fell, his jaw grew slack, and his eyes crossed.

Lila stood, struck numb, her mouth opening and closing without a sound.

Kat fisted her hands on her hips, and managed the most evil grin she could. “There. Now you can have him, Lila. He’ll be forever your own babbling idiot.”

Dribble ran down Damon’s chin as his lips curved into a soppy, imbecilic smile. “L-Liya?” he lisped in a sweet, childlike voice.

Lila’s heart-wrenching cry shattered Kat’s appreciation of Damon’s acting ability. “Kat, you monster. What have you done?”

Kat pursed her lips and glared at Lila. “I gave him what he deserved. I hope you both have a happy life together spawning one moronic child after another.”

According to plan, Lila stopped her before she could leave the room. “No, Kat, you can’t go. You’ve got to change him back. It’s not his fault. I’m responsible, not Damon.”

“Responsible for what, Lila? Damon’s the one who lied to me.” Kat remained aloof, intent on delivering the performance of her life.

Tears coursed down Lila’s face. Her eyes beseeched Kat, and she held onto her arm, refusing to allow Kat to take another step.

“Explain yourself, Lila, and you’d better tell me the whole truth. Don’t leave anything out because if I find out you’ve lied, I’ll...”

“All right, all right. I concocted the whole thing. Damon courted you so he could break you and Colin apart. I coerced him into playing your besotted admirer. Then, while he wooed you for your affection and, thus, destroyed your marriage, I worked to sabotage your business. I have been for over a year now. I put a spell on your building to drive customers away.”

Kat pretended to be shocked. “Why, Lila? Why did you want to hurt me?”

Lila sniffled and turned to the blubbering Damon. Wrapping her arm around him, she continued, "I thought I knew what was best for you. You know, getting you to marry a wizard. But now I see I was wrong. If Colin and your business make you happy, then I'll never interfere again. But please, please make Damon himself."

"I see. Why should I trust you now?"

The sincerity in Lila's eyes rocked Kat to her core. Her false coldness slid away, and she resisted the urge to take her sister into her arms.

"Because I love him."

"You do?" Damon dropped his act and grabbed Lila. "I never thought I'd hear you say those words."

A startled Lila watched Kat dance around the room. Hearing the commotion, Colin burst into the room, grinning at her dance and clapping to the rhythm of unheard music. "We got her big time, babe. Great job, Kat, and even you gave a standup performance, Damon. Of course, playing a moron wasn't much of a stretch for you."

Lila pushed away from Damon. "This was a trick? You were never under a spell at all?" A chilling breeze blew through the room, and Kat tensed, half expecting Lila to change Damon into something horrible and smelly. She moved to step between them, but Damon's salvation came from himself.

"Yes, my love, it was a trick." He brought her closer, refusing to let her fight against him. Folding a hand over his heart, he added, "But I'll always be a fool for you."

His words caught Lila off guard, robbing her of speech. Taking advantage of this brief respite, Damon dipped her in his arms and crushed his mouth to hers.

Kat's unexpected tears ran freely down her cheeks. "Forgive and forget, Lila. He tricked you because he loves you."

Colin's strong arms encased her from behind, as he rested his chin on her shoulder. "Ya gotta love a man who'll make an idiot of himself for love." He swiveled her to him and wiped away her tears.

"Hey, what's going on in here?"

Without breaking their embraces, the two couples' attention shifted toward the sound. Maddy and James stood in the doorway, arms linked together.

"A lot of things have happened." Checking for Colin's approval first, Kat continued, "Since we're revealing our secrets, Colin and I have a bit of confessing to do. No one could break up our marriage because our marriage is a fake. Colin and I pretended to be married to get Lila off my back.

Plus, he hired me to help remake his brothers and find them relationships. A job which, I do believe, I did remarkably well.”

Lila’s temper threatened to rise again, but Damon pinched her, causing her to laugh. “Ow. Oh, all right. I suppose I forced you into desperate measures. I guess I never realized how bothersome I could be. And for your information, Damon, I prefer a kiss to a pinch if you’re going to interrupt me.”

“Whatever you say, my love.”

“As far as I’m concerned, I’m grateful to Kat for helping Colin’s brothers.” Maddy grinned as she took James’ hand in hers. Maddy cast a sideways glance at Lila, inhaled, and began speaking, rushing each word right after the other. “James and I are engaged. Now, Lila, I know you don’t like the idea of witches marrying mortals, but you don’t have any say in this. I love James and nothing you can say or do will ever change that. So get over yourself.”

Maddy let out a long breath, and waited. All eyes focused on Lila.

Wow, where was the shy, timid Maddy now? Kat braced herself and prepared to support Maddy against Lila’s expected tirade.

Lila raised her eyebrows, checking first Maddy and then Kat. “Well, you see now what your influence has done.”

Kat groaned, ready for anything. “Yes, and I for one welcome James into our family.”

Lila paced away from her sisters, silent, before spinning around to speak. “I’ve watched you and Colin and seen how he treats you, Kat. And if James treats Maddy even half as well, then I give her my permission to marry this mortal.”

Kat narrowed her eyes and went on the attack, charging full steam ahead. “She doesn’t require permission from you. She’s a grown woman and can do what—”

Colin’s hand clamped over her mouth. “Shut up, Kat. Maddy can marry James. Don’t push our luck.”

The group broke into cheers, laughing and congratulating James and Maddy. Lila even managed to give James an awkward hug.

“Wait a second.”

A somber Colin caught everyone’s attention. “My brother can’t get married.”

Maddy gasped, color draining from her face. “Why? Do you have something against him marrying a witch?”

“Heck, no. But the oldest brother ought to be the first one to get hitched.”

Kat searched the smiling faces around her, but remained confused. Then a cold realization showered her body in ice. “You? You mean, while we were together, pretending to be a couple, you found someone you’re willing to marry? But you said you’d never get tied down. So who? When?”

Fresh moisture blurred her vision. Swallowing, she said the one thing she could think to say. “Colin, this is wonderful. I’m so happy for you and your lady. Whoever she is.” An excruciating ache wrenched through her, slicing her in half.

He brought Kat’s hand to his chest and laid it over his heart. “Kathryn Carlton, sometimes you can be an idiot, too. I realize I’m not as good with words as Damon, but if you can put up with me for the rest of your life, will you please be my real wife?”

A glowing warmth flowed over her, melting all the ice away. Grinning, she sought her sisters’ eyes, and found joy and happiness radiating within them. Releasing her tears, Kat fell into Colin’s open arms.

## Chapter Fourteen

Kat stood in the reception hall, eyeing another piece of cake. Couples dressed in elegant outfits whirled around the dance floor, moving in rhythm to the music of a full orchestra, while waiters, dressed in tuxedos, strived to keep the hundreds of guests supplied with drinks and food. Gold shimmered throughout the room under a canopy of white lace, creating the illusion of a shimmering winter wonderland.

Kat listened, while witches, wizards and mortals conversed, describing their reactions to the earlier ceremony. Amused, she could hear the exclamations of the mortals, having never seen such a spectacular event, while magical folk appeared to be unaffected by the pageantry.

Kat winked at Colin who stood on the other side of the room, talking to a graying wizard. Sipping her champagne, she patted Lila on the back. "I'll give you credit, sis, you do know how to organize a wedding. I know Maddy's overjoyed to be in the Grand Ballroom. You outdid yourself, sister, and I'm impressed. How did you manage this extravaganza in only a few weeks?"

Inclining her head in acceptance of the praise, Lila explained, "I had a lot of help. I called in a few favors and, of course, Damon did his part."

"Yes, but getting Celine Dion to sing at the wedding? How in the world did you ever convince her?" Kat wiggled her eyebrows at Colin, trying to tempt him to join her.

Lila laughed and tossed her head. "She was happy to sing for me since she didn't have to leave Vegas to do so. Besides, her voice is magical. Am I right?"

Kat swiveled to see her sister, questioning her with a tilt of her head. "Are you trying to tell me..."

Sipping her drink, Lila lifted one eyebrow and turned back to the dancers. "Really, Kat, I don't know what you're talking about."

Knowing when not to push an issue, Kat leveled her gaze at the newly married Maddy, swirling around the floor with her handsome new husband. "So, don't you think my wedding dress is more beautiful than all the other brides' dresses?" Kat searched the room for the four mortal brides.

Lila, on the other hand, tapped her chin with her finger. "Hmm, maybe so. But mine is more gorgeous than yours."

Kat laughed at the remark. “If you say so. But, Lila, having cherubs fly around the ceiling? Talk about over the top. How do we explain them to the mortal guests?”

Lila craned her neck, watching an athletic cherub twirl around the giant crystal chandelier. “No explanation necessary. The mortals are assuming they’re a part of a Vegas show, like *Cirque du Soleil*..”

“You’re kidding.” Kat glanced upward, catching the eye of one chubby flyer. He waved and did a somersault in the air.

Maddy and James joined them. “Ladies, find your husbands. We’re going to have a group photo taken. Meet us under the canopy.”

Kat and Lila parted, searching for their husbands. Colin, having freed himself from the older wizard, stood at the bar, greeting some friends of his.

“Kat, why didn’t you rescue me from Barnaby? The old geezer talked my head off. In fact, I may be missing an ear.” He reached up, checking both ears.

“Barnaby is a family friend. I hope you were nice to him. Or you could live to regret any rudeness.” Kat took the champagne glass Colin offered.

Colin cringed, pretending to be frightened. Moving her away from his friends, he held his head close to hers, and murmured, “I don’t know how you girls are pulling this off, but none of my friends suspect anything. They are, however, going to be dropping by your office so you can find women for them. Greg even wants to hire your friends to perform a make-over. Your business is going to be booming since Lila’s lifted the spell from the building, and my brothers are your best advertisement.”

Kat nodded. “Business has already picked up. Melanie’s very competent and the assistant I hired for her is a quick learner. Otherwise, we might not be able to go on our honeymoon.”

Colin brought her around, forcing her full attention. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about the honeymoon. I know I agreed to let you and your sisters handle everything, but I want to ask for one stipulation.”

“What? You should have told me if you wanted something special.” Concerned, Kat wondered if he’d be pleased with the trip to the deserted island she’d located.

“I like your sisters and all and, hey, I’ve even learned to like Damon. At least, a little bit. And I was a good sport about getting married in a seven-ring ceremony, right?”

“Right.” She dragged the word out, making it sound like several syllables.

Colin ran his hands up and down her arms. “Honeymoons are private, Kat. Let’s go on ours without your sisters, my brothers, or any of our new in-laws. What do you say?”



This man would always make her laugh. Taking his face in her hands, she laid her lips on his. His immediate response pleased her. “I say, when you’re right, you’re right.”

“Woo, hoo!” Colin swung Kat around in an arc, delighting the guests surrounding them. “Finally, time alone with my wife.”

*Wife.* Kat hugged herself at the word. She is his wife. Not a temporary one, but a real, honest-to-goodness, ‘til-death-do-us-part real wife.

Nick and his new bride, Lois, hurried them toward the canopy. All the brothers and their new wives were there, smiling, waiting for the last couple to join them. Kat waved and took her place next to Colin under the flower-filled arch.

The photographer shifted the group, fitting them into the best possible positions. He fiddled with his camera for a minute, and studied the couples. “You know, I’ve never photographed a wedding with seven couples before. I’m having a difficult time getting you all in the picture without having to back up too far to get a good close-up.”

Kat glanced at her sisters standing nearby. Nodding, she closed her eyes and mumbled a silent chant. When she finished, she motioned to the photographer. “Try now. Maybe the problem’s been cleared up.”

He gave her a patronizing smile and bent over his camera again. Scratching his head, he peered back at Kat. “Well, if this doesn’t beat all. I don’t know what I did, but the picture’s perfect. Hold on, people, and say ‘cheese’ when I tell you.”

“Um, we’re going to say ‘magic’, if it’s all right with you.” Kat bit her lip, trying not to giggle at his mystified expression.

“Sure, lady, anything you say. After all, it’s your wedding day.”

“It sure is.” Gazing into Colin’s love-filled eyes, Kat smiled, happy in the knowledge that she’d found what she’d always been searching for.

“Then it’s settled. Ready, everyone? Good. Now smile and say—”

The voices of seven happy couples blended, reverberating around the ballroom for all to hear.

“Magic!”

**The End**