

# *The Reluctant Witch*



*Susan Grace*

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*I dedicate this book to my sister and  
personal angel, Linda Louise Gregory.  
Gone, but never to be forgotten.*

# Chapter 1

HE WAS HUGE.

His hair was black as sin, slicked back from his classically sculpted features. Muscles rippled across his broad back when he moved. There was a feral glint in his topaz eyes.

Scowling at her unwanted guest, Meredith Albright stamped her foot and pointed toward the door of her shop. “Go back to my Aunt Nora and tell her I don’t need you! Get out of here before I send you to perdition in a puff of smoke!”

Her threat didn’t appear to faze him in the least. Turning away from her, he yawned and stretched his large, powerfully built body.

Merry was furious. She had come in early to prepare for her store’s seventh annual Halloween sale and found him sitting on the main counter. Making Merry’s Magic Emporium & Costume Shop a success had taken a great deal of work. The last thing she needed was someone like him leaning against her antique cash register looking over her shop like he owned the place.

Sending him here was obviously her aunt’s newest way of interfering in her life. She had to get rid of him!

“Now look, I don’t want to be rude, but I have a business to run and I can’t have you hanging around here.”

His amber eyes turned toward her, but he didn’t reply.

Merry twisted the end of her long blonde braid that had fallen over her shoulder. “It’s nothing personal, but at this point in time, I don’t need someone like you in my life. Frankly, I doubt if I ever will. Why don’t you go back to Nora and tell her this plot to get us together just didn’t work?”

Though he didn’t respond, she knew he’d heard what she said. His head tilted as if he were carefully studying her.

“If you’re lonely or have no place else to go, I’m sure my friend Lauren at the dry cleaners next door would enjoy spending time with you. She’s a pretty redhead and real friendly. You’re exactly her type. The two of you would do very well together.”

Merry could almost detect the hint of a sneer forming at the edge of his mouth. His impervious demeanor finally got her angry enough to throw her purse down on the counter and grab him by the shoulders.

“That’s it! I’m through being Miss Sweetness and Light. I want you out of here this minute!” she declared, jerking him up from her glass-topped counter.

His thick body stiffened with pain. “*Meow!*” he howled.

Merry nearly dropped the large black and white cat. As she cradled his sizable weight in her arms, she noticed his right paw was cut and bleeding.

“My stars! How did you do that?”

The cat cuddled close to Merry and rubbed his head against her chin. At that moment, Lauren Fitzgerald came in through the back door of the shop, holding several plastic-covered costumes in front of her.

“Here are the doublets and gowns the community theater people dropped off yesterday.” She placed the hangers on the clothes rack filled with costumes near the counter. “I got the makeup off the velvets, but you’ll have to take a needle to the Hamlet outfit. The prop sword was

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a bit too sharp and sliced a hole right through his—” Freed of her burdens, Lauren saw the cat in Merry’s arms and gasped. “Oh, my! What a beautiful tuxedo kitty. Where did you find him?”

Merry frowned. “I found him sleeping next to the register when I came in. I don’t know how he got in here, but he has a nasty cut on his paw.”

“Poor little baby,” Lauren crooned, reaching out to touch the cat’s white furred chest.

“Little baby! This beast weighs at least thirty pounds. I wonder who he belongs to.” Merry struggled to hold him in one arm while she inspected his injury. “Maybe I can take him to Dr. Brown and let him treat this wound. Afterward, Dr. Brown can hold on to him until his owners are found.”

Lauren shook her head. “Fraid not. Doc Brown went to a vet’s convention in Dallas. He won’t be back until next week.”

Merry set the cat down on the counter and took a closer look at his paw. “I suppose I could patch him up myself. Lauren, could you get the first aid kit from the bathroom for me?”

“Sure. I’ll stick around and give you a hand with him, too.”

Ten minutes later, the two young women were putting away the medical supplies and the cat was sprawled across the length of the counter sporting a wide bandage on his paw.

“I’m always doing things like this for my brood,” Lauren boasted. “If I took my brats to Doc Brown every time one of them got into a scuffle, I’d be broke.”

Leaning against the cash register, Merry’s frown lifted into a hopeful smile. “Seeing how you already have three cats, would you consider taking him to your house until I find out who he belongs to? I’d pay for his keep.”

Lauren scratched behind the cat’s ear, evoking a loud purr from the animal. “No can do. Bitsy is ready to drop a litter of kittens anytime now and she would never put up with a strange male around the house. Poor Pepe and Lucifer have to hide out just to survive her tantrums. Why don’t you keep him? Your apartment is right upstairs and you don’t have any pets.”

“Yes, I do. Are you forgetting Dickens?”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot you own a crow.”

Merry sighed. “Dickens is a myna bird, not a crow. My father sent him to me from South America. I can’t risk letting Dickens get hurt.”

“Then let the cat stay here in the store. Put an orange ribbon around his neck and let him decorate the place for Halloween.” Lauren looked at the content feline and smiled. “Since he already has the tuxedo markings, mostly black with a white chest and matching paws, give him a bow tie. Let him go formal!”

“You’re talking about dressing a cat, Lauren, not a Barbie doll. He probably won’t like being fussed with.”

Lauren shrugged. “Hey, it was only a suggestion. If you’re dead set against having a cat around, I suppose you can call Palm Beach County Animal Control. But you know what will happen if no one claims him in a week.”

The object of their conversation suddenly let out a pitiful wail and limped toward Merry. Rubbing against her, he butted his nose against her chin.

Merry didn’t know what to do. If her aunt hadn’t sent the cat to her, then giving him over to animal control would be cruel. The thought of an innocent creature being put to sleep because no one wanted it was too painful to consider.

The only way to know the truth was to contact Nora, no matter how unpleasant that idea was at eight in the morning. As soon as Lauren left, she would call her aunt.

Lauren tugged on Merry’s braid. “Hey, if it helps, I can lend you some food, litter, and a

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box for this guy to use until you go to the store. I'll call Bob and tell him to drop it all off to you when he goes to the law library this morning."

"I wouldn't want to burden your husband like that. Bob has enough to do with helping you and studying for the bar exam."

"Bob won't mind. He's a bigger pushover for critters than I am. I better get going so I can catch Bob before he leaves the house. See ya, girlfriend."

Merry followed Lauren through the back room and locked the door. Going to her office, she closed her eyes, shook the small brass bell she kept on her desk, and summoned Nora.

*"Nora Glendenning, hear my plea, Nora, Nora, come to me."*

When nothing happened, she rang the bell again and called out another incantation in a louder voice.

*"Nora Glendenning, recall your vow, Nora, Nora, come to me now!"*

A bright flash of light and a pain-filled groan told Merry her message had finally gotten through.

"Lose the bell, Meredith! I heard you the first time. Have you no pity for a dying witch?"

Merry shook her head. The world famous cosmetics queen, Nora Glendenning, looked far from death. Wearing a long black lace peignoir and silk nightgown, she looked more like a lingerie model in a men's magazine. Her makeup was flawlessly done and diamond rings adorned several of her manicured fingers. The single deviation in her otherwise flawless appearance was the bulging icepack she held against the top of her head, crushing her thick cluster of platinum curls.

"Another late night, Aunt Nora?"

Nora peeked at her from beneath heavy lidded eyes. "More like a late week. My head is splitting. Mortal wine always does this to me. I don't know why I accepted Andre's invitation to visit his vineyard in the first place."

"Andre is handsome and sexy. Maybe you're sweet on him."

"Don't be absurd. The most attractive feature about Andre Marchand is his bank account. And even he doesn't have enough money to secure my affections."

"But I thought you and Andre were involved in a romance."

"Romances are for youngsters and mortals," Nora scoffed. "Though I don't look it, I am well past forty and I certainly don't require such alliances. Andre wanted to marry me, but all I wanted was a brief lusty affair."

"Don't you ever want to get married?"

"Me? Married to a man? Never!" Nora grimaced and adjusted the icepack on her head. "Don't get me wrong, Meredith. I like men. They serve a purpose. If you keep them on a tight leash, they even make admirable pets. But with a life expectancy of a hundred and fifty, I certainly don't want to attach myself to one man permanently."

Merry perched on the edge of her desk. "My mother did. She and my stepfather were very happy together."

Nora sighed. "I know, poppet. Fiona was such a romantic. We were identical twins, but our temperaments were nothing alike. Poor Fiona became disenchanted with our special ways and turned her back on magic and witchcraft. She wanted true love, and with Peter, she found it. But if you ask me, the price for her happiness was too high a cost."

Merry tried to harness her impatience. "Why do you always make it sound like my mother was afflicted with a fatal disease? It was her choice not to live as a witch. She fell in love with a mortal, married him, and never regretted any of her decisions."

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“And that’s what killed her,” Nora protested. “Had Fiona been using her powers, she might have foreseen the plane crash they were involved in twelve years later and at least saved herself.”

“You know very well, Aunt Nora, if given the choice, my mother would have preferred death with Peter than a life of loneliness without him. She loved him with all her heart.”

Nora’s eyes dimmed with sadness. “You’re right of course. Though only a mortal, Peter adored her and fulfilled her needs far better than your father ever did.” Her lips tightened in anger. “This is all your father’s fault. If Simon Rand had married your mother instead of taking her as his consort, Fiona might have been content with her life and still be alive today.”

Hearing her aunt voice an opinion similar to the one she kept hidden deep within the recesses of her own heart irritated Merry and prodded her conscience. A promise made to her mother years before to be tolerant, and a genuine love for the man who had sired her, kept Merry from voicing her thoughts out loud.

“Simon is a wizard and the Grand Master of the Domain with many responsibilities. Being leader of a worldwide confederation of witches and warlocks can’t be an easy task for him. My mother understood why he couldn’t marry her. If she didn’t fault him, then neither should you.”

Nora slapped her icepack down on the desk. “You are definitely your mother’s child. So hopelessly forgiving! How can you ignore the fact your father, the mighty Simon Rand, rarely visits you? Since you were born twenty-six years ago, I doubt if he’s seen you more than two dozen times. Is that any way for a man to treat his only child?”

“Simon writes to me often and sends me presents from all over the world. Between his responsibilities with the Domain and his ten art galleries—”

“Enough!” Nora grimaced and rubbed her forehead. “Listening to you defend that man is making my headache worse.”

Rolling her eyes at her aunt’s dramatics, Merry sighed. “Can I get you an aspirin or a cup of tea?”

“Don’t bother. I know just the thing.” Nora snapped her fingers and a steaming cup appeared in her hand. Taking a deep sip, she moaned with pleasure. “Mmm—perfect.”

“What is it? A secret witch’s brew to cure your ills?”

Nora shook her head. “A double espresso from Starbucks. Not even a great witch like me can conjure up better magic than this.” She finished the coffee and snapped her fingers, making the cup disappear. “I trust you have a good reason for calling me out of bed at this unseemly hour.” A smile curved her mouth. “Have you reconsidered your decision and decided to join us?”

“Get the hopeful glint out of your perky blue eyes, Aunt Nora.” Merry hopped off the desk and straightened out the fit of her snug jeans. “I don’t want to be a witch and that’s final.”

“Meredith, Meredith,” Nora sighed. “How many times must I remind you? You *are* a witch and there’s nothing you can do to change that. Not only do you have the blood of the Glendennings running in your veins, but you’re also a—”

“I know,” Merry interrupted, effectively cutting her off. “I’m also a Rand, the product of the two most powerful families in the history of the Domain. I can quote you line and verse, Aunt Nora. You’ve been saying the same things to me since I came to live with you in Palm Beach when I was fifteen.”

Nora fluffed her ice-dampened curls with her fingers. “And you still won’t listen to me. If you would forget this silly notion of living like a mortal and accept your abilities, you could be a wizard and take your father’s place as the new Grand Master of the Domain.”



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Merry dropped into the chair behind her desk. “Why is it so important to you that I become the Grand Master?”

Leaning toward her, Nora tapped her crimson-coated nails on the desk. “It’s time for a woman to lead the Domain. Warlocks have held the position since our group’s inception nearly one thousand years ago. With your mystic gene pool and some practice to perfect your magic, you could become a wizard and be the best leader the Domain has ever had.”

Merry chuckled. “You know, Aunt Nora, if you ever leave the cosmetics business, you should consider a position as a political advisor. With your drive and feminine zeal, I believe you could get women elected to every major office in this country.”

“Me, in mortal politics? Impossible! The dishonesty of it all would drive me insane.” Nora yawned behind her jeweled hand. “Now, are you going to tell me why I was summoned, or would you like to watch me fall asleep right here on your desk?”

Merry stood and opened the door. “Come with me.” Leading her aunt to the front counter, she pointed at the cat sleeping by the cash register. “Did you send him to me this morning?”

“Why on earth would I send you a bag of fleas like that?”

“As a familiar. I thought you sent him to become my mystical animal companion.”

Nora sniffed with indignation. “Shades of Salem! How can you accuse me of something like this, Meredith? If I wanted to give you a familiar, I would certainly send you one with a lot more flair than an ordinary cat.”

“Like Cuddles, your python, or your silver wolf, Medwyn?”

“Of course.” Gazing at the sleeping animal, Nora clucked her tongue. “He’s nothing more than an everyday housecat. A little larger than most, but a simple feline nonetheless. You really should get rid of him as soon as possible. Since you insist on providing for yourself in the mortal way, the bills to feed this beast are going to break you in a week.”

Merry shrugged off the advice. “Whatever. I’ll deal with it.” She kissed her aunt’s cheek. “I’m sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion and got you out of bed so early. Forgive me?”

Nora flashed her a wry smile. “Only if you’ll come to my Samhain celebration next week. Shamus McFay, Kate, Rhianon, Rutger, Sly, and all the others will be there.”

Looking around her costume shop, Merry laughed. “Just what I need. A party on Halloween night surrounded by leprechauns, fairies, witches, movie stars, and werewolves.”

Nora propped her hands on her hips and boasted, “But unlike those produced by your costume business, mine are all real. Can I count on you being there?”

“Sure. Just because I don’t want to practice witchcraft doesn’t mean I’m going to desert my old friends.”

“Good. I’ve got the perfect escort for you. Dorian Laird’s been asking about you and he’s—”

“A warlock!” Merry arched her brow. “I know the way your mind works, Aunt Nora. If I get involved with a man from the Domain, you think I’ll stop living as a mortal and accept my due. But you’re wrong. I’ve no intention of ever dating a warlock, let alone falling in love with one.” *And most especially not Dorian Laird*, she declared silently to herself.

Nora sighed. “Would you consider a passionate little affair then? Until you take a lover, you cannot attain the full force of your powers. Combine that with your bloodlines and you could be one of the most formidable witches in the Domain. Besides, being a virgin at twenty-six simply isn’t normal, Meredith.”

Merry crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s fine for me, so keep your opinions to

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yourself, Aunt Nora. When I make love, it will be with a man I'm in love with—a real man, a mortal who will care for me like Peter loved my mother.”

“What happens if this mortal paragon never shows up, poppet? You're waiting for a dream that may not come true and life is passing you by.”

“But it's my life and my dream, Aunt Nora. I'm not a child and I'm going to live the way I please. Learn to accept it and you'll save us both a lot of grief.”

Nora frowned at her terse response. “Please don't be angry, poppet. You're like my own daughter and I want only the best for you. But if this is what you truly want, I'll keep my opinions to myself and support your decision.” Giving Merry a quick hug, she patted her cheek. “Love you, honey. See you at the party.”

With a flash of light, Nora was gone. A second later, her voice called out to Merry. “*By the way, no jeans or sweatshirts will be allowed at my party. Costumes or formal wear only, or I will zap you into an outfit of my choosing. And you know what that means.*”

Merry sighed and leaned back against the counter. “Yeah, something black, slinky, and see-through. Now, go away, Aunt Nora. You might be able to go back to bed, but I have to open the store.”

“*Au revoir, poppet! Don't work too hard...*”

As Nora's voice faded, Merry snickered. “Don't work too hard? After dealing with her, I feel like I've just run a marathon, taken inventory, and renovated the shop, all at the same time. Why do I let her get to me?”

Feeling something tapping her back, Merry turned to discover the cat batting at her braid with his paw. She pulled the plait over her shoulder and dangled it over his head. His attempt to catch the ribbon tied around her hair made her laugh.

“Silly creature! Here I thought you were sent to coax me into using witchcraft. All you want is the scrap of gold satin tied at the end of my braid.” She stroked his head. “Having you around for a bit won't be so bad. At least when I talk to myself, I'll have an audience.”

Merry sighed wistfully. “They say people who talk to themselves are either crazy or like the sound of their own voice. I do it because it helps me work out my problems. Or at least that's what I tell myself. I probably do it to ward off the loneliness. Being a reluctant witch isn't easy. I can't tell Lauren or my other mortal acquaintances what I am. They would think me insane or become frightened of me. And that's hardly a way to make friends.”

The large cat rubbed his body against Merry and licked her cheek with his tongue. His feline gesture made her smile. “So you want to be my friend? I suppose you can stay until I find out who you belong to. Someone must be very worried about you.”

His only reply was a loud throaty purr.

“Too bad I don't know your name. Even if you're only a temporary guest, you deserve a name of your own.” Merry studied him for a moment, then nodded. “I've got it! I'll call you Harry in honor of the great magician, Houdini. Couldn't be a better name for the mascot of a magic shop!”

She scratched his ears. “All right, Harry. You stay on the counter while I open the store. With Halloween only a week away, today is going to be very busy and I don't want you to get hurt. Once Bob gets here, I'll set up your litter box in my office and feed you.” Giving his head a final stroke, she walked away.

Merry never saw Harry wink at her retreating back.

## Chapter 2

“DONALD, YOU’LL HAVE to deliver the costume boxes to the Burkes’ house. The mayor’s wife is having difficulties with her caterers and can’t make it down here before her party. The keys to my van are on the counter.” Merry gave her young part-time employee a grateful smile. “I really appreciate all your hard work today. After you make the delivery, you can go home.”

“But Miss Albright, with the thirty percent discount on magic trick supplies, the racks are looking kind of sparse. I could come back and restock the shelves for you.”

Merry knew the sixteen-year-old was infatuated with her and was careful not to take advantage of him. “Thanks, Donald, but that’s not necessary. It’s nearly five o’clock and the rush is over. I can restock the racks myself. Besides, aren’t you going to the dance at your school this evening?”

“You mean The Spook Hop?” Donald ran his fingers through his short blond hair. “I was thinking about it, but...well, I’m not very good at parties. Since I’m an honor student, all the girls think I’m a nerd. One look at this wholesome face and they don’t want anything to do with me.”

“You’re not a nerd, Donald. You’re articulate, witty, and quite handsome.” She patted his arm. “I think you’re just shy.”

Donald’s cheeks flared pink from her compliments. “I don’t know about the rest of it, but you’re right about me being shy, Miss Albright. When I finally get up the nerve to talk to a girl, I try not to panic. Then the girl looks at me and I begin to stammer like an idiot.” He shook his head. “No, going to a costume party would be a disaster for me.”

“Donald, you’re wrong! A masquerade party would be a wonderful place to bolster your confidence. With the right costume and mask, you can be anyone you choose to be and forget your fears and insecurities.”

“Do you really think so?”

Merry nodded. “Of course I do. What young lady would refuse to dance with a dashing Romeo or perhaps a Roman gladiator? Or better yet, the master swordsman, Zorro!”

“I would love to be Zorro. All in black with a cape and silk mask—it would be perfect.” Donald’s smile faded into a frown. “But what good is Zorro without his sword? We sent out the last ones we had with the musketeer costumes an hour ago.”

Merry smiled. “I have one in the closet beside my office. It has a leather scabbard and comes from Spain. You can use it.”

“But I was in that closet and never noticed—”

“It’s there,” she assured him. “Get a ladder and look on the top shelf. Be careful. You would hardly look like Zorro if you broke your leg.”

After Donald thanked her profusely and hurried off to find the ladder, Merry closed her eyes to concentrate. “I hope this works,” she sighed. “*The pride of Toledo, the finest steel, appear in my closet with a blade that’s real.*”

Donald’s exclamation a moment later told Merry she had succeeded. He rushed from the rear of the store with the weapon.

“Miss Albright, this is perfect! It’s just like a genuine Toledo sword. Even the handle looks like sterling silver.”

Merry smiled. “Remember to leave it in its sheath. We wouldn’t want you to skewer

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anyone with that prop.” She put the van keys in his hands and pushed him toward the back room. “Now pick up your costume on the way out, make the delivery to the Burkes. I want you to have a wonderful time tonight. Be sure to tell me all about it on Monday.”

“But I hate leaving you alone like this.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Donald. I have no customers right now and Harry will keep me company.”

Donald looked over at the cat sleeping on the counter. “Oh, yeah, I almost forgot about him. He’s been snoozing like that most of the day. Several people thought Harry was a stuffed animal and tried to buy him.”

“Harry wakes up to eat and do his business. So far, he hasn’t been much trouble.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Donald scoffed. “I was the one who had to lift him up there after his last snack.”

Merry returned to the showroom to find Harry awake and staring at her. There was an accusatory gleam in his gold eyes. Realizing the silliness of her thoughts, she laughed. “I know it’s a bit hypocritical to use magic when it suits me, but I couldn’t stop myself from helping Donald out.” She scratched the large cat’s head. “There’s something about helping the underdog that I simply can’t resist. That’s exactly why I didn’t have the heart to turn you out, my friend.”

Hearing the bell ringing at the rear service door, she sighed. “Must be the UPS man. You stay here and behave, Harry. I’ll be right back.”

A few minutes later, Merry returned to the front of the store, grumbling. “No one was there. I wonder if some of the kids in the neighborhood are starting their Halloween pranks early this year.” She saw the counter top was empty. The cat was nowhere in sight. “Now where have you gone to, Harry?”

“Ah-choo!”

The sound of a loud sneeze drew Merry’s attention to a man standing beside the display of magician top hats near the door. He was tall with thick dark hair. After wiping his nose with a handkerchief, he turned and smiled at Merry.

“Sorry about the noise. I’m afraid my allergies are acting up this afternoon.”

In spite of his wire-rimmed glasses, Merry thought the stranger was extremely handsome. His face was chiseled perfection with high cheekbones and a strong jaw. The black denim jacket he wore over his white T-shirt displayed broad shoulders. His soft black jeans hugged his hips like a comfortable old friend. An unexpected jolt of instant attraction shot through Merry.

“Ah-choo!” He sneezed again, knocking his glasses askew.

Seeing his face flush with embarrassment as he adjusted his glasses, she rushed to put him at ease. “Don’t apologize. I often do the very same thing when I’m unpacking stock. The dust plays havoc with my nose and I sneeze for hours.”

“Dust doesn’t bother me much and I’ve grown out of most of my other allergies,” the man explained, moving toward her. “The only thing that still affects me is cat hair. You don’t have a cat in here, do you, Miss...”

“Albright. I’m Meredith Albright. I own the shop.”

He held out his hand across the counter. “How do you do? My name is Bryan Aldwyn.”

Shaking his hand, Merry found herself gazing into a pair of golden eyes. His nearness caused her pulse to race. “N-nice to meet you, Mr. Aldwyn. Aldwyn sounds like an old English name.”

“Actually, it’s Welsh. My grandfather was born in Cardiff. He once told me the name meant ‘protector.’” Bryan tucked his handkerchief into his pocket. “And please, call me Bryan.”

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“Only if you’ll call me Merry.” She smiled and tried to disregard how the warm spicy scent of his cologne was muddling her senses. “I’m...ah...very sorry about the cat. I found him this morning with a wounded paw, so I patched him up. But you don’t have to worry. He seems to have taken off for a while.”

“The lady has a kind heart and lovely smile.” Bryan grinned. “I could hardly fault you for taking in a stray. I brought home dogs, birds, and other injured animals that needed care throughout my childhood. That’s the main reason I decided to go into medicine.”

“Oh! Are you a vet?”

He chuckled. “No, my allergy to cats squashed that lofty ambition. I’m a pediatric oncologist. I recently joined the staff at Hopewell Hospital.”

“Hopewell is a very prestigious hospital. I’m impressed,” Merry replied and genuinely meant it. “So why have you come to my shop? Need a costume for Mrs. Burke’s masquerade? I know she and the mayor are two of Hopewell’s benefactors and she always invites the doctors on staff to her parties.”

Bryan shook his head. “Not me. Hospital politics bore me. I usually avoid such gatherings when I can. I’m here to pick up supplies to put on a magic show for the kids on my floor. All children love Halloween, but my young patients are confined to the hospital for various forms of treatments. I thought it would be nice to bring the holiday celebration to them with treats and a little entertainment.”

“What a wonderful idea! Have you done magic tricks before?”

“When I was a junior in high school, I put an act together for the annual talent show. Though I haven’t performed in years, I’m sure it will all come back to me.”

Merry came out from behind the counter and led him toward the illusions display. “Well, I have several things you might be able to use for your magic show here in the Wizard’s Corner. Have you ever done any of these tricks?”

Bryan picked up a set of three large silver rings. “Chinese linking rings. I used to be quite good at this one.”

It took more than a dozen tries and a great deal of metallic clinking before Bryan got the ten-inch rings linked together in a chain. He frowned. “I guess I need to work on that trick.”

Hoping to soothe his battered ego, Merry pointed to an open sample box on the lower shelf. “Have you ever tried the Blaze To A Blossom illusion?”

He nodded and picked up the box. “Sure. You light the matchstick and when you blow out the flame, it transforms into a flower. Let’s see if I can do this one any better than the rings.”

After setting up the trick, Bryan struck the match. Before he could proceed further, the ignited match snapped in half, burning the tip of his finger.

“Ouch!” he cried, as he flicked his hand in the air and sent the glowing match toward the tiled floor. He stomped the ember with his foot. “That’s great! Now I can’t even light a match without nearly burning your store down.”

The pained disappointment on his face and in his voice touched Merry’s heart. She scanned the display for an easier illusion for him to try and picked up a deck of cards. “How about card tricks? Have you ever used a Svengali Deck?”

“Sure,” he replied, taking the deck of ordinary looking cards from her hand to vigorously shuffle them. “I mastered at least a dozen different tricks—” The cards sprayed out of his hands in a colorful arch, scattering across the floor. He bent down to retrieve them. “Damn! I don’t recall being so clumsy when I was fifteen.”

Merry knelt beside him to gather the cards. “You’re not clumsy, Dr. Aldwyn, just out of

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practice. Take a few of these illusions home and one of the instruction books. Once you read over the steps to reacquaint yourself with the trick, you should have no problem doing them again.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Bryan sighed. “After working at the hospital ten hours a day, pouring over medical journals, and writing my reports, I have little patience for reading. If I tried, I would likely fall asleep with my nose in the book.”

Merry longed to console him, but a sudden thought piqued her curiosity. Not wanting to appear foolish, she carefully chose the words of her next suggestion. “Perhaps your wife could read the instruction book and help you relearn the tricks.”

Bryan shrugged. “I’m not married. In spite of what people say about doctors being a good catch, I’ve yet to meet a woman who could accept my crazy hours and workload. My family doesn’t live in West Palm Beach, so I can’t ask them to help me with this either.” Giving her the cards, he stood up and helped Merry to her feet. “I’m sorry to have troubled you. Perhaps you can recommend a local magician I could hire for the kids’ party.”

The excitement Bryan’s single status caused Merry was tempered by the despair she sensed in him. The last thing Bryan wanted was another magician entertaining his patients. He wanted to do it himself. A thought suddenly made her smile. *If I’m careful, I could get to know him better and assist him at the same time.*

She touched his arm. “Since you have no one else to help you, Dr. Aldwyn, how about letting me tutor you in the evenings? I know all of these illusions and many more. I could even be your assistant.”

Bryan put his hand over hers. “Thanks for the offer. As much as I’m tempted to accept, I can’t take advantage of you like this. With Halloween next week, this must be the busiest time of the year for you.”

Merry shook her head, trying to disregard the comforting warmth of his hand and the gentleness in his touch. “You’re not taking advantage of me, Dr. Aldwyn. I love children and really want to do this. My sales clerk can handle things here while I help you.”

“Surely there’s a man in your life who will feel neglected if you’re spending your evenings with me.”

She shook her head. “No man or anyone else I’m afraid. My only company these days is Dickens.”

“Who or what is Dickens?”

“He’s a talking myna bird my father sent me several years ago. I love the little guy, but the only things he says are quotes from the works of Charles Dickens and it gets a bit tiring. So as long as you don’t start reciting *Oliver Twist* or *Great Expectations*, I’m all yours, Dr. Aldwyn.”

Bryan’s frown became a smile and he chuckled with relief. “Oh, Merry Albright, you are a temptation and the nicest thing that’s happened to me since I moved to this town.”

“Then you’ll let me help you, Dr. Aldwyn?”

He nodded. “On two conditions. Again, you must call me Bryan, and second, you go out to dinner with me tonight. We can discuss our schedules and decide what illusions I’ll have to relearn in time for the kids’ party.”

“I have a better idea, Bryan. I’m closing the store in an hour. Why don’t you come back then? My apartment is upstairs. I can fix something for us to eat and we can begin your lessons then. As you pointed out, Halloween’s only a week away, so we haven’t a moment to spare.”

Bryan looked at the shelves beside them and nodded. “The way I messed up those tricks,

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I'll need all the practice I can get." He gave her hand a squeeze. "But I insist on bringing the dinner. Do you prefer Chinese, Mexican, or Italian?"

She shrugged. "I like them all. You decide."

"Well, I've only been in town a few weeks, but I have found this incredible take-out place called the Panda Pagoda. Do you know it?"

"Of course I do. Charlie Chan makes the best Hunan style pork and shrimp I've ever tasted."

"Charlie Chan? You must be joking."

Merry shook her head. "No, Charlie's mom, Lotus Chan, was a real mystery buff. She couldn't resist naming her first son after her favorite detective character. Poor Charlie took quite a ribbing when he was a kid at school, but his younger sister suffered even more than he did."

"Why? Did Lotus name her Miss Marple?"

"It would have been easier if she had, but by the time Lotus gave birth to her daughter, she had stopped reading mysteries and became enthralled with early American history. That's why Charlie's little sister was named Pocahontas!"

Bryan burst out laughing. The rich sound of his voice sent shivers up Merry's spine. "Merry, you are a delight! I haven't laughed like this in a long time and it feels great. Besides that, you're giving me a chance to do something special for my kids and I'm grateful. It must have been divine intervention that led me to your shop today."

Before she could respond, Bryan turned toward the door. "I'll be back in an hour or so with Hunan shrimp and pork, and all the trimmings. See you then, Merry."

Lauren was coming in the front door as Bryan hurried past her. She leaned out and watched him walk away before she turned back to Merry. "Who was the amazing hunk? Another movie star friend of your Aunt Nora's?"

Merry was lost in her own thoughts. Bryan Aldwyn was a veritable stranger. Why had she invited him to her apartment like that? After years of playing it safe with men, had she suddenly taken leave of her senses?

Lauren waved her hand in front of Merry's widened eyes. "Earth to Merry! Hey, are you going to tell me who that divine man was?"

Merry forced her attention to focus on her companion. "Huh? Did you say something, Lauren?"

Lauren whistled low. "You've got it bad, girlfriend, but I can't blame you. I've always loved men in glasses. When a guy like him wears glasses, he looks so cool and intelligent. Then he takes them off and he becomes a wild passionate animal. That's one of the things that first attracted me to Bob."

Merry laughed to cover her embarrassment. "So it was Bob's horn-rimmed spectacles that caught your eye and not his svelte manly physique."

"Well, it was that too, but I must admit—" Lauren suddenly frowned. "Wait a minute. You're trying to change the subject on me. We were discussing your new love interest, not mine."

Trying to display a disinterested shrug, Merry turned and walked behind the counter. "I met the man less than an hour ago. How can you suggest he's my new love interest?"

"Because you're living and breathing, and you haven't had a date in months. Not to mention the man is drop-dead gorgeous!" Lauren leaned her elbows on the counter and propped her chin in her hands. "With those great shoulders and sexy cats' eyes, any woman would be attracted to him. Now, tell me who he is or I'm not going to give you a moment's peace."

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The determined set of Lauren's jaw told Merry her friend wasn't going to be easily placated. She opened the register to remove the bills and to keep her trembling hands busy while she answered her. "All right. His name is Bryan Aldwyn and he's a pediatric oncologist at Hopewell. He's putting on a magic show for some of his young patients and came in to purchase some supplies for the event."

Lauren nodded. "Well, that's two more points in his favor. A doctor who evidently likes children. Is he single?"

"Um...yes, he said he wasn't married."

"Bingo! Meredith Albright, if you don't go after that guy, I'm going to have you committed to the local lunatic asylum."

Merry laughed and shook her head as she stuffed the contents of the cash drawer into a bank pouch. "Delay the men in the white coats, Lauren Marie. The good doctor and I are having dinner tonight at my place. As a matter of fact, Bryan went to the Panda Pagoda for Chinese food and should be back in an hour."

"Ahh. An intimate supper for two, dim lights, soft music," Lauren sighed. "Ain't romance grand!"

"It's not a romance at all. I'm going to help Bryan polish up some tricks for the magic show he's putting on for his patients next week. That's all there is to it."

Lauren rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, and I'm the Barber of Seville! Look, Merry, you can call it anything you want, but I have a feeling about the two of you."

"Now, Lauren, I just met the man."

Ignoring Merry's protest, Lauren continued. "I know you don't believe in reading the future and all that hocus-pocus stuff, but I think you two would be great together."

"But I never said I didn't believe in—"

Lauren reached over and patted Merry's cheek. "Well, far be it for me to stand in the way of true love. I'll get out of your way so you can close the store and get ready for your big date. Call me tomorrow with all the horny details! See yah!"

As the door closed behind Lauren, Merry shook her head. "This has been one crazy day. First a big cat takes up residence in my shop. Then I had to confront Aunt Nora and deal with Lauren's wild imagination. To top it off, the man of my dreams suddenly comes into my life and I can only hope he doesn't disappear as quickly as Harry."

Merry began to search the store for the missing cat. After finding no sign of him in the storage room, closets, storefront or office, she stood at the counter and frowned. "Now, I wonder where Harry's taken off to. He didn't go out the back door when I answered the bell. Perhaps he slipped out the front when Bryan came in—"

The thought of Bryan caused Merry to look up at the clock and gasp. "My stars! Bryan's going to be back any minute and I've got to lock up, restock the shelves, turn out the lights, put on the security system, do the bank deposit, and get cleaned up. I certainly don't want him to find me in these same old clothes when he returns."

Merry shrugged. "There's only one way I can do it all. I just hope Aunt Nora doesn't find out." She held up her hands.

*"Things need sorting, things are wrong. Put them now where they belong. Lock the door and do it right. Secure my business for the night."*

With a wink, she invoked the spell. The tumblers on the door locks clicked into place as the lights flickered off. The empty shelves in the Wizard's Corner were fully replenished, and the computerized system that regulated the burglar alarm beeped its starting sequence. Even the



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coins and bills she had stuffed in the bank bag were now stacked and neatly listed on the deposit slip. All the tasks had been completed within seconds.

The pleased smile on her face quickly turned into a frown. “This was too easy. I mustn’t make a habit of using my magic. If Lauren or one of my other mortal buddies ever discover I’m a witch, I could lose everything I’ve worked so hard to achieve. No amount of ease or convenience is worth that.”

Unknown to Merry, a pair of golden eyes peered through the front window and watched as she made her way toward the back of the store.

*An interesting little display, Meredith. I wonder how many other skills you have perfected...*

## Chapter 3

“YOU WERE RIGHT about this Hunan shrimp and pork. Charlie Chan is a culinary artist!” Frowning, Bryan pointed at Merry’s filled plate with his fork. “You’ve barely touched your food. Maybe I overdid things when I ordered the hot and sour soup, spring rolls, spare ribs, and the lobster fried rice as well. I wasn’t sure what you would like so I bought a bit of everything.”

“The food is delicious. I tend to eat slowly so I can savor every bite.” Merry stood and picked up the teapot. “Let me take this to the kitchen to refill it. You can’t enjoy Chinese food without a cup of hot green tea.”

Waiting for the kettle to boil, Merry leaned against the refrigerator and tried to control herself. Ever since Bryan’s arrival forty minutes before, her usually healthy appetite had disappeared and she was shaking with anxiety.

Her spacious home seemed to dwarf in size when Bryan Aldwyn stepped inside. He had replaced his T-shirt and jacket with a white oxford shirt. The long sleeves were rolled to the elbows, displaying a pair of well-muscled forearms. The thought of how it would feel to be held in those arms made her tremble with a mixture of excitement and trepidation.

Inviting him here had been an impulsive act. There was no mistaking the fact that she was attracted to him. He was nothing like the men she had dated in the past few years. Was she ready to take a chance on developing a relationship with Bryan Aldwyn?

Doubts assailed her, yet seeing him sitting at her dining room table also seemed right. The teak armchair Bryan sat in seemed to have been made for his tall build. With his looks, he was easy on the eyes, but the inner man was even more attractive.

In less than an hour, Merry had discovered that Bryan was a dedicated physician with a warm sense of humor and a friendly demeanor. His smile was contagious. His enthusiasm for his work and patients was undeniable.

Bryan was exactly the kind of man she had been looking for: handsome, gentle, educated, hard working, and definitely mortal. So why was she on edge?

Shaking her head, Merry chuckled to herself. “I’m acting silly. Seeing as I rarely date and never allow men into my home, it’s no wonder I’m a nervous wreck.”

She returned to the dining room a few minutes later with the teapot and sat down at the table. “Sorry it took so long. Would you like me to refresh your cup, Bryan?”

“Allow me to do the honors while you finish eating.” Bryan filled their cups with the steaming brew. “Ronald Loo, my roommate at Harvard, got me into drinking green tea. Throughout college and med school, his parents sent us a supply of it every month. Unlike coffee and regular blend teas, green tea is actually very good for you.”

Trying to maintain a calm facade, Merry swallowed a mouthful of spicy pork. “Did you like living in Boston?”

Bryan shrugged. “It was all right, but the cold weather really got to me. I’m originally from southern California and wasn’t accustomed to such low temperatures. That’s why I was so happy when I got the staff appointment at Hopewell. I’m looking forward to spending winters here in West Palm Beach.”

“My mother and stepfather took me on a driving tour of New England the summer I was ten years old. I loved the whole trip, but I especially liked the hills in Vermont.” Merry smiled.

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“Being raised in Florida, it was the first time I ever got to see mountains. They were so tall and majestic.”

Bryan nodded. “I know what you mean. During breaks from school I worked at a camp in the Green Mountains for children with cancer. There was one hill in particular I used for my meditation every night. Up there, overlooking the nearby town, with the stars so brilliant above, I felt like the king of the world. It’s one of my favorite places on earth.”

Merry recognized the wistful tone in his voice reflected a soul much like her own. “I feel that way about the ocean. If something is troubling me, I go to the beach before sunrise and let the sounds of the waves give me peace. Watching the sun come up on the horizon renews me every time.”

After several more minutes of eating and small talk, Merry set down her fork. “As much as I’m enjoying all this, I think we better get on with our plans for the evening. If you’ll help me clear the table, we can get started on your refresher course.”

Bryan gathered the take-out containers and followed her to the kitchen. “I really do appreciate your offer to help me like this, Merry. Those kids in the hospital have little enough to cheer them in their lives. Some of them fear doctors. By doing this act, perhaps I can gain their trust while entertaining them.” Taking the plates from her, he set them in the sink and took hold of her hands. “Most people would think I was wasting my time trying to put on this magic show myself, but you seem to understand how much this means to me. Thank you.”

Merry gave his hands an answering squeeze. “You don’t have to thank me. I’m looking forward to—”

*“Bah humbug!”*

Frowning, Merry dropped his hands and turned toward the covered brass cage sitting in the corner of her kitchen. “Go to sleep, Dickens, or I’ll throw away the new bag of sunflower seeds I bought for you.”

*“Please, sir, I want some more.”*

Bryan chuckled. “That must be the myna bird you told me about. Is he always so talkative?”

“Only when he wants to be the center of attention. Which is most of the time.” Merry turned off the light. “Come into the living room, Bryan. We can work there without his interference.”

Following Merry into the large living room, Bryan looked up at the vaulted ceiling and shook his head. “I never expected this apartment to be so large and modern. As a matter of fact, from the outside of the building, it doesn’t look like living quarters at all.”

“I planned it that way. When I inherited the trust fund from my mother and stepfather’s estate, I used a portion of the money to buy this old building and totally renovated it,” Merry explained. “The storefront had all the old fashioned ambience I needed for a costume and magic shop, but the two floors above it were in a sorry state. I wanted to live close to my business and yet maintain my privacy. So after six months of tearing out and building new walls, replacing antiquated plumbing and wiring, and dealing with dozens of local trades people and inspectors, my home was ready to move into. I even have a rooftop garden that has a nice view of the Intercoastal Waterway.”

“This place is amazing.” Bryan ran his hand along the top of the ebony console table that stood behind the crimson sofa. “I have no talent for decorating, but this room is a wonderful blend of oriental simplicity and comfort. Did you plan it yourself?”

“No, my Aunt Nora put this room together as a house warming present. At first I didn’t

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think I was going to like the bright red, black, and white motif, but it grew on me.”

“My new condo is little more than a closet for my clothes and a place to sleep. I could use someone like her to make it a real home. Is your aunt a professional decorator?”

Merry laughed and shook her head. “No. Though Nora has enough talent to do many other things and often does them, my aunt’s the CEO of Glendenning Cosmetics.”

Bryan’s smile faded. “Your aunt is Nora Glendenning? Doesn’t she own that huge oceanfront estate on Palm Beach?”

Hearing his obvious disbelief, Merry regretted mentioning Nora. All too often while she was in high school, she’d had to deal with people who judged her as a snob because of her aunt’s wealth and flamboyant lifestyle. Their unfeeling comments about her plain appearance and not resembling her very glamorous kin hurt even more than their callous expectations of her character.

Over time, Merry had learned the best way to diffuse the pain was to meet it head-on.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s her,” she admitted with a chuckle. “I know it’s hard to believe a gorgeous peacock like Nora would have a drab little wren like me for a niece, but she does. She’s my mother’s twin sister. Just goes to show how murky even the finest gene pool can be.”

Bryan frowned and stepped toward her. “You’re hardly a drab wren, Merry. Sure, Nora Glendenning is a knockout with her platinum curls, picture perfect face, and model thin figure, but she can’t compare to your beauty.”

“Thanks for the kind words, Doc, but I wasn’t fishing for compliments. I got used to the fact years ago that I was never going to make the covers of Vogue and Harpers like my aunt. Not only am I too unfashionably rounded for the task, but I’ve got freckles on my nose and long streaky blonde hair that’s more brown than blonde. If that’s not bad enough, my hair won’t curl worth a damn.” She looked around the room and scowled. “Where did I put the box of things I brought up from the store?”

When she turned to walk away, Bryan grabbed her arm and made her face him. “Merry, I wasn’t being kind, just honest. Most men are put off by women like your aunt. Her perfection is too cool and haughty to suit me.” He cupped Merry’s shoulders with his hands. “You, Meredith Albright, are an incredibly lovely woman. Soft and sweet, and utterly feminine. I happen to like long straight hair and I’m very partial to freckles. Especially the few that adorn your cute little nose. So, unless you’re calling me a liar or think my eyesight is more impaired than it is because I wear glasses, accept the fact that you’re beautiful.”

Merry’s objection was cut off when Bryan gave her a quick hug and released her a second later. Her heart was pounding as she watched him cross the room to pick up a cardboard carton.

“Is this the box you were looking for?” he asked.

She nodded and tried to ignore the odd excitement Bryan’s unexpected embrace had caused. “Th-that’s it. As you can see, I brought up the tricks you tried earlier with a few others I thought you might like to master.”

Setting the box on the coffee table, Bryan rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Well, I guess there’s no time like the present to get started. You sit here on the sofa and see if I’m doing anything wrong.”

Within minutes, Bryan’s enthusiasm waned. Merry felt his disappointment. It was hard to believe, but his attempts at doing the illusions were even worse than those he had tried earlier in the store. She feared he was trying too hard and wished there was a way to distract him. He suddenly dropped down beside her on the sofa and sighed.

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"It's useless. I know all the moves, but I screw them up every time." Frowning, Bryan looked at his hands. "I can perform intricate surgery with these hands, yet tricks I mastered when I was fifteen are impossible for me to execute properly now."

Nibbling on her lip, Merry thought of a way to soothe his battered ego. "I know this may sound strange, but have you grown much since then?"

Bryan's brow was creased with confusion as he turned to her. "Yes, as a matter of fact, my mother called me a late bloomer. I was only five foot three on my fifteenth birthday and painfully thin. My mother encouraged me to take up magic tricks so I could get over being so self-conscious about my appearance. The next year, I started to grow. By the time I was eighteen, I stood six foot four and filled out as I am now." A hopeful smile lifted his mouth. "Do you really think the reason I can't do the tricks is that I've grown so much?"

Merry nodded. "Could be. If there have been major changes in the size of your hands, it might cause difficulties in using props and cards like you did before. You simply must learn to compensate for the differences and practice the illusions accordingly."

"That could take too much time. What if I can't—"

"But you will because I'm going to help you." Merry stood up and grabbed Bryan's hands. "Have no fear, Doc. When it comes to magic tricks, I'm the best around. Let's get to work and I'll prove it to you."

Bryan frowned. "If you're that good, why don't you do the show for the kids? At least you won't be dropping things all over the place like me."

She shook her head. "No way! Stage fright leaves me a babbling idiot. Now, no more delays, Doc. You are going to do fine. Stand up so we can get started."

Before Bryan could muster another excuse, Merry invoked a silent bit of magic and swiftly pulled him to his feet.

Caught by surprise, he gasped and looked down at her. "I don't know how good a magician you are, Merry Albright, but for a little lady, you certainly are strong. I'm nearly a foot taller than you and I outweigh you by at least seventy pounds. How did you pull me up like that?"

"Um...leverage? Yeah, that's it," she offered in a firmer voice, trying to cover what she had really done. "With proper leverage a person can lift anything, even a man who is as stubborn as a pessimistic mule."

Bryan's brow rose. "So you think I'm a pessimistic mule?"

"Well, if you're going to give up doing the magic show for your kids without even trying..."

He sighed with acceptance. "All right, Merry, you win. What illusion should we start with?"

Smiling, Merry picked a package from the box and gave it to him. "This one should do the trick. No pun intended."

"The Blaze To A Blossom illusion? I nearly set your store on fire with this one. Can't we start with the rings instead?"

She shook her head. "Nope! Now, come stand with me in front of the console table where we'll have plenty of room. Tell me the steps of this illusion. Then you can give it a try."

After carefully following her instructions, Bryan attempted the trick again, and once again he failed.

Bryan angrily threw the broken pieces on the table. "This is a waste of time! I couldn't do this trick right if my life depended on it."

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Merry took hold of his hands. She could feel his tension beneath her fingertips. "Bryan, you've got to relax. I want you to close your eyes and take a deep cleansing breath. Hold it for a few seconds and then let it out."

Bryan shrugged, but did as she suggested. "What's this supposed to be? A magician's meditation exercise?"

She gave his hands a reassuring squeeze. "Sort of. I want you to visualize the entire illusion in your mind's eye. See the props. Watch your hands moving through the successful execution of it. Hold the image in your mind. Once it's secure, you can try the trick again, and this time it will be perfect."

"I hope so," he muttered, "because if it doesn't I'll forget about magic and hire Ronald McDonald for the party."

"Stop talking and do the visualization exercise as I explained it," Merry ordered. "When you have it firmly in your mind, you can begin."

A few moments later, Bryan opened his eyes and took the props Merry offered him. "All right, I'm ready. But don't blame me if I set the place on fire."

"You won't. I have faith in you."

Bryan smiled his thanks. "I'm glad someone does." Stepping away from her, he began addressing his imaginary audience.

"Now boys and girls, in my hand I'm holding an ordinary wooden matchstick. But rather than lighten your day with its blaze, I'm going to brighten your life with nature's beauty. Voila!"

Merry watched as he struck the match. She saw the stick snap in two and knew the trick had gone wrong again. In a fraction of a second, she blinked her eyes and gave the illusion a bit of real magical help. The flame flared out and the prop in his hand exploded into an array of red and pink silk flowers.

"I did it," Bryan gasped, waving the small bouquet toward her. "I was ready to give up, and you told me I could do it. How can I ever thank you?"

Before Merry could reply, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. His lips were soft and warm on hers. Though a chaste caress, Merry felt the excitement of it clear to her toes. As she lifted her arms to embrace him, Bryan suddenly broke away.

His cheeks were flushed with obvious embarrassment. He pushed his glasses back in place on the bridge of his nose and avoided looking at her. "I...I'm sorry, Merry. I usually don't jump all over a lady like that, but the moment of finally doing the trick right pushed me over the edge and I...well, I hope you can forgive me."

Merry touched his arm. "There's nothing to forgive. The kiss may have been unexpected, but I enjoyed it."

Covering her hand with his own, Bryan looked tentatively into her eyes. A frown creased his brow. "I just didn't want you to think I was...I mean, some guys would try and take advantage of a situation like this. But I would never...I couldn't..." He sighed and shook his head. "It maybe politically incorrect to admit this, but I am basically very shy. Though I've grown a lot since I was a skinny little kid in high school, inside a part of me is still that nervous geek with the glasses and a bad case of low self-esteem."

His awkward confession touched Merry's heart. "Then we're two of a kind, Bryan. Because every time I look in a mirror, I can see a pudgy fifteen-year-old with freckles and frightened green eyes who is plagued by loneliness and the fear of not fitting in."

Stretching up, she kissed his cheek. "Enough apologies and explanations. We have a magic show to arrange and an audience of young patients to entertain in a few days. Which trick

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do you want to master next? The rings or the disappearing coins?"

\* \* \*

During that following week, Merry and Bryan spent every evening together preparing for the show. After eating the dinner he brought along, they would practice new illusions and decide which should be added to the act.

Everything seemed to be going well. With each mastered trick, Bryan's pride increased and his confidence was restored. Only Merry was bothered with guilt because she knew his success was based on her interference with real magic, and not his ability.

What had started as an urge to help him with one illusion had become a habit. Merry didn't like using witchcraft, but when it came to sleight of hand, Bryan Aldwyn was all thumbs! Rather than risk his disappointment again, she gave each and every trick he performed an added boost of her powers.

By the time she unlocked the back door to her shop early Friday morning and stepped inside, she was scolding herself for the deception.

"It's wrong and I never should have done it, but what choice did I have?" she muttered while making her way to the front counter. "Bryan would have given up doing the show for the kids and might have walked out of my life. This way we spend time together, get to know one another, and hopefully, something special can develop between us."

Merry's self-inflicted argument came to a halt when she spied the now familiar black and white cat sitting beside the cash register. "I see you're back, Harry. You vanish every day before closing and reappear to plague my life the following morning. I searched this place from top to bottom last night with Donald and couldn't find a trace of you. Houdini would have been proud, but it's ticking me off! Where were you hiding, you ungrateful hairy brute?"

Harry sauntered to the edge of the counter where she was standing and rubbed up against her. Merry wanted to remain angry, but the ticklish feel of his cold wet nose on her chin and the husky sound of his contented purr made her smile.

She stroked his long arching back. "All right, you big baby, I won't throw you out just yet. I guess I'm simply a pushover for a sweet-talking guy like you."

Merry heard a tapping on the front display window. She looked over and found Lauren grinning in at her with a bakery bag and two large Styrofoam cups in her hands. Giving Harry a final pat on the head, she hurried to open the front door.

"Good morning, Merry Sunshine!" Lauren announced, pushing a container into Merry's hand as she entered the shop. "Since I haven't seen much of you lately, I thought we could have breakfast together. Nothing fancy, just your favorite jelly-filled doughnuts and a cup of French roast made the way you like it, light with one sugar."

Relocking the door, Merry followed her friend to the center counter. "Lauren, I saw you yesterday when you dropped off the box of gourmet cat food for Harry."

Lauren handed Merry a doughnut from the sack and scowled at the cat reclining next to the register. "Did that fussy thing find any of those cans of food to his liking?"

"Not yet. Harry sniffs at the stuff, but he won't eat it." Merry bit into the doughnut. A dollop of jelly oozed out on her hand. She offered it to Harry and laughed as his coarse tongue licked off the raspberry filling. "Look, he likes jelly!"

Lauren shook her head. "You're spoiling him. Sweets and people food aren't good for cats."

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“But Harry likes it, Lauren. He has to eat if he’s going to get better.”

Merry’s protest made Lauren snicker. “That cat could go without food for a week and be fine, so stop worrying about him.”

“Uh-oh! Someone sounds a bit put out.”

Rooting through the bakery bag, Lauren avoided her friend’s knowing gaze. “Well, you can hardly blame me. Between this fussy guy, your constant rush of customers all day, and your evenings with Doctor Dolittle, it’s no wonder I feel ignored.”

“I haven’t been ignoring you. It’s only that—” Merry suddenly frowned. “Why did you call Bryan Dr. Dolittle?”

Lauren bit into her doughnut and shrugged. “Well, um...after you told me about your first date with the good doctor, you know, one little kiss and a quick hug, I thought the name suited him.” Taking a sip of her coffee, she chuckled, “It was either Doctor Dolittle or Boy Scout.”

Merry rolled her eyes. “That’s not funny, Lauren. Bryan’s a wonderful considerate man. Just because he’s not the great Casanova you thought he was at first sight, doesn’t mean—”

“I’m sorry,” Lauren interrupted. “I was only teasing you. Though I must admit, it’s hard for me to believe that a hunk like him would be so shy or act like such a...a...a gentleman.”

“Being a gentleman isn’t a bad thing, Lauren. Besides, you’re the last person who should be making snap judgments about Bryan. Remember that great guy, Raymond Johnson, you fixed me up with at your birthday celebration?” Merry shivered with the memory. “Just thinking about him gives me the creeps.”

“Hey! How many times must I apologize for that? Raymond was a law school buddy of Bob’s. I had no idea he would try to molest you on the way home from my birthday party.”

“Molest is putting it mildly,” Merry countered bitterly. “He tore my blouse, bruised my lips with his attempts at kissing me, and he didn’t understand the meaning of the word no. I had black and blue marks all over me from his attack.”

Lauren scowled. “He left town and no one’s seen him since. I still think you should have brought rape charges against that bastard. God knows how many other women he’s hurt by now.”

Merry stifled her urge to smile as she walked around the counter. There was no way she could explain to Lauren that Raymond Johnson wouldn’t be attacking women anymore. She had tried to deal with the man on a mortal level when he forced himself on her, but it was a losing battle, so she used magic to stop him. Thanks to a spell she had learned from Nora, the would-be rapist was now a Buddhist monk. With no recollection of his past, he spent his days in prayer, simple farm work, and quiet devotion in an ancient monastery in Southeast Asia.

A strange ringing sound drew Merry’s attention back to her friend. “Is that your beeper going off?”

Lauren pulled a small cellular phone from the pocket of her jeans. “No, it’s my new electronic leash,” she said, showing it to Merry. “Excuse me a minute, will you?”

Pressing a button, Lauren put the phone to her ear. “Hi honey! I’m down at Merry’s. What do you need?” She frowned. “If your notebook isn’t on the desk, you must have moved it. You think you left it where?” A second later, she shook her head. “No. I didn’t see it in the car. All right, already, I’ll go check the trunk and call you back.”

Lauren pushed the disconnect key on the phone. “With the bar exam only a month away, Bob is a basket case. He insists on being able to contact me at a moment’s notice. That man’s going to drive me crazy before the week is out with this damned phone.”

Merry raised her cup in salute toward Lauren. “Stop complaining. You love Bob, and you



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know very well that he loves you very much. The guy absolutely adores you.”

“Yeah, I know. Bob worships the ground I walk on. He just gets a bit testy when he doesn’t know where that particular piece of ground is located.”

As she set the phone down, Lauren stepped back and picked up a long flat package wrapped in brown paper that was leaning against the display case next to her leg. “Hey, what’s this, Merry? It looks like a framed picture. There’s an envelope taped to the front of it addressed to you.”

Merry took the package from Lauren and recognized the distinctive Rand monogram on the linen envelope. “Apparently my father has sent me another gift. I wonder what Simon—” Her words faded into a gasp of surprise when she removed the paper covering the painting. “Oh, my! I’ve never seen anything so exquisite. It looks like a portrait of an ancient Chinese emperor. Look at the detail work in his scarlet and black robes. I wonder if this artist would be interested in doing a painting of a noblewoman in this same era for me. The pair of them would be perfect on my living room wall.”

Frowning, Lauren studied the painting Merry propped up on the counter. “The artist who painted this portrait has been dead for years. At least nine hundred, if I remember my art history correctly. My professor at the university could probably tell you what dynasty it’s from.” She touched the ebony frame in awe. “Your father certainly is a generous man. This painting is worth thousands and thousands of dollars.”

Merry shrugged. “That’s Simon. Generous to a fault and filled with surprises. Since I was a baby, he’s sent me extravagant and unusual presents from all over the world. I suppose it’s his way of apologizing for being away so much.”

“With galleries in Paris, London, Rome, San Francisco, Tokyo and New York, it’s no wonder the man is so busy.” Lauren looked down at the floor beside her feet and shook her head. “I can’t believe the painting was sitting there when I came in and I didn’t see it. Either my eyesight is failing me or that package just appeared out of thin air.”

“Don’t let your imagination run off like that. You were simply too caught up in our conversation to notice it before,” Merry quickly assured her. “Donald must have received the package last night after I went upstairs and left it there for me to find this morning.” Hoping to distract her mortal friend, she pushed the bakery bag to Lauren. “Eat your breakfast and stop worrying.”

As Lauren took the sack, the cell phone rang. “That’s Bob again. No one else has the number. I better go and check the car before he has a coronary over his missing notes.” Picking up her phone, she headed to the door. “See you later, girlfriend.”

Suddenly alone with only her cat for company, Merry sighed and set the painting on the floor behind the counter. “You know, Harry, if Simon would just use Federal Express to make his deliveries instead of magic transference I wouldn’t have to lie to my friends.” She removed the letter from the envelope. “Let’s see what Simon has to say this time.”

Patting Harry’s head, Merry read the message aloud. “*My dearest Meredith, I found this in Hong Kong and thought it would be perfect in your home. I trust it meets with your approval. After the Council meeting of the Domain next month, I am planning on coming to see you. There is a matter of utmost importance we must discuss. I hope you will make time to visit with your most contrite father. Signed with love, Simon.*”

Merry frowned. “Most contrite father? That doesn’t sound like Simon. And why the advanced notice? With his duties as the Grand Master, he usually pops in, spends an hour with me, then he’s off again.” She shrugged and gave Harry’s head a final stroke with her hand.

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“Halloween’s tomorrow, so I’ve no time to worry about it now. The Council meeting is five weeks away. Surely by then I’ll be able to figure out why Simon is coming to see me. And once he’s gone, I will get on with my life and be happy just as I always have.”

## Chapter 4

THE AFTERNOON OF the magic show arrived and Bryan Aldwyn was a nervous wreck. His hands shook and his palms were sweaty as he drove through the streets of West Palm Beach to Merry's shop. It wasn't the thought of performing the illusions properly for his young audience that caused his distress, but the lovely lady who would be helping him that plagued his thoughts.

"What if Merry doesn't want to see me again once the show is over?" he muttered, slamming his hand on the steering wheel of his car. "She's bright, beautiful, and can have the choice of any man around. Why would Merry want to get involved with me? A doctor who works sixty-hour weeks and spends most nights sleeping in the interns' quarters at the hospital. Was I wrong to think she could become interested in me?"

Bryan dragged his fingers through his mussed hair. Sleep deprivation was getting to him, he decided. It had taken a great deal of effort during the past week to free up his hours so he could spend time with Merry. Yet the cost had been worth every swapped shift, all the late nights, dinner tabs and concert tickets he'd paid for to get his colleagues to cover for him while he was away from the hospital.

In less than a week, Meredith Albright had become a very important part of his life. She made him laugh and feel good about himself. When he messed up on the illusions, Merry offered advice and gentle assurance. She had a wonderful nurturing soul and never condemned his need to perform for the children or try to dissuade him from doing it.

Dealing with cancer, especially when it involved children, as he did on a daily basis, was a topic most people avoided. Instead of being put off by his work, Merry showed a genuine interest in it. Over dinner, she encouraged him to talk about his patients. She listened and asked questions about the children and the procedures he used in treating their illnesses.

The memory of a conversation they'd had the previous night in her kitchen regarding his family's disdain of his career choice gave Bryan hope that Merry really cared about him.

"I can't believe your family didn't want you to be a doctor," Merry gasped, setting her cup on the table.

Bryan sipped his coffee and shrugged. "My parents wanted me to take over my father's brokerage business. It's been a tradition in our family for more than a hundred years that the eldest son head up the firm. Since I was their only son, they assumed I would do the same. When I went to Harvard and signed up for pre-med instead of business, they weren't very happy about it."

"That's ridiculous. Doesn't every mother dream that her child will grow up to be a doctor, lawyer or president of the United States?" Merry sniffed indignantly. "Though I personally think there are too many lawyers, and being president isn't all it's cracked up to be, being a physician, a healer of men, is a good and noble profession. With all the disease and suffering in the world, doctors are always needed." She reached over to touch his hand. "How can your mother and father find fault with that?"

"My parents are a bit old fashioned. They had their plans for me, but I wanted no part of it. I can only hope that one day they'll learn to appreciate what I have done with my life and be happy for me."

Merry squeezed his hand. Understanding shimmered in her pale green eyes. "I know all

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about such things, Bryan. My Aunt Nora never approved of my decision to assert my independence and go into business for myself. If she had her way, I would be living with her and accepting my place in what she calls my 'splendid family heritage.' The truth is, Nora won't be pleased unless I give all this up and become exactly like her."

"What about your real father? You said he was an art dealer. Does he approve of what you're doing?"

Looking away, her brow creased with a frown. "He's never said one way or another. I guess he approves."

Bryan heard the sadness in her voice. "You miss your father, don't you, Merry?"

With a smile that was too bright to be real, she nodded. "Of course I do, but Simon has important obligations that take him all over the world, so I rarely see him. He didn't raise me; he wouldn't know how. Simon's too much of a free spirit to be a typical father, but I love him anyway."

It took all of Bryan's control not to reach over and pull Merry into his arms. He wanted to soothe away the pain of loneliness she valiantly fought to conceal. He could see it. He could feel it in his own heart. For he had suffered in a very similar way.

His parents had been more than disappointed by his decision to become a doctor. They thought their ungrateful son was a fool to turn his back on the family's power and wealth. Until he gave up his pipedream of curing the ills of the world as a physician, they threatened not to speak to him.

The threat became a harsh reality. Fifteen years had passed and still they refused to give up that mandate. No calls, visits, or letters to Bryan. It was as if their son didn't exist. The only way Bryan knew anything about them was the occasional calls and letters he received from his sister, Jade.

A blast from a car horn pulled Bryan back to reality. Yet as he turned into the alley behind Merry's shop, his thoughts went back to Jade. His sister was a lot like Merry—lovely, energetic, and very determined. Jade had defied their parents' archaic ideas and gone after her dream of being president of Worldwide Investments. After working ten years for the firm, she succeeded. And she did a great job of it. Company profits had more than doubled since she became its leader two years before.

"Better Jade than me," Bryan chuckled ruefully.

Parking beside a white delivery truck at the Emporium's back door, he got out of his car and entered the shop. As he made his way through to the front of the store, he heard Merry issuing orders like a general on the battlefield.

"All right, Donald, have the delivery men put these boxes in the truck with the others. The crew on the *Caribbean Queen* is expecting their delivery to be made at its docking facilities in Miami by five this afternoon. This gives our men plenty of time to drop off the other boxes to the *Island Princess* in Fort Lauderdale on the way. If they have any problems, they are to contact you immediately. Got that?"

"Chill out, Miss Albright. The guys have made this same trip at least a dozen times before and did okay, so why are you worrying now?"

"Because it's Halloween, Donald. These costumes are needed for the staff to use on the two masquerade cruises this evening. Now, where is the packing list? I want to go over it one more time before this box is loaded into the truck."

Bryan stepped into the store and saw Donald shaking his head at someone who was standing behind a wall of stacked boxes that lined the counter. Or at least Bryan thought it was

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Donald. It was a little difficult to tell.

Merry's assistant was dressed as Frankenstein's monster, complete with face makeup, shoulder pads, and electrodes on the sides of his neck. Built up platform boots increased the high school student's height by several inches. The whine of his voice removed all doubt about his identity when he spoke.

"But why, Miss Albright? We've gone over it six times already."

"Because seven times is even better and I want to be sure nothing's been left out." Her words became slightly muffled. "I thought we put it in this last big carton."

"We did," Donald sighed, crossing one booted foot in front of the other. "Just look for the manila envelope. Maybe it slipped down to the bottom of the box." At that moment, Donald noticed Bryan moving toward him. "Hey, Doc! Miss Albright's over there trying to find some paperwork."

Bryan could hear Merry mumbling about finding a needle in a haystack and a few other assorted complaints as he turned to see her. But it wasn't her anger that caused his breath to catch when he saw her; it was the sight of her bent over, leaning into a box, which knocked him off his axis. Her shapely round bottom was draped in sheer violet harem pantaloons, swaying slightly side to side. Through the translucent fabric he could see purple satin panties clinging to her feminine nether regions like a second skin. How he envied that scrap of silk!

Bryan closed his eyes and struggled to control the swelling in his groin area. For the past week he had kept his mind on winning Merry's trust and affection without frightening her away. There was a wariness in her gaze that told him she wasn't a lady to be wooed by lust. Perhaps another man had hurt her. That thought provoked Bryan's anger. Merry deserved to be cherished and loved. If he was going to build a lasting relationship with her, it would take patience and a great deal of will power.

*But, oh how he wanted to kiss her. To hold her in his arms. To make her his...*

"I found it!" Merry proclaimed, waving the envelope over her head as she stood up. "Maybe we should tape it to the top of the—" Her words halted when she turned around. "Hi, Bryan! I see you left your glasses home and wore the contact lenses like we discussed last night. You look great."

Bryan swallowed against the thickness in his throat. The view of Merry from the back had been stunning. The sight of her facing him in the purple and gold costume that belonged in a tale from *The Arabian Nights* damn near stopped his heart.

The short-cropped over-blouse had long see-through sleeves and gold cuffs that matched the jeweled bands around her trim ankles as well as the wide sash on the waistband of her harem pants. The sheer trousers dipped slightly in the front, exposing a shimmering amethyst colored stone settled in the recess of her navel. The bolero styled top had no buttons, and revealed a gold sequined bra beneath it. Her long blonde hair was caught up into a ponytail that was pulled through a hole in the top of her small gold hat, allowing her tresses to swing freely as she moved. Veils of gossamer-thin purple silk, attached to the sides of the glittering fez, floated around her shoulders. One gauzy length was draped beneath her chin, holding the hat in place.

"Uh-oh," Merry groaned, peeking up at him through her thick bangs. "From the look on your face, I guess you don't like what I'm wearing. I know I'm not tall and willowy like Barbara Eden, but I thought the children would get a kick out of this *I Dream of Jeannie* costume like they've seen on television. Give me a minute and I'll change into something else."

As she moved to go by him, Bryan took hold of her arm and gently stopped her. "No, don't do that, Merry. You look..." his mind searched for a word that wouldn't betray his lusty

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thoughts, "...terrific. And you're right about the kids. They'll love it. I wish I had thought of wearing a wonderful costume like that for our little show."

Merry's eyes sparkled with fun as she smiled at him. "Not to worry, Bryan. I've already taken care of that."

Bryan cocked his brow. "I hope you're not dressing me up like Aladdin or Ali Baba to do this show."

"Of course not, silly. It's a genuine set of a magician's tie and tails, complete with lots of secret pockets and a full-length cape lined in red satin. It will go perfectly with the silk top hat you use in the act," she explained. "Come to my office and I'll show you."

Merry gave Donald the envelope she was holding. "I'm going to leave everything in your capable hands, Donald. As soon as Bill and his helper get back from their break, have them load up the rest of these boxes and get going."

Bryan was following Merry around the corner when she suddenly turned back to Donald. "Before the guys leave, have them search their truck for Harry. I haven't seen a trace of my cat in the last two hours and I don't want him stranded at the port of Miami because he hitched a ride with them."

Even beneath the thick green monster makeup, Bryan could see the scowl on Donald's face.

"It's frustrating, Miss Albright. I spend half my time searching for that cat or trying to get him to eat. You know, it's all your fault because you cater to him. You've made Harry a spoiled brat."

"Harry's just a bit finicky. And I don't cater to him."

Donald snorted. "Oh, yeah? Whoever heard of feeding a cat smoked salmon primavera?"

Merry tried to shrug off the accusation. "Well, Harry was hungry yesterday afternoon. He was only nibbling on the leftovers from my lunch that I ordered in from Donzetti's."

"Some leftovers! That cat stole most of your meal while you were busy with customers. Next time order lobster. With his Palm Beach tastes good old Harry would probably like that even better." Donald strode past Bryan and into the storeroom. "Hey, Doc, did you see that ungrateful beast out in the back alley when you came in?"

Before Bryan could call out a reply, a very unique couple entered the store. Holding hands and laughing, the man and woman looked to be around sixty years old. The most striking thing about their appearance was not the fact that they were both redheads and dressed in green, but they were midgets. Each of them was barely three and a half feet tall.

Bryan chuckled softly. "I didn't know the circus was in town."

With a heavy sigh, Merry shook her head at him before walking around the counter to greet her visitors.

"There's our Merry girl, my love," the man announced with a distinctive Irish brogue. "Did I not say she would be here waitin' to see us?"

The woman's bright curls bounced on her head when she nodded. "Aye, you did, Shamus, my own. 'Tis good to see you've not lost your touch. Well, child, have you no words of greeting for your Aunt Kate and Uncle Shamus?"

Merry laughed to cover her embarrassment and hurried toward the diminutive couple. "Of course I do, Aunt Kate. I'm just so surprised to see you." She hugged them both and kissed their cheeks. "Why didn't you let me know that you were coming?"

Kate nudged Shamus with her elbow. "'Twas all his fault. Said a surprise would be more fun."

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“Now don’t take on so, sweeting,” Shamus instructed, his green eyes flashing with humor. “You never know what you’ll find when you arrive unannounced. It appears our little Merry has found herself a beau.”

Merry turned and was surprised to find Bryan standing beside her. Mortification nearly strangled her. “But he’s not...” she gasped, “I mean we aren’t...I didn’t—”

Without missing a beat, Bryan came to her rescue. He shook Shamus’s hand and gallantly placed a kiss on Kate’s. “How do you do? My name’s Bryan Aldwyn. I’m a friend of Merry’s. It’s an honor to meet you both.”

Gathering her wits, Merry completed the introductions. “Bryan, may I present Shamus and Kate McFay. The McFays were very dear friends of my mother’s and have been watching out for me since I was a baby.”

Kate smiled with pride. “And who better, I ask you? Seeing how I was there when you were born.”

“There she goes, braggin’ again,” Shamus complained, frowning at his wife. “I’d have been there too if the council of the Domain hadn’t called upon me to—”

“Sheesh,” Kate countered. “Just listen to him boast. The council this, the Domain that! Speaks with such importance, he does! A body would think the man was bein’ considered for the post of Grand Master himself.”

Bryan frowned in obvious confusion. “Grand Master?”

“Kate, Shamus, no more bickering,” Merry broke in before they could reply to Bryan’s question. “Have you come all of this way so I could witness one of your famous battles in person?”

A comical portrait of shame, the boisterous couple looked from her to one another and sighed with regret. Kate patted Merry’s hand. “Sorry, dearling. We’ll behave ourselves, we promise. Never meant to cause such a ruckus in front of your handsome beau. Will you be bringin’ him to Nora’s party tonight?”

Feeling suddenly on the spot, Merry motioned her aside and avoided looking at Bryan. “Well, I um...haven’t asked him yet.”

“Why ever not?” Kate asked in a husky whisper.

Merry could feel the flush increasing on her face. “Bryan’s a doctor and a very busy man. We’re putting on a show for his young patients in the hospital this afternoon. That’s why I’m dressed in this costume. Entertaining the children could take hours.” She knew she was rambling, but couldn’t stop herself. “When we’re done doing that, he might be too busy with his work to want to attend a party with me.”

Kate shook her head. “You’ll never know unless you ask him, child. What are you waitin’ for?”

“But Bryan doesn’t know—”

The tiny woman ignored Merry’s objection and turned to Bryan. “Listen here, boyo, our girl’s a might shy, but I’m not. Nora is having a party this evenin’, and we’d be most pleased if you would be our Merry’s escort. Are you available?”

Bryan looked quickly at Merry and nodded. “Of course, but only if Merry wants—”

“Then ’tis settled,” Kate declared, tugging on his arm. “Now bend down here, lad, so’s I can give you a kiss and grant you me blessings, Bryan Aldwyn.”

Wearing a bemused grin, Bryan followed her instructions.

After kissing his cheek, Kate stroked his face with one hand, placed her other hand on his chest and spoke softly to him in Gaelic. Her voice sounded sweet and lyrical. When she finished,

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Kate gave him a wink and patted his cheek.

"Blessings to you always, Bryan Aldwyn." Kate turned to Shamus and hooked her arm through his. "We best be on our way, my own. These youngsters have things to accomplish and I've a sudden hankerin' for some American pizza for lunch."

As Shamus and Kate left the shop, Merry leaned against the counter and found the courage to face Bryan. He seemed slightly distracted, staring at the front door.

"Bryan, I'm sorry Kate put you on the spot like that. If you don't want to attend my aunt's party with me, I won't hold you to it."

He smiled. "The party sounds great, but Kate didn't give you much of a choice in the matter either. If you'd rather go with someone else, I would understand."

Merry shook her head. "Oh no, Bryan. I would have asked you sooner, but with all the prep work we did for the magic show, I completely forgot about it. I just don't want you to think that you have to go because Kate pushed you into it."

Bryan pulled Merry into his arms and gave her a hug. "No one is pushing me into doing anything I don't want to do. I want to take you to that party. It will be our first real date," he said, easing away from their embrace to smile down at her. "Maybe I can get Kate to tell me what that blessing of hers meant. Did you understand any of those strange words?"

She shrugged. "It sounded like Gaelic. Knowing Kate, it was probably an ancient blessing for long life and good health." Merry looked at the clock on the wall and gasped. "We're supposed to be at the hospital by two and it's nearly one now. Why don't you go in my office and put on your costume? I'll wait here while you dress."

"Sounds good to me." Bryan walked around the counter. "By the way, I'm sorry about my circus comment when your friends came in. I really enjoyed meeting them. Shamus and Kate are quite a special pair."

"Yes, they are."

When Merry heard her office door close, her smile faded and she shook her head. "My stars! What has Kate gotten me into? How can I take Bryan to Aunt Nora's party? The place will be overrun with real witches, warlocks, and lots of other magical creatures."

She gnawed on her lip, deep in thought. "It is Halloween. I could just let Bryan think that everyone is wearing costumes and hope he doesn't ask too many questions. If things work out for us in the future, I'll work up the nerve to tell him the truth about everything, including the fact that I'm a witch."

Thinking of Bryan's remark about Shamus and Kate being a special pair made her laugh. "They're special all right. I wonder how the good doctor would react if he knew Shamus McFay was a leprechaun and that Kate is my fairy godmother. It's not every day that one gets to meet a five-hundred-year-old fairy who absolutely adores American junk food!"

A few moments later, Donald returned to the showroom, shaking his head. "Sorry, Miss Albright, there's no sign of your crazy cat out back or in the truck. I wonder where Harry's gotten off to this time? He usually waits until evening to disappear."

"That's my Harry. Refuses to eat cat food and keeps banker's hours." Merry rubbed her hand on Harry's favorite napping spot on the counter. "I know it's silly, but I worry about where he spends his nights."

Donald rolled his eyes. "Only a week ago you were trying to give that silly cat away. Now you treat him like family. At least the little guy stays out of sight when Doc is here."

Merry frowned at Donald. "What did you say?"

"You told me about Dr. Aldwyn's sneezing fit the first day he came in here. Since



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Harry's long gone by the time he gets here every night, Doc hasn't had to go through that again."

"I never realized—" Merry's attention was suddenly drawn to the two men coming in the front door. "At last their coffee break is over. Have Bill and Eddie get going as soon as the truck's loaded. And, Donald, don't forget the packing list."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. After I check the list, I'll be sure to tape it to the top of the last carton."

Merry smiled and patted Donald's green-tinted cheek, unaware that someone was watching them from the back room.

*That was too close. I'll have to be more careful from here on out or Meredith will learn of my little deception before I'm ready. With so much at stake, I can't risk that happening.*

# Chapter 5

“FOR MY NEXT magic trick, I’m going to need a volunteer from the audience,” Bryan announced to the two-dozen children clustered in front of him in the solarium. “Tommy Freeman, I bet you could be of great help to me. Would you like to come up here and give it a try?”

Ten-year-old Tommy nodded. A joy-filled smile lit up his thin pale face. “Sure thing, Doc.” He looked at the nurse standing beside his wheelchair. “Can you give me a push up there, Miss Hanson? Doc needs my help.”

Merry watched the nurse maneuver the narrow wheelchair to the draped prop table where Bryan stood. No one had to tell Merry that the laughing little boy, like so many of the others, had cancer. His emaciated form and the sparse hair on his head were clear evidence of his body’s reaction to the harsh effects of chemotherapy.

Yet there was an exuberance in Tommy’s face that could not be denied. His eyes were bright, his grin endearing. Even wearing his baggy Mickey Mouse pajamas and robe, he seemed to preen like a peacock because he had been chosen to take part in the show. A look of awe covered his features when Bryan flicked back his cape and bent to him a courtly bow.

While Bryan handed Tommy the cone of rolled paper and showed the young giggling audience his magical milk pitcher, Merry’s eyes were drawn to a little girl at the back of the room. Unlike the other children who were enthralled by the demonstration, the girl stared out of a nearby window. With her balding head propped up on her tiny hand, she sat in her wheelchair, silent and alone, seeming oblivious to the entertainment. The faded green of her hospital-issued nightgown only emphasized her sallow complexion. Not even the nurse’s aide who had gently tried to redirect the child’s attention to the show several times could penetrate her trance-like state. Sadness seemed to radiate from the girl’s stooped shoulders.

A burst of laughter brought Merry’s attention back to Bryan and Tommy.

“Stop frowning, Tommy. This is a very special milk pitcher. When I pour its contents into the cone you’re holding, not a single drop will splash out on you.”

“Are you sure about this, Doc? This cone’s only newspaper and there’s a hole in the bottom,” Tommy protested. “If I mess up these new PJs, my mom’s gonna have a fit.”

“Trust me, Tommy, and the magic will keep you high and dry,” Bryan assured him. “Now hold it up in front of you while I say the magic words. Abracadabra!”

Bryan tilted the pitcher toward the paper cone. Almost too late Merry realized that somehow this simple illusion had gone awry. It was only her quick thinking and the use of her powers that saved the boy from being bathed in the chalky white liquid.

As Bryan held up the empty pitcher and unfurled the dry paper cone, the children applauded wildly and Merry shook her head.

*“I don’t know why I’m surprised. So far he’s botched up every illusion. Bryan may be a brilliant doctor, have the looks of a GQ model, and have a heart as big as the great outdoors, but he’s the worst magician I’ve ever seen.”* The happiness on his face when he turned toward Merry, made her sigh. *“Bryan Aldwyn may not be Houdini, but he is one clever thief! In just a week, he came into my life and stole my heart. My stars! I’m such a willing victim.”*

Twenty minutes later, the show was over and the children were being returned to their

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rooms with a special bag of treats Bryan had put together for each of them. Fresh fruit, crayons, coloring books, granola bars, and several pieces of candy were included in every package.

Merry laughed as they gathered up the props. “Well, Bryan, if you hadn’t thrilled them with your magic show, those trick-or-treat bags sure would have won them over. I’m sorry I didn’t think of doing something like that myself.”

Removing his tie and tucking it into his jacket pocket, Bryan shrugged. “It was the least I could do. Even though they’re in the hospital, these kids should be able to celebrate the holidays, too. For some of them, it might be their last.”

“Yes, I know. I don’t have to be a doctor to see that many of those children are very, very ill.” Merry reached over and touched his arm. “I want to thank you for letting me help you with this show.”

Closing the box he was packing, Bryan removed his cutaway coat and turned toward her. “I’m the one who’s grateful, Merry. If you hadn’t—”

Merry pressed her fingers against his mouth. “Not another word about it. I thank you, you thank me, and so on, and so on. The important thing is the children had a wonderful time and we got to know one another.”

Bryan took her hand from his mouth and gently kneaded her fingers with his own. “Then you don’t regret all the hours we spent together this week?”

“Of course not. I was just hoping, now that the show’s over, we might...well...I thought maybe we could...” Merry sighed and looked away. She could feel the blush on her cheeks. “I’m really making a mess out of this.”

“Perhaps I can help.” Bryan cupped her chin with his hand and made her look at him. “I want to continue seeing you, Merry. Getting ready for the show was great, but now I want us to be together for my own very selfish reasons.”

The tenderness she saw in his eyes gave her the confidence to forget her shyness and to ask, “And exactly what selfish reasons are you talking about, Bryan?”

He smiled. “To begin with, I’ve been wanting to do this since I stepped into your shop and saw you the first time.” Gathering Merry into his arms, he kissed her.

His lips were warm and inviting. They coaxed and stroked, encouraging her response. Merry’s tension eased. Her lips parted and Bryan eagerly deepened the caress. As she put her arms around him and began to return his kiss with equal fervor, a strange male voice sounded behind her.

“Excuse me, Dr. Aldwyn. Can I speak with you a moment?”

The interruption caused Merry to jump. When she would have moved away from Bryan, his arms tightened around her and held her close. Looking at his face, she saw him glaring at someone over her shoulder. From the change in his demeanor, it was obvious he recognized who the man was, and that he wasn’t pleased to see him.

“What do you want now, Parnell? If you’re here to complain about the magic show, you can forget it. I got permission from your boss to do it a month ago.”

Merry rubbed Bryan’s back in a soothing manner as she eased away from his embrace to stand beside him. She recognized the unwanted visitor in the tailored suit as Howard Parnell, the over-eager assistant to Hopewell’s administrator. During dinner the previous night, Bryan had mentioned the owlish little man the hospital staff referred to as Buddy Brown-noser, and had explained how his penchant for involving himself in everyone’s business caused problems.

“Calm down, Dr. Aldwyn, I’ve no complaints about this. On the contrary. I was taking some of the board members on a tour of the pediatric floor and caught a bit of your performance.

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"You're really quite good!" Casting an appreciative eye on Merry, Howard grinned and held out his hand. "How do you do. I'm Howard Parnell, from the administrator's office. And you are...?"

"With me," Bryan snapped, yanking Merry away from Howard's reach. "Enough small talk, Parnell. After our argument at the last staff meeting, we're hardly friends. What do you want?"

Howard pulled back his hand and used it to straighten his tie. "The truth is Mrs. Burke and several board members also saw your act. They wanted me to ask you about doing it for the hospital ball on New Year's Eve."

Bryan shook his head. "Forget it, Parnell. Tell them to hire a professional magician. I only did the show for my patients. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have things to take care of."

Before Bryan could move, Howard grabbed his arm. "Don't blow me off on this, Aldwyn. If you want the board to vote on the improvements you've been asking for, I would strongly advise you to consider their request."

Bryan frowned until the shorter man let go of his shirtsleeve. "Okay, I'll bite, Parnell. Exactly what are you talking about?"

Preening with self-importance, Howard rocked back and forth on his heels. "It may interest you to know that the New Year's Ball is going to be the kickoff for the fund raising campaign for the new pediatrics cancer ward. If you want the board to approve that special isolation suite for bone marrow recipients you've designed, the least you can do is participate in the festivities."

Bryan sighed and shook his head. "Damn it, Parnell, I've told you before how much I despise hospital politics. Besides, I'm only an amateur magician. Good enough for kids, but I'm hardly qualified to entertain at such a high-brow event."

"Don't count yourself short, Dr. Aldwyn." Howard leaned forward and spoke in hushed tones. "Mrs. Burke thinks you're great and the New Year's Ball is her baby. Your personal involvement in the ball would insure her backing of your project. Get her on your side and the isolation suite is a done deal."

Merry could sense Bryan's reluctance as well as his interest. While discussing his work, Bryan had told her of his plans for the pediatric isolation suite. After patients received bone marrow transplants, they had to be kept in isolation for weeks to prevent infections and other illnesses from setting in. Adult patients accepted such restrictions, but it was very difficult for the children. Children were social creatures with extremely short attention spans, Bryan had explained. Television sets and toys offered only temporary diversions for them.

His idea was to have a suite of glass enclosed cubicles in a ward setting, where the children could see one another and not feel so alone. There would be intercoms for communications between them, drapes for privacy when needed and a central station for the nurses to monitor their care.

Knowing how important the isolation suite was to Bryan, Merry made him an offer he wasn't likely to refuse.

"I'd be willing to help you create a more sophisticated act for the ball, Bryan. In two months we could put together some new illusions that would please everyone and garner you the Board's approval for anything you wanted."

Bryan's silent scowl earned him a poke in the ribs from Merry. "What's the matter, Dr. Aldwyn?" she asked. "Is the thought of spending more time with me so distasteful?"

Bryan took hold of her arm and pulled her to the far side of the room. "Don't be ridiculous, Merry. I'm looking forward to spending a great deal of time with you in the very near

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future. I was just hoping we could get on with um...other things in our relationship besides magic tricks.”

“There’s no reason we can’t have it all.”

Bryan shot a furtive glance at Howard before turning back to Merry. “We both know I’m a lousy magician. It was just dumb luck the kids’ show went as well as it did. If I tried to do an act for the ball and screwed it up, I would look like a fool and my patients would gain nothing.”

Knowing the true source of his success, Merry ignored his remark about dumb luck and patted his cheek. “Don’t lose faith now, Bryan. With me at your side, you could do illusions that would give David Copperfield a run for his money.”

“Copperfield, huh?” Bryan chuckled derisively to himself. “I think you’ve got too much confidence in me if you believe that one, Merry.”

“I have confidence enough for both of us, Bryan. Together, we can make the magic happen.”

Bryan frowned. “But, Merry, what if I—”

“No what ifs, Dr. Aldwyn,” she cut in, shaking her head. “Only positive thoughts for us. Now, are we going to do this magic act for the New Year’s Ball to impress the board or not?”

His creased brow lifted. A smile curved his lips. “We? Us? I like your use of those pronouns, Miss Albright.” He gave her a quick kiss and smiled down at her. “Maybe you’re right. Together we can make the magic happen.”

“Of course we can. Have I let you down yet?” Merry peeked around him. “Why don’t you give Mr. Parnell the news? If we wait much longer, I’m afraid he’s going to leave a hole in the rug with all his pacing.”

Bryan looked back at Howard and shook his head. “If the dictionary had a picture for the word aggravation, that man’s face would be there. For two cents, I’d let the little weasel stew in his own broth a while longer and not tell him.”

“Don’t be cruel.” Merry gave him a playful shove. “Go on and get it over with. The sooner you do, the quicker he’ll leave you alone.”

“All right.” With a sigh of reluctance, Bryan turned to Howard. “Tell Mrs. Burke I’ll do the magic act for the ball.”

“That’s fabulous!” Howard said rushing toward them. “But why don’t you come up to the administrator’s office and tell her yourself? I know how pleased Mrs. Burke will be to hear the news directly from you.”

Bryan was about to object to the man’s suggestion when Merry gave his arm a gentle squeeze. “Go on and see Mrs. Burke. There’s no time like the present to begin making inroads with her if you want that isolation suite for your kids. I’ll finish packing up the props and wait for you here.”

\* \* \*

Merry was closing the last box and putting her tote bag over her shoulder when a nurse came in to search the solarium floor near the windows. An exclamation of success soon left the woman’s lips.

“Ah-ha! There it is. That girl would lose her head if it wasn’t attached to her neck.”

Merry saw the small gray knit cap dangling from the woman’s fingers. “What a drab color. No wonder the child lost it.”

The nurse, whose nametag showed her to be Ann Roe, shrugged. “The women’s auxiliary

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makes them and donates them for the patients to use. But the color doesn't matter to Linda. The poor thing does nothing but sulk and stare outside all day."

"Was Linda the little girl in the wheelchair by the window?" At the woman's nod, Merry sighed. "I saw her during the show. She looked so sad and alone. Does she have many visitors?"

Ann shook her head. "No. Since her father died in a car wreck last spring, the child's been an orphan and she has no other family. Besides Dr. Aldwyn, the social worker, and the nursing staff, no one comes to see her."

Merry held out her hand. "Why don't you let me take that cap back to her? When Dr. Aldwyn returns to the floor, please tell him I'm visiting Linda. What room is she in?"

"Linda's in the oncology ward at the end of the corridor. Her bed's by the window." Ann gave Merry the gray knit cap. "See if you can get her to put this on. There's an air duct in her corner of the room. With everything else she has to contend with, Linda doesn't need hypothermia, too."

"What kind of cancer does she have?"

"Leukemia. I'm told the same strain of the disease killed her mother five years ago when Linda was only four." The nurse sighed with resignation. "Maybe your visit will brighten the kid's spirits for a while."

Still wearing her costume, Merry entered the ward and was greeted by several children. Tommy Freeman called out to her from his bed.

"Miss Merry, come over here and meet my mom." He turned to the auburn haired woman sitting beside him. "See, Ma," he boasted, "I told you a magic genie came to the hospital today. Isn't she beautiful? Miss Merry helped Dr. Bryan do the show."

After the introductions were made, Mrs. Freeman apologized for her son's behavior. "Please forgive Tommy's enthusiasm. I tried to tell him you weren't a genie, but he won't hear of it. He claims you and Dr. Aldwyn were performing real magic."

"Then our show was a success." Patting Tommy on the back, Merry silently regarded the boy with a new respect. *Out of the mouth of babes...I wonder what your mother would say if she knew you were half right, Tommy Freeman.*

Leaving the Freemans to their visit, Merry approached the bed in the corner. Linda was sitting up, facing the window. A blanket covered her thin form. The handwritten tape showing the name Craig affixed to the foot of her bed was slightly faded, indicating its occupant had been in the hospital for quite some time. Merry clutched her tote bag and moved to the side of the bed near the window.

"Hello, Linda. My name is Merry. You lost something in the solarium during the show, so I brought it back to you."

For a long moment, Linda didn't respond. When she did, her eyes were fixed on the window and her soft voice was barely a sigh. "Thanks. Please leave it on my nightstand."

"Do you know what it is, Linda?"

With her head propped on the pillow, she nodded. "Uh-huh. I lost my cap again. Miss Rowe's always scolding me for not wearing it."

Merry sat on the edge of the bed. "Why won't you wear it?"

Linda sighed, but didn't look at her. "'Cause it's ugly and the kids make fun of me when I put it on."

"Oh! Well, I have a gift for you in my bag that would take care of all that." After issuing a silent incantation, Merry pulled another knit cap from her tote bag. She leaned over and held it closer to Linda's line of vision. "I hope you like the color."

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“Sorry, I can’t take presents from strangers.” Linda’s blue eyes fixed on the pink angora cap. “Oh my goodness! That’s my favorite color.” She reached out to touch it and a smile creased her pale face. “I’ve never felt anything so soft. It feels like a soft furry kitten.”

Merry stroked the fluffy wool and nodded. “Now that you mention it, it does remind me of fur. At least it doesn’t have the problem of fleas like my cat, Harry, does.”

Linda’s full attention turned on Merry. “You have a cat named Harry?”

“Yes, I do. Though his entire name is Harry Houdini.”

The little girl frowned. “That’s a silly name for a cat.”

Merry shook her head. “No, it’s not. He’s named after the great magician, Harry Houdini. I gave him that name when he kept vanishing and reappearing like magic.”

Linda rolled her eyes. “Then it *is* silly! Everyone knows there’s no such thing as magic.”

“That’s not what Tommy and the other children think.”

“Big deal!” Linda scoffed, turning back to the window. “What does Tommy know anyway? Him in his fancy new PJs and stuff. He’s just a stupid boy!”

Merry didn’t have to look at Linda’s clean but drab hospital issue gown to understand her resentment. She could feel the pain and envy in Linda’s words and decided to do something about it.

“Well, I’m not a stupid boy, Linda, but I believe in magic, too. If I proved that magic really exists, would you do me a favor and be my friend?”

Linda’s eyes darted back to Merry. “Why would you want to be my friend? I’m just a little girl.”

“My mother always told me that you could never have too many friends.” Tears pooled in Merry’s eyes. “After my mother died, I was so lonely, I decided to make a new friend every day.”

“Don’t cry. I lost my mama and my daddy, too,” Linda said, touching Merry’s hand. “If it will make you feel better, I’ll be your friend.”

“I’d like that, but I also want to show you that magic can be real. Will you let me try?”

Unimpressed, Linda shrugged. “I suppose. Are you gonna do some of those tricks you and Dr. Bryan did in the solarium?”

Merry shook her head. “Nope. What I’m going to show you is just between us girls. Not even Dr. Bryan knows about this kind of magic.”

Crooking her finger, she got Linda to lean toward her so she could whisper. “This bag I’m carrying actually belonged to a very powerful wizard. It was his magic present pouch. By holding it in your arms and wishing real hard, you can get all kinds of wonderful things. The only limitation is that the item has to fit in the sack and you mustn’t be too greedy.” Merry offered her the tote bag. “Are you willing to give it a try?”

Linda took the tapestry bag and frowned. “What should I asked for?”

“Hmm,” Merry replied, tapping her finger against her chin. “How about a robe to match your new knit cap?”

The little girl looked doubtful. “Do you think the present pouch will work for me, Miss Merry?”

“Only if you close your eyes, whisper your request out loud, and then say the magic words.”

“But I don’t know the magic words.”

Merry smiled and put her arm around Linda’s thin shoulders. “That’s why I’m going to help you learn them. Now repeat after me: *There’s always room for magic in my life.*”

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Linda frowned. "I thought the words would be something cool like abracadabra."

"Abracadabra is only for easy tricks. In order for these magic words to work on the wizard's present pouch, you must try to believe them in your heart. Are you ready to do it?"

Following Merry's instructions, Linda closed her eyes, hugged the bag to her chest, whispered her request and said the magic words. Within minutes a pink robe trimmed with lace, a matching nightgown, and a pair of fuzzy slippers sat on the bed beside them.

"Why don't you try these on, Linda? Everything looks like it would fit you."

"Oh Miss Merry, these are the prettiest things I've ever seen! But I can't keep them."

Merry was stunned by her statement. "Why not?"

"Cause my daddy said it was wrong to accept charity when there were so many more deserving people in the world," Linda replied with a nod. "Now, how can we send them back?"

The pride and certainty on Linda's young face nearly made Merry cry. She had performed magic to impress the little girl, yet she was the one who was duly impressed. Linda Craig was only nine years old, but she was wise beyond her years. Merry never knew that nobility could come in such a small package.

\* \* \*

Standing at the door, Bryan watched the lady dressed in a harem costume and the little girl in pink sitting on the bed coloring pictures in a book. It was the first time he could recall seeing Linda laugh. During his visits with the child, she would smile and nod. But with Merry, Linda glowed with happiness.

As if sensing his presence, Merry looked up and waved to him. Not wanting to intrude, yet curious over the change in his patient, he crossed the room to Linda's bed.

"Well, look at you," Bryan declared with mocked surprise. "My two favorite ladies have found each other and appear to be the best of buddies. Is there any room in this gathering of friends for one overworked and forgotten old doctor?"

Linda leaned against Merry and giggled. "Sure, Dr. Bryan. Miss Merry said a person could never have too many friends. We'd always make room for you."

Bryan looked at Linda's new apparel and whistled. "My goodness! Don't you look gorgeous. Where did you get that pretty pink outfit?"

"Out of the magic pou—" Linda clapped a hand over her mouth. She looked up in alarm at Merry.

Merry smiled and shrugged. A silent message seemed to pass between them. A second later, Linda began to speak.

"Miss Merry gave it to me. I know it's not right to accept charity or take things from strangers, but she says this is different 'cause we're friends now. I didn't do anything wrong, did I, Dr. Bryan?"

Shaking his head, Bryan touched the soft angora cap she wore. He knew without being told that the change in this usually solemn child was due to Merry. The emotional knot in his throat nearly prevented him from answering Linda's question.

"Not at all, sweetheart. If Miss Merry says it's fine, then it must be so."

"Uh-oh," Merry drawled with a dramatic flourish, "I'm afraid that I'm about to be made a villain. Nurse Rowe is wheeling in the dinner cart and that means it's getting late. I have to get back to my shop before closing."

Linda looked crestfallen. "Will you come and see me again, Miss Merry?"



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“Of course I will, honey. As long as you’re feeling up to it and if Dr. Bryan says it’s all right, I’ll stop by and visit every day.” Merry kissed Linda’s cheek and stood up to adjust the blankets around her. “Now be sure to keep that cap on your head. I wouldn’t want you to lose it like the other one.”

“Don’t worry, Miss Merry, I won’t. And thank you again for everything.” After giving Merry a hug, Linda turned to Bryan. “Take good care of Miss Merry for me, Dr. Bryan. I don’t want anything to happen to my new friend. She means a lot to me.”

Bryan smiled. He took hold of Merry’s hand and let his gaze lock with hers. “You’ve got nothing to worry about on that score, Linda. I’ll take care of Miss Merry for both of us. She means a great deal to me, too.”

# Chapter 6

“YOU SEEM A little on edge tonight, Merry. If you don’t want to go to your aunt’s party, we could have dinner at Testa’s instead,” Bryan offered as they drove along the Intracoastal Waterway that evening.

Anxiety filled Merry’s mind with doubt. *On edge, he says? That’s an understatement! I’m insane! I’m taking a mortal to Nora’s party without warning him about what to expect there. But how can I do that without revealing the truth about myself? If I told Bryan that I was a witch, he would take off never to be seen again, or he’d have me committed. And if I try to dissuade him now from going to Nora’s, he might think I don’t want to go out with him, or worse, that I don’t want to be seen with him.*

When he put his hand on her arm as he stopped the car at a light, Merry’s attention was brought back to him. “It’s up to you, sweetheart. Dinner for two or the party at Nora’s?”

Merry gave him a remorseful smile. “No fair tempting me, Bryan Aldwyn. As much as I would prefer a quiet evening with you, I don’t dare ignore Aunt Nora’s invitation.”

“That sounds ominous. Is your aunt really such a shrew?”

“No, she’s not a shrew, but attendance at one of her parties is like a royal summons from the Queen of England. Nora speaks and everyone obeys, or else.”

Pulling away from the light, Bryan chuckled. “Now you really have me intrigued. What does ‘or else’ imply?”

“The last time I didn’t show up for one of Nora’s parties, she arrived at my apartment with her forty guests, muttering something about Mohammed and the mountain.” Merry grimaced from the memory of that night. “It took me days to recuperate from Nora’s little surprise.”

“Speaking of surprises, I still can’t get over what you did for Linda this afternoon. For weeks I could barely get her to say a word, but in less than an hour you had her laughing, talking and doing something other than looking at the view from her window.”

Merry shrugged. “All Linda needed was a little TLC.”

Bryan turned onto the bridge that connected Palm Beach to the mainland and sighed. “I still can’t figure out why Linda stares outside all the time.”

“I think she uses the window to escape from reality. While looking outside, she doesn’t have to see the other kids and all they have. Though Linda would never begrudge them their fancy clothes and visitors, it doesn’t stop her from wanting them herself. She’s just a little girl.”

“A little girl who loves pink and is crazy about her new friend. Thanks again for taking an interest in Linda.” Bryan reached over and squeezed Merry’s hand. “You must have bought those things for her from the hospital gift shop while I was speaking to Mrs. Burke. I insist on reimbursing you for them.”

“Insist all you want, Dr. Aldwyn, but I won’t accept a dime from you.”

“Then I’ll go to the gift shop Monday and buy Linda a gift of my own.” Bryan’s smile suddenly faded. “I really should be more observant. I’ve been in that shop several times, but I never noticed they carried such nice sleepwear for children.”

A knot of panic lodged in Merry’s chest. *My stars! When Bryan gets to the shop and realizes the place is little more than a candy store with newspapers, I’ll never be able to explain*

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*where I got those things for Linda. Thank goodness my name isn't Pinocchio. With all the lies I'm going to be forced into telling tonight, my nose would be a foot long by midnight!*

"Bryan, the items I purchased from the shop were actually ordered for someone else, but never picked up. If you want to get Linda a present, I'd be happy to go to the mall for you."

"Thanks, I'd really appreciate that," Bryan replied. "I hate shopping. I'll give you the money and you can buy something special for her."

Merry's relief was short lived as they pulled into Nora's tree-lined driveway on Ocean Boulevard. Thinking about all the possible problems she might yet encounter, she nervously fussed with the chiffon skirt of her red gown.

Looking over at her, Bryan smiled. "Calm down, Merry. It's only a party. Once we make an appearance to appease your aunt, we can leave." He winked at her. "Have I told you how absolutely gorgeous you look in that scarlet dress?"

Merry had worried about wearing the Dior gown. Its daring neckline showed more cleavage than she was used to, but that hadn't been the cause of her unrest. Though red had always been her favorite color, she had never felt bold enough to wear it.

"You did mention that fact four times already, but I appreciate hearing it again, thank you," she answered, trying to control the wild beating in her heart. "I was afraid the color was too bright for me."

"Nonsense. With your creamy complexion and coloring, you should wear red all the time. The color is perfect on you." He reached over to touch a curl that rested on her bare shoulder. "You should wear your hair down more often as well. It's a sin to wear it pulled back all the time."

Merry didn't know if it was the feel of his fingers brushing against her skin, the fiery heat in his eyes or his words that affected her the most. She quickly sought a way to change the topic of their conversation before she melted in the seat.

"Bryan, I hope you don't mind me not wanting to wear a costume tonight. After running around in my Jeannie outfit all afternoon and spending the past month taking care of everyone else's costume needs, the last thing I wanted to do was wear one myself."

Bryan shrugged. "It's fine with me. At least I got a chance to wear this monkey suit I bought for my college buddy's wedding last spring."

While he pulled his car into a space near the house, Merry took the time to observe how wonderful he looked in his monkey suit. In spite of his obvious disdain, Bryan seemed quite relaxed in his formal attire. The tailored cut of his tuxedo showed his lean form to its best advantage. With his high collared white shirt that required no tie, he wore the height of fashion as if he had been born to it. Not even his glasses could take away from his devastatingly handsome appearance.

Taking his key from the ignition, Bryan turned to her. "I'd offer you a penny for your thoughts, but from the expression on your face, you'd probably hold out for a much higher price."

She sighed. "I was just thinking about you, Bryan. It's not often that I meet such an attractive man, let alone date one."

"Gosh, ma'am, you could turn a fella's head with such talk," he drawled like a cowboy from an old western movie as he leaned toward her. "It's right nice knowing that it's my pretty face and not my mind that appeals to you."

Merry chuckled and gave his shoulder a playful shove. "That isn't true, Bryan. You know very well I'm attracted to more than just your looks. Besides your sense of humor and

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intelligence, I am most impressed by your choice in cars. Just one look at this vehicle and I was totally enchanted by you.”

Bryan frowned. “Now you’ve lost me. What does my car have to do with this discussion? Are you insulting my Dodge minivan?”

“Not at all, but I have heard it said that a man’s car is an extension of himself and you’re the first male doctor I’ve ever met who didn’t drive a Mercedes, a Lexus, or at least a BMW.”

Confusion made his frown deepen. “Which means I’m steady, reliable, and get good gas mileage?”

Merry stroked his cheek with her hand. “No, silly. It tells me you are confident in yourself, you’re not a spendthrift, and with seats for seven, you like to travel with others. Seeing the built-in baby seats also shows you’re not adverse to children. In my opinion, that adds up to one very incredible man, my dear Dr. Aldwyn.”

Clearly moved by her words, Bryan turned his head and kissed the palm of her hand. “Remind me not to show you my garage at the condo. One look at the mode of transportation I was using until I purchased this van last month, and you might decide never to see me again.”

“Why? What were you driving? A moped?”

Bryan winced. “Not exactly, but you’re close.”

“Oh, yeah? How close?”

“Well...it does have two wheels, an engine, and handlebars.”

His awkward explanation made Merry smile. “Sounds like a motorcycle.” At his nod, she continued. “What’s so bad about owning a motorcycle? They’re lots of fun. A few years ago, Lauren and I spent the summer tooling around the Florida Keys on a couple of Honda 250s we rented from a dealership. When can I come over and take your bike out for a spin?”

Bryan’s frown blossomed into a dimpled grin. “My bike’s a bit bigger than a Honda, sweetheart, but if you’re willing to try out a full dressed Harley-Davidson, Electra Glide with a two thousand cc engine, you can be my guest tomorrow morning. I’ve even got an extra helmet if you need one.”

“You’re talking about a Harley-Davidson!” she gasped. “But I could never handle—”

Bryan dropped a quick kiss to her lips and effectively cut off her objection. “Of course you can, because I’m going to teach you. But we can discuss this later. Right now we have a party to attend. And the sooner we get in there, the faster we can leave.”

“My goodness, for a few minutes there I actually forgot all about it.” She looked suspiciously at Bryan. “That was your intention from the start of this discussion wasn’t it? To cure my jitters over this party, you made me think about something else.”

His brow rose. “And did it work?”

Nodding, Merry laughed. “Dr. Aldwyn, you never cease to amaze me! I’m very glad you came into my life!”

“So am I,” Bryan proclaimed as he leaned over to kiss her. “So am I.”

\* \* \*

Nora Glendenning’s three-story oceanfront home resembled a pasha’s palace with its white marble columns, tall windows, and a wide staircase that led visitors to its majestic entryway. The royal blue front doors were ten feet high and trimmed in gold hardware that glittered in the lamplight. Two huge statues of roaring lions sat like sentries on either side of the doors.

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Bryan stopped to touch one of the statues. "These are magnificent. I wonder where the artist got the marble. I've never seen this particular shade of blue green before."

"It's not marble. The lions were carved from solid pieces of moss agate," Merry explained with a smile.

Bryan whistled low. "Agate? Isn't that a little costly for an outside decoration?"

Merry carefully chose her words. During their walk from the car, she had decided on easing Bryan around certain issues with plausible answers that would cure his curiosity without actually revealing the entire truth about her family and friends.

"My Aunt Nora is very superstitious. According to ancient lore, agate keeps negative vibrations from entering your home, while carved images of lions are said to repel your enemies. Her choice of blue enamel for the front doors was based on a similar belief that it would bring only good luck into her dwelling."

Bryan's brow arched with surprise. "From all I've read about Nora Glendenning and her feminist attitudes, it's difficult to believe she's so superstitious."

"Well, it's true. For all her modern ways, Aunt Nora is pure Irish at heart. When you see how she celebrates—"

A heavily accented male voice suddenly called from behind them. "Greetings and felicitations to you, Miss Meredith."

Bryan turned toward the door and gaped at the bearded man wearing a turban and Indian garb who was bowing before Merry. "Where in the blazes did he come from?"

Ignoring his question for the moment, Merry gave Bryan a reassuring smile as she took hold of his arm. "Bryan, may I present Rashid Rampoor, the amazing man who manages my aunt's household. Rashid, this is my friend, Dr. Aldwyn. Have many of the guests already arrived?"

Rashid's dark eyes rolled heavenward in unguarded disgust. "I am sorry to say, nearly everyone is here. They are in the ballroom. It pleases Miss Nora, but I could do without most of them. Not a thimbleful of respect or decorum for the old ways in the lot." He mumbled some words to himself and pushed open the door. "Enough of my complaints, Miss Meredith. You and your companion are most welcomed. This gathering will be truly blessed this night by your all-shining presence."

As they entered the house, Bryan looked back at the frowning man who was closing the doors. "What a strange guy. With his attitude, you would think he owns the place. Is Rashid always so critical of your aunt's guests?"

Stopping in front of a wall mirror to check her appearance, Merry shook her head. "Not usually. Rashid is very protective of my aunt. He's worked for our family for many years. Nora couldn't get along without him."

"I don't know about the rest of it, but Rashid certainly moves quickly and just like a cat. I never heard him open the door or step outside."

Merry fluffed up her long hair with her fingers. "I suppose Rashid mastered the technique while working for my aunt. Nora keeps very irregular hours and demands absolute silence when she does sleep."

Bryan seemed to accept her explanation and Merry was pleased. *Thank the heavens! I don't think Bryan would want to know that Rashid is a genie my great grandfather rescued from captivity when he bought his bottle in Tangiers five hundred years ago. I can only hope Rashid doesn't get any angrier with Nora's guests. Bryan's a trusting soul, but I'd never be able to explain a herd of braying donkeys running through the house!*

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Gathering her courage, Merry turned to Bryan and brushed off a non-existent bit of lint from his lapel. "Well, there's no use putting it off. Are you ready to party, Dr. Aldwyn?"

Bryan gave her a quick hug. "Lead the way, sweetheart. I'm putting myself in your very capable hands."

"Wishful thinker!" she responded with a laugh.

\* \* \*

The ballroom was a visual sea of glittering gowns, costumes, and formal attire. Uniformed waiters scurried about offering the revelers crystal flutes of chilled Dom Perignon and a selection of sumptuous hors d'oeuvres. A large orchestra played music for dancing on a raised stage on the far side of the room.

Bryan stood under the ballroom's arched entry with his arm around Merry's waist. "Wow! When Kate said your aunt was having a little party, that was certainly an understatement. I've seen fewer people at a pro football game."

"And this isn't all of them," Merry admitted, shaking her head. "There's a big salon on the other side of the ballroom that's been set up for the buffet supper that will be served throughout the evening, not to mention two full liquor bars and dozens of tables with chairs that are arranged by the pool."

Scanning the throng of people, Bryan noticed several very familiar faces. "Am I crazy or is that the guy who made all those Rocky movies over there talking to...Damn! She looks exactly like the woman who was involved in that scandal in Washington last year."

"It's him and that's her. Aunt Nora has quite an eclectic grouping of friends and acquaintances. Everyone from power moguls to media darlings seems to gravitate to her. So if you see someone who resembles a movie star, a famous politician, or the face on the current issue of Time magazine, it's probably them."

Bryan chuckled. "You don't seem overly impressed."

"You wouldn't be either if you had to put up with this kind of gathering ten or twelve times a year."

"A dozen of these parties a year? No wonder Rashid was complaining. Your aunt must enjoy playing hostess. What the—" Something pushed Bryan and caused him to look down beside him. A second later, he jerked back from the doorway and shoved Merry behind him. "Who let a wild animal into the house?"

Merry leaned around him and spotted the reason for his distress. "Medwyn, you naughty boy! You know Nora doesn't want you running about the house scaring guests."

Bryan's gaze was riveted on the large gray wolf. "This beast really belongs to your aunt?"

Patting Bryan's arm, Merry stepped to his side. "Yes. Medwyn has been with Aunt Nora since he was a cub. He would never harm you."

"I'm not so sure. It was my hand he was licking a moment ago and those big blue eyes of his are staring directly at me."

"That's strange," Merry replied, petting the wolf's large head. "Medwyn usually avoids mort...men."

Suddenly, Bryan's attention was drawn to a shaggy-haired man breaking through the crowded dance floor. "Now that guy's Halloween disguise is sensational! A werewolf mask like that must have cost him plenty."

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Biting back a groan, Merry watched helplessly as the man in question rushed toward them.

"There you are Medwyn," the man shouted. "Nora will have my hide for letting you out of my sight." His dark eyes met Merry's. The whiteness of his teeth stood out in stark contrast to the thick brown hair that covered his face when he smiled. "Meredith, my dear, I didn't know you were coming tonight. What a wonderful surprise!"

"Hi, Felan," she managed to reply through the tightness in her throat. "It's good seeing you again, too. I would like you to meet, my friend, Dr. Bryan Aldwyn. Bryan, this is Nora's cousin, Felan Lloyd."

As the two men exchanged pleasantries, Bryan shook his head in amazement. "If Nora were to hold a contest for the best costume, you would certainly have my vote, Felan."

Felan's shiny black nose twitched. "I would? But why?"

"I've never seen such incredible detail," Bryan declared. "Right down to the bristle-like hairs and claws on your hands."

Cocking his head to the side, Felan looked at his hands. "You like my claws?"

Bryan nodded. "But tell me, Felan, doesn't that fur on your throat itch like crazy against your turtleneck sweater?"

Felan touched the top of his black sweater. "Does it itch?"

Merry ended Felan's confusion by turning his attention to another issue. "If you mean to avoid Nora's anger, you better get Medwyn back upstairs. People are beginning to look at us and someone's bound to tell her."

Felan nodded, his eyes darting over the ballroom. "You're right of course, Meredith, my dear. Come along, Medwyn. I won't expose myself further to Nora's wrath because of your curiosity."

As the pair of them rushed off toward the back of the house, Merry half listened to Bryan's discussion of the other costumes that were being worn by party guests. She nodded in agreement and occasionally shrugged, but most of her concentration was on her worries about Felan.

*Poor Felan. With his witch mother and werewolf father back in Wales, no wonder he looks so lonely. Being able to visit with his Uncle Medwyn must be a real comfort to him.*

The sound of Bryan's voice asking her a question penetrated Merry's thoughts.

"Don't you think I'm right, Merry?"

She opted for a safe reply. "Maybe."

"There's no maybes about it," Bryan explained, looking over the crowd. "It's downright strange if you ask me. Hundreds of people are here wearing costumes of every shape and description, and there isn't a single vampire among them."

"Of course not," Merry replied without thinking. "A vampire would be out of his mind to be around witches. They'd kill each other if given the chance."

"What did you say? I don't think I heard you right."

The marked confusion she saw in Bryan's eyes as he faced her instantly brought Merry back to reality and to what she'd said. She laughed and gave his arm a reassuring squeeze.

"With all the noise from the music and talking, it's a miracle we can hear anything. As far as popular costumes go, I just said vampires are out at this time, but so are witches." She raised her hand toward the ballroom. "See. There isn't a broom or pointed black hat in sight."

Bryan scowled. "But what about the rest of it? I swore you said someone would be killed if given the chance."

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Merry looped her arms around his neck and gave him a gentle kiss. “My poor baby. You should have your hearing checked at the hospital next week. I said I would be *thrilled* if you asked me to *dance*.”

Her show of affection erased the frown from Bryan’s face. After answering her kiss with a long lingering one of his own, he held Merry in his arms and smiled down at her. “Are you sure I couldn’t offer you something a little more satisfying than a dance around that crowded ballroom?”

The feel of his hard body pressed against hers and the heated gleam in his eyes spoke volumes to Merry. She recognized his needs were mirroring her own. But as much as she longed to take him up on his sensual invitation, there were other things that had to be dealt with first. Not the least of which was seeing Nora before leaving the party.

“Now that you mention it, Bryan, I know of a thing or two I’d rather be doing with you other than dancing.”

“Lead on then, sweetheart,” he said, kissing the side of her neck. “I’ll gladly follow you anywhere.”

“Great! Then let’s get to the salon and have something to eat. I’m starving. Besides lobster from Maine and New Orleans crawfish, the prime rib will melt in your mouth.”

Bryan pulled out of their embrace to look at her. “You were talking about food?”

Affecting her most innocent smile, Merry nodded. “Sure, Bryan. Wasn’t that what you were suggesting when you offered me something more satisfying than a dance?”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. A second later, he kissed her cheek and pulled her to his side. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I meant. Come on, sweetheart. We don’t want to miss out on all that wonderful food.”

They were nearly across the ballroom when Bryan suddenly stopped. “Now there’s a Halloween costume that even puts Felan’s werewolf outfit to shame.”

Merry shrugged off the bout of conscience Bryan’s open disappointment had caused her and followed the direction of his gaze. “Who are you talking about? The tall woman in the Lady Godiva wig? Talk about careful placement of one’s attributes.”

Bryan laughed. “No, not her. The man in the black with the silver framed sunglasses standing beside her. Damn! If I didn’t know better, I would think that guy really was Elvis Presley.”

Recognizing the man who Bryan was referring to, Merry rolled her eyes and silently prayed for divine guidance. *Oh, please give me strength. I just can’t get into that explanation right now. Even if I told Bryan the truth, he would never believe me. Mortals are funny that way.*

“What do you think, Merry? Doesn’t he look like the King of Rock and Roll?”

“He’s not bad, but I’ve seen better.” Merry took hold of Bryan’s arm and steered him toward the salon. “Over dinner I’ll tell you how Aunt Nora became friends with the real Elvis and let him hide in her house for a few days when I was a little girl.”

“The man’s been dead over twenty years. Surely you don’t remember a whole lot about the incident yourself.”

Merry looked back over her shoulder and smiled at the man in black who was waving at her. “You know, Bryan, if an event is important enough, it could seem just like yesterday...”



# Chapter 7

TWO HOURS LATER, Bryan and Merry walked along a garden path lit by tiki torches, enjoying their momentary solitude and the ocean breezes.

“Well, sweetheart, we’ve enjoyed a gourmet dinner, toured this magnificent house, and you’ve introduced me to at least a hundred people, but I’ve yet to meet your notorious Aunt Nora.” Draping his arm over Merry’s shoulder, Bryan chuckled. “Are you sure she’s attending her own party?”

Merry sighed in resignation. “Yes, Nora is here. My aunt probably knows I’m planning a hasty exit after I see her, so she’s taking her time seeking me out. It’s Nora’s warped way of getting exactly what she wants.”

As they stopped near the end of the path, Bryan sniffed the air. “It smells like wood smoke. I can’t imagine anyone having a cookout at this hour of the night.”

Merry looked toward the beach and then back at him. Anxiety filled her green eyes. “It’s nothing like that. Come with me. I’ve something to show you.” She took him to the top of the stairs that led to her aunt’s private beach and pointed below.

A huge bonfire with flames shooting twenty feet into the air was burning brightly on the sand. Several dozen people were gathered around it. Some were laughing, some were talking, and others seemed to be deep in prayer.

“Tonight is more than a celebration of Halloween,” Merry explained. “It’s also Samhain, the Celtic new year. My family’s roots are deeply embedded in the traditions of our ancient Irish heritage. On this night, we burn the fire to honor those we have lost and to contemplate the promise of the New Year before us. I wanted to share this with you.”

Bryan drew her into his arms. “Why? Is there a special significance about sharing this event with someone?”

“Only for me, Bryan,” she replied, resting her cheek against his shoulder. “I’ve always been a private person, keeping people at arms’ length to protect myself. But a few moments ago I realized how much I cared for you and how badly I wanted you to feel the same for me. But we hardly know one another. The best way to overcome this was to take a chance and let you get to know me better. Telling you about Samhain was just the first step.”

“The first step?” Smiling, Bryan stroked her hair with his fingers. “You make it sound like we’re going on a long journey of discovery—a journey I sense you’re not very eager to make.”

Merry looked up at him. “Would you believe I’m frightened? Other than occasional talks with Nora, my thoughts, fears and dreams of the future have been mine alone. I’ve never opened my heart to anyone before. Revealing myself to you is important, yet it’s the most difficult thing I’ve ever had to do.”

Bryan shook his head. “Then don’t rush it. When you learn to trust me, and the time is right, you’ll tell me then.”

A smile curved her lips. “But I trust you already, Bryan. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here with you now.”

“Having your trust means more to me than you’ll ever know, Merry. It’s a gift I will treasure forever.”

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When Bryan kissed her, Merry suddenly stiffened in his arms. “Someone’s here,” she whispered against his lips. “Please, let me handle him.”

Before Bryan could protest, Merry turned from his embrace to confront a tall man dressed in a tuxedo who was standing on the path a few feet behind them. The flickering light from the torches illuminated the stranger’s handsome features and his neatly styled pale blond hair.

Merry sighed. “You know, Dorian, sneaking up on people like that could prove damaging to your health.”

He held up his hands in supplication. “Forgive the intrusion, my dear. Nora’s been searching for you and I agreed to help her.”

“Fine. Now that you’ve found me, go away! I certainly don’t need you dogging my heels, Dorian.”

Instead of being put off by her terse reply, Dorian smiled. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend, Meredith?” Stepping forward, he offered Bryan his hand. “How do you do? My name is Dorian Laird. And you are...?”

The man’s pretentious attitude annoyed Bryan far more than he let on. He had come up against men like Laird before and dealt with them accordingly. But not wanting to endanger his growing relationship with Merry, Bryan reined in his natural inclination to take this man down a few pegs, and shook his hand.

“Bryan Aldwyn. I’m a pediatric oncologist at Hopewell.”

Dorian’s perfect brow creased slightly. “You know, it’s the oddest thing. Your name means nothing to me, but you look vaguely familiar, Dr. Aldwyn. Have we met before?”

“Not unless you attended Harvard or been to the Boston area in the last ten years.” Bryan met Dorian’s scrutinizing stare with one of his own. “Your name is Laird. Any connection to Laird Pharmaceuticals?”

Frowning, Dorian nodded. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Perhaps we met at a medical convention, then.”

Merry laughed. “Not likely. Dorian is much too busy playing at other things to involve himself in the mundane running of his family’s business.”

Rage flashed in Dorian’s hazel eyes for a split second before an indulgent smile appeared on his face. It happened so quickly, Bryan wondered if he had imagined it.

Dorian sighed. “Meredith, you above all should realize the importance of what I’m involved in. My family takes care of the firm while I carry out my duties for the council—”

“Dorian, now isn’t the time to discuss such things,” Merry said, cutting him off in midsentence. “Why don’t you return to the house and tell Aunt Nora that I’ll be in to see her in a few minutes?”

At that moment, the beeper in Bryan’s pocket went off. He pulled it out and read the digital message. “I’ve got to get to a phone right away. Benton wouldn’t be calling me if it wasn’t an emergency.”

“The nearest phone’s in the pool house,” Merry explained. “Come on, I’ll show you where it is.”

“But, Meredith,” Dorian protested as they rushed past him, “I need to speak with you privately about an important matter. It has to do with you and Simon.”

At the mention of her father’s name, Merry stopped and turned back to Dorian. “You’ve seen Simon recently?”

Dorian nodded. “Yes, I met with him last week. I don’t wish to alarm you, Meredith, but

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your father has planned several things I think you should know about before he arrives.”

Merry was clearly perplexed. She looked from Dorian to Bryan and then to the beeper in his hand.

Understanding her dilemma, Bryan took pity and kissed her cheek. “I know you’re anxious to speak to Laird about your father. Why don’t you talk to him while I call the hospital? I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

After Merry told Bryan where to find the phone, she watched him hurry down the path toward the pool house. When he was safely out of sight, she turned to face Dorian.

“All right, warlock, tell me what you’re talking about and save the ruse of acting like my concerned friend. Knowing how conniving you can be, I doubt if you’ve even seen my father.”

Walking toward her, Dorian frowned. “Your accusations are not justified in this case, my pet. To prove it, I know Simon has sent you word of his impending visit. He’s coming to see you immediately after the council’s meeting next month.”

“That’s true, but it still doesn’t convince me. Exactly what has my father done that you think I should know about?”

“To begin with, your lack of acceptance of our ways is finally getting to Simon. He’s determined to change your mind.”

Merry shook her head. “I don’t believe you. Simon and I have discussed this and he respects my wishes to live like a mortal. If my father had altered his views on this, I’m sure he would have come to me first.”

Dorian moved closer to her. “Not this time, Meredith. With the state of world affairs as they are, the Domain must have strong leaders now and in the future if it is to survive. The council is demanding to know who Simon will be choosing as his successor. As his only child, you would have been the obvious choice, but you’ve made it clear that you don’t want to practice magic, let alone take on such a responsibility.”

Merry sniffed. “As if the almighty Council of the Domain would accept a woman as Grand Master!”

“Times have changed and the Domain must go along with it. There are several women serving on the council already.”

“Aunt Nora will be pleased about that, but I still don’t want to be Grand Master and no one can force me into doing it.”

Dorian nodded. “Simon accepts that, but he’s come up with a way to appease the council and to give them what they want.”

“And exactly how will my father accomplish this?”

“By making you marry a warlock of his choice.”

For a few seconds, Merry couldn’t find the ability to speak. “He wouldn’t do that!” she gasped. “Simon knows I would detest such a marriage. Why would he even consider such a thing?”

Dorian put his arm around her shoulder. “Simon has no alternative. A Rand or Glendenning wizard has ruled the Domain since its inception. Once your marriage is consummated, your husband will be declared a Rand and in doing so, becomes Simon’s successor.”

“That’s all well and good for the Domain, but what does it do for me? Nothing!” Merry trembled in anger. “I’m forced into a marriage I don’t want and a way of life I detest.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to you before Simon gets here. I may have come up with a solution that will please everyone.”

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She eyed him warily. "I know I'm going to kick myself for asking, but what do you have in mind?"

Dorian smiled. "Simple. Marry me."

Merry began to laugh. The tittering became deep belly chuckles that bent her over within seconds. "Simple? Dorian Laird, marrying you wouldn't be simple! It would be crazy, insane, and totally moronic! I hate your guts! Why on earth would you think I'd even consider such a thing?"

Dorian's smile gave way to a look of utter consternation. "Because after we had a baby, I would set you free. Only a warlock can declare a marriage dissolved. You could return to your mortal way of living, the needs of the Domain will be met, and everyone gets what they want."

"Especially you." Walking away from him, Merry shook her head. "I've known all along that you were ambitious, but I never realized your aspirations went as far as being the Grand Master of the Domain. Is that why you've been pursuing me the past five years? Hoping to latch onto the crown if you were married to the heir apparent?"

"Don't be absurd! I've wanted to have a relationship with you because I was attracted to you," Dorian protested. "The idea of marrying you off to insure the continuation of the Rand line in the Domain was Simon's idea. Why, the man has even prepared a list of possible candidates! There's Preston Harper from London, Eric Von Braun of Austria, Liam Gregory in Dublin, and the son of Magnus Griffon in San Francisco. Magnus is a powerful wizard who presides over the largest coven in North America."

Merry shook her head in disbelief. "But I don't know any of these men. How can Simon expect me to marry a stranger?"

"That's why I think you should marry me, Meredith. We know one another and there will be no false hopes or expectations of a lifelong union between us." Dorian moved to her side and touched her arm. "As soon as we have a child to ensure the continuing family bloodline, we can go our separate ways. What are we talking about time-wise? One or two years at most."

Merry slapped his hand away. "Except one day, my child would be coerced into doing the bidding of the Domain just as I have. Thanks, but no thanks, Dorian. I won't marry you. I'll take my chances with Simon. Once he understands how badly I abhor this idea, I'm sure he will come up with another solution for finding a successor."

Dorian's smiling façade became a mask of seething anger as he forcefully grabbed her by the shoulders. "You can't do this, Meredith. I want to be the Grand Master of the Domain and if that means having to marry you, then I will!"

"Get your hands off me, Dorian Laird, or I won't be held accountable for what happens to you!"

His laughter was low and threatening. "What are you going to do if I refuse, Meredith? My magic is far more powerful than yours. I've been watching you, and unlike you, I don't scorn my ability. I practice my skills." Dorian arched his brow. "What will you do if you don't use magic? Call on your mortal friend, the good doctor, to rescue you?"

"Leave Bryan out of this! Harm one hair on Bryan's head and I'll have Nora invoke a spell on you that will leave you impotent for the next five decades!"

Dorian winced dramatically. "My, my, you certainly can sound like a real witch when it suits you, my pet. As for Nora, while she has the ability to do such things, the Domain would not be pleased. There are rules about members of the Domain attacking one another. Would she risk punishment and side with a mortal against me?"

"Aunt Nora cares for me like a daughter. She would do anything I asked of her. Once she

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knows how much I love Bryan Aldwyn, she would..."

The realization of what she had just said stunned Merry. *My stars! It's true. I do love Bryan. With every particle in my being, I love him. How in the universe did that happen?*

"So, you fancy yourself in love with a mortal," Dorian said with a sneer. "How very gauche of you, my pet. And how does the good doctor feel about you? Or more importantly, how will the saintly Bryan Aldwyn feel when he discovers you're a witch?"

Dorian's question stung Merry's heart, but she wouldn't let him know how much pain his words provoked. The truth of his query only served to make her angrier. "What makes you think I haven't told Bryan already, Dorian? It's hardly a thing one can hide from a lover."

"Perhaps, if it were true. But I know you've never had a lover, Meredith." Dorian's manicured hand softly caressed her cheek as he leaned over her. "I can smell your innocence. It wafts around you like an alluring perfume. If I touch your flesh with my tongue, I would be able to taste the purity of it and desire you even more than I do already."

Merry shoved him away from her. "Keep your desire, tongue, and other body parts to yourself! I wouldn't have you for a lover if you were the last man in the cosmos."

Ignoring her words, Dorian chuckled and moved toward her again. "There's that spirit I've come to admire. Fiery and impatient. I can hardly wait to take you that first time, Meredith. It's incredible to think how my powers will be doubled when I merge your magic with mine."

"Your powers will be doubled? What are you talking about?"

Dorian's brow rose in surprise. "Oh, that's right! You don't know about the merging gift. If a warlock takes a witch's virginity, his powers are increased at least twofold."

Merry kept him talking as she inched her way further from his grasp. "Well, excuse me if I don't believe you. I've never heard of a merging gift. I bet you're making this all up."

"It's true," he boasted. "Centuries ago, the merging gift was an expected benefit of a marriage between a warlock and a witch. Then a few clever witches used their virginity and the gift like bargaining chips to buy their way into advantageous marriages. In retaliation, warlocks on the council began to play down the worth of the merging gift by claiming it didn't really exist. After a couple hundred years of hearing this, everyone began to believe it was so. Now, only warlocks in the hierarchy of the Domain know of its existence."

Merry could just imagine Nora's reaction to this bit of news. No wonder her aunt had such a low opinion of warlocks and men in general.

The high heel on Merry's shoe twisted on a piece of gravel, causing her to lose her balance. Before she plummeted to the ground, Dorian caught her in his arms and pulled her against him. Merry struggled to free herself as he carried her from the path to a nearby, enclosed garden.

"You'll never get away with this, Dorian. Bryan will be back any second. Put me down this instant!"

Licking her neck, Dorian laughed. "I had planned on waiting till our wedding to claim my reward, but with your reluctance, I can't take a chance on losing it now. And if Aldwyn interferes, I won't hesitate to kill him!"

Merry felt her back being painfully pressed into the rough stonewall that surrounded the estate. When she tried to scream, Dorian's mouth fell over hers and muffled the sound. His attempt to probe her mouth with his tongue was halted when she bit him. Filled with rage, he captured her flailing arms and imprisoned them over her head with one of his hands. Within seconds, he savagely tore away the bodice of her gown, exposing her lace-covered breasts to the night air.

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Using magic to protect herself was futile, Merry quickly discovered. For every spell she tried to invoke, she felt Dorian silently countering it with one of his own.

She valiantly fought the panic rising inside her when Dorian forced his leg between her knees. He lunged forward and she felt the hard evidence of his arousal rubbing on her abdomen. His hand brushed her thigh as he groped for the hem of her cocktail length gown. Realizing she only had minutes to save herself, Merry decided to take a chance on catching her attacker off guard and played possum. Rather than fighting him, she let her entire body go limp and fell against him.

Almost instantly, Dorian broke off his assault and staggered to support her unexpected weight. Merry used his momentary lapse to knee him in the groin and cry out for help.

\* \* \*

Bryan was returning from the pool house with Kate and Shamus when a woman's scream disturbed the tranquility of the shadowed gardens. He knew instinctively who the woman was.

"That's Merry," he shouted, leaving the path to follow the direction of her voice.

Running into the enclosed torch lit garden, Bryan found Dorian wrestling Merry to the ground. He grabbed the fair-haired man by the neck and spun him around to face him. Before Dorian could gain his bearings, Bryan struck him full force in the jaw with his fist, sending him down to the ground in a heap.

"Get up, Laird, and fight me like a man, you spineless coward," Bryan demanded.

As he shoved his unconscious opponent over with his foot, Kate knelt beside Merry and helped her sit up. "Me poor, poor darlin'! Did that bloody villain hurt you?"

"I'm fine, Kate. A bit shook up, but I'm okay."

Kate pushed Merry's long tangled hair away from her face. "Well, you look plain awful to me. Bryan, leave Shamus there to watch over Dorian and see to our girl. She needs you."

Catching sight of Merry's torn gown and quivering shoulders, Bryan was suddenly hit by two confounding truths. First, he wanted to destroy Dorian Laird with his bare hands. And second, but more importantly, he was in love with Meredith Albright.

Only Kate's words "She needs you" brought him back to the realization of what had to be done now. The rest could wait. Removing his jacket, he draped it over Merry's shoulders. He slipped into his role as a physician and knelt to examine her. "This will only take a moment, sweetheart," he explained, cradling her cheek with his hand. "Are you in any pain?"

"No, of course not. Dorian went a little crazy, but I'm fine. Nothing's wrong with me."

It took an effort, but Bryan schooled his features to appear calm. In spite of Merry's anxious words, the physical signs of shock and attempted rape were too clear to ignore. Besides the ripped gown, bruises were beginning to surface on her face, neck, and chest. Her hands were clenched in her lap, but he could see the scrapes and broken nails. Her complexion was pale, her skin cool and clammy. The pupils of her eyes were dilated and she was shivering. "Merry, I don't want to alarm you, but you might be going into shock. I want to take you to the emergency room—"

"No-no emergency room!" she frantically protested, grabbing his shirt. "Please, Bryan. I can't go to the hospital. There would be too many questions. Then the police would get involved. I can't let that happen!"

Bryan took hold of her trembling hands. "Merry, sweetheart, calm down. You've been through a terrible ordeal and you need to be seen by a doctor for possible injuries."

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“You’re a doctor, Bryan. Can’t you take care of me?” she begged. “I just couldn’t deal with being poked and prodded by a bunch of strangers right now.”

The brightness of her eyes and the desperation in her voice made him relent. Heaving a sigh, he pulled her into his arms and held her. “All right, Merry. No emergency room or strange doctors tonight. But I think we should call the police. That bastard shouldn’t be allowed to get away with this.”

Merry jerked away from him and shook her head. “No police, Bryan! Please understand. This is Palm Beach. Get the police involved and the media is right behind them. The tabloids would have a field day with this and my face would be appearing with Dorian’s at every grocery store check-out stand in the country.”

“But Laird should be punished for what he did to you,” Bryan protested.

Kate put her hand on Bryan’s shoulder. “Don’t you worry, Bryan. When Nora hears what that blighter did to our girl, she’ll see he’s punished properly for his offense. Laird will rue his actions for the rest of his days.”

Bryan looked at Dorian lying face down on the grass and frowned. “He must have a glass jaw. I only hit him once, but he’s still out cold. As a doctor, I really should check him out before we go.”

Dapper in his tuxedo, Shamus sat on top of Dorian’s back and chuckled. “Don’t bother, lad. ’Tis more likely the spirits he drank earlier are keepin’ him down. I’ve a feelin’ this boyo won’t be goin’ anywhere for quite a while.”

Kate kissed Merry’s forehead. “Bryan can take you home and see to your care, dearling. Rest assured everything is being taken care of here and you’ve naught to fear. All right?” she asked, patting Merry’s cheek.

Bryan noticed the color had returned to Merry’s complexion and the tremors that had racked her body had subsided. A small smile curved her lips.

“Thank you, Kate. Tell Aunt Nora I’ll call her tomorrow. I don’t think I can take her clucking over me tonight.”

“I will, dearling. Now you and Bryan best take the path around the house if you want to avoid the others.” Kate winked at Bryan. “Till we meet again, Bryan Aldwyn.” After a private word with Shamus, the diminutive lady hurried toward the house.

When Merry stood up and tried to walk on her own, Bryan put his arm around her waist to stop her. “Hey lady, where do think you’re going?”

Looking at her torn gown, she shrugged. “Home, I guess. I certainly can’t go any where else in this outfit.”

Bryan frowned. “Don’t play dumb with me, Merry. You know very well what I’m getting at.” Before she could react, he swept her up in his arms and began carrying her down the path.

“This isn’t necessary, Bryan. I can walk.”

“Fine—if you can walk, I think I’ll go back there and rearrange Dorian’s face a little more.”

Wrapping her arm around his neck, Merry sighed and laid her head on his shoulder. “On second thought, I’ll just stay where I am and enjoy the ride.”

Bryan knew Merry was putting on a brave face for his benefit. He wouldn’t pressure her to talk about the altercation with Laird yet, but when she was ready, he planned on being there for her.

\* \* \*

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Kate watched them undetected from a shadowed alcove of hedges beside the path. A smile filled with joy creased the wizened old fairy's round face.

"Aye, Bryan Aldwyn is the one for my Merry. He's exactly what she needs. Now if I can just get Nora to let them be, everything will be fine." She laughed. "Aye, very fine indeed!"



# Chapter 8

THE MOON WAS full, the breezes were mild, and the stars above the Palm Beach coastline resembled glittering diamonds on black velvet. But Merry didn't notice. As Bryan drove her home, her mind was filled with memories of Dorian's attack and the things he had said.

In spite of Kate's assurance that Dorian would be dealt with and she had nothing to fear, Merry knew better. If there really was a merging gift, the ambitious warlock wouldn't rest until he possessed it and her. She also knew his threat to kill Bryan was one he would fulfill without a second thought. Somehow she had to find a way to stop him—Bryan's life depended on it.

After pulling his car into the parking area behind the store, Bryan reached over and took her hand. "I blame myself for what happened tonight. If that call hadn't taken so long..."

Merry patted his hand. "Hey, it wasn't your fault. Dorian has been trying to hit on me for a long time. I can see now my instincts to avoid him were right."

"That doesn't make me feel less responsible. I could tell you didn't like the man, but when he mentioned your father..." Bryan shrugged. "I thought you'd appreciate a bit of privacy. I had no idea it was merely a ploy to get you alone."

*But was it a ploy?* Merry asked herself. *In Simon's note, he did say there was a very important matter we had to discuss. Was Dorian telling the truth? Has my father come up with a plan to marry me off to a stranger for the good of the Domain?*

The possibility of such a thing really happening was bad enough, but recalling how close she had come to being brutally raped by Dorian caused her to tremble. The action didn't escape Bryan's attention.

"Damn! You're shivering again. I knew you were in shock. Why did I let you talk me out of taking you to the hospital?"

Merry shook her head and tried to smile. "I don't need a hospital. All I need is your arms around me, holding me tight. Can you administer that kind of treatment, Dr. Aldwyn?"

With a sigh of resignation, Bryan brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "For as long as you need, sweetheart. But first, let me get you upstairs. After you've had a chance to clean up, I'll check you over for other injuries."

When Merry opened her mouth to object, he tapped the tip of her nose with his finger. "Don't argue with me. One word and you'll find yourself in Hopewell's ER getting acquainted with the staff on the graveyard shift. Understand?"

Rolling her eyes, Merry clamped her lips shut and nodded.

\* \* \*

"Bryan, this is silly. I don't need a medical exam," Merry protested as she sat on the edge of the bed while he took her pulse. Disgruntled with his lack of response, she sighed. "Of all the luck! The first time I get a man in my bedroom and he wants to play doctor for real!"

"Stop complaining and let me do my job." Bryan parted the front of her robe to examine the bruises on her neck and chest.

His close proximity had Merry's senses in a riot. Her hands clutched the bedspread beneath her so she wouldn't be tempted to explore the silkiness of his thick dark hair. She fought

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to ignore the spicy scent of his cologne teasing her nose. Her eyes viewed the petal pink walls and white ceiling rather than linger on the perfect contours of his handsome face.

Merry frowned at her thoughts. *Instead of taking inventory of Bryan's desirable traits, I should be thinking of a way to protect him from Dorian. I'm the reason Bryan's in danger. If I weren't the daughter of Simon Rand or a virgin witch, Dorian Laird would have never come after me in the first place.*

At that moment, she realized Bryan had spoken to her. "Sorry. What did you say?"

He shrugged. "Nothing important. Forget it."

"That's not fair. You've made me curious," she teased. "Tell me what you said."

"I...um...asked if I really was the first man you ever had in your bedroom." Turning from her, Bryan went to the nightstand and began going through the medical bag he had brought up from his car. "I'm sorry, Merry. It's none of my business. I don't even know why I asked the question."

She smiled. "Perhaps it's because you care about me?"

Merry's amusement vanished as Bryan looked at her. There was no mistaking the tenderness in his eyes when he spoke. "Yes, I do care for you, Merry. Very much. I've never felt this way about a woman before. But after what happened to you tonight, this is hardly the time for me to be saying such things to you."

Merry stood up and moved toward him. "You're wrong, Bryan. Now more than ever, I need to hear that you care for me. I need you to hold me and make me forget the cruelty of Dorian's touch."

Bryan took Merry into his arms. "It may sound selfish, but I need this too. Holding you like this, I can almost set aside the rage that came over me when I found Laird attacking you. If he ever comes near you again, I swear I'll kill—"

"I love you, Bryan."

Clearly startled by her softly spoken words, Bryan eased back to look at her face. "What did you say?"

Merry felt heat rising in her cheeks. She'd wanted to take Bryan's mind off Dorian, and from his reaction, it was obvious he hadn't been expecting her to say something as revealing as this. With his eyes shielded behind his glasses, she wasn't sure if he was surprised or stunned in horror.

"I...ah...ah..." Merry heaved a heavy sigh and burrowed her face against his shoulder. "Never mind. It wasn't important."

Bryan cupped her chin with his hand and made her look up at him. "Oh, no, sweetheart, you can't deny it. You said 'I love you' and that's very, very important to me."

Merry frowned at his eager smile. "Bryan Aldwyn, if you knew what I said, then why did you ask?"

"Because I wanted you to say it again." Bryan kissed the crease on her brow. "It's not everyday a man gets to hear the words he's been waiting all his life to hear."

A tightness formed in Merry's throat, making her reply a husky whisper. "All his life?"

Bryan nodded. "Yes, all my life. And what's even more incredible is that I love you, too."

Words were unnecessary when his mouth lowered to hers to capture it with a kiss. His tongue lightly traced the trembling line of her lips, seeking entrance. She needed no coaxing and willingly opened to him. Merry shivered with need as he took and explored her silent invitation.

In seconds, Merry found herself swept away with newfound feelings of passion.

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Following an instinct that seemed too natural to ignore, she drew on his tongue, pulling it deeper into her mouth. She relished its velvet-like texture and absorbed its slightly salty flavor with the eagerness of a starving child. With Bryan there was no fear, only an extraordinary desire for more, so much more.

A moan of disappointment escaped her lips when Bryan lifted his mouth from hers. Shaking his head, he hugged her. "Merry, you are such a temptation. Any more kisses like that and I'll forget my good intentions and make love to you here and now."

Feeling like a petulant child, Merry sniffed against the shoulder of his white pleated shirt. "Would that be so bad?"

Bryan pulled back to look into her eyes. "Not bad, sweetheart, just poor timing. When we make love the first time, I want it to be special. Candlelight, roses, and all the romantic trappings you deserve. I only want the best for the woman I love." His fingers grazed her cheek. "I do love you, Meredith Albright."

Nodding, Merry blinked back her tears of happiness. "I know, Bryan. And I love you, too."

"Good," Bryan said, walking her back to the bed. "Now you're going to keep those precious thoughts in mind while you get into that bed and go to sleep. After the battering you took tonight, you need to rest."

Merry glared at him. "You make me sound like an invalid, but I'm fine."

"Oh, really?" His brow arched. "Tell me you're not hiding some colorful bruises beneath that nightgown you insisted on wearing under your robe. I didn't press you into a full exam, but from the way you've been moving, I can tell you're sore."

When Merry stopped to perch her hands on her hips, she proved him right by wincing in pain. "You're just too smart for my own good, Dr. Aldwyn. I won't argue anymore, but I really hate being treated like a child."

After helping Merry to remove her robe and get under the covers, Bryan sat on the bed to give her a quick chaste kiss. "Treating you like a child is the last thing I want to do, sweetheart. I just want you to get better. Is there anything I can get for you before I leave?"

She shook her head. "No, the Tylenol you gave me is beginning to help. You could stay with me a little while and talk. I'm too wound up to fall asleep yet."

"On one condition: that you close your eyes and try to relax while we talk. I don't want you fighting sleep to amuse me."

"All right, Doc. I promise." Merry promptly shut her eyes and propped her folded hands on top of the spread. "Now, what should we talk about?"

"It's up to you, sweetheart."

Merry felt him moving on the bed beside her. Her eyes were closed, but she knew Bryan was sitting with his back against the headboard near her pillow. Having him close by gave her the courage to tell him about Dorian Laird.

"I know you're curious about Dorian. Our families are friends and I've known Dorian for more than ten years. It's only been in the past five that he's even given me more than a passing glance. He flirts, I ignore him. He calls, I don't answer the phone. If he wasn't so set on impressing my father and Aunt Nora, I doubt if he would even speak to me."

"Why not? The guy's a real jerk, but he certainly can see how beautiful you are. I thought the two of you had dated."

Merry peeked up at Bryan and scowled. "Please, give me more credit than that. As I told Dorian this evening, I wouldn't have him if he were the last man in the cosmos!"

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Bryan chuckled. "That must have shot holes in the guy's inflated ego! But if you constantly avoided him all this time, why would he suddenly try and force himself on you tonight?"

Closing her eyes, Merry tried to appear unconcerned by his question. "I guess Dorian has aspirations of cozying up to my father and his business by marrying me. I told him no and he went nuts! Maybe he thinks being an art dealer like Simon is better than being an executive for a pharmaceutical company."

"That doesn't give him the right to attack you. If he ever comes within a mile of you, I'll—"

"Bryan, can you hold me for a few minutes?" she asked, gazing up at him. "I suddenly feel very vulnerable and alone."

The haunted look in Merry's eyes cut through Bryan like a razor edged knife. There was no way he could deny her whispered request. Lying down on the bed, he drew her into his arms until she was cuddled against him.

"Is this better?"

Smiling, she nodded and closed her eyes. "Oh, yes, this is nice. I've always been a restless sleeper. My mother used to put me to sleep by singing me lullabies and stroking my hair when I was little."

"I'm not much at singing, but I think I can handle the rest." Bryan began to run his hand over the unbound length of Merry's hair. "How am I doing?"

"Mmm...wonderful," she moaned with a contented sigh. "I can see why my cat likes having his head petted so much. Thanks, Bryan."

Kissing her brow, he smiled. "Anytime, sweetheart. Just try to relax."

Merry's hair felt like satin beneath his fingertips. Soon he realized how much the caressing movements were making him relax as well. An air of contentment swept over him, covering him with a tranquility that had long been missing in his life. This was right; this is where he was meant to be. Now that he had found Merry and gained her love, he could never let her go.

But first, there were problems looming before them that had to be dealt with. Love wouldn't be enough if Merry couldn't accept him for what he was. An overworked doctor with a badly dysfunctional background like his was hardly a great catch for a sweet spirited woman like Merry.

Besides the obvious difficulties, she adored her family, while he barely spoke to his. What if her Aunt Nora didn't like him? What if Simon Rand didn't approve of their relationship? Would Merry stand by him or be swayed by the powerful people around her?

Bryan shook his head and hugged her closer. "You will be mine, Merry. No matter what I have to do or who I have to impress, I intend to keep you with me forever."

Merry didn't resist or answer. From her deep even breathing, he knew she was sleeping. Careful not to wake her, Bryan eased himself away from the bed and tucked the covers around Merry. Kissing her cheek, he gathered his things and turned off the lights. He was nearly out the door of her room when she called to him in a sleepy voice.

"Bryan, you really were the first man in my bedroom."

He smiled. "I know, sweetheart. I know."

But Merry never heard his reply. She was sound asleep.

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“My poor sweet baby! What has that foul warlock done to you, Meredith? Bruises, cuts, scrapes! When I get my hands on Dorian Laird, he will regret the day he was put on this earth!”

Merry opened her eyes to find Nora’s worried face looming over her. Squinting against the sunlight coming in the window that increased the pain in her head, she sat up to look at the clock on the nightstand. It was eight A.M. “I appreciate your concern, Aunt Nora, but I’ll be fine. I told Kate I would call you. You didn’t have to get up early to see me.”

“Get up? My darling girl, I haven’t been to bed yet.” Looking as perfect as a runway model in a gown of black silk and a fortune in diamond jewelry, Nora sat on the edge of the bed to hold Merry’s hand. “By the time Kate found me and told me what happened, you were gone and Dorian had broken free of Shamus’s spell and vanished. We’ve spent every moment since then trying to find that blasted warlock! Laird had me convinced he was in love with you. I should send for your father. Simon won’t let Dorian get away with attacking you like this.”

At the mention of her father’s name, Merry forgot her discomfort and shook her head. “No, Aunt Nora. Don’t call Simon. If what I learned last night is true, he’s the last person I want to see right now.”

Merry repeated everything Dorian had told her in the garden. As she spoke of Simon choosing a husband for her and Dorian’s revelation of the merging gift, she waited for Nora’s look of disbelief—but none came. The older witch didn’t react at all until Merry finished speaking.

Her brow rose with an elegant ease. “Sweet Mother Goddess! So that’s what all the uproar’s been with the council. I’ve been hearing rumors for months and now I see it’s true. Simon is being pressured into naming his successor. That really must irk Simon’s omnipotent self!”

“But what about the merging gift? Does it actually exist, or did Dorian make the whole thing up to justify his attack on me last night?”

Nora let out an exasperated sigh. “As much as I’d like to say Laird was lying, I have strong suspicions it’s true.

“When I was a girl, I crept into my father’s study so I could look at the ancient scrolls he stored in there for the council. While reviewing these texts, I found several references to the merging gift, but no explanation as to what it was.”

“Did you ever ask your father what it meant?”

“Yes, for all the good it did me,” Nora replied with a dry humorless laugh. “Once he reprimanded me for reading the scrolls, my father, the eminent Morgan Glendenning, told me the merging gift was the price a good little witch paid for the great honor of marrying a warlock. That was the day I decided I would never marry a warlock or be concerned with paying such a debt.”

Merry nervously toyed with a tendril of her tangled hair. “But do you think he was referring to a witch’s virginity?”

“Since my father was the original male sexist, I wouldn’t doubt it. According to him, a woman’s place was under a man’s thumb! If he hadn’t been killed in that L.A. earthquake thirty-odd years ago, Morgan Glendenning would have destroyed the feminist movement before it ever got started in this country.”

Shivering with dread, Merry stood up and walked across the room to the window. The third story vantage point displayed the sun shimmering on the Intracoastal Waterway, boats rocking from the slight waves, and the Flagler Museum in Palm Beach, but Merry saw none of it.

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All her thoughts were centered on one undeniable conclusion: everything Dorian had said the night before was true.

“Curse those men on the council!” Nora hissed with anger. “Denying witches this knowledge was simply another cruel way of manipulating them all these years.”

“Don’t worry. Several women have recently gained places on the council. Once they learn about the merging gift, it won’t be a secret anymore.”

“Women on the council? Well, it’s about time. I wonder how I could secure a position for myself. I’d make sure every young witch in the Domain knew what she—” Nora’s mouth suddenly fell open. “Meredith, you’re still a virgin and that means—”

Merry spun around to face her. “Now you know why Dorian was so desperate to possess me. It was never love. He wants power. I refused to marry him, but my merging gift might give him the edge he’ll need to...to force me.” Tears burned her eyes. “Oh, Aunt Nora, what am I going to do? Dorian will come back for me. He’s already threatened to kill Bryan if he gets in the way. I can’t let that happen.”

Nora hugged Merry and let her cry against her shoulder. “Bryan must be the handsome mortal Kate told me about. Why haven’t you introduced him to me? Afraid I wouldn’t approve of your choice?”

Merry shook her head. “No. I was going to let you meet Bryan last night, but then Dorian...well, I never got the chance.”

“I sense there’s something more going on here, Meredith.” She pulled Merry up by her shoulders to face her. “Guilt and reluctance are shining in your lovely green eyes. You’ve fallen in love with this man and he has no idea you are a witch. How long do you think you can keep this from him?”

Wiping the tears from her face, Merry shrugged. “I don’t know. Bryan’s a doctor, a realist, a man of science. How can I tell him the woman he’s in love with is a witch? That her family is made up of creatures he thought only existed on the pages of fairy tales and horror novels. I want to tell him the truth, but how can I if I risk losing him in the process?”

“But if you don’t tell him, think how betrayed he will feel when the truth comes out.” Nora stroked Merry’s hair with her hand. “And the truth will come out someday, honey. It always does.”

“I know, I know. But our relationship is so new; I just need more time before I can tell him. Right now, keeping Bryan safe from Dorian is my number one concern.” Merry sighed. “Maybe I should go out of town for a couple of weeks. I’d hate leaving Bryan, but perhaps it’s the best way to protect him.”

A strange look passed over Nora’s face; then she smiled. “If you want to protect Bryan, you must seduce him.”

Merry gasped. “You want me to seduce...?” She shook her head. “Aunt Nora, you’re crazy! I could never do that.”

“I don’t know why not,” Nora answered with a delicate shrug. “It’s the perfect solution and you haven’t got a second to spare. Once you and Bryan make love, the merging gift will no longer be an issue. Dorian will have no reason to pursue you.”

“But it seems so planned, so deliberate.”

“Think of it this way: As soon as you remove the merging gift from the equation of this problem, Bryan will be safe.”

Merry felt her resolve wavering. “Will the merging gift harm Bryan?”

“He’s a mortal, so I don’t believe it will have any effect on him at all.” Nora smiled

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wryly to herself. “Thank the stars my first time wasn’t wasted on a dissolute warlock. Just the thought of one of those chauvinistic bastards gaining anything from me really burns my...”

Taking a deep breath, Nora patted Merry on the back. “Why don’t you get dressed while I get breakfast? All this adrenaline and aggravation has left me famished.”

For the first time since she woke up, Merry found a reason to smile. “You’re going to cook?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Meredith. I want to satisfy my hunger pangs, not poison myself. Brush your teeth, run a comb through your hair and get right back here. I’ll take care of everything else.” Looking at Merry’s neck, she frowned. “Those bruises are awful. Are they very painful?”

Merry grimaced as she moved slowly to the bathroom. “Yes, but they’re nothing compared to the ones on my legs, arms, and hips. I’m just lucky none of my ribs were broken.”

“Well, I can take care of all those too.” Nora waved her hand in Merry’s direction. “*Pain and bruising now must flee, make my precious trouble free.*”

A tingling sensation ran through Merry’s body for a few seconds before it vanished. Along with it, her pain, bruises and abrasions disappeared. Even her torn nails were restored.

Merry blew out a sigh of relief. “Oh my, that does feel better. You’re a lifesaver, Aunt Nora. Thanks.”

“You could have done it yourself if you had practiced your magic. Having the inborn ability isn’t enough. You need to study your lessons and polish your skills if—”

“I know, I know,” Merry replied, “but I’m still not interested in living as a witch.”

Nora held up her hands in surrender. “Fine. Have it your way, Meredith. Just don’t expect me to do the same.”

With a snap of her manicured fingers, Nora conjured up a breakfast table with two chairs next to the window. The air was quickly laden with the tempting smells of fresh coffee, western omelets, home fried potatoes, and blueberry muffins.

The elegant witch nodded with satisfaction. “That’s what I call good cooking. Now, for a little comfort.” In the blink of an eye, her jewels and black gown were replaced by deep purple lounging pajamas and matching slippers.

Laughing, Merry moved toward the bathroom and dressing area. “You seem to have everything you need for the moment. I’ll be right back.”

“Do hurry,” Nora called, taking her place at the table. “While you’re eating, I’ll start helping you with your lessons.”

Merry stopped at the bathroom door and frowned at her aunt. “How many times must I tell you? I’m not interested in learning magic.”

Nora’s blue eyes flashed with merriment. “Who said anything about magic? I’m going to tutor you in a subject I should have taught you about years ago: how to seduce a man. By the time I’m through teaching you a bit of what I know, Bryan will think the seduction was his idea.”

“I never agreed to—”

“But you’ll do it,” Nora cut in, “because you love him. I just hope your mortal is worthy of you, my girl. Because if he brings you one moment of grief, he will have to answer to me.”

Merry nodded, hiding the truth of what she was feeling from showing on her face. Telling Nora about Bryan had been a big mistake. If things didn’t work out between them, Nora’s distrust of men and protective nature could cause problems.

Until she was sure of their relationship and Bryan accepted the truth about her being a witch, Merry vowed to keep the man she loved and her aunt apart.

## Chapter 9

FIVE DAYS LATER, Merry unlocked the front door of her store to let in a woman and a little girl. “Good morning, Mrs. Wycoff. Sorry I’m late, but I had to see a friend at the hospital before she underwent a procedure this morning.”

Wearing an expensive brown and tan linen suit with matching accessories, Mrs. Wycoff entered the store with the child in tow. “Think nothing of it, Miss Albright. Tracy and I just got here ourselves.”

“This can’t possibly be your daughter Tracy.” Merry smiled at the little girl. “My goodness, you really have grown up since I saw you last year.”

“I’m six now,” the small child with brown pigtails boasted. “Mama said I’m finally big enough to be in the Thanksgiving pageant this year.”

Mrs. Wycoff patted Tracy’s shoulder. “Why don’t you go look around the store while I talk to Miss Albright? As soon as we’re through, you and I will go to the mall to pick up that book I promised to buy you.” When her daughter scampered off, she turned to Merry. “The committee from the church wanted me to thank you again for your generosity. Your wonderful costumes always make the pageant special.”

“I’m pleased that I can help. So, how many pilgrims and Indians are we planning on outfitting this year?”

As Merry and Mrs. Wycoff stood at the counter completing the list of costumes, Tracy came running up to them with a pointed black witch’s hat.

“Mama, can I have this instead of the book at the mall?”

Mrs. Wycoff shook her head. “No. Put the hat back where you found it.”

“Please, Mama,” Tracy pleaded. “You wouldn’t let me be a witch for Halloween like I wanted. Can’t I just have the hat?”

“Absolutely not. Now put that hat where it belongs and not another word about it.” After Tracy scowled and ran toward the clearance table, Mrs. Wycoff gave Merry an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry about the little confrontation. With our family’s status in the church, a devil worshipping witch is hardly an appropriate costume for a Christian child.”

Merry frowned. “Witches don’t worship the devil.”

“Of course they do,” Mrs. Wycoff said firmly. “Surely you’ve heard that witches and warlocks are Satan’s loyal minions. Blood oaths, animal sacrifices, crucifixes turned upside down. It’s all a part of witch cults.”

“I think you’ve got Satanic cults confused with witchcraft, Mrs. Wycoff. Witches don’t believe in Satan. Satan, Lucifer and the existence of Hell were concepts of the early Christian church to explain the unexplainable. The church also used the fear of such things as a way to govern their followers.”

“You’re wrong, Miss Albright. The Bible clearly says Hell, Satan, Lucifer and all the rest of it exists.”

Merry’s patience tightened like a noose around her neck. “But the Bible was written by men and men are not infallible.”

“Those men certainly were,” Mrs. Wycoff countered. “Why, according to Revelations...” The well-dressed lady suddenly flushed and chuckled with embarrassment. “Will you listen to



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the two of us? Debating theology, the devil and witchcraft like we're experts. It's pretty silly when you think about it, since everyone knows there are no such things as witches."

A few minutes later, Merry sighed as she watched Mrs. Wycoff and Tracy standing outside of her store talking. "I don't know what bothers me more—that woman's ignorance or her arrogance."

*"Meow!"*

The loud feline call turned Merry's attention back to the counter directly behind her. "And a good morning to you too, Harry. I'm glad you managed to find your way home again."

The large tuxedo-marked cat rubbed against Merry, inviting her touch. His loud purring made her smile. While stroking his back, she noticed Mrs. Wycoff's list under his padded feet, and her reason to frown returned full-force.

"People like her make me sick. They can accept their beliefs without question or proof while they deny others the same privilege. But why am I surprised? Most mortals are like that. Other than their religious faith, everything else must be in black and white. There's no room in their limited perspectives for shades of gray."

Harry's golden eyes fixed on hers as he sat in his favorite spot next to the cash register. There seemed to be a wealth of comprehension in his silent gaze.

Merry laughed at her foolish thoughts. "If only you could understand what I was saying, Harry. I'd tell you how mixed up and confused I've been. I want to tell Bryan I'm a witch but he's a part of that black and white world. Would he be able to accept what I am without endangering our love?"

\* \* \*

Two customers and one delivery later, Merry suddenly noticed Harry was gone. "I wonder where he's off to now. Lunch will be delivered soon and I ordered a portion of grilled chicken for him so I could eat in peace for a change."

The ringing of the wall phone behind the counter made her smile. "Maybe that's Bryan. He's only been out of town a few days on that consultation in Tampa, but I miss him like crazy." She happily lifted the receiver to her ear. "Good morning. This is the Emporium. May I help you?"

A sinister laugh came through the earpiece. "How utterly delightful of you to offer, my pet. I'll be right over to collect on it."

Merry's blood suddenly ran cold. "Dorian, if you value your worthless hide, you'll stay far away from me. My magic might be lacking in strength, but Aunt Nora has invoked a spell to protect me that even you can't undo. She's also sent word to Simon about your attack on me."

Dorian chuckled. "I applaud your bravado, Meredith, but I'm not worried. I have sources who can help me get around any spell I might encounter when I return for our little reunion. As for Nora contacting Simon, you'd never let her do it. Knowing what your father has planned for your future, he's likely to be the last person you want to see."

Recognizing words that nearly duplicated her own caused a tremor of fear to course through Merry. "Oh no, Dorian, that particular position belongs to you and you alone," she replied, carefully keeping her voice low and modulated. "I would gladly welcome Simon and the entire council into my home, if it would keep you out of my life."

"Such zeal, such spirit! And such lies." Dorian sighed. "Meredith, I've been watching you for some time and I know what you're trying to do. But it won't work. Make it easy on

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everyone, especially that mortal you've been seeing, and accept the fact that you and your merging gift will eventually be mine."

Merry slapped her hand on the counter. "I'll accept nothing of the kind. I would cut my own throat to end my existence before giving myself to you."

"That would be a terrible waste. But be warned, my pet. If you take the coward's way out, Bryan Aldwyn will be right behind you. I'll personally send your precious doctor to his death."

"Dorian, stay away from Bryan!" The buzzing of the dial tone told Merry her tormentor was gone. Hanging up the receiver, she dropped into the swivel chair behind the counter and shut her eyes.

"It's my own fault. I let my temper get out of hand and now Dorian's ready to call my bluff. I wish there was a way I could stop him myself."

Nora's suggestion of seducing Bryan would solve only one part of the problem. Yet thinking about her aunt reminded Merry of another conversation they had had a couple of weeks before: *Until you take a lover, you can't attain the full force of your powers. Combine that with your bloodlines and you could be one of the most formidable witches in the history of the Domain.*

"A formidable witch? But would I be strong enough to stop Dorian from hurting Bryan? If only I could be sure."

"Hey lady," a familiar male voice whispered behind her, "do you always talk to yourself?"

Merry spun around in her chair. The tall dark haired man wearing jeans and gold-framed glasses was the most beautiful sight she had seen in the past week. "Bryan, I can't believe it. You're back!"

She was halfway out of her seat when Bryan pulled her up and into his arms. After several mind-blowing kisses, he eased away from her lips and smiled. "Can I safely assume from this warm reception that you missed me, too?"

"No doubt about it! With you gone, this has been the longest five days in my life."

Bryan frowned and touched the corner of her eye with his finger. "Tears? What's wrong, sweetheart? Why are you sitting here alone, talking to yourself and crying?"

"Can't a lady get a little emotional without being reminded of it?" she protested, resting her head on his chest as she hugged him. "And I always talk to myself. Some would say I do it because I value my own opinion. But the truth is, on slow days like this in the shop, it's the only clever conversation I get to hear."

Bryan held her closer. "Sorry if I got carried away with my concern. After what happened last weekend, I can't help worrying about you."

"Well you shouldn't. As I've told you every day when you called, I am perfectly all right." Hoping to change the subject, Merry stood back to look at him. "How did things go in Tampa? Did you get the bone marrow for Tommy?"

"I harvested the marrow myself and dropped it off at the lab for processing on my way here. The donor was a perfect, six out of six match, so Tommy has an excellent chance of making it. By the way, one of the nurses told me you saw Linda this morning."

"I normally visit Linda later in the day, but since she was having chemo this afternoon, I stopped in before I opened the store." Merry sighed. "Poor little thing. Linda knows the treatments are necessary, but the nausea makes her miserable. Not even the pretty blue pajamas I brought her got more than a passing glance. Isn't there any other way she can be treated for her

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leukemia?”

“A bone marrow transplant might help, but the odds of finding a donor for her aren’t very good.”

“Why? Is her blood type that rare?”

Suddenly looking tired, Bryan sat in the chair Merry had vacated and pulled her down onto his lap. “Linda’s B negative is difficult enough, but her blood also contains a quirky enzyme associated with Native Americans. That particular enzyme drastically reduces the chances of finding a match for her. I’ve listed Linda with marrow banks all over the world, but none of them have come up with one that meets her needs.”

“Wasn’t Tommy’s donor a cousin? Maybe someone in Linda’s family could help her.”

Bryan shook his head. “Linda’s an orphan. Her parents and grandparents are dead. According to social services, she has no other living relatives.”

Merry jumped when the beeper on Bryan’s belt began vibrating against her hip. “Uh-oh! Only back an hour and they’re already looking for you, Doc.”

He shrugged. “It’s the nature of the beast I call a career. I’m used to it.” Bryan took off the beeper and read the message on its small screen. “Got to go. The lab has the test results back on Tommy. If all goes well, we can do the procedure on him this afternoon.”

“Then Tommy goes into isolation for about a month, right?” Merry asked as she stood up.

“More or less. It depends on how his body reacts to the treatment. In anticipation of this, I moved Tommy into isolation the day after the Halloween party. He’s in excellent spirits and handling his circumstances very well.” Getting to his feet, Bryan sighed. “That’s probably the hardest thing about my job. These kids, for the most part, are so hopeful, so resilient. I hate it when I can’t find a way to save one of them.”

Merry gave him a consoling hug. “Of course you do, Bryan. But think about all the children you have helped. Without caring doctors like you, none of them would survive.”

Drawing her closer, he rubbed his chin on the top of her head. “You’re good for my soul, Merry. I’m so glad you’re a part of my life now.” After sharing a gentle kiss, he caressed her cheek with his hand. “Would you like to go out tonight? We could grab a bite to eat and maybe see a movie.”

“I’ve got a better idea. After your long drive from Tampa, you’re going to be exhausted. Why don’t you come here for dinner? That way you won’t have to dress up and you can just kick back and relax.”

Bryan smiled. “Sounds great. What kind of take-out do you want? Chinese, Mexican, or Italian?”

“Don’t bring a thing but yourself and a good appetite. I’m going to cook. What’s your favorite dish?”

“It’s beef stroganoff, but I certainly can’t expect you to make a meal like that after working all day. If you’re really determined to cook, how about something simple like hamburgers or steaks? I’m a very easy man to please.”

Merry arched her brow. “An easy man, huh? I better remember that.”

“I’m only easy when it comes to food and you, sweetheart,” Bryan countered with a grin, dropping a kiss on the end of her nose. “I’ll be back around eight and I’ll bring dessert.”

Merry leaned on the counter to watch him leave her store. She loved the sight of him, so tall, so masculine. She loved his easy gait, the assured way he moved. She loved the dimple in his cheek when he turned to wave and throw her a final kiss before he walked away. She loved

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his smile, his looks, his charm, his...

She sighed out loud. "Face it, Meredith, you simply love the guy. And you'll do anything to keep him safe. Even if it means finding out how formidable a witch you really can be."

The thought of truly invoking her powers made her stomach churn. This was something she had been avoiding most of her life. She had decided years ago to live as a mortal and to find the sort of happiness her mother had found with Peter Albright.

But what if Nora's other belief was true? The one that Merry would be so pleased by the taste of her power, she would accept her aunt's suggestion to live as a witch and abandon the mortal ways once and for all.

Merry shook her head. "I won't let it happen. I'll use magic to protect Bryan from Dorian, but that's as far as it will go. From here on out, I will do everything else on my own. No more magic, no spells, no simple tricks. If I can't do a task the mortal way, then I swear I won't do it at all!"

Several hours later, Merry would question her sanity for making such a rash decision...

\* \* \*

This evening was supposed to be the first step in her plan to protect Bryan. And that meant seducing him into making love with her. Everything had to be perfect. The food expertly prepared, the wine properly chilled, the right music to set the mood. So, why had everything gone perfectly wrong?

Cooking Bryan's favorite dish had been the first difficulty she had to deal with. Without a cookbook at her disposal (nor one with the snap of a finger), Merry had to go to the library to borrow one. It didn't help that Donald arrived late to take her place at the shop, leaving her only a few minutes to find a book before the library closed for the day. The problem was further confounded when she got home and found the second page of the recipe, the one with the preparation instructions on it, had been torn out of the book.

Armed with only the list of ingredients and the photo of the dish from the book's cover, Merry went to the grocery store and purchased the ingredients necessary for making beef stroganoff. She was grateful the photo was intact or she never would have known about the noodles that were usually served with it.

From the picture, the meat appeared to be in pieces and covered with the creamy sauce. But how to cook it she wondered? Fried, baked or boiled? Since the recipe was in a section called "Quick One Pot Cooking," she decided on boiling. Putting all fifteen ingredients in her copper-bottomed stewpot, Merry placed it on the stove. Because it was getting late, she set the burner on high so it would be done faster. Remembering the noodles in the picture, she filled a pot with water, poured in the wide egg noodles, and put it on another burner to cook.

Merry left the kitchen to select music for her special evening. Thirty minutes later, she was ready to throw her stereo out the window. The CD player refused to operate when she tried to program it and the cassette player in the unit ate up and destroyed her favorite Whitney Houston tape before she realized what was happening. Her first instinct was to wiggle her nose and correct all this, but recalling her pledge not to use magic, she didn't do it. Her distress over losing the cherished tape was forgotten when she heard her myna bird squawking and a pungent odor drifted into the living room from the kitchen.

In her rush to get to the stove, Merry bumped into the table. The bottle of expensive burgundy the wine salesman told her was the perfect accompaniment to beef stroganoff, tipped

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over and rolled to the floor. The white ceramic tiled floor was quickly splattered in deep red wine and shards of glass.

Merry's eyes filled with tears when she looked into the large pot. Pale chunks of meat floated in a gray glutinous mixture of water, onions and white rubbery lumps of flour. Using a wooden spoon, she stirred the bubbling concoction and discovered it was scorched and sticking to the bottom of the pot.

"Oh, no! Now what am I supposed to do?" she wailed. "Bryan will be here in less than an hour and I've ruined dinner."

*"Bah humbug!"*

Merry shook the wooden spoon at Dickens, who was sitting in his brass cage across the kitchen. "One more comment from you, my obnoxious feathered friend, and dinner will be minced myna bird under glass!"

At that moment the pot of noodles boiled over, causing a loud hissing sound and sending clouds of steam over the stove. Throwing the spoon down, Merry used a dishtowel to carry the hot vessel to the sink. She emptied the contents into a colander and found the noodles had merged into a solid ball of steaming pasty yellow mush.

Tears trickled down her cheeks. "This is just great! Why do I get a feeling this whole evening is going to be a disaster?" Merry threw the towel on the counter, her voice rose in anger. "Just wine him and dine him, Meredith, and the man will be yours for the asking. Ha! It's all your fault, Aunt Nora! How could I let you talk me into this? Where are you when I need your help, Aunt Nora?"

As the last word left Merry's mouth, a flash of bright light exploded in the kitchen. Billows of pink bubbles wafted through the air around Nora's glistening nude body.

"Where is he, Meredith?" Nora shouted, waving a bath brush over her head. "Show yourself, Dorian, so I can bash your brains out, you worthless scourge of inhumanity!"

Merry gasped. "Aunt Nora, what are you doing here? And where are your clothes?"

Nora looked down at herself and shrugged. "Well, what do you expect? I was just dozing off in my bath when I heard you call for me." With a snap of her fingers, she was wrapped in a floor-length terrycloth robe and her bath brush was gone. "That's better. Now, where is that warlock scum, Dorian Laird?"

"Dorian's not here, Aunt Nora. He never was." Merry frowned. "I still don't understand how you heard me. I didn't use an incantation to call you."

Nora put her arm around Merry's shoulder. "You didn't have to, honey. It was my spell that brought me here. I invoked a protective shield around you that notifies me when you call my name or say 'I need your help.' That's what you said, isn't it?" At Merry's sheepish nod, she continued. "So, my precious niece, if it's not Dorian Laird plaguing you, what's the problem you need my help with?"

Merry held up her hands in disgust. "Just look around my kitchen and you'll see what a mess I've made. How can I hope to be the great seductress you've encouraged me to be when I can't make a simple meal without botching things up?"

Nora looked into the pot on the stove and grimaced. "Good grief! What's this slimy mixture supposed to be?"

"Beef stroganoff," Merry sighed. "What's left of the noodles is draining in the sink."

Casting a quick glance at the colander, the wine-splattered floor, and the littered counters, Nora shook her head. "This is bad, but it's certainly not hopeless, Meredith. Why don't you just utilize several of the household spells I've taught you and set things right."

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Not wanting to reveal her true reasons for not using magic, Merry carefully selected her words. “I can’t. It’s bad enough seducing Bryan like this to keep Dorian from claiming my gift. Using magic to do it would make me feel even more calculating and sneaky than I already do.”

Nora rolled her eyes. “Saturn’s rings! Your need to act like a mortal makes no sense to me, yet I’ll abide by your wishes, Meredith. Thank the fates I’m not so inclined.”

With a flick of her wrist, the kitchen was transformed into a homey scene of domestic tranquility. A pot of beef stroganoff simmered on low heat on the stove, its succulent fragrance filled the air. Steaming noodles drained in the colander in the sink. The floor and countertops were immaculate. A new bottle of burgundy sat uncorked on the table. Music played softly from the stereo in the living room.

Nora nodded and smiled at her accomplishments. “That’s more like it. Everything neat and ready for your handsome—” Looking at Merry, she stopped short. “Jeans and that tacky T-shirt just won’t do, honey. For this night, you’re going to need something special.”

“Aunt Nora, wait—”

Before the objection left Merry’s lips, a casual hostess gown of emerald green silk replaced her clothes. A belt of gold links circled her waist and gold leather sandals adorned her feet. Even her hair was set free from its usual braid, to hang in shiny waves over her back and shoulders.

Clapping her hands, Nora laughed with delight. “This is fun! I feel like the fairy godmother in *Cinderella*.” She patted Merry’s cheek. “Don’t be angry with me, poppet, I just want everything to be perfect for you tonight.”

A reluctant smile curved Merry’s lips. “I’m not angry, Aunt Nora. In spite of my need for independence, I do appreciate all the things you do for me. Thanks for the help. After the mess I made of things, I can see I’m going to have to work doubly hard if I want to live like a mortal.”

Nora hugged her niece. “Well, anytime you need me, Meredith, remember I’m only a call away.”

“Or even an incantation?” Merry teased.

Nora winked. “Especially an incantation!”

# Chapter 10

BRYAN HAD HIS arm around Merry as they walked into the living room later that evening. "I hope you're not angry, sweetheart, because I insisted on helping you clean up the dishes. It's the least I can do after such an incredible meal. Your stroganoff was the best I've ever tasted."

Merry felt like a louse. *Yeah, Little Suzi Homemaker, that's me! Well this is one lie I can do without tonight.*

She sighed. "Bryan, I have a confession to make. I ran into a few problems making dinner, but Aunt Nora came by and helped me. If it wasn't for her, we would have had tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches tonight."

Bryan sat on the sofa and pulled her down beside him. "That would have been all right with me. Tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches are my second favorite meal."

She frowned at him. "You don't have to tell a fib to make me feel better."

"But it's true. While I was an intern in Boston, it was my meal of choice when I worked nights. The soup could be heated in the microwave in the staff lounge, but the sandwich took a little more invention to prepare it right. After experimenting, some of the other interns and I discovered a clothes iron set on high makes the best grilled cheese sandwich you could ever imagine."

"That sounds too funny not to be true."

Bryan held up his hands. "It's the truth, I swear it. The iron's home in my kitchen cabinet. Come over anytime and I'll show off my cooking expertise."

Merry began laughing. "Why do I suddenly envision your kitchen devoid of pots, pans, and appliances? Just a microwave and a GE steam iron. The perfect bachelor kitchen!"

Her laughter made Bryan smile. "Now that's a sound I've missed all evening. You've been tense ever since I got here. What's wrong?"

Merry hid her frown. *What's wrong, he asks! I've got to be a great seductress and I haven't a clue as to where to start. No wonder I look tense!*

She shrugged. "I guess dealing with one catastrophe after another today shook my confidence. I keep waiting for something else to go wrong."

Bryan drew her into his arms. "Then relax and leave the rest of the evening to me."

*Thank the stars; he's making the first move! Now all I have to do is go along with it and everything will be fine.* She gave him what she hoped was an inviting smile. "That sounds quite intriguing, Bryan. What do you have mind?"

"How about dessert? Aren't you curious to know what's in the bakery box I put in the refrigerator before dinner?"

Smiling, Merry worked hard to hide her disappointment. "I noticed the box came from Maxim's, so I guess it contains some pastries. What kind did you bring? Éclairs, napoleons, cream puffs, or fruit tarts?"

He winked. "All of the above. Wasn't sure which you'd like best, so I bought assorted miniatures."

Merry groaned out loud. "Don't you know it's cruel to tempt a lady that way? Just thinking about eating them adds another pound to my already over-burdened hips."

"There's nothing wrong with your hips. I think they're perfect."

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Leaning against his shoulder, Merry patted his chest. “Oh, Bryan, there you go being kind again. We both know my hips would be perfect if I were three inches taller.”

“I know nothing of the kind.” Bryan gently tugged on her hair and made her look at him. There was no mistaking the frown that creased his brow above his glasses. “Stop tearing yourself down, Merry. What must I do to convince you that I like you just the way you are?”

“But, Bryan, I never meant—”

“Forget about other people’s warped opinions of perfection and learn to accept mine, Meredith,” he insisted. “You are the most beautiful and desirable woman I’ve ever met. And I’d think that way even if I wasn’t in love with you.”

His declaration of love was only intensified by his anger. His sincerity pleased Merry. “You do love me, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. Why are you so surprised? I told you I loved you the other night. Must I have it tattooed on my forehead for you to believe me?”

She shook her head. “A tattoo isn’t necessary, but a kiss might be a nice start. Other than that peck on the cheek you gave me when you got here, you haven’t tried to kiss me once.”

Bryan removed his hand from her cheek and let it fall to his lap. “So I was trying to use a little restraint. After being apart from you these past few days, all I’ve thought about is taking you in my arms and...” Faltering for a second, he turned away. “Needless to say, we would have skipped dinner entirely and gone directly to the real dessert. I think taking things slowly is better for you. Better for both of us.”

“Is that so?” Merry touched his chin and made him face her. “You know what your trouble is, Doc? You think too much!”

Dimples appeared in his cheeks when he smiled. “Oh, yeah. And what do you suggest I do about it?”

“Just shut up and kiss me.”

Bryan’s brow rose. “That doesn’t take any thinking at all.”

“My thought exactly.”

Merry’s smile of satisfaction was quickly lost with Bryan’s heart-stirring kiss. He pulled her close as their mouths met in sweet unfettered union, tasting and exploring. She burned with excitement. He drew on her tongue, coaxing her response. His fingers brushed along her midriff until his hand gently cupped her breast. An electrifying sensation swept through her.

*So this is passion! Marvel of marvels! I had no idea...But I want more...I want Bryan.*

“Make love to me, Bryan,” she whispered against his lips.

Bryan lifted his mouth from hers. “What did you say?”

Merry swallowed hard. Her cheeks burned as she realized what she had said aloud. “I ah...said...I—”

The beeper on his belt suddenly went off. “Damn!” he grumbled, dropping a quick kiss on her lips. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll answer this call on your kitchen phone and be right back.”

Merry bolted from the couch the instant she was alone and began pacing the room. “Aunt Nora told me to be subtle and provocative, alluring yet mysterious. But could I do that? Oh no! Not me! I’m as subtle as a ton of bricks falling on the man. I actually asked him to...to—” She shook her head in disgust. “And then I lose my nerve to follow through with it. Cosmic catastrophes! I couldn’t have given up magic at a worse time. Using a love spell would be so much easier than dealing with this on my own.”

Looking for a distraction, Merry stopped in front of the wall unit that held her stereo system and began fussing with the controls on the CD player. “Don’t jam on me now. Listening



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to some music might help take my mind off my stupidity.”

To her relief the player engaged and the room was filled with Michael Bolton’s voice. She closed her eyes and began swaying with the tempo of the beautiful music. But instead of making her forget, the lyrics of the romantic ballads pricked her conscience.

*Every song talks about love and trust. How can I expect any of that when I’ve so much to hide from Bryan?* She picked up several disks and sighed. *No time for a guilt trip now. I’ll just have to ease into this seduction slowly and hope I don’t chicken out again.*

\* \* \*

From the shadows of the dining room, Bryan watched Merry as she stood at the stereo shaking her head. Her cheeks were still flushed. He didn’t have to ask what was bothering her. She was obviously embarrassed by her unguarded request to make love.

Merry was a confident lady most of the time. Her shyness when it came to sexual matters was genuine and hardly the norm in the current ways of the world. Yet her response to his touch and kisses hinted at a deeply banked heat of sensuality just waiting to be released.

*And I intend to be the man who turns that ember into a passionate blaze.*

Bryan silently moved across the room until he was standing behind her. She jumped and nearly dropped the CD she was holding when his hands encircled her waist and drew her back against him. “Sorry, sweetheart. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

Merry laughed at her reaction. “Guess I was caught up in the music. Did you take care of your call?”

“Yes. It was my new resident, Frank Newton.” Bryan lifted the hair from her shoulder to nuzzle the exposed side of her neck with his mouth. He felt her trembling in reaction beneath his touch. “Wanted me to know he had everything under control and I was free for the rest of the night.”

“Why...ah, wasn’t he thoughtful to call? That means your beeper won’t be going off anytime...soon.”

“Not likely,” Bryan said, taking the disk from her hand. He set it down and turned her to face him. “Enough talk about my work. There’s something I’ve wanted to do with you since Saturday night. I won’t be denied a second longer.”

After a moment’s pause, Merry smiled and looped her arms around his neck. “I know exactly what you mean, Bryan. That’s why I put on this music so we can get started right away.”

He nearly choked on his reply. “You want us to get started here, in the living room?”

She nodded eagerly. “Sure, it’s the ideal place for it. Lots of light, minimal furniture, and plenty of room to maneuver on the floor.”

Bryan couldn’t believe what she was suggesting. Was his sensual little innocent really a sexual acrobat? “You...want room to maneuver here...on the floor?”

“Of course. We wouldn’t want anything to get in our way once we begin.” Merry moved slightly forward till the length of her body was lined up with his. “Dance with me, Bryan.”

“You want to dance? But I thought...you said—” Bryan didn’t need glasses to read the warring emotions in Merry’s pale green eyes. She wanted him, yet she was apprehensive. He would have to be patient. He’d let her set the pace. It might kill him, but he was determined to give her all the time she needed. He knew the ultimate prize would be worth the effort.

Bryan hugged her. “You’re right, sweetheart. Circumstances cheated us out of many things that night. Dancing seems like an excellent way to begin making up for our lost

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opportunities.”

He felt Merry’s relief when he swept her into to his arms to dance. Moving with the tempo of the music, she rested her cheek on his shoulder and followed his lead with easy grace.

“Now, isn’t this is nice,” she sighed.

He nodded, but nice wasn’t the word Bryan had in mind. Sensual torture seemed a better way of describing what he was enduring. The fragrance of her perfume combined with the warm scent of her skin filled his nose and invited him closer. Her lush feminine curves brushing against him set all of his male nerve endings on alert. He shut his eyes and did mathematical equations in his head—anything to keep his mind off Merry. But as the third song led into a fourth, Bryan conceded the battle was lost and sought a way to end his torment.

Bryan curled a lock of her long hair around his finger and lightly pulled on it to gain her attention. “Hey lady, when are you going to stop trying to hide from me?”

Merry stopped dancing to look up at him. “But I wasn’t hiding...I mean...I...” After a slight hesitation, she let out a deep sigh. “You’re right, Bryan. I was hiding. I wanted this evening to be perfect for us and then I act like an idiot and spoil everything.”

Bryan frowned. “Telling a man you want to make love doesn’t make you an idiot, Merry.”

She dropped her eyes from his and began stroking away the non-existent wrinkles from his shirt. “Maybe not, but acting like a coward and avoiding the issue sure fits the bill. You probably think I’m a tease.”

He raised her face with his hand until she was looking at him. “I think you’re a lovely young woman who hasn’t had much experience with men. If you’re having second thoughts about making love, I won’t press you.”

Merry shook her head. “You don’t understand, Bryan. I’m not having second thoughts about making love with you. It’s just that...well, I’m nervous. I don’t want to look foolish or do anything wrong. The last thing I want to do is disappoint you.”

“Merry, I—”

“And I’ll disappoint you,” she continued without taking a breath, “because I do things without thinking or maybe it’s because I think too much and then I worry.”

“Sweetheart, you can’t—”

“Worry leads to distress, and distress leads to disaster.” Merry threw up her hands and turned away from him. “I’m such a waste! I can’t understand why you would even be interested in a screwball like me!”

Bryan gently took her by the shoulders and spun her around to face him. “Because, silly woman, I love you. I know what your trouble is, Meredith Albright. You think too much!”

Hearing him use her earlier words made Merry smile. “Is that so? And what do you suggest I do about it?”

“Just shut up and kiss me,” he demanded with a wink.

The time for words and misgivings had passed. Kisses—hot, deep and probing—took their place. Bryan’s mouth ravished hers with unbridled lust as he pulled her into his arms, but Merry wasn’t alarmed by his passion. She welcomed it. Stroke for stroke with her tongue, caress for caress with her hands, she matched his ardor with her own.

A few minutes later, Bryan eased back from Merry so he could gaze into her eyes. “I know I promised you all the romantic trappings such as candlelight and roses when we made love the first time, but that’s going to have to wait. If I don’t make love to you tonight, I’ll go insane. Can you forgive me?”

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A secretive smile curved her lips. "There's nothing to forgive, Bryan. I wasn't about to let you get away from me again, so I've taken care of everything for you." She took his hand. "Come upstairs and I'll show you."

\* \* \*

Halfway to her room, visions of melted wax, dead flowers, and burning draperies filled Merry's mind and threatened her confidence. *Merciful Mars! Please don't let this part of my surprise blow up in my face like my cooking. I can't call on Aunt Nora for help if anything's gone wrong now.*

Opening her door, she looked inside and smiled with relief. The interior of her bedroom was lit by the golden glow of candlelight. Dozens of white candles in small crystal bowls and goblets shimmered their radiance across the room. A vase filled with scarlet red roses adorned the night table. Two stemmed glasses sat on the dresser beside an ice filled wine bucket that contained a bottle of champagne. The white cotton linens on the bed had been replaced with sheets and pillowcases of pink satin. Music from the stereo downstairs flowed softly through the speakers in the room.

Merry saw the frown on Bryan's face and her doubts returned full force. "I'm sorry. Did I leave something out?"

He gave her hand an affectionate squeeze. "No, this is exactly what I had in mind. I'm just disappointed I wasn't the one to do this for you. The least I could have done was send you the flowers."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. "You can send me flowers another time. What's important is here and now. I love you, Bryan Aldwyn, and I won't be put off a moment longer. Are you going to make love with me or must I—"

The threat she was about to issue was lost forever when Bryan kissed her. His mouth plundered hers as he picked her up and carried her to the bed. The sensual haze he evoked in Merry with his soul shattering kisses made her totally unaware of anything else he was doing to her. Only the feel of the cold satin sheets on her back a few minutes later made her realize she was naked, laying on her bed with Bryan. That he was fully dressed while she was in such a revealing state irritated her.

Merry pulled her mouth away from his and poked him in the chest with her hand. When he leaned up on his elbow to look at her face, she scowled. "Hey Doc, would it be rude to ask how you got me undressed so quickly?"

Removing his glasses and setting them on the night table, Bryan grinned. "Working in a trauma center taught me more than just emergency medicine. We had to get the patients out of their clothes in a hurry so we could save their lives. Never knew that little skill would come in so handy."

Merry looked over the side of the bed and saw her clothes strewn across the floor. "My things are all over the place!"

"Don't blame me! They taught me to be quick, not tidy."

A giggle escaped Merry's lips as she fell back on the pillow. "You're quite a comedian, Dr. Aldwyn. But I'm wise to you. By keeping me laughing, you're actually distracting me from being nervous over my a...state of undress."

"Is it working?" At her nod, Bryan smiled. "Good. Though I don't know why you should be so nervous about this. Don't you know, with or without clothes, you're a very beautiful

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woman, Merry?”

Her smile faded. His compliment touched her soul. “Hearing you say that makes me believe it’s true. I want to be beautiful for you, Bryan. Only for you.”

“And you are, sweetheart. Never doubt it.” Gazing down at her, Bryan cupped one of her breasts with his hand. “You are so lush, so soft, so feminine. I can’t believe such perfection is soon going to be mine.”

Merry would have replied, but the words caught in her throat as Bryan tenderly kissed her breast and suckled on its pale pink nipple. Cradling his head with her hands, she closed her eyes to savor the enjoyment of his touch. Strange tingling sensations began to course through her. The electric-like feelings only increased when he lifted his mouth and began his adoration of the other breast.

She knew all about human physiology and sexual response. She must have read a dozen books on the subject. More than once, she had explored her body with her own hands. But this was entirely different. Bryan was touching her now. The sensation was new and very exciting.

Passions never sparked before came to life inside Merry. Without thought, her legs parted, exposing that part of her that craved a special touch. And Bryan didn’t disappoint her.

While continuing his oral caresses of her breasts, his hand slowly made its way to the apex of her thighs. His fingertips explored the moist folds of her womanhood and found the nub of sensation hidden there. Her gasp of surprise and her moan of pleasure were captured by his mouth when he kissed her.

Merry locked her arms around his neck and kissed Bryan with an intensity she had never felt before. Like a starving child, she sucked on his tongue and drew it into her mouth. Her hips rocked forward, increasing the pressure of his hand rubbing against that most sensitive part of her sexual being. It felt good, it felt wonderful, and yet, it wasn’t quite enough. An odd sense of frustration threatened her satisfaction.

As if sensing her dilemma, Bryan pushed a finger inside her, and then two. The thrusting added to her pleasure. Merry was quick to notice how his tongue speared in and out of her mouth, matching the movement of his fingers, and she followed his lead. Her breathing quickened and she felt like she was racing toward some kind of amazing finish. When Bryan caressed her clitoris with his thumb while his fingers were deep inside her, she totally lost control. She cried out at completion. Her explosive climax left her warm, languid, and totally satisfied.

Several minutes later, Merry regained her senses and found herself cuddled against Bryan. He was stroking her hair, but there was a strange look in his eyes as he gazed down at her. When he realized she was staring at him, he tried to cover his odd actions with a smile.

“Welcome back, sweetheart. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. Floating on air, but fine. It will only get better when you take off those clothes and share the passion with me.” Merry touched his cheek when he didn’t reply. “What’s the matter, Bryan? Don’t you want to make love with me?”

“Of course I do, Merry. More than you’ll ever know. It’s just that...” Bryan sighed. “Well, I’m a doctor and I couldn’t help but notice that you’re still a...I mean you’ve never...”

She tried to hide her confusion with half-hearted humor. “So, I’m a virgin and I’ve never been with a man. Is that a crime? Should I be condemned to another twenty-six years of celibacy or do you think I belong in a museum with the rest of the relics and dinosaurs?”

Bryan frowned. “I wasn’t finding fault with you. But the gift of your innocence can only be given once. I want you to be sure that making love with *me* is really what you want to do. I

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don't want you regretting this tomorrow."

"The only regret I will have in the morning will come from not making love with you."

He sat up and dragged his fingers through his hair. "But, Merry, I should be honest with you. There are things about me, my family, and the way I was brought up that you know nothing about."

The irony in the situation caused Merry to wince. *I should be honest too, but if you knew the truth about me and my family, you would probably run away and never see me again. I can't risk losing you now, Bryan Aldwyn. I just can't!*

She knelt beside him on the bed. "The past, our families, and the rest of it aren't important. The only thing that matters is our love for one another. You do love me, don't you, Bryan?"

"With all my being, but you must know—"

Merry pressed her hand against his lips. "Make love with me, Bryan. Because all I want, all that I'll ever need, is you."

With a groan of combined relief and acceptance, Bryan pulled her into his arms and kissed her. One kiss led to another and soon there was no need for words, doubts or explanations. Desire, hot and consuming, flared anew.

His passion quickly sparked Merry's and she refused to be docile. As his hands caressed her, she was driven to return the favor. Working the buttons of his shirt free, she broke away from their kiss to explore his bared chest. His skin was warm and taut beneath her fingertips. Fine dark hair surrounded his flat nipples. She pushed aside the thin gold medallion he wore suspended from a chain around his neck to rub her lips against the muscled contours of his chest. She tasted him with her tongue and felt him shiver in response.

"God, Merry, you're driving me crazy," he gasped, easing her away from him. "I've got to get out of these clothes so we can do this right."

What should have taken a minute or two took a great deal longer because they couldn't keep their hands off one another. Kisses, caresses, and lingering embraces prolonged the process. When Bryan finally got into bed beside her, Merry only caught a glimpse of his nude body. But even that momentary glimpse was enough to show her how beautifully he was formed.

A feeling of pride detracted from any fear or embarrassment she had expected to have at the first sight of his engorged member. How could she be afraid, Merry scolded herself, knowing this incredible man was hard with desire for her.

Curious by nature, she reached out to touch that throbbing part of him. Bryan caught her hand and shook his head. "Although I burn for the feel of your hand on me, I'm too aroused at this moment to endure it. Let me give you pleasure before I find my own. The next time we make love, I promise you can touch me to your heart's content."

Merry quickly learned Bryan was a caring, patient lover. He kissed and caressed her entire body with his hands, mouth and tongue, bringing her passions back to a fevered pitch. Only when he had her on the brink of another orgasm, did he kneel between her parted thighs. Bracing most of his weight on his elbows, he stretched out until his body covered hers.

His hardened male length probed her opening, rubbing against the kernel of inflamed nerves hidden there. Merry gasped with enjoyment at this and eagerly accepted Bryan's tongue into her mouth when he kissed her. She wrapped her arms around him to draw him closer. There was no pain as he penetrated her. Only an unfamiliar fullness accompanied by a tug of resistance when he breached her hymen caused her a few seconds of discomfort that quickly passed.

Instincts rather than knowledge caused her hips to lift, encouraging Bryan to sink deeper

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within her. His powerful body went rigid in her embrace. She felt his moan of pleasure vibrate on her mouth. Heady with newfound feminine power, she arched against him when he began to thrust inside her and was soon caught up in the building cadence of his movements.

Suddenly, Merry was assailed by many kinds of sensations. She was burning hot yet shivering with chills from the excitement of it all. Every inch of her flesh seemed acutely alive and very tender to the touch. The medal Bryan wore on a chain around his neck dangled between her breasts and tickled her. Her nipples tingled almost painfully where his chest brushed against them.

Making love was an enigma, she decided. She wanted him to stop. She wanted him to go on. She wanted it to last forever.

Merry was racing toward completion when Bryan wrenched his mouth from hers. In the dim candlelight, she saw the mask of labored concentration on his face. His eyes were closed. The muscles in his chest and neck were strained, glowing with a sheen of perspiration. She gasped as his pelvis ground into hers with renewed force sending her over the edge of sensual oblivion. His hoarse shout of satisfaction quickly followed and Bryan collapsed against her breathless and sated.

Coming to her senses a few moments later, Merry hugged him tightly. "I love you, Bryan," she whispered.

Bryan didn't respond right away. A few moments later, he rolled to his side and cradled her in his arms. "And I love you, Merry. Please never, ever doubt that."

His brief distraction and his curious choice of words caught Merry's attention. Suddenly needing to see his face, she sat up and turned on the lamp on the bedside table. "Bryan, we've just shared the most incredible experience two people can have, but I never would have gone through with it if I didn't believe you loved me. Unless you've been keeping a secret wife or you're really a mass murderer on the run, how could you think I would ever doubt your love?"

Sitting up beside her, Bryan took hold of her hands. "It's nothing like that, Merry. But you've never made love before and I should have warned you about certain things. Complications might arise that you're not ah...prepared for and you would have every right to blame me."

*Blame? Protect? Complications?* The answer suddenly occurred to Merry and she wanted to laugh with relief. *Poor Bryan is worried about getting me pregnant! He doesn't know birth control isn't a problem for women like me. A witch can only conceive when she wills it to happen.*

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I appreciate your concern, Bryan, but you don't have a thing to worry about."

Bryan frowned. "I don't?"

From the probing look in his eyes, Merry knew he wouldn't be placated easily. *Uh-oh! How can I explain this without telling him I'm a witch?*

Recalling a conversation she'd recently had with Lauren gave her a plausible explanation, but she wasn't happy about it. *Saturn's rings! I really hate lying like this, but what choice do I have?*

Merry squeezed his hands. "The doctor put me on birth control pills to regulate my cycle last year, so you can relax."

"But Merry, I—"

She silenced him with a kiss. Her arms wrapped around his neck while her mouth coaxed him into a response. The diversion was successful, but Merry barely had time to think about it.

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His mouth, so hot, so demanding, took possession of the kiss. He pulled her across his lap as he devoured her mouth with his own. Their tongues entwined, their breaths were shared. She was caught within her own trap of seduction and drugged with desire when Bryan suddenly pulled his lips away from hers.

“Oh, sweetheart, we shouldn’t be doing this. It’s too soon for you.”

Merry shook her head to clear away the sensual cobwebs clouding her thoughts. “Huh? What’s too soon?”

Holding her in his arms, Bryan smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. “To make love again. It was your first time. You’re going to feel sore for a while, so maybe we should wait.”

She scowled. “There you go being the doctor again.”

“I’m also the man who loves you and doesn’t want to cause you any more pain.” He eased her back onto the bed and covered her with the top sheet. “How about a compromise? While I’m downstairs getting our dessert, why don’t you take a nice hot bubble bath? If you want to make love after that, I’ll be more than happy to accommodate you.”

Leaning up on her elbow, Merry returned his suggestive smile with one of her own. “I’ve got a much better idea. Why don’t you stay here and take a nice hot bath with me?”

Bryan pulled on his jeans and stood up. “Wish I could, but if I stay, neither of us will get near that tub and you know it. I’ll use the bathroom down the hall to get cleaned up and be back in a half hour.”

When Bryan bent down to drop a chaste kiss on her lips, the medallion he was wearing grazed Merry’s chest. She caught the flat gold piece with her hand and held it toward the light to see what was engraved on its surface.

“I thought you were wearing a religious medal when I noticed this earlier. But this image doesn’t belong to any church I know of. It looks like a dragon.”

Bryan’s smile waned as he drew the medal away from her to look at it. “This is my family’s coat of arms and the creature on the shield is a gryphon. It has the head and wings of an eagle with the body of a lion. My sister sent me this for my last birthday. Guess it was Jade’s way of reminding me I was still part of our family.”

His somber reaction and the way he clenched his hand around the medallion made Merry’s heart ache for him. Bryan had told her about Jade and the falling out with his parents. Merry didn’t have to use witchcraft to know how badly he missed his sister.

“Jade must be a very special lady. Do you get to see her very often?”

Bryan put on his glasses and shook his head. “Not really. Just once or twice a year. Between her business obligations and my medical practice, it’s difficult to arrange visits.” He walked toward the door and smiled back at her. “I’ll be back soon and we can pick up where we left off. I love you, Merry.”

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, Merry sighed with pleasure as hot water and fragrant bubbles swirled around her. Besides soothing the parts of her body that were tender from their unaccustomed use, the heated water eased away the tension that had been her constant companion for days.

Smiling to herself, she adjusted the small plastic pillow beneath her head and closed her eyes. *Everything turned out perfectly. I’ve finally made love with Bryan and gotten rid of that cursed merging gift forever. I hope this keeps Dorian out of my life and away from the man I*

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love.

And she did love Bryan. He was everything she had ever wanted in a man. He was a friend and a lover. She sensed in him a kindred soul. Yet she had lied to him and that was wrong.

*Maybe I'll tell Bryan the truth tonight. But I'll have to be careful. He's been so considerate and sweet; I certainly don't want to frighten him—*

"Who the hell is Stephen?"

Bryan's loud voice caused Merry to jump, sloshing water over the rim of the tub. She looked up and found him standing in the bathroom doorway frowning at her. He looked very annoyed.

"What are you talking about, Bryan?"

"That fool bird of yours must have me confused with a guy named Stephen. The cage cover had fallen off and the moment I turned on the kitchen light, that feathered nuisance began yakking at me. I don't know what was more unnerving. That your pet sounds so human or that he's mistaking me for some other man you've obviously been seeing."

Merry bit her lip to prevent herself from laughing. "Exactly what did my myna bird say to you, Bryan?"

Leaning against the vanity, Bryan folded his arms over his bare chest. "Let's see. Oh, yeah. 'I am glad you have come at last, Stephen. You are very late.' And if that's not bad enough, your bird began squawking while I was making up the dessert tray. 'Stop thief! Stop thief! You're a falsehood, Mr. Giles!'" Bryan shook his head in disgust. "I don't know who this Stephen Giles is, but I have no intention of letting some jerk... Merry, are you laughing at me?"

Merry lost her battle and began chuckling out loud. Hugging the side of the tub, she shook her head. "I don't mean to laugh, Bryan, but you've got it all wrong. My bird was reciting from the works of Charles Dickens."

Bryan's mouth dropped open. "You've got to be kidding."

"Oh, no. Stephen was a character in *Hard Times* and Giles was in *Oliver Twist*," she explained. "When my father sent the bird to me a few years ago, I named him after Dickens because of his ability to quote from many of the author's books. No matter how hard I've tried, I've never been able to get him to say anything else."

Bryan suddenly felt like the biggest jerk in the world. He dropped to his knees beside the tub, shaking his head.

"Am I an idiot or what? That stupid bird starts rattling on and I imagine the worst." He picked up her hand and kissed it. "Forgive me for being such a jealous fool?"

Patting his hand, Merry smiled impishly. "No way, Doc. I rather like this unexpected possessive side of your nature. It gives my ego quite a boost knowing you care so much about me."

"You better be careful, lady," he warned, nipping playfully at her knuckles with his teeth. "The green eyed monster might bring out a beast in me that you won't be able to handle."

Merry used her other hand to stroke his hair. "Oh, I'm not worried, Doc. I have a way of taming wild animals. Especially tall, handsome ones with dark hair and gold eyes."

"And how exactly do you tame such a wild beast?" he asked with a grin.

"Simple," she replied. "All I have to do is love him. He would never harm me."

"Are you sure about that?"

The shining topknot of hair gathered on top of her head bobbed when she nodded. "Positive, because this remarkable being loves me with all his heart. He would sooner harm himself before hurting me in any way. And the simple fact is, I would gladly do the same for



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him.”

The absolute trust in Merry’s eyes humbled Bryan. He gently took her face in his hands and kissed her lips. “You’re like the missing half of me, Meredith Albright. How on earth did I get so lucky to find you?”

“Luck had nothing to do with it, Bryan. It was magic.”

Her reply gave him quite a start. He sat back on his heels to look at her face. “Did you say magic?”

Merry rolled her eyes. “Of course, silly. If you hadn’t come to my shop to get things for your *magic* act for the kids show, we wouldn’t have met.”

Shaking his head, Bryan chuckled. “Sorry. I thought you meant there was something mystical that brought us together.”

“Nothing mystical, Doc,” she sighed in a tone that hinted of regret. “Just your generous nature that made you want to give those kids some fun.” Averting her eyes from his, Merry crossed her arms over her breasts. “Speaking of giving, could you give me a few minutes of privacy so I can get out of this tub? The bubbles are nearly gone and my body’s getting waterlogged.”

Bryan leaned over and turned her flushed face toward him. “Oh sweetheart, you’re blushing. We’ve made love and I held your lovely nude body in my arms less than an hour ago. How can you be shy around me now?”

“Nearly twenty-seven-years of practice, that’s how,” Merry grumbled, more embarrassed than angry. A spark of hope suddenly brightened her eyes. “Do you really think I’m lovely, Bryan?”

He found her uncertainty endearing. He scowled at her with mocked annoyance. “I can see it’s going to take a lot more than words to convince you of the truth. But don’t worry; I’m just the man for the task.”

“And how are you going to convince me?” she asked.

“Rather than just tell you, I’m going to show you that you’re a beautiful, lovely, desirable woman.”

“That sounds...” Merry swallowed hard, “nice.”

Bryan stared into her eyes as he lightly grazed the top of her breasts with his fingertips. “Nice hardly describes what I have in mind, Merry. Once I get you out of that tub, I’m going to kiss and adore every inch of you, from the top of your head to the tips of your toes. I’ll use my mouth to taste your flesh. My tongue will explore your sultry depths and relish your sweetness like the richest ambrosia. When I’m through making love to you, there will be no doubt in your mind as to how beautiful you are to me.”

Merry was breathless. Her voice was barely a whisper. “What if that doesn’t work?”

Grabbing the large bath towel from the wall rack, Bryan stood beside the tub and held it up for her. “Well, if that doesn’t work, I’ll just keep trying until I get it right. Even if it takes me all night.”

Bryan knew her flushed complexion was due to anticipation, not embarrassment, as Merry stood up and allowed him to wrap her in the thick terrycloth. Rubbing her damp skin dry, he felt her quaking with need under his touch.

Wrapped in the towel, Merry’s lips curved in a beguiling smile when she turned to face him. “Do you really think it’s going to take you all night to convince me?”

Bryan pulled off his glasses and tossed them on the counter. “Maybe, but if it takes longer than that, I’m not worried.”

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“You’re not worried, Doc?”

Taking her into his arms, he shook his head. “Not in the least. You see, I’m prepared to spend the rest of my life accomplishing that particular goal.” Bryan grinned down at Merry as her towel fell to the floor at their feet. “Enough talk, sweetheart. Just shut up and kiss me!”

And she did.

# Chapter 11

“NOW THERE’S THE look of a sexually satisfied woman if I ever saw one,” Lauren boasted, walking into Merry’s shop a week later. “You look so sweet just sitting there in your new little sundress, staring off into space with that faraway look on your face. So when are you and Dr. Hunk setting the date?”

Merry tucked the book she was holding under the counter and frowned at her. “Bryan and I are hardly ready for marriage. We’ve never even discussed it.”

“Come on! Don’t play coy with me, girlfriend.” Lauren propped her elbow on the counter and rested her chin in her hand.

“You may not have discussed it, but you are definitely ready for marriage. Hell, you never would have gone to bed with him if there hadn’t been a wedding and a gold ring in the offing.”

“But I never told you that we—”

Lauren smirked. “Didn’t have to. We’ve known each other since high school and I can read your face like a large print book, Merry. You love the doc, he loves you, and...well, your relationship has taken its natural progression. You’ve made love with the man, so now you have to marry him. Case closed.”

Merry stood up and shook out the creases in her flowered gauze skirt. “I really can’t believe you’re preaching to me like this. You were the one who lived with Bob for three years before finally marrying the guy.”

“There’s no use trying to compare us. When it comes to men, you know I’ve always been like an overripe peach hanging on the low branch of a tree, soft and mushy, just ready to fall for the first guy to come along. You’re like a coconut.”

The picture that entered Merry’s mind at that moment made her frown. Coconuts were hard, brown, and hairy. She knew she’d regret asking, but, as usual, curiosity got in the way of her better judgment. “Exactly how do I remind you of a coconut?”

Lauren held up her hands in a defensive gesture. “Hey don’t get your panties in a twist over this. I only meant that a coconut is protected in a thick outer shell and grows far out of reach. Only a patient man, willing to work hard to reach it and use his specially honed blade to cut through the layers of shell will ever get to taste the sweetness of the fruit within.”

Merry smirked. “I don’t think coconut is a fruit.”

“A mere technicality. Would it be easier to accept if I said you were even more like a pineapple?”

“A pineapple?”

“Sure, though it’s all prickly on the outside with those sharp spikes sticking out on top, there’s—” The cell phone in the pocket of Lauren’s jeans began beeping and halted her explanation. “Damn! What does Bob want now?” Pulling the phone out, she pressed a button and brought it to her ear as she grumbled. “I swear, as soon as the bar exams are over, I’m going to shove this damn thing right in his...Hi, honey! Miss you, too. Something I can do for you, darlin’?” she asked brightly, turning away from the counter.

Merry had to laugh at the instant change in her friend’s demeanor as she spoke to Bob. For all her bluster, Lauren was totally devoted to her husband and she loved him very much. It

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had been Lauren's lack of confidence in herself that prevented her from marrying Bob when he first asked her.

But the future attorney wasn't deterred. Every day over the next three years he proposed to her. Sometimes he'd do it over breakfast or dinner. Other times while they were driving in the car. He'd even wake her up in the middle of the night to pop the question. Lauren had complained about Bob's crazy antics, but Merry could see the love and hope shining in her friend's eyes. She wasn't surprised in the least when Lauren said yes.

The day of their wedding had left Merry with mixed emotions. She was pleased her friends were getting married, but she was envious, too. This was real love—no magic, no family alliance for the good of the Domain, no ego battles that commonly came when witches and warlocks married. This was what Merry was determined to have for herself. If her mother could find happiness with a mortal, then she would too.

Bryan seemed to be the perfect mate for her and she loved him with all her heart. He was a wonderful man and a generous lover. But aside from his open declarations of love and his occasional use of the word "forever," he had yet to mention marriage. Was he afraid of making a commitment or had the feud with his family left him leery of trusting people he loved?

"Don't worry, Bob," Lauren said as she turned toward the counter. "I'll pick up the book from the library and bring it to you with your lunch, ASAP. Yeah, yeah, I love you too." Punching the disconnect button, she pushed the phone into her pocket. "Well, I gotta go. I'll stop by tomorrow so we can get started on making plans for the wedding. See ya, girlfriend."

"But Lauren, I never said..." Merry's protestation died on her lips as the door closed behind Lauren. "I don't know why I try to reason with that woman. Once she gets her mind set on one thing, she's as stubborn as an old mule."

At that moment, Merry felt something rubbing against her leg. She smiled when she looked down and found Harry staring up at her.

"Meow," he cried, blinking his bright golden eyes.

"And a very good day to you, my fine furry friend. It's about time you showed up. I was beginning to think you didn't love me anymore." Merry patted the countertop. "If you want to be petted, you're going to have to make it up here on your own. I'm just too exhausted to lift you myself."

In spite of his size, Harry easily made the jump and landed silently beside her. Butting her face with his head, he rubbed his cool wet nose and raspy tongue on her cheek.

Merry chuckled and scratched his head. "That's one special greeting, Harry. Are you really glad to see me or has hunger forced you into such a sweet display? If it's food, you're going to have to wait for at least an hour. Charlie Chan's dropping off our lunch of shrimp in lobster sauce on his way to the bank."

Harry's only response was a loud purr as he arched up into her hand that was stroking the length of his back. His obvious enjoyment made her smile.

"Bryan likes being stroked too. After we make love, I run my hands up and down his back, and he moans with the pleasure of it. He likes it even better when I massage that sexy little butt of his. Come to think of it, so do I."

Harry jerked his head back to look at her. His golden gaze fixed steadily on her face, but Merry didn't notice his actions.

Visions of how she and Bryan had spent the last seven nights together filled her mind. There had been bubble baths for two, intimate dinners in front of the fireplace, kissing, cuddling, and making love for hours on end. Even eating dessert had become an erotic experience that

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invaded her thoughts.

Chocolate éclairs never tasted better than when they were fed to her by Bryan as they sat naked on her bed that first night. When a dollop of the custard filling oozed out and landed on her breast, Bryan licked it off. He enjoyed it so much he began squeezing more of the custard on her bare skin and cleaned it up the same way. But the fun truly began when the icing fell on her upper thigh and he bent down to...

Merry sighed. "If I'm going to visit Linda this afternoon and have dinner with Bryan tonight, I better get to work on my studies." She gave Harry's head a pat and lifted him down to the floor. "Sorry, sweetie, but I need the counter for my book. Why don't you take a nap in my office until lunch arrives?"

In his usual haughty manner, Harry sauntered away without looking back while Merry pulled the large leather-bound book she'd hidden from Lauren beneath the counter. She set it in front of her and ran her fingers over the gold embossed lettering on the cover as she read it aloud.

"*The Mystical Grimoire Of Spells, Rituals, And Magic.*" Tears filled her eyes. "Oh, Mama! This was your book and then you left it to me. I suppose you wanted me to make the decision about living as a witch on my own. I never wanted to use it, but with Bryan's life in danger, I need all the help I can get." Brushing the dampness from her cheeks, Merry opened the book to the marked section and leaned down over it. "Now where was I? Oh, yes, here it is. 'Chapter Thirteen, The Ultimate Taboo: Banning Of Black Magic.' She scanned down the small print on the page and shook her head. "And poor Bob thinks law books are confusing! He should try using a *Grimoire*. Besides these gruesome pictures, I've never seen so many kinds of punishment for one crime."

Merry was deep into her reading when she felt something prodding her elbow where it rested on the counter. She waved away the nuisance without looking up. "Go away, Harry. Be a good cat and try some of that new dry food I poured into your bowl this morning. Lunch won't be here for another hour."

Without warning, an old fashioned walking stick with a silver ram's head handle slammed across the opened book. Merry jerked back and discovered Dorian Laird standing on the other side of the counter.

"Dorian, what are you doing here?" she gasped.

Though the handsome warlock looked like a magazine ad for Armani suits, the effect was ruined by the malevolent gleam in his pale eyes.

"Why are you so surprised, Meredith? I told you I'd be back." He lifted his ebony cane from the book and caressed the ram's head with his hand. "I've put up your closed sign and locked the door so we won't be disturbed. Have you no words of welcome for your most devoted suitor, my pet?"

Merry covered her fear by taking an aggressive stand with her unwanted visitor. "You're not my suitor, devoted or otherwise, Dorian. I despise you. Why don't you just get out of here before I take steps to have you removed?"

Twirling the cane like a baton before tucking it under his arm, Dorian smiled. "Threats are so unbecoming and so very unnecessary, Meredith. I told you during our little chat on the phone last week that I had sources that would help me thwart any spells your aunt could invoke to harm me or protect you."

"I don't believe you, Dorian. You're bluffing."

"Am I?" Dorian turned his back to her and leaned against the counter in a restful pose. "Go ahead. Try and summon Nora. See if she can hurry over here to rescue you."

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Merry took a deep calming breath and began the incantation. *“Dear Aunt Nora, hear my plea, Nora, Nora come to me. I need your help, I need it now, I command the aid that you have vowed.”*

When Nora failed to appear, Merry silently tried to invoke the spells she had learned to protect herself. But none of them worked. She knew her powers had been enriched since losing her virginity, but Dorian was obviously doing something to prevent her from using them.

Dorian laughed and spun around to face her. “See, I told you so. Now, why don’t you make it easy on yourself and everyone else, and accept my offer?” He held out his hand to her. “Marry me, Meredith. You and I would be sensational together.”

Merry noticed a strange marking on Dorian’s wrist just below the cuff of his silk shirt. The image looked like a tattoo, but the flesh around it was red and swollen like a burn. A second later, she recognized the odd symbol from the picture she had been studying in the *Grimoire* and knew its source. Her finger trembled as she pointed at the page.

“Black magic! Dorian, you’re branded like an animal and the head on that walking stick is the talisman of your evil powers. I can’t believe it! You’ve broken the most sacred covenant of the Domain by invoking the dark side for assistance!”

With a casual shrug, Dorian pulled back his hand to adjust the cuff of his shirt. “So, you’ve been studying your spells and rituals like a good witch. That pleases me, Meredith. As the wife of the next Grand Master, it’s fitting you know all about such things.”

She shook her head. “You’re insane! I’m not going to marry you! Besides the fact that I hate and loathe you, there’s no future in being your wife. When the council discovers your crime of using black magic, you’ll probably be put to death.”

“The council wouldn’t dare harm me. With the aid of the dark side, my powers are stronger than ever.” Bracing his arms on the counter, Dorian smiled at her. “And thanks to you, dear sweet Meredith, it will only get better. Once I possess your merging gift, I shall be invincible!”

A nervous laugh passed over Merry’s lips. “Then you’re here on a fool’s errand, Dorian. My merging gift is gone.”

All too soon, Merry realized that she’d made a mistake by telling Dorian the truth. In a split second, the warlock was suddenly behind the counter, shoving her against the wall. His eyes glowed red, his nostrils flared, and his usually attractive face was contorted with rage as he grabbed her.

“Damn you, bitch! You’ve given yourself to that mortal. I can smell his foul scent on you. I could kill you for cheating me out of my victory.”

Merry refused to back down. “Go on, Dorian, kill me. I’ll go happily to my death knowing you won’t get what you want.”

“You’re so smug and self-righteous! But tell me, Meredith, how happy will you be knowing that your lover will be soon be joining you in death?”

She struggled fiercely to free herself from his hold. “No, Dorian, leave Bryan alone! He’s a mortal. He knew nothing about the merging gift.”

“You should have thought of that before you got him involved in this. Let his death be on your conscience.”

Dorian put his hand over Merry’s mouth and pinned her to the wall with his heavier body. “One quick blow to the head and an emptied cash register, and poor Meredith Albright becomes another crime statistic. No one from the Domain will ever accuse me of such a mortal deed. Farewell, my pet.”

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As he raised his walking stick to inflict the lethal blow, an explosion of light and swirling winds filled the shop. The cane flew from Dorian's grasp and into the hands of the tall man in black who was standing in the center of the store.

"Unhand my daughter, Dorian Laird, and prepare to die."

Dorian spun away from Merry and cowered from the imposing figure coming toward him. "Master, you don't understand—"

Simon Rand would hear no excuses. With a flick of his wrist, he propelled Dorian over the counter and sent him crashing into the far wall. Ignoring the whimpering warlock huddled on the floor, Simon hurried to Merry and pulled her into his arms.

"My dear precious child, are you all right? Did that bloody bastard hurt you, Meredith?"

Merry couldn't speak. The aftermath of nearly being killed had her entire body quaking to its core. It took several moments for her mind to process the fact that her father had rescued her and she was safe. Pressing her face against the soft cashmere fabric of his jacket, she tried to absorb the warmth and strength in his comforting embrace. Tears of relief flooded her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

"I-I'm fine, Daddy, now that you're here. But Dorian was going to kill me. He said...he said..."

"Hush, love, hush." Simon rocked her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. "It's all over, dearling. I vow Dorian Laird will never come near you again. I'll see to it personally."

Merry shook her head. "But Dorian's using black magic. I don't want him to use it to hurt you."

Simon hugged her tighter. "My sweet Meredith, your concern warms my heart, but you've naught to fear. As a wizard and the Grand Master of the Domain, I possess powers that far exceed anything that blackguard could ever conjure up, with or without the assistance of the dark side."

Looking up at her father, Merry smiled through her tears. "Simon, you still sound like an English nobleman in a historical romance novel."

"And just as pretty as the lads on the covers, or so I've been told by my brilliant daughter," he teased in reply. "That's quite a compliment, considering I don't have Fabio's magnificent build or long blond hair."

"Who needs Fabio? You look more like my favorite actor, Pierce Brosnan with your dark hair, handsome face and continental manners. Your smile is every bit as charming as his."

"All that, am I? Perhaps I should contact the studios and see if they're in the market for another James Bond. I could give that Brosnan fellow a run for his money."

A groan of pain from the other side of the store quickly turned their attention away from their playful banter and back to the matter at hand.

Merry frowned as Dorian struggled to stand up. "What are you going to do about him?"

Simon sighed with disgust. "Though it would please me greatly to destroy him myself, the council must be convened to decide his punishment. But they only adjourned yesterday. It could take weeks to gather them for his hearing."

"So you're just going to let him leave and hope he shows up for his trial?"

"Not bloody likely. For the moment, I've invoked a force shield that will prevent him from going anywhere. I've got to come up with a way of securing his confinement until the trial." He looked at the silver headed cane in his hand and nodded. "This gives me an idea."

Now on his feet, Dorian heard Simon's remark and snickered. "You can do nothing with my talisman. It was made for me."

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Simon nodded. "That in itself should guarantee you a death sentence at your trial, Laird." Leading Merry from behind the counter to where Dorian was standing, Simon held the walking stick toward him. "Since you chose the ram for the figurehead on your wand, it's evident you hold the animal in high esteem. See how much you revere the beast from your new position."

Dorian tried to push through the invisible wall around him, but quickly discovered that he was trapped. "You can't do this to me, Simon. I know my rights."

"You gave up your rights when you tried to harm my daughter. But by using black magic, you involved the council and cheated me out of killing you myself." Simon arched his brow. "Yet all is not lost on that score. I intend to make you suffer. You see, Laird, until your trial, your worthless hide belongs to me."

Dorian screamed. "No! You can't do that. I'm sorry, please—"

Ignoring his prisoner's plea, Simon invoked the spell. *"This fool admires the mighty ram, so give him what he's due. Let him run among the sheep, but as a full grown ewe."*

There was a flash of light, then Merry gasped. The walking stick was gone and a large bleating sheep stood before her. The noise it made was dreadful, but its foul smell was even worse.

"Simon, could you please get this...Dorian out of here? It will take me a week to get the stink of him out of my shop."

"With pleasure, darling. Just wanted you to see how well Laird looked in his new guise." Simon snapped his fingers and the animal disappeared. "I'm sure Dorian will be well pleased with his new accommodations."

Merry noticed the wicked smile on her father's face and was immediately curious. "Simon, where did you send Dorian?"

"Australia. Friends of mine have a large sheep ranch in the outback. Dorian will be safe there until the council convenes."

"But what if he's accidentally sent to market? Dorian could be slaughtered for mutton before ever going to trial."

Simon put his arm around her shoulder. "Not a chance. My friends don't sell any of the stock during mating season. And especially not a ewe. Their flock has far too many rams and there aren't enough females to service them all."

Merry felt herself blushing. "But that means..."

"That Dorian is going to be kept very busy for a while and will undoubtedly get *his* in the end." Simon kissed her cheek. "Forgive my crude sense of justice, darling, but I've always thought the punishment should fit the crime. Being a ewe in heat among a flock of rams seems the perfect penalty for a would-be rapist."

"Rapist? But I never said—" Seeing the knowing look in Simon's eyes, Merry shrugged in defeat. "All right, who told you about the attack? Kate or Shamus? I can't imagine Nora telling you, but she could have if she thought I was in danger."

Simon shook his head. "I'll never divulge my sources, Meredith. But I will tell you how disappointed I am that you didn't trust me enough to contact me about the attack."

Feeling suddenly embarrassed, Merry turned away from him and walked back to the counter. "It wasn't a case of not trusting you, Simon. But Dorian told me things that sounded too real to ignore. Things that had to do with you and me."

Simon followed her. "What sort of things did he imply?"

Merry closed the cover of the *Grimoire* and nervously rubbed her hand on its leather binding. "Well, Dorian said the council was pressuring you into naming your successor. Since



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I'm your only child and I refuse to live as a witch, they wanted you to pick someone other than me to take your place."

"That's an annual occurrence I've learned to ignore over the years. So what else did Dorian tell you?"

"Only that you had found a way to placate the council and sidestep the issue of my not wanting to be a witch."

"And how exactly was I going to accomplish that?"

Merry's mouth suddenly went dry. "By forcing me to marry the warlock of your choice. Then my husband could be groomed to be the next Grand Master of the Domain."

"Dorian told you I was going to force you to marry a warlock of my choice?"

Staring down at her hands, she nodded and then shook her head. "Well, no. I was going to be given a choice of four men you had gathered on a prospective groom list. There was a Harper from London, an Eric von something, Liam Gregory in Dublin, and the son of a wizard named Magnus from San Francisco."

"Well, that certainly sounds like the list."

Merry's eyes darted up to meet her father's. "Then it's true? You made a list of grooms and you were going to force me into marrying one of them, Simon?"

He shook his head. "There was a list, but I had nothing to do with it. Several members of the council put that group of names together." He stroked Merry's cheek with his hand. "My dear lovely daughter, I would never force you to do anything against your will. That you would even consider such to be true proves what a dreadful father I've been to you."

"You're nothing of the kind," Merry countered. "You may have been kept busy handling your duties as the Grand Master and running your galleries around the world, but I always knew you cared for me."

"How? By my expensive gifts and occasional visits? I may be the best Grand Master the Domain's ever had and be as wealthy as Croesus, but at what cost?" Simon's voice grew taut with emotion. "I'm a failure as a father. My only child barely knows me. She doesn't think I can be trusted and nearly gets killed for it. And other than the one time you said it when you were crying in my arms a few minutes ago, you haven't called me 'daddy' in years."

Merry frowned in confusion. "But, Simon, you were the one who told me to call you by your name when I was twelve. Since I was all grown up, you said—"

"Rubbish! Truth be told, I did it to please your mother. Thought she'd appreciate the gesture so your stepfather wouldn't feel threatened by my place in your life. That's also why I rarely came to see you." Simon sighed and turned away from her. "By the time Fiona and Peter died in that bloody plane crash, it was too late for me to go back to being 'daddy.' But I've missed it, Meredith. By the gods, I've missed it so very much."

Merry had never seen this vulnerable side of her father. He'd always been so confident and assured. A living portrait of sophisticated elegance, Simon's expertise in art and history made him one of the most successful and respected men in his field. With his midnight hair and movie star looks, he looked far too young to have a twenty-six-year-old daughter.

Yet here he stood, with his head hung low, berating himself, calling himself a failure. A strong sense of empathy and hope filled her heart. She had always loved and admired her father, but for the first time in her life, she felt a genuine bond was being forged between them.

She reached over and touched his shoulder. "I've missed you too, Daddy."

Those five words seemed to set a tidal wave of emotions free in Simon. He whirled around and caught Merry in a bone bruising hug. "Forgive me for being such a poor father. I love

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you so much, my daughter. When I think of how close I came to losing you today because of that beast, I could..." Controlling his renewed anger, he took a deep breath and slightly eased his hold on her. "Suffice to say, I never want to go through that again."

Merry wrapped her arms around his waist and happily accepted his comfort. She didn't want to break the mood of the moment, but her curious nature wouldn't let her rest. "Daddy, what made you come here today? Did you know Dorian was pursuing me?"

She felt him nod against the top of her head. "I knew he was interested in you, dearling. Laird came to me with his reasoning as to why he thought he should be on that cursed list of prospective grooms the council had gathered together. Said he loved you. But I knew what the man was about. It wasn't tender feelings for you that drove him. No, it was a greed for power. I simply didn't realize how desperate he would become in his quest to possess it."

"But how did you know to come here today? Have you suddenly mastered the art of telepathy and can read my mind? Is that how you knew I was in danger?"

Simon chuckled. The deep rich sound of it vibrated in her ear. "I wish it had been so simple. No, the truth is I've had others searching for Laird since I heard how he assaulted you at Nora's party. He surfaced a few days ago and has been kept under tight scrutiny since then. When I learned he was here this morning, I decided to confront him myself."

Merry gave his waist a quick squeeze. "I don't care how you came to be here. Thank you for rescuing me."

"Thanks aren't necessary. It's a father's duty to protect his little girl."

She leaned back to frown at him. "Little girl? I haven't been a little girl in years."

"Nonsense!" Simon scolded. "Even when you're a loving grandmother to a dozen children, you'll still be my little girl."

"A dozen grandchildren? Has the mighty wizard Simon Rand suddenly become a soothsayer as well?"

His smile faded as he shook his head. "No. I'm simply a father who wants his child to be happy. You've always told me that you wanted to live as a mortal, get married, and have a large family." He nodded toward the *Grimoire* on the counter. "But seeing that here gives me pause. Have you changed your mind about living as a witch?"

Merry turned from Simon and picked up the book. "Not at all. I was just looking for help in dealing with Dorian. Now that you've taken care of him, I can put this back in my desk."

Simon smiled. "Allow me." With a blink of his amber eyes, the large volume disappeared. "Now, why don't you close the shop for a bit and have lunch with me? I've got some wonderful news to share with you that can't wait."

She was going to turn him down, but the enthusiasm of her father's invitation was too captivating to ignore. She stretched up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "All right, I'll go. I just have to check on Harry before we leave."

"Who is Harry? A new man vying for your attention?"

The curt tone of Simon's question made Merry laugh. "No, Daddy. Harry's my cat."

Simon scowled. "A cat? When I gave you that myna bird a few years back, you told me you didn't want any other pets. Have you given away the bird in favor of a feline?"

"No, I still have Dickens. Harry's a black and white cat who showed up injured in my shop a couple of weeks ago and adopted me."

"A stray off the streets? Who knows where this beast has been! You should get rid of it, Meredith. If you're set on having a cat, at least let me provide you with a lovely Siamese kitten from a champion bred litter."

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“Don’t be a snob, Daddy. I love Harry and I’ve no intention of replacing him with a pedigreed kitten or any other cat.” Taking Simon by the arm, she guided him away from her office and Harry, and toward the front door of the shop. “Let’s get some lunch, Daddy, so you can tell me all about your news.”

Simon’s mood instantly lifted. “Oh, yes! My news. I can hardly wait to tell you. I hope it pleases you as much as it does me.”

Merry unlocked the door and looked back over her shoulder at him. “So, don’t wait. You’ve got my interest piqued. Tell me what has you grinning like the Cheshire Cat.”

“Nothing much,” Simon preened, rocking back on his heels. “Only that your father has simply decided to be a real part of your life, Merry, my love. I purchased the large estate next to Nora’s in Palm Beach so you and I can start spending a lot of quality time together. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“Oh, yeah! That’s great!” Merry tried to look pleased and hoped the nausea she was feeling wasn’t showing on her face.

*Jumping Jupiter! Keeping Nora from getting near Bryan has driven me crazy. With Simon underfoot, it’s going to be a real “Mission Impossible.” My stars! What am I going to do now?*

Simon ushered her out the door. “Come along, dearling. You’re about to learn what an incredibly doting father can add to your life.”

Feeling more than slightly green around the gills, Merry smiled. “Oh, swell. I can hardly wait...”

## Chapter 12

BRYAN STUFFED HIS stethoscope into the pocket of his lab coat as he hurried through the pediatric wing. Entering the children's cancer ward, his attention was immediately drawn to the bed in the corner where two familiar figures were huddled together, laughing over a book.

"There's my two best girls!" he announced when he got to the bed. "Wow! Where did you get that great hat, Linda?"

The little girl cocked her head away from Merry's shoulder, making the yellow blossoms on her brimmed hat flutter. "Hi, Dr. Bryan! Isn't it pretty? Miss Merry said she doesn't wear it anymore, so she gave it to me 'cause I love flowers. I think Miss Merry is wonderful."

Bryan smiled at Merry. "I think she's pretty wonderful myself." Merry's blush and answering smile made him lose his train of thought for a moment. "I...ah...what were you two laughing about when I came in?"

Linda held up a book. "We were just reading this joke book Miss Merry got from the library. Some of the jokes are real corny, but the riddles are pretty cool. Wanna hear a couple?"

Merry patted the bed beside her. "Come on, Dr. Bryan. We've got plenty of room for you. Stay and visit for a minute."

"Sure. Go ahead, Linda. I'm all ears."

As Linda read aloud, Bryan sat on the bed and put his arm around Merry. He rubbed his chin against her loose flowing hair and sighed. A feeling of satisfaction flowed through him. Peace of mind, so long denied, was now within reach. He had found paradise on earth. And it was all due to this woman.

Whether they were sharing a meal, practicing for the upcoming magic show, or simply talking about the events of the day, he had come to cherish every minute they spent together. Like jewels in a vault, the memories of their nights making love were carefully stored in his heart. Merry had become a very important part of his life. He'd sooner lose a limb than risk losing her.

*Damn! I can't ask Merry to be my wife just yet. I know she loves me, but I need her to trust me too. Yet every time I sense she's close to revealing things about herself, she loses her nerve and changes the subject. Somehow, I must find a way to convince her that nothing she can tell me will change the way I feel about her. Once that's done, I'll be able to—*

A poke in the ribs shook Bryan from his musings.

"All right, Doc, Linda's waiting. Stop beating around the bush!" Merry taunted. "What's the answer to the riddle?"

Bryan covered his lack of response with a frown. "Gee that's a tough one. Maybe Linda should read it to me one more time."

Linda rolled her eyes. "Okay, but I'm not giving you any hints, Dr. Bryan." She carefully pointed at each word on the page as she read it. "What is black and white and red all over?"

Lowering his brow, he put on a face of great concentration for the child's benefit. "Could it be...a newspaper?"

The little girl giggled. "No, silly. It's a zebra with a sunburn! Didn't I tell you these riddles were cool? Wait till you hear the next one."

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\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, Bryan and Merry were walking down the hospital corridor to the elevators when he suddenly pulled her into a small storage room and locked the door. Before she could say a word, he had her in his arms and kissed her until they were both panting for air.

Tucking Merry's head against his shoulder, Bryan hugged her. "I really needed that. It seems like forever since we were together."

Merry's gentle laughter filled the darkness. "It's only been eight hours, Doc. Remember, breakfast in bed, my place."

Bryan growled playfully. "Don't remind me. You were trying to get me to eat eggs sunny-side up and the only thing I wanted sunny-side up was you."

"So why are you complaining? The eggs were forgotten and you got to have breakfast *your* way, Doc."

He moaned with the sensual memory. "I wasn't complaining, sweetheart. Just wishing for another helping."

She arched up against him and nibbled on his neck. "Doctor, I do believe you're becoming insatiable."

"When it comes to you, that's exactly how I feel." Bryan felt himself growing hard and his control ebbing. It took every molecule of his restraint to ease himself away from her. "Merry, I can't come over tonight. Benton's in-laws got in town today and I promised to cover for him."

Merry sighed. "He's the doctor that's been helping you out all week so I guess it's only fair to return the favor. Though I'm going to miss you like crazy, I can get through one night alone."

The disappointment he heard in her voice made his next bit of news even more difficult to share. "It's going to be more than one night, I'm afraid. Benton's taking them to dinner tonight, a concert at the Kravitz Center tomorrow, and a weekend trip to the Keys. Then I may have to fly up to Atlanta on Monday to harvest marrow for one of my patients."

Her silence after his announcement set off alarms in Bryan's head. Had he upset her? Was she angry? Did Merry think he was using work as an excuse to stay away from her? If he could see her face, perhaps he would be able to tell what she was thinking. He frantically searched the wall beside the door with his hand and flipped the switch.

The expression on Merry's face didn't reflect pain or anger. She was chewing on her bottom lip, deep in thought. It took her a second or two to even realize the light was on.

She smiled. "I'm sorry. Did you say something, Doc?"

"Merry, are you all right? I just told you that we wouldn't be seeing each other until next week and you haven't said a word. I was afraid you might be angry with me."

Merry frowned at him. "Angry because you have to work? Don't be ridiculous. I was only realizing that your timing couldn't be better. As much as I'm going to miss you, Bryan, there are several things I have to deal with in the next few days that are going to keep me pretty busy too."

Her easy acceptance rubbed Bryan the wrong way. "Anything I can help you with? If you really need me, I can call Bill Morris at Good Sam and see if he can cover for me at night."

She shook her head. "No. Though I appreciate the offer, this is something I have to do myself. But don't worry. By the time you get back from Atlanta next week, I'll be able to spend all my nights with you."

"You're still going to come to the hospital and visit Linda every day, aren't you? She

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really looks forward to seeing you.”

“Of course I’ll be here.” Merry winked at him. “I might even find time to seek out a certain doctor friend of mine, who is worrying for nothing. I’ve no intention of forgetting him.”

“But I’m not worried about...” Bryan shook his head and sighed. “Was I that obvious?”

Putting her arms around his neck, Merry smiled. “Only to me, Doc. But then again, I’m in love with you, so that gives me the edge on everyone else.” She tenderly kissed his lips. “I’m going to miss waking up in your arms, but I can survive for a few days. In the meanwhile, you take care of your patients, I’ll run my business, and when this crazy week is over, we can make up for lost time. We have a deal, Doc?”

“Only if you promise to at least spend a few moments alone with me when you come to visit Linda.” He hugged her closer to him and nuzzled her ear. “We could have lunch or coffee in the cafeteria, or perhaps find a cozy spot to cuddle in.”

His suggestive actions made Merry laugh. “I’m all for cozy spots, Doc. But next time, could you find one with a place to sit down. My feet are killing me.”

Bryan leaned back to wiggle his eyebrows at her. “Give me enough notice of your arrival and I’ll find a private room with a bed. Ever thought about playing doctor in a real hospital?”

“Sure. Been a fantasy of mine for years,” she replied with a saucy grin. “Know anyone who wants to play?”

He slowly nodded his head. “It will be my pleasure...and then yours.” A smile curved his mouth as he moved toward her, backing her up to the door. “And after that, sweetheart, you can tell me about the rest of your fantasies and I’ll do my very best to make every one of them come true. Are you interested?”

Merry never got a chance to reply. Bryan captured her lips with a kiss. In seconds, playful teasing turned into undeniable desire. The taste of her response made him forget everything else. He devoured her with his mouth and tongue. His hands caressed her, kneading her breasts through the gauzy fabric of her dress, making her tremble beneath his touch. He was hard and throbbing for her. He needed her. He had to make love to her. He had to do it right now—

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* The sound of someone knocking on the door broke through his sensual haze.

“Hey, I need a bottle of Betadine, and the door’s locked,” a female voice called from the corridor.

Bryan jerked away from Merry. Bracing his hands on a nearby cabinet, he closed his eyes and rested his head against it while he fought to catch his breath.

He looked up to see Merry pick up a bottle from the shelf. She opened the door a crack and held out the iodine solution to the woman standing there. “Hi, Rita. Sorry about the delay. Dr. Aldwyn and I were using the room to practice a new illusion we’re going to be doing in the holiday show next month. Can I get you anything else?”

“No, Miss Albright, this is all I need. Thanks. Don’t let me disturb your rehearsal.”

Merry shut the door and Bryan began laughing at the frown on her face. “Practicing a new illusion? You don’t really think she bought that excuse, do you?”

“I didn’t have time to come up with a better story and you weren’t exactly in the mood to talk.” Casting a quick look down at the front of his trousers, her cheeks flushed. “I...ah...don’t want to leave you like this, Bryan, but I’ve got to get back to the shop. Donald and I have to pack a costume order that’s being picked up first thing in the morning. Walk me to the elevator?”

Bryan pulled his lab coat over the bulge in his pants and sighed. “Sure, sweetheart. And

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then I'm going to take a cold shower." Putting his arm around her shoulder, he led her out the door. "Something tells me I'll be taking a lot of cold showers this week."

"Playing for sympathy, Doc?" she quipped.

His brow rose hopefully. "Is it working?"

Merry gave him an answering smile. "We'll see, Doc. We'll see."

\* \* \*

It was nearly six o'clock when Merry returned to the shop. Her concerns over her father's unexpected move to town and not being able to spend her evenings with Bryan for a week flew out of her head the moment she saw the condition of her store.

Costumes were scattered across the floor in colorful piles. Posters were hanging off the walls. Magic supplies had been knocked from their neatly stacked shelves. Packets of playing cards and theatrical makeup were tossed all over the place.

"What in the name of Venus went on here?" she shouted. "Donald, where are you?"

Donald's woe-begotten face shot up from behind the counter. "Miss Albright, I'm so glad you're back. That woman came in here a few minutes ago, tried to grab Harry, and the cat went berserk! I've never seen anything like it. He was bouncing off the walls. It was all her fault. Then she started screaming, Harry howled, things started flying! Even the cash register—"

"The cash register?" Looking over the counter, Merry took a deep breath to control her anger. "Get off your knees, Donald, while I lock the door and put up the closed sign. Then you're going to tell me exactly what happened here this afternoon."

"But shouldn't I help you clean up first?"

Merry scanned the destruction of her usually pristine showroom and shook her head in disgust. "No. Cleanup can wait. I want to know the name of the human hurricane responsible for this mess." Securing the door, she walked back to Donald. "Have you ever seen this woman before?"

"Sure. It was your aunt, Miss Glendenning."

Hearing his statement, Merry nearly stumbled over her own feet. "Nora was here? What did she want?"

Donald shrugged. "I'm not quite sure. Though she did say something about your father pulling a stunt he wouldn't get away with, when she first got here."

Merry rolled her eyes. *Drat! Good news certainly moves fast! I should have called Nora before I went to the hospital.* "And what happened next?"

"Well, Miss Glendenning was standing next to the counter, real annoyed that you weren't here. Then she yelped and claimed Harry had scratched her."

"That doesn't sound like Harry. Did you see him do it?"

Donald shook his head. "Nope. He was just lying there next to the register like he always does. I think your aunt was ticked off about something else and just took it out on poor Harry."

"Is that when Nora tried to grab him?"

Donald nodded. "Uh-huh. She touched the back of his neck and Harry went ballistic! He jerked away from her, hissed, and knocked the register over as he leaped off the counter and began running around the store. I didn't know the old fur ball could move that fast! Things went flying all over the place! Your aunt tried to catch him, but Harry wanted no part of her. She caught his tail once, but he howled and gave her hand a whack with his claws."

Merry winced. "What happened next?"

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“Well, she screamed and let him go. By the time he escaped into the back room, Miss Glendenning was a wreck!” The young clerk chuckled. “Her dress was torn, she’d snapped the heel on her shoe, and her hair was standing up all over her head like a fright-wig!”

“This isn’t funny, Donald,” Merry scolded, holding back her own laughter. “What were you doing while all this was going on? Standing by, keeping score?”

Donald immediately sobered. “Oh no, I tried to help Miss Glendenning corral him, but every time I got close enough, she’d tell me to go away, that she could handle Harry without my help.” He sighed. “No disrespect, Miss Albright, but your aunt scares the heck out of me. I swear I saw red flaring in her eyes when she stormed out of the store.”

The sound of a car horn beeping in front of the shop gained Donald’s attention. “That’s my mom. I forgot she was coming to get me. I’ll tell her to go home and I’ll catch a bus later.”

Merry sighed and shook her head. “No. Go on home, Donald. It’s a school night and you’ve probably got homework.”

“But, Miss Albright, I can’t leave you with the store so messed up. I don’t mind taking a bus.”

“Don’t argue with me, Donald. Go home and have a pleasant evening. I’ll take care of everything here.” She ruffled Donald’s hair. “Go on. Your mom’s waiting for you. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After locking the door behind Donald, Merry turned on the store’s security system and began picking up the costumes from the floor and returning them to their racks. When a red velvet cloak started to rise on its own, she jumped back and screamed.

“Merciful Mars! What’s happening now?”

“*Meow!*” the lump beneath the cloak replied.

Merry sighed with relief as a familiar black and white head poked out from the folds of the garment. “There you are, Harry. I’m glad to see Aunt Nora didn’t frighten you away from here.” She lifted the large cat in her arms and carried him to his place on the counter. “Poor baby! Did that mean spirited witch give you a hard time?”

Purring like a well-tuned engine, Harry rubbed his head against her chin, inviting her touch. She laughed and stroked his soft fur. “Sorry about your run-in with Aunt Nora. I’m just glad she remembered her promise not to use magic in front of my assistant. You were able to escape and Donald doesn’t know that she’s really a witch.”

Merry shrugged. “Can’t worry about Nora now. I’ve got to come up with a way to deal with my father and his sudden urge to play ‘daddy.’ I don’t have the heart to refuse him, but I have a life of my own to live. And that life includes Bryan.” Thinking about Simon, she sighed. “But after what he said at lunch today, I don’t think my father’s ready to accept any man getting close to me. Especially not a mortal like Bryan...”

\* \* \*

Lunch with her father at the Lobster Shanty had been a pleasant treat. As the waitress cleared away their dishes, Simon picked up the opened bottle of Chablis. “More wine, Meredith?”

“No, thank you.”

“Well, if the Chablis isn’t to your liking, I could order an aperitif or a fruit liqueur for you, darling.”

Smiling, she shook her head. “That’s not necessary, Daddy. To tell the truth, I’m not



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much of a drinker. I'll just stick to my iced tea."

Simon put down the wine and touched her cheek. "There's another example of how much I don't know about you, Meredith. Your mother never cared for spirits either."

"Yes, I know. Mama said she never liked the way it clouded her mind. I suppose I take after her in that respect."

"That and so many others, I suppose." He cradled her chin in his hand. "By the fates, you do remind me of Fiona."

Merry frowned. "My mother was tall and ethereal, with platinum blonde hair and blue eyes. I don't look anything like her."

"In that regard you do resemble my side of the family with your darker hair and green eyes, my lovely daughter. But inside, in your very soul, I can see Fiona, proud, giving, and painfully independent. Like her, you have a tender heart and a generous nature. When I think how close Dorian came to destroying you, I blame myself. I could—"

She pressed her fingers on Simon's mouth. "My mother also taught me guilt is a wasted emotion. And in this case, totally uncalled for. I was the one who chose to deal with Dorian on my own. You knew nothing about it."

Simon took her hand from his lips and held it. "But had I been a more attentive father, Laird never would have accosted you in the first place." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "You can rest assured, Meredith, love, I will never allow a warlock or mortal man to hurt you ever again."

The vehemence in his voice surprised Merry. "Simon, I'm not a little girl who needs a protector. Though I appreciate your rescuing me from Dorian, he was the exception not the rule. If he hadn't used black magic, I could have handled him."

"I know, love. Forgive my anger. It's just the father in me lashing out, I suppose." Simon smiled indulgently and patted her hand. "I don't want to do anything that could jeopardize our renewed relationship. If you'll remember to call me daddy, I'll do my best to curb my protective paternal instincts. All right?"

Merry nodded. "Fine. But I want your word that you won't interfere in my life, Daddy. If I need your help with men or anything else, I'll ask for it."

"Of course, love, of course. Don't worry. I shall govern myself accordingly." Taking a sip of his wine, he set down the glass and sighed. "Since you have a business to run, I won't trouble you during the days, but the evenings are mine. What would you like to do tonight? Dinner and a play? Or better yet, why not come by and I'll give you a tour of my new house?"

Before she could reply, Simon leaned forward and took her hand. "I'm very pleased that you and I are going to be spending time together. I missed having you near me while you were a child, but I'll be denied no longer. You are my daughter, Meredith, love, and no one will ever come between us again..."

\* \* \*

*"Meow!"*

Harry's cry broke through Merry's thoughts and brought her back to reality. She was standing in her shop, stroking her pet, but the memory of Simon's words and the determined glint she had seen in his eyes made her shudder.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so confused. Simon's my father, but he's also a powerful wizard. If he thought Bryan was a threat to his plans of being close to me, I don't know what he would do."

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Recalling her talk with Bryan in the storeroom, her tension eased slightly. “You know, Harry, for once I’m grateful Bryan has a busy schedule. Though I’m going to miss being with him, I can use these nights to work things out with my father. When Simon is secure with his place in my life, I’ll tell him about Bryan.”

Harry’s only reply was to lick her hand with his rough tongue. She kissed the top of his head and set him on the floor.

“Come on, Harry. You must be hungry. I’ve got the rest of your shrimp in the refrigerator in my office. Once you’re taken care of, I’ll finish cleaning up the mess you and Aunt Nora made of my store.”

\* \* \*

The well-fed cat was sleeping in the chair behind her desk when Merry closed her office door and returned to the showroom. Standing in the middle of the store, she shook her head.

“Cosmic catastrophe! This place is a wreck. It’s going to take me all night to get it straightened out. And that doesn’t include packing the costume order for the Thanksgiving pageant. If I’m to get this done, I need help.” Heaving a sigh, Merry shrugged. “Well, I really didn’t want to do this, but what choice do I have?”

She closed her eyes and snapped her fingers. A moment later, she cautiously opened her eyes to look around.

“Oh, my stars! I can’t believe it!”

The entire shop was back together again. Costumes were returned to their racks. The overhead lights were dimmed for the night. Boxes were stacked neatly on the shelves. Nothing was scattered on the floor. A large carton sat next to the counter, a detailed packing list was taped across its lid. Even the cash register was in its place.

Flexing her fingers, Merry shook her head in amazement. “Wonder of wonders! The *Grimoire* said my powers would increase, but this is astounding. I didn’t even need an incantation to do it all.” She chuckled to herself. “Times like this make me wonder how mere mortals get through life without magic.”

“My thoughts precisely, Meredith, love.”

Merry screeched and spun around to face her unexpected guest. “Daddy, don’t do that again! You nearly gave me a heart attack sneaking up on me like that!”

Dressed in a tailored black shirt and trousers, Simon stepped out of the shadows and gave her an apologetic smile. “Sorry, dearling. Since we didn’t set a specific time to meet, I thought I’d pop over to see you. Please don’t be angry.”

His sincerity dissolved Merry’s irritation. “I’m not angry, Daddy, but you can’t pop in and out of here whenever the mood strikes you. How could I explain your sudden appearance if any of my mortal friends or customers were around? Even Nora refrains from using magic when she visits me here.”

“Well, if Nora is capable of doing that, then so am I. Having a daughter who wants to live as a mortal is still new for me. In the future, I promise to be more circumspect.” He kissed Merry’s cheek. “Are you ready to go?”

Looking at her clothes, Merry shook her head. “Not yet. I wanted to get cleaned up first and brush my hair. Why don’t you run along? I’ll be there in an hour or so.”

“An hour? Mortal practices certainly take a great deal of time. But since you’re so inclined, I’ll just wait for you here. While you’re upstairs getting dressed, I can look around your

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shop.” Simon walked past her toward the counter. “I’m also interested in seeing this new pet of yours. Where do you keep ‘Hairy’? In the back room?”

Merry caught her father’s arm. “My cat’s name is Harry and I don’t want you to bother him. Give me a moment and I’ll be ready to leave.”

Simon winked. “I thought you’d see it my way!”

Heaving a sigh, Merry snapped her fingers. Just that quickly her flowered gauze dress was replaced with a black silk blouse and matching slacks. Gold-strapped sandals were on her feet. Her long thick hair was pulled back into a sleek chignon.

“Now, I’m ready to go,” she announced.

Simon frowned and shook his head. “Not quite. Indulge your father in this, Meredith, love.” With a practiced flourish, he flicked his wrist and changed her outfit from black to royal blue. Her hair cascaded down her back in a riot of loose curls.

He nodded in approval, stepping around her. “Yes, that’s infinitely better. Never wear black, dearling. Bold jewel tones and vivid colors are perfect on you.”

Merry laughed. “You’re hardly the one to talk to me about colors! I’ve seen your photos in the papers and magazines all my life. Other than an occasional pleated white shirt added to your formal attire, you always wear black.”

“That’s different. I wear black because it’s expected of me. Part of the persona I created for myself when I became the Grand Master,” he explained. “Black is a neutral color that befits my station as an unbiased leader.”

“Ha! I think you like wearing black because it adds to your allure of being dark and dangerous. Many women, witch or mortal, find that sexy in a man.”

Simon’s brow arched as he regarded his daughter. A rakish smile curved his lips. “You might be your mother’s child, but you’ve certainly inherited my wit and candor. Remind me never to keep secrets from you, Meredith, love. To do so would likely be an act of sheer futility.”

He offered her his arm. “Since you insist on doing things the mortal way, I’ll let you drive. Your car’s behind the building, parked next to the service door, so let’s be off.”

Something in his statement about the location of her car irked Merry as they made their way through the backroom. “This afternoon we walked to lunch and I never even mentioned having a car. What are you up to now, Daddy?”

Opening the door with the blink of his eye, Simon smiled and ushered her out before him. “Nothing much, Meredith, love. Just a little bauble for my baby girl.”

Merry frowned back at him as she stepped outside. “I’m a full grown woman, not a baby. I don’t need...” Her words caught in her throat when she turned and spied a silver sports car in her parking place. “My stars! That’s not a bauble. Th-that’s an Astin Martin! I saw one just like it on display inside the British Imports showroom the other day.”

“It *is* the one from the showroom. A rare limited edition with every customized feature you could ask for,” Simon boasted. “The perfect vehicle for my precious daughter.”

Merry propped her hands defiantly on her hips. “Simon, it’s got to go back. I don’t mind you using magic to zap me into new clothes, but this is different. Living like a mortal is my choice. I’d be a hypocrite if I accepted a car that was stolen by magic.”

Simon took hold of her shoulders. “I didn’t steal the car or use magic to obtain it. I purchased it for you this afternoon and kept you busy in the shop while it was being delivered a few minutes ago. The dealership is storing your old car until you decide what’s to be done with it. The entire transaction was very legal and above board, I assure you.”

Feeling foolish, Merry shook her head. “I’m so sorry. But Nora is constantly using magic

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to impress me. She wants me to embrace magic and accept my life as a witch, but I simply can't do it. I just assumed you used magic."

He brushed a windblown curl from her face. "Meredith, love, I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit how pleased I would be if you changed your mind about living as a witch. But I'm also very proud of you for sticking to your principles. You've made a difficult decision and you're working hard to achieve your goals. I offer you my love and support, Meredith. Because above all, I want you to be happy."

Meredith considered telling her father about Bryan as he kissed her forehead and pulled her into his arms for a lingering hug. The timing seemed perfect. Even though Bryan was a mortal, she was confident Simon would understand her feelings for this wonderful man and give them his blessings. As she opened her mouth to speak, Simon's next words put a stop to her declaration.

"I thank the gods you're not involved with a man, Meredith love. You were right to wait. Mystic or mortal, most men are treacherous brutes who can't be trusted. Dorian Laird has certainly taught me a lesson I won't soon forget."

Merry pulled away from her father's embrace. "But I told you before, I was never interested in Dorian."

"Of course not, dearling. I'm simply going to make sure another warlock doesn't try to seduce you and use you as a pawn like he did."

"You're worrying for nothing, Daddy. I don't date warlocks. Besides the only man I'm interested in at this moment is—"

"Me! And I couldn't be more pleased about your choice!" Simon kissed her cheek and pressed a set of keys into her hand. "Now let's get going. I'm really looking forward to seeing you behind the wheel of this car."

Merry eyed the silver Astin Martin and sighed out loud. "Daddy, about the car. It's beautiful and all, but I really can't accept such an extravagant gift from you."

"Nonsense. I'm a very wealthy man. If I want to give my only child a present or two, I won't allow anyone to gainsay me. Not even you, Meredith, love." Simon turned her toward the car and gave her a gentle push. "Go on, dearling. You know you want to drive it."

"But I really shouldn't..."

Simon leaned over her shoulder and grinned. "Accept the car, or by noon tomorrow, I will have a Rolls Royce, a Bentley, and a BMW delivered to you as well."

Merry gasped. "You wouldn't really do that, would you?"

"Indeed I would. Continue to defy me and I'll purchase others. By Tuesday next, you could have an entire fleet of expensive cars." He put his arm around Merry's shoulder. "So, are you going to accept the Astin Martin and save me all the trouble of carrying out my threat?"

She frowned at his rakish smile. "You're enjoying this a little too much to suit me. Okay, I'll take the Astin, but with one condition. That you don't give me any more fancy cars or gifts."

Simon nodded and held up his hand in pledge. "No more fancy cars, Meredith, love, I promise."

In the days to follow, Merry would chide herself often for not getting a more specific promise from her father.

## Chapter 13

“MY STARS! I’VE gone over this statement three times and I still can’t get it right.” Merry dropped the stack of invoices next to the calculator on her kitchen table. “Why can’t I get this blasted thing to balance?”

A voice squawked from the cage in the corner. “*’Umble we are, ’umble we have been, ’umble we shall ever be.*”

“One more word from you, Dickens, and I’ll pluck your feathered butt bare!” Merry let out a deep sigh and shook her head in disgust. “My mind’s gone to mush and I’m sitting here, threatening an innocent bird. What’s the matter with me?”

There really wasn’t a mystery about what her problem was, and she knew it. She was suffering from not enough sleep, too much Simon, and no Bryan.

Taking a sip of cold coffee from her abandoned cup, she grimaced. “Well, there is a positive side to all this. Nothing could possibly make this week any worse than it already is.”

A knock on her apartment door caught her attention. When she opened it and discovered who her visitor was, she leaned against the doorjamb with her arms folded over her chest and shook her head. “Drat! I knew I spoke too soon.”

Nora arched her brow. “And a pleasant good day to you, too, Meredith. Can I come in?”

“Sure, why not? I’ve hidden up here to go over paperwork, but Donald’s called me six times, my bird won’t shut up, and I’ve received three deliveries and four fax messages. So why should I mind the arrival of an unexpected visitor when compared to all that lovely confusion?”

Wearing a pantsuit of pink linen and a fragrant cloud of roses and spice, Nora entered the small foyer. “You’re awfully touchy today, poppet. Need I ask why or would you like me to guess?” She looked at Merry’s stoic face and chuckled. “I take it His Eminence is still around, wreaking havoc on your usually mundane, yet comfortable life.”

Merry rolled her eyes. “That’s putting it mildly. While you were out of town, the man’s become a fixture around here.”

Nora gave her niece a comforting hug. “Sorry I haven’t been here to help you, but when I learned Simon was my new neighbor, I had to get away for a few days. I swear he bought that place just to annoy me.”

“Well, you’re back now and that’s what matters. Come into the kitchen and have some coffee while I tell you about my week as Simon’s little girl.”

Nora sat at the table and noticed the jar of instant coffee on the counter beside the electric kettle. “Drinking that foul stuff might be acceptable to mortals, Meredith, but it hardly qualifies as coffee. Allow me.”

A snap of her fingers produced two steaming mugs of coffee. The brew’s rich bouquet wafted through the kitchen. Nora picked up the cup in front of her and took a sip.

“That’s perfection,” she sighed. “Just the right amount of cream, sugar, and caffeine.” Nora pushed the other mug toward Merry. “Now, sit down, drink your coffee, and tell me what Simon’s been putting you through while I was away.”

Merry dropped into her chair. “I really feel odd complaining about this, but Simon is killing me with all his attention. I don’t know what to do. After years of sporadic visits, he’s now constantly underfoot.”

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Nora waved her hand toward the papers on the table. "I see you've brought your work home with you. I gather Simon's been making a pest of himself in the store."

"Oh yeah, and then some. He said he wouldn't interfere with my business schedule if I would see him in the evenings, but he's been here every day chatting with my customers, answering the phones, and charming my friends. Lauren thinks he's a real doll!" Merry shook her head. "And if that's not enough, Simon's driving me nuts with his suggestions about making changes in the store. Thank the gods, Harry keeps out of sight when my father's around, or he'd find himself replaced by a pedigreed kitten. I swear Simon spends more time in my shop than I do."

"Hmm," Nora hummed, taking another sip of coffee. "What in the heavens has made Simon hang about like this? Before now, you barely saw him once or twice a year."

"I think it has to do with Dorian Laird."

Nora put her cup down on the table with a resounding thud. "Why? Has that slimy warlock been around?"

Merry told her aunt about the confrontation she'd had with Dorian and how Simon had rescued her. By the time she finished, Nora was quaking with anger.

"Making him into a sheep was too good for the bastard! I would have come up with a more painful way of punishing him for what he tried to do to you." She impatiently tapped her long manicured nails on the side of her mug. "Too bad the council has become so civilized with hearings and such. Dorian deserves nothing less than a good old-fashioned sentence of being drawn and quartered."

Merry shrugged. "Simon wasn't happy about it either, but Dorian must stand before the council and be tried for using black magic. In their eyes, that crime is far more damning than what he tried to do to me."

"Now I can understand why Simon has suddenly become the world's most devoted father. It's a combination of guilt and fear, tempered with genuine affection. Isn't it amazing? The great Simon Rand actually has a heart."

The myna bird flapped his wings. "*Once a gentleman, always a gentle man.*"

Nora turned and scowled at the bird. "Has that creature stopped quoting Dickens? I don't recognize that passage at all."

"It's from *Little Dorrit*, one of Dickens' lesser known works." Merry sighed. "Oh, Aunt Nora, what am I going to do about Simon? Besides all his attention, he's been showering me with presents."

"So what's the big deal about that? The man's a wizard. With a mere thought he can conjure up anything. Just tell him to send the gifts back the same way."

Merry shook her head. "You don't understand. He knows I won't accept things produced by magic, so he goes out and buys gifts for me like a mortal. So far I've got an Astin Martin, a customized computer system for the store, daily deliveries of fresh flowers, a gold Rolex watch, perfumes, bath oils, and enough new clothes and shoes to fill two closets. I've heard the Chamber of Commerce is considering Simon for an award because he's rescuing the local economy with all his purchases."

She reached across the table and picked up three small boxes. "Last night, Simon gave me a pair of diamond earrings. They were studs with a weight of at least three carats each. Of course I tried to refuse them, but he wouldn't take them back. Instead he gave me his word he wouldn't buy me any more diamonds. These arrived by separate messengers this morning."

Nora opened the boxes and her mouth dropped. "Merciful Midas! The man's got

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incredible taste. Ruby hearts, sapphire clusters, and emerald teardrops. Didn't know the area jewelers carried such fine quality in gems."

"Aunt Nora, stop gaping at those and give me some advice! What should I do about Simon? I appreciate his love and concern, but I want my life back the way it was."

Arching her brow at Merry's desperate tone, Nora carefully regarded her niece's face. "Uh-oh! I sense the reason you want to be rid of father's attention has more to do with your personal need to see a certain mortal. Have you told Simon about Bryan?"

Merry shook her head. "No. With all his ravings about men taking advantage of me and how he wants to protect me, I'm afraid Simon would hurt Bryan."

"From what you've said about Simon's present state of mind, I wouldn't doubt it. Have you told Bryan that your father was in town?"

"Not yet," Merry confessed with a sigh. "If I did, Bryan would insist on meeting him. Thank the heavens, he's been too busy with his medical work this past week to even see me."

Nora snickered. "So, you've been abandoned already!"

"I have not," Merry shot back. "Bryan's been covering for a colleague and because of the fire at Beth Israel Hospital, he's had to accept a dozen more patients onto his floor. The man's a dedicated doctor and I won't let you deride him like this."

Nora held up her hands in surrender. "The man's a paragon. I'm sorry. Don't take my head off for speaking my mind, but people who care for one another usually find a way to spend an hour or two together. Even a few minutes are better than none."

The truth in Nora's words compounded the thoughts in Merry's mind. "Yes, I know. The day Simon arrived, Bryan told me about the increased hours on his work schedule. We planned on getting together everyday when I visited Linda in the hospital. Then the fire at Beth Israel happened and added to his workload and I haven't seen him since."

Feeling slightly unnerved, Merry got up and walked toward the window. As she gazed outside, she hastily brushed away the tears welling in her eyes. "I don't know why I'm getting so melancholy over this. Bryan calls every morning to tell me how much he loves me."

Nora was suddenly beside her, putting a comforting arm around her shoulders. "You're crying because you miss Bryan. A phone call is nice, but a visit in person is what you need. Why don't you put together a special picnic supper, put on a slinky little outfit, and go down to the hospital to see him? No matter how busy Bryan is, the man has to stop and eat sometime."

Merry sniffled. "That sounds nice, but what am I supposed to do about Simon? He promised to stay away from the store today if I agreed to have dinner with him tonight at his house."

"You leave your father to me. I'll go in your place."

"But you hate Simon. I can't ask you to spend the evening with a man you despise."

Nora shrugged. "I really don't hate your father, honey. It's his male arrogance that ticks me off. But I can deal with Simon. Anyway, it's about time I paid my new neighbor a visit." A smile curved her pink lips. "I'll even bring him a lovely house warming present."

"Aunt Nora, I know that look in your eye means nothing but mischief. What kind of a gift are you talking about?"

Nora grinned and gave her a quick hug. "Nothing for you to worry about, poppet. You go out and find your darling Bryan, and I'll be in touch tomorrow."

Releasing Merry, Nora hurried toward the foyer. A second later, she turned and snapped her fingers. A large wicker hamper sat on the kitchen counter.

"There's the picnic supper all ready for you, Meredith, fresh from my favorite Palm

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Beach deli. I suddenly recalled the last time you tried to cook and thought better of leaving you to your own devices. Au revoir, honey!”

The door slammed shut behind Nora as Merry looked inside the basket. “Oh, my! French bread, cheese, pasta salad, coleslaw, baked ham, sliced tomatoes, roast beef, and a chocolate cake for dessert. What’s this? A bottle of wine?” She pulled the green bottle from the basket. “Sparkling apple juice. Thanks for remembering, Aunt Nora.”

The sound of a familiar voice whispered in Merry’s ear. “*Anytime, poppet...*”

\* \* \*

It was nearly nine o’clock when Merry carried the cumbersome basket back into her apartment. Turning on the kitchen light, she unbuttoned her long coat and dropped the hamper on the floor.

“So much for my big surprise! Two hours of lugging this thing around, searching for a man who wasn’t even there. Drat it all,” she grumbled. “Why didn’t Bryan tell me he was leaving for Atlanta tonight?”

“Because he’s been too busy looking for you.”

Merry spun around to find the object of her quest standing behind her. He was leaning against the doorframe with his cheeks flushed. His glasses sat slightly off center on his face.

“Bryan! What are you doing here?”

He shoved his eyeglasses in place and frowned at her. “I ran up the stairs just moments after you, but you were so busy talking to yourself, you didn’t hear me.”

She shrugged. “Sorry, Bryan, I didn’t—”

“And you didn’t lock the door downstairs. Any lunatic could have followed you up here!”

“But I wasn’t—”

Bryan moved slowly toward her. “I stopped by the shop to see you a couple of hours ago and Donald told me you had gone to the hospital.”

Merry nodded. “That’s where I was. I waited around until someone finally told me that you had left for a trip to Atlanta.” The odd look on his face as he drew closer to her made her step back. “Are you upset about something, Bryan?”

“Why should I be upset? I only drove through six parking lots at the hospital a dozen times, looking for your brown Honda Accord and couldn’t spot it anywhere.”

“Oh! I don’t have that car anymore. I gave the Accord to Donald...though he’s not driving it until his insurance goes into effect.” She gave him a sheepish smile. “Sorry. I should have told you about my new car when I got it last week.”

“You damn well should have! Do you have any idea what you’ve put me through in the past two hours? Racing back and forth between here and the hospital, searching for some sign of you or your car. Visions of Dorian attacking you again filled my mind.” Bryan stopped before her with his hands clenched into taut fists. His golden eyes shimmered with anger. “The thought of that bastard returning to hurt you drives me insane.”

Merry wrapped her fingers around his fists. “Calm down, Bryan. Dorian had a run-in with the law that could earn him a death sentence. He’s being held in Australia until his trial next month, so we’ll never have to deal with him again.”

“I admire your confidence, sweetheart, but knowing the judicial systems in most countries, Dorian could be found innocent and set free.”



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“There’s no chance of that happening. The ah...foreign power trying Dorian is not lenient with their criminals. He’s already been found guilty; the trial is a mere formality.”

Bryan began to relax. She could feel the tension leaving his hands, but just as quickly it returned. “What about that car you were driving?” he asked. “I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw you behind the wheel. Then I watched you pull into your parking place out back and knew it was true. While I don’t know much about classic cars, I know Astin Martins cost a fortune. Where on earth did you get it?”

She smiled and hoped Bryan would accept her act of cool indifference. “My father had it delivered to me last week as a present. It’s kind of a guilt gift. His attempt at making up for all the times he missed my birthdays and such.”

“That’s one heck of a lot of guilt and very impractical. If he was going to buy you a new vehicle, a van for your business would have been a much better choice.”

Merry shrugged. “In my father’s way of thinking, he was being very practical. According to him, classic cars, fine art, and antiques are excellent investments because they only increase in value with age.”

Bryan scowled and turned away from her to pace the floor. “That’s true, but I still think—”

“Bryan?”

“...spending a fortune on an expensive car is foolish—”

Merry sighed. “Bryan?”

“...when you consider the probability of accidents and theft, the premium on the insurance policy would likely choke a horse!”

“Bryan?” She tried to grab him as he passed her, but she missed. “Bryan, will you listen to me?”

“That fancy vehicle is a car-jacking waiting to happen and you could be killed!” he continued.

At the end of her patience, Merry decided on a more direct approach to gain his attention. She removed her coat and tossed it on a chair. As he turned to go by her, she stood in his path.

“Hey, Doc! Do you like my new dress?”

Bryan’s eyes practically popped out from behind his glasses. His Adam’s apple visibly jumped as he struggled to speak. “That is a not a dress, sweetheart. It’s black and sheer, and too damn sexy for words.”

Merry sighed with pleasure when his hand cupped her breast through the thin lace dress. “The designer calls this little number A Bit Of Temptation. It came with a full-length satin slip, but I seem to have forgotten it. Should I run upstairs and put it on so you can enjoy the whole effect?”

“Don’t bother,” he growled, pulling her into his arms to nuzzle her neck. “I intend to have this dress off you in just a matter of minutes.”

His hand ran down the length of her back to stroke her hips and buttocks. Suddenly, his head jerked up and he glared at her. “Merry, you’re not wearing any underwear! You’ve been driving all over town and running around the hospital almost naked.”

“Calm down, Bryan. I was wearing a coat. No one saw what I had on beneath it.”

“What would have happened if a policeman pulled you over and found you like this? I don’t know why you take such chances.”

His censure prodded Merry’s temper. Tears of disappointment burned her eyes. She retaliated by poking him hard in the ribs with her fist. “I did it to surprise you, you ungrateful

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dolt! Why else would I dress in such a skimpy outfit and tote around a huge basket of food? After being apart all week, I thought you would enjoy my attempts at seduction! But you weren't at the hospital and now your macho attitude is ruining everything."

Letting out a deep sigh, Bryan took her into his arms. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. For being such a jerk and for spoiling your surprise. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you? Dinner out, a night at the theater, me groveling on the floor begging for forgiveness?"

Merry leaned back to look up at him. "Doc, there's only one thing I want from you at this minute."

His brow quirked. "Oh, yeah. And what's that?"

She smiled. "Just shut up and kiss me!"

Setting his glasses on the table, Bryan grinned. "Now that's a penance I'm more than willing to pay."

His mouth captured hers like a hungry man after a month long fast and Merry eagerly let him have his fill. Hands caressed and stroked as they kissed. Needs and desire banked during the past week, fired anew between them.

Bryan unbuttoned the back of her dress and pushed it off her shoulders until the black lace pooled at their feet. His lips left hers to explore the sensitive contours of her neck and breasts causing her to moan with pleasure. He drew her nipple into his mouth, sucking hard on the taut peak.

"Yes, Bryan, yes," she gasped. "I've missed this so much."

Merry drove her fingers through his hair and stretched on tiptoe to better accommodate his mouth. Her legs soon quivered from the effort. As her knees threatened to buckle, Bryan lifted her onto the tiled counter.

The unexpected feel of her bare bottom on the cold ceramic top caused her to giggle. "Oh! This tile is like ice! We're not going to make love in the kitchen, are we, Bryan?"

Taking off his own shirt and tossing it aside, he nodded. "Yes, we are, sweetheart. After a week away from you, I can't wait to get you upstairs," he replied, using his hands to gently part her knees. His fingers stroked the pale skin of her inner thighs as he stepped between her legs.

Merry tried to ignore the sensual pull of his eyes and touch by focusing her attention on the medal he wore around his neck. "But people don't make love in the kitchen."

"We are." Bryan lifted her chin to drop a tender kiss on her lips. "As a matter of fact, I intend to make love to you in every room of this apartment tonight. Are you up to it?"

"Well, I...oh yes-s-s!" Merry's gasp became a sigh as his fingers found and caressed the small pulsing center of her sex. Leaning back on her arms, she arched her hips and opened herself fully to his touch. And Bryan didn't disappoint her. While kissing her breasts, he rubbed the hidden kernel with his thumb and fingers, varying the intensity, soft and then hard, fast and then slow. A sweet burning sensation built up within her, but he refused to bring her to completion.

"Please, Bryan," she pleaded, tossing her head side to side. "I need you inside me now."

"Soon, sweetheart, soon. You are so hot and wet for me. Let me do this first."

Merry never got the chance to question his meaning as his mouth replaced his fingers to continue her erotic torment. He cradled her hips with his hands while he probed and teased her quivering flesh with his tongue. When she was on the brink, he brought her over by flicking his tongue over the engorged nub.

The sound of her own passion-filled cries was still ringing in Merry's ears when Bryan pulled her into his embrace and eased his thickened length inside her. His groan of sheer pleasure

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spurred her into action.

Circling his neck with her arms, she kissed his mouth and wrapped her legs around his waist to draw him closer. The thrust of his manhood within her sexual core and his tongue in her mouth took on a matching cadence that inflamed her, pushing her toward another climax. Hoping to return the gesture, she drew on his tongue and clenched the muscles in her feminine passage the same way. The effort didn't go unnoticed. Bryan grasped her hips with his hands and increased the impetus and speed of his thrusts.

Bryan suddenly wrenched his mouth away from hers, gasping for air. "So tight, so wonderful...can't wait. Come with me, Merry, come with me now!"

Merry didn't know if it was his voiced command or the new grinding motion of his pelvis against her clitoris that did it, but a moment later her entire body was shaken by an explosive climax. Imprisoning him with her arms and legs, she held onto Bryan as his shouts of completion drowned out her own.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, the two lovers lay content and happily exhausted in Merry's bed. She cuddled close to Bryan and sighed. "Having a picnic in bed was certainly a fun experience. No ants or rain to worry about. But some of your ideas, Doc, for dining *au natural*, will never make it to the party suggestion list in *Better Homes and Gardens*."

Bryan chuckled and stretched back on the mound of pillows behind him. "Maybe not, but your use for chocolate icing would surely make it to the pages of *Playboy*. I wasn't sure if you were going to like doing that—"

Merry tugged on his necklace to gain his attention. "I liked it fine, but one more word about it and I won't be so inventive in our love making ever again."

Her obvious embarrassment made him smile. "Now that's a cruel threat, sweetheart. Just think what we would have missed if you'd made such a decision before our little tryst in the living room. I never knew how erotic the back of a sofa could be until I saw you draped over it in that position—"

Her hand on his mouth stopped his words. Instead of being put off by her gesture, Bryan opened his mouth to nip and suckle on her fingertips. He was pleased to feel a tremor of excitement running through her arm.

"Bryan, don't...", she protested in a voice that sounded more like a purr than a plea. "If you're to catch that plane at eight in the morning, we have to stop, turn off the lights, and let you get some sleep."

Taking her fingers from his mouth, he tugged on her wrist and pulled her until she was lying across his chest. "I can go for hours without sleep. Mastered that when I was an intern."

Merry braced herself up on her elbows to frown at him. "That's all well and good for you, Dr. Aldwyn, but I've got to get some rest if I'm going to drive you to the airport."

He stroked back a lock of hair from her forehead. "I'll take my own car and leave it in long-term parking so you won't have to worry about picking me up. As it is, the airline still hasn't been able to confirm my return flight. With the Thanksgiving holiday this week, they're all overbooked."

"But Atlanta's only a ten hour drive from here, Doc. Wouldn't it make more sense to take your car so you won't get stuck there?"

"I considered doing just that. But when I stopped at my condo to pick up my luggage

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earlier this evening, I received a message that the donor in Atlanta got a viral infection and can't be used. Another family member in Tulsa is going to donate the marrow for my patient, so I'm off to Oklahoma."

Resting her head on his chest, Merry sighed. "And you, the wonderful doctor with the big heart and the need to oversee all procedures for the good of your patient, have to fly clear across the country during the busiest traveling weekend of the year."

Bryan wrapped his arms around her. "Sorry I won't be back in time for Thanksgiving, sweetheart. I was going to surprise you by taking you to the Breakers for dinner."

He felt her shrug. "Don't sweat it, Doc. I'm not big on holidays or big fancy places in Palm Beach. I prefer staying home, but I might go to Lauren and Bob's after I visit Linda in the hospital. They invited me over for dinner." She patted his chest. "You take care of your patients and I'll be here waiting for you when you get back."

Instead of feeling relief at her acceptance, Bryan was plagued with doubts. *Why isn't Merry annoyed by all the time we've spent apart lately? Even when I tell her that I'm going to miss our first holiday together, she doesn't get upset. Is she that understanding, or has her interest in me waned?*

Bryan suddenly needed reassurance. "Hey, Merry, I just got a great idea. Getting stuck in Tulsa would be a lot more fun if you were there. Why don't you close the shop for a few days and come with me?"

She shook her head where it rested on his chest, but didn't look up at him. "Can't do it this week, Doc. Got a meeting with the...a...a...director of Palm Beach Opera...Friday, first thing. Wants to order costumes for his next three productions. Could lead to a long term contract." Kissing his chest, she yawned and snuggled against him. "I'll tell you all about it in the morning while I'm making your breakfast. Night, Doc."

Bryan pulled the sheet over them and turned off the lamp on the nightstand. Merry slept peacefully in his arms while he stared into the darkness and worried about losing her.

\* \* \*

"Hurry up, Doc! Your breakfast will be ready in a minute and nothing's worse than cold eggs." Merry turned from the stove and saw Bryan passing by the kitchen doorway.

"Be right there, honey. I'm going to put my suitcase in the car first."

As the door shut behind Bryan, Merry sighed. *Vexing Venus! I wish I were going to Tulsa with him, but how can I with Simon in town? There would be far too many questions, and who knows what the consequences would be when my father found out about Bryan. Another thought made her wince. Or if Bryan discovered the truth about me and my mystical family before I was ready to tell him.*

Putting a cover on the omelet pan, she picked up a potholder and removed a pan of muffins from the oven. "I don't know what's more aggravating, my reluctance to reveal what I really am, Bryan's time consuming career, Simon's interference, or my inability to deal with it all."

Without warning, a thin scratchy voice called out from the cage in the corner. "*Hark, the time is drawing near!*"

Merry scowled at her pet. "I'm not in the mood for *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens. If you're not quiet, I'll cover your cage again and you can spend the rest of the day in the dark."

While standing next to the sink, filling a breadbasket with her freshly baked muffins, the

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words Dickens had quoted rattled through her brain.

"It's true. The time is drawing near for me to do something. I just can't go on like this much longer."

"Uh-oh! From those last few mutterings, I can hear I'm in trouble," Bryan announced coming into the kitchen. "Sorry about the delay. I couldn't resist taking another look at that new car of yours." He came up behind Merry and put his arms around her waist. "I hope my dawdling didn't ruin the spectacular breakfast you're making for me. It's not everyday that I get to have fresh blueberry muffins and a western omelet."

Merry closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax for a moment in Bryan's embrace. She loved everything about this man: his laugh, his wit and his charm. Even his devotion to his patients warmed her heart.

While he was gone, she would sleep with the pillow he used. The scent of his soap and spicy cologne on the percale covering would be her company during the lonely nights ahead. The memory of how they had made love for hours filled her mind. They were so real, so vivid, she could actually feel his mouth kissing her neck. His hands cupping her breasts, making them peak—

"Bryan, what are you doing?" Merry looked over her shoulder and pulled her neck away from his lips. "As much as I'm enjoying this, we don't have time now. Your plane takes off in ninety minutes and your breakfast is getting cold."

Rubbing up against her, Bryan smiled and continued caressing her breasts through her silk robe. "I'd gladly give up food for a week if I could make love to you one more time before I go."

Merry shut her eyes to gather her resolve. *I wonder if a witch can be canonized for making such a noble sacrifice.* A second later she turned, put her hands on his chest and shoved him away.

"All right, Bryan, that's enough. I see the task of being the voice of reason here is mine. Sit down, eat your breakfast, and stop teasing me like that. The next time I might not be as forgiving when—"

"*Oh no, kind spirit!*" Dickens screeched from his cage. "*Say he will be spared!*"

Bryan chuckled. "See. Even your bird's sticking up for me."

Merry shook her head. "No he's not. That silly creature's been spouting lines from *A Christmas Carol* for the past few days. I wish he'd find something else to quote from." Picking up the basket of muffins, she gave it to Bryan. "Take this to the table while I get the omelet and the coffee pot."

Bryan let out a sigh and kissed her cheek. "Only because you insist. But when I get back, Meredith Albright, I'm going to find someone to cover my patients. Then I'm taking you away for a few days and keeping you completely to myself. There are some very important matters we need to discuss, and I won't allow my medical practice or anything else to get in the way. The future of our relationship depends on it."

\* \* \*

Merry was still sitting at the kitchen table, mulling over Bryan's statement a half hour after he left. When she'd tried to ask him about his reference to the future, he had given her a mysterious smile, saying she would find out when he returned.

"Maybe Bryan's going to ask me to marry him. He's told me many times that he loves

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me and how much he wants to be with me. But how can I even consider his proposal without telling him first that I'm a witch?"

As she refilled her coffee cup, there was a knock on her apartment door. "Who can that be at this hour? It's not even eight o'clock." Merry was in the mirrored foyer when she noticed what she had on.

"My stars! A red silk robe will never do." Looking at her reflection, she shrugged. "Oh well, it can't be helped." With a snap of her fingers, she was instantly attired in her favorite jeans and pink sweatshirt. Waving her fingertips, she smiled. "Gosh, that was easy! Now, let's see who's come for a visit."

Opening the door to her unexpected guest, Merry gasped with surprise. "Daddy? What are you doing here?"

"Forgive the unseemly hour, my dear, but I needed to talk with you." Simon entered her apartment and kissed her cheek. Instead of being dressed in his customary black, the powerful wizard was wearing white shorts, a cotton sweater, socks and a pair of white Reeboks.

Merry could hardly believe her eyes. "Daddy, you look like a tennis pro! Do you actually play the game?"

"I haven't for years, but thanks to Nora, that's about to change. At ten, she and I are meeting the mayor of Palm Beach and his wife for mixed doubles."

"You and Aunt Nora? Playing tennis with the mayor? But why? I don't understand."

Simon put his arm around Merry's shoulder. "Make your dad a cup of coffee and he'll tell you how all of this came about."

"Sure, come into the kitchen. Would you like a blueberry muffin? I baked them myself this morning."

"No, thanks, my love. Just coffee, black, will be fine."

When Merry put the coffee in front of Simon and sat down beside him, she realized he was staring at her. "Daddy, you're looking at me in a strange way. Have I done something wrong?"

Simon smiled ruefully and shook his head. "No, Meredith, you haven't. I simply never realized how seriously you take living like a mortal. You bake your own muffins, brew your own coffee, and probably do all your own housework. You have the magic ability to carry out these tasks with a mere thought, yet you opt to do them the old fashioned way with your hands."

Merry shrugged. "I enjoy doing these things myself. I always have."

"So I've been told by Nora. According to her, if I want to be involved in your life, I should respect your wishes to live like a mortal and find a way of being a part of the world you live in." Picking up his cup, Simon sipped his coffee and set it down with a sigh. "Hence, my tennis date with the mayor."

Merry was confused. "What does my living as a mortal have to do with your tennis date with the mayor?"

"Only that I too must appear to be a mortal if I'm to have a relationship with you as my daughter. So while I'm here in Palm Beach, I must fit in. I shall be what the mortal world expects me to be. Simon Rand, art dealer and antiquarian expert, wealthy entrepreneur, concerned area resident, and above all, your most devoted father." A frown creased Simon's brow. "At first I thought Nora was going a bit overboard with all these suggestions, but after thinking on it, I totally agree with her. She's a very clever woman. I may have sorely misjudged her."

Shaking her head in amazement, Merry laughed. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. You're taking advice from Aunt Nora and paying her a compliment, too."

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Simon smirked. “Don’t think that doesn’t surprise me as well. When she appeared at my home last night for dinner in your stead, I was far from being hospitable. Especially when I saw that awful snake she was carrying. Called it Cuddles. What a ludicrous name for such a beast!”

“That python is one of her familiars.” Merry was perplexed. “I can’t understand why she brought it to you.”

“She wanted to wrap the bloody thing around me, so I could experience first-hand what I was doing to you with my constant attention. Suffice it to say, when Nora went on to explain that she was there on your behalf, I had no choice but to listen to her. And I’m glad I did.”

He reached over and took hold of Merry’s hand. “I know you adored your stepfather and he loved you as his own. That’s why I agreed to the adoption when he married Fiona. But you’re a part of me, Meredith, and now I want everyone to know that you are my child. Would you consider using my name as your own?”

“You want me to change my last name from Albright to Rand?”

Simon gave her a hopeful smile. “Not change it, just add to it. Peter was very important to you and I wouldn’t dream of ever trying to diminish that. What I’m suggesting is allowing me and my name to share his place in your life. You would be Meredith Albright Rand. But if you’d rather not, I’ll understand.”

In spite of his smile, Merry could see the vulnerability in her father’s eyes. “Oh, Daddy, how could I refuse your request? Of course I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, Meredith, my love. You’ll never know how much this means to me.” He gently squeezed her hand. “Besides, if you ever decide to give up your mortal ways and follow your family’s mystical traditions, carrying the name of Rand would be a definite advantage for you.”

She frowned. “In what way?”

“Why, as the next Grand Master of the Domain,” he declared. “A Rand or Glendenning has held the position since the inception of the Domain. As the child of both of these families, the office is practically your birthright.”

“But I’m a woman. The council would never permit it.”

Simon’s brow rose in an imperious arch. “The council could not prevent it. With my support and tutelage, and your immanent talents, you would be the best candidate for my replacement, and well they know it. No one could gainsay you if you wanted to be the next Grand Master.”

Merry scowled at his enthusiasm. “Daddy, you’re beginning to sound exactly like Aunt Nora. She’s been telling me the same things for years.”

“Well, Nora hasn’t said a word about it to me, though I am once again impressed by her surprising wisdom. Perhaps she didn’t mention it to me last night out of respect to your wishes not to pursue a life as a witch. I shall do the same. Just remember, the option is still open for you.”

Picking up his cup, Simon finished his coffee. “So what plans have you made for today, Meredith, my love?”

Merry realized the discussion about her being the next Grand Master was over and she could allow herself to relax. Talking about her business was a far more pleasant topic.

“I’ve got to prepare a proposal for the local opera company and call in orders to several vendors. Then I’m going to try and work on that new computer you had installed last—”

The sound of wings fluttering in the cage garnered her attention. Dickens called out, “*Just shut up and kiss me!*”

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Simon turned and looked at the cage. "What did he say?"

"I ah...um...don't know," Merry stammered. "Lately Dickens hasn't been speaking very clearly."

The bird chirped. "*Please, Bryan, I need you inside me now.*"

"What Dickens novel is that from?" Simon asked. "I know them all quite well, but I don't recall that particular passage."

Recognizing the myna bird was imitating her, Merry jumped to her feet to divert her father's curiosity. "It's one of Dickens's lesser known books. Daddy, let's go down to the store and finish this conversation. I've got a delivery due any minute and I don't want to miss it."

"All right, Meredith." Simon got up and walked toward the foyer, but not before casting a quick glance at the myna bird's cage. "I really must take the time to read my Dickens novels again. I can't imagine forgetting that line."

Merry hurried her father down the stairs and was closing the door when she heard the bird talking again, but the voice he was mimicking wasn't her own.

"*So tight, so wonderful...can't wait. Come with me, Merry, come with me now!*"

She felt her cheeks burning. "Oh, my stars!"



## Chapter 14

“MISS MERRY, THAT’S the third time you’ve yawned. Sure you don’t wanna lay down here and take a nap with me?”

Shaking her head, Merry sat on the bed and gave Linda a hug. “Thanks for the offer, honey, but I wouldn’t dare. Given the chance to stretch out, I’d probably sleep for a week.”

The little girl playfully tugged on Merry’s braid and giggled. “I know why you’re tired. One of the nurses showed me all your pictures in the newspapers. How come you went to all those parties with that man? I thought you liked Dr. Bryan.”

“I still like Dr. Bryan, but while he’s been away, I’ve been spending time with my father.”

“That guy’s your dad? Gosh, he looks like a movie star!”

“Yeah, I know,” Merry agreed weakly. *And so does half the female population of Palm Beach. The other half is dead or in diapers! I never knew so many desperate women could reside on such a small island.*

Linda sighed. “It must be a lotta fun going out with your dad all the time.”

Merry nodded and smiled, but her heart wasn’t into it. *If fending off females setting their sights on my father and having him scaring away any man who remotely takes an interest in me is fun, then I must be having a ball! Last night I thought Simon was going to turn that poor French diplomat into a frog for flirting with me at the Literacy Reception. When is Simon going to learn that I don’t need his protection and let me handle these guys myself?*

“So when’s Dr. Bryan coming home, Miss Merry?”

Pulling herself from her thoughts, Merry shrugged. “Soon, I hope. After he got to Tulsa, the patient he was to see had the flu, so he stayed on a few days till he could do the procedure. To keep busy, Dr. Bryan agreed to do some consultations for the cancer center in Oklahoma.” The little girl’s frown drew her concern. “What’s the matter, Linda? Don’t you like Dr. Benton?”

“Sure, I like him fine, but he’s not Dr. Bryan. Dr. Bryan’s the bestest doctor in the whole wide world, and I miss him. Is he really comin’ back soon?”

That question had been on Merry’s mind too. What had started as a two-day trip had grown into nearly two weeks. She couldn’t fault the man for his dedication to his work, but she missed him, too. There was so much she wanted to tell him, many things that had to be explained. But none of this could be done over the phone. She’d have to wait until he returned.

Yet, who knew how long that was going to take? According to his call that morning, Bryan had made appointments with Native American tribal representatives about getting people in their communities to take part in the marrow donor program. Knowing his main motivation for this effort was to find a donor for Linda and children like her who needed the quirky enzyme found only in Native Americans, didn’t make missing him any easier. And that fact sparked her resentment and pricked at her conscience.

“Of course he is. Dr. Bryan will be back any day now,” Merry assured Linda as she adjusted the soft angora knit cap on the child’s head. “So how are you feeling today? Any more nausea?”

Linda sighed. “Just a little. But I did eat all my lunch.” A smile suddenly brightened the girl’s pale face. “I nearly forgot to tell ya. Even though Tommy’s gone home with his folks, he

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remembered me. He sent me a card and a Christmas present. It's that big red box under the Christmas tree."

Merry glanced over at the decorated tree by the door and blinked back the tears in her eyes. It seemed Tommy was one of the lucky ones. His body hadn't rejected the transplant and he was doing fine. How she wanted that same chance for Linda!

"What a lovely surprise!" she exclaimed. "I nearly forgot Christmas was this month."

Linda rolled her dark eyes and giggled. "Oh, Miss Merry, stop teasing me. Nobody forgets Christmas! You know very well it's only fifteen days away."

Smiling, Merry shrugged. "So it is. Besides getting well, what would you like for Christmas, Linda?"

The little girl's face became serious. She stared down at her small hands. "What I want for Christmas can't be wrapped up in pretty paper or put under a tree. I wouldn't even mind being sick if I had one."

"What is it you want, honey?"

Linda sighed. "A mommy," she whispered.

\* \* \*

"Oh, Harry, that little girl just broke my heart," Merry said, stroking her cat's silky black head later that afternoon.

"Linda wants a mommy, but the social worker told her that's not going to happen anytime soon. With her medical condition, she's not even being considered for adoption." Merry leaned against the counter in her shop and sighed. "I suppose qualified adoptive parents only want healthy children."

Harry rubbed his long furry body against Merry and butted his head on her chin. Purring, he licked her cheek. His actions caused her to smile. "Trying to make me feel better, Harry? I think it's working." She gathered him in her arms and hugged him close. "Thanks, my friend. It's times like this that make me glad you adopted me."

The door to the shop opened and Nora hurried in. Dressed in a navy blue suit, she was the perfect image of a sophisticated businesswoman. Before her aunt was halfway to the counter, Merry felt Harry stiffen in her arms.

"Uh-oh! I forgot you two don't get along." She set the cat on the floor. "Go take a nap in my office, Harry. I've got a feeling Aunt Nora won't be here long."

Nora got to the counter as the cat regally sauntered into the back room. "So you've still got that old fur ball hanging around. I thought your father would have convinced you to get rid of that thing by now."

"Harry is not a thing, he's my pet. And no one, not you or Simon, will get me to abandon him. Now, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Aunt Nora? Doing a bit of Christmas shopping?"

The glamorous witch shook her head in irritation. "Don't be glib, poppet. You know the mortal preoccupation with this particular holiday really irritates me. What began as a quiet religious observance has become an outrageous mockery of buying, selling, and over-indulgence."

Merry giggled. "You're one to complain! Doesn't your company make its biggest profits during this season?"

"While that may be true, I won't deny it or apologize for it. If these silly mortals choose

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to spend lots of their money on perfumes, colognes, and such, Glendenning Cosmetics is only too happy to oblige.”

In a move Merry recognized as a show of self-importance, Nora patted her already perfect curls. “I came by to tell you that I’ll be away for a few weeks.”

“A little cruise around the Mediterranean with that German millionaire, Gunter, I saw you with at the reception last night?”

“No cruise. I’m going to Dublin to see Uncle Mathias.”

“Uncle Mathias? Isn’t he your father’s younger brother? Platinum hair, good looking older man?” At Nora’s nod, Merry smiled. “I remember when he came to my sixteenth birthday party. I was still grieving for my mother and he seemed to sense it. He danced with me and tried to cheer me up. I used to wonder why a charming man like Mathias had never married.”

“Men like Mathias don’t get married, they—” Nora suddenly stopped talking. Her cheeks flushed. “Oh, dear! What I meant to say is my uncle’s a fascinating person with artistic talents that have made him the most successful and sought after interior designer in the business, but he has um...certain...ah...peculiar traits you know nothing about. Someday, I’ll explain—”

“What you’re trying not to tell me is that Uncle Mathias is gay. I figured that out years ago when I met his long time companion, Raleigh. A nice guy, but he looks better in pink and lace than I do.” Filled with exasperation, Merry shook her head. “I’ve grown up, Aunt Nora. I know about homosexuals, alternative lifestyles, drugs, rising crime rates, and all the other things you tried to protect me from when I was a teenager. When are you going to stop treating me like a child?”

Nora gave her a repentant smile. “Sorry, poppet. I can’t seem to stop myself. Kate scolded me for the same thing when she called last week and I told her how worried I was about you, and Simon’s sudden interest in your life.”

Merry sighed. “I can’t believe you bothered Kate with all this. With my father’s constant attention, the last thing I need is my equally protective fairy godmother hovering around me.”

“You can relax, poppet. I invited her and Shamus for a visit, but Kate said she was too busy to get away. She also assured me that you were being very well looked after in spite of Simon’s interference and that you were going to be all right. The sprite guaranteed it.” Nora frowned. “I don’t know why Kate seemed so confident,” she scoffed. “Has our friendly fairy suddenly become a prophet of the future?”

Merry was curious to know what else Kate had said, but before she could question her aunt, Nora began talking again.

“Enough chitchat about all that nonsense. I’ve got to tell you why I’m going to see Mathias. You will never believe it, but I’ve been asked to take his place on the council.”

“The Council of the Domain?” At Nora’s enthusiastic nod, Merry laughed. “You’re right, I don’t believe it! How in the cosmos did this happen?”

“It was Simon’s idea. Mathias asked your father to advise him on finding a suitable replacement for the family’s seat he holds on the council. Evidently, Uncle Mathias finds the council post takes up too much of his time because he’s also head of the Glendenning Coven. Simon thinks I’d be absolutely perfect for the position.”

“My father is a very clever man. He knows you would make a wonderful contribution to the Domain. I guess you don’t think Simon is such an ogre anymore.”

Nora shrugged. “Perhaps not, but I’m still going to be wary around him. Simon Rand never does anything without a purpose.”

“Shades of Salem! How can you be so suspicious? Simon has gone out of his way to be

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nice to you. Now he's given you the one thing you've always wanted—respect. Why can't you just accept that and be content?"

"I'll try, though it won't be easy." Nora adjusted the fit of her prim jacket. "Simon believes I'm up to the task of being a council member. Now, all I have to do is convince good old Uncle Mathias that I'm worthy of his consideration."

Merry eyed her aunt's sedate ensemble. "So that's why you're dressed like a corporate fashion-plate. Elegant, yet low keyed. I'm surprised you're not carrying a briefcase and wearing horn rimmed glasses."

"They're in the limo with the rest of my things. No reason to start toting them about until I get to Dublin." Nora looked at the clock behind the counter. "I better get going. The plane is scheduled to take off around seven."

"A limo and a plane? Why, Aunt Nora, one would think you were a mortal!" Merry teased. "What happened to snapping in and out of places like you usually do? Afraid Uncle Mathias wouldn't approve of you using your powers like that?"

"Not at all, but snapping in and out as you just described it, is fast, yet can be rather tedious. Doing things the mortal way does have certain advantages, poppet."

At that moment, the front door of the shop opened. A tall handsome man with the build and looks of a fabled Viking stepped over the threshold and called to Nora. "Mein Liebling, a storm is due in an hour and my pilot wants to depart before it arrives. Come along or he will have to re-file his flight plan."

Nora smiled and acknowledged him. "Be right there, Gunter. Go back to the car and open that bottle of champagne you've got chilling for us. I'm suddenly in need of a drink."

"As you wish, *mein Liebling*." Throwing her a kiss, Gunter waved at Merry. "*Tchuess*, Meredith. See you in a few weeks. Happy holidays!"

Merry held her laughter until the door shut behind Gunter. "I can see how you're going to take advantage of certain mortal ways. My stars, he's gorgeous! But isn't his presence going to hinder your meetings with Uncle Mathias?"

"Of course not. I can't spend all my time with Mathias. Gunter is wealthy, adoring, and sexy beyond belief. I'm sure he'll be able to come up with ways to keep me amused." Giving Merry a hug and a kiss on the cheek, Nora hurried toward the door. "I've got to get going before my incredible mortal hunk comes looking for me again. Take care, poppet. I'll be in touch."

The sudden silence was deafening. Merry yawned and braced her elbows on the counter. "Well, at least I won't have to run interference between her and Simon during any social functions for a few weeks. Now if I can just get my father to stay home and take up a hobby besides watching me, I might be able to get some sleep." She yawned again. "One more Palm Beach party and I may collapse—"

*R-r-ring!* The harsh sound of the phone brought Merry to her senses. Shaking her head, she picked up the receiver. "Good evening. This is the Emporium. May I help you?"

"Hello, Meredith, love. How's my little girl today?"

Merry rolled her eyes at Simon's question, but kept the annoyance out of her reply. "I'm fine, Daddy. Just tired. I was going to call and thank you for giving your support to Nora. She's really excited about the prospect of being on the council."

"Thanks aren't necessary, love. Nora is a natural for the post. The council can use a woman with her zeal and enthusiasm. It didn't take her long to share the news."

"Nora was on her way to Dublin. I think she's worried Uncle Mathias won't approve of your suggestion."

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Simon chuckled. "Mathias is known for being dramatic over such things. He'll make her grovel a bit and dance to his tune, but I know he will give his blessings to Nora's appointment."

"Being dramatic must be a Glendenning family trait. They deserve one another. Will I be seeing you tonight, Daddy?"

After a slight pause, Simon spoke. "No, darling, that's why I called. The charges are being drawn up for Dorian's trial in London as we speak, so I'm leaving immediately. I don't want that bastard to weasel out of his final punishment."

"Is the trial going to held soon?"

"Three or four weeks, no more. The entire council will be convened for the hearing."

Merry took a deep breath before she asked. "Will I be called to give testimony against Dorian?"

"No, absolutely not. I'll testify on your behalf. You will never have to see that animal again."

She sighed. "Thank you. I appreciate that, more than you'll ever know."

"My darling, I may have been a wretched absentee father while you were growing up, but no longer. I love you, Meredith. No one means more to me in this universe than you."

"I know, Daddy. And I love you, too. Keep in touch and remember I'll be thinking about you."

"As I you, Meredith, love. Farewell, darling!"

Before she could reply, the connection was broken and the line was buzzing in her ear. She hung up the receiver.

"Looks like I'm on my own for a while. Nora and Simon are off to Europe. Donald won't return to work until after New Year's and Bryan's halfway across the country being the good doctor. After all my complaining about being tired, I really should take advantage of my solitude and catch up on my sleep, but why do I suddenly feel so alone?"

*"Meow!"*

Merry smiled down at Harry as he rubbed his large body against her leg. She picked him up and cuddled him in her arms. "Sorry, Harry. Didn't mean to forget you. Why don't you come up to my apartment and keep me company tonight? I don't have much food in the house, but I'm sure I could conjure a meal for us. How about prime rib, Caesar salad, and a stuffed baked potato? Between the two of us, I'm sure we can lick the platter clean."

Harry tucked his head comfortably beneath Merry's chin. His deep resonant purr was his only response.

She chuckled. "Don't think I'm going to get an argument out of you tonight! Come on, Harry, let's go home."

Snapping her fingers, the locks engaged, the lights turned off, and the store was secured for the night. Merry scratched Harry's head as she made her way to the back of her shop.

"I'll also snap in some kitty doors for your convenience, Harry, just like I did down here in the store. Wouldn't want you to feel like a prisoner."

The muffled *"meow"* against her neck made Merry laugh. "Isn't that just like a man. Always wants the last word."

*"Meow."*

## Chapter 15

"I'LL BE WITH you in a moment," Merry called from the back room when she heard someone entering her shop. Suddenly losing patience with the large box she was lifting to a higher shelf, she blinked and magically set the cumbersome parcel in its place. "So I cheat once in a while," she muttered to herself. "It's not my fault. No one comes in all day and the very minute I try to get some work done so I can leave early, a customer arrives."

Merry knew she should be grateful for the diversion a customer would bring her. The past few days had been a lesson in loneliness. Nora and Simon were off in Europe while Donald had gone away with his family for the holidays. Bryan's continued absence was made less intolerable by his daily phone calls, but she hadn't heard from him at all that day. Even Harry had deserted her after breakfast that morning.

Wiping the dust from her hands with a rag, she went into the showroom and pasted on her best be-nice-to-the-customers smile on her face. Her smile blossomed into a genuine grin when she recognized the man in the black denim jacket standing with his back to her in the middle of the store.

"Bryan, you're home! I can hardly believe you're here."

Merry ran into his arms when he turned to face her. He didn't speak, but took her lips in a kiss tempered with undenied longing. A few heart stopping moments later, she wrapped her arms around his waist as he tucked her head beneath his chin and embraced her. "My stars! I've missed you so much, Bryan. I was beginning to think you had deserted me."

"I missed you too, sweetheart."

The strained tone of his voice made Merry pull back to look at him. Bryan appeared very tired. He was pale and his clothes were rumpled. His glasses didn't hide the shadows of weariness around his eyes.

"You look exhausted, Doc. It's nearly five and I was just getting ready to close the stop. Why don't you go upstairs and relax? When I get through here, I'll make us some dinner."

Bryan shook his head. "I'm not very hungry and I'm too wound up to rest. Would you mind if we took a walk instead? I need to stretch my legs and get some fresh air."

Merry smiled and touched his cheek. "After spending hours confined in a plane, that's understandable. Give me a minute to lock up. We can walk down to the little park by the Intracoastal Waterway."

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later they were walking hand in hand along the street in companionable silence. Merry sensed Bryan had a great deal on his mind and rather than interrupt his musings, waited patiently for him to start the conversation. They were standing at the seawall, looking out over the dark churning water when he began to speak.

"I finally harvested the marrow for the Harrison boy. Between the flu bug and all the other ailments his donors came down with, I never thought it was going to happen. Thankfully the boy had a big family of generous people and everything worked out all right."

"Are you going to schedule the transplant for tomorrow?"

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With his arms braced on the wall, Bryan leaned down and stared out at the horizon. "Already done. I sent the vials back last week. Benton and Dr. Ramus did the procedure."

This bit of news took Merry by surprise, but she hid her reaction. "I met Ramus the other day. Wasn't he the pediatric oncologist at Beth Israel?"

"Yes, but until Beth Israel is up and running again, Ramus and members of his staff are helping us out. With everything else I've been doing lately, I'm grateful he's been there."

Merry brushed away the wisp of hair that blew into her eyes. "You mentioned the consultations to me on the phone, but you never said what happened with the leaders of the Native American organizations. Are they going to help organize a donor list for patients like Linda?"

He shrugged. "They said they would try, but who knows if anything will come of it. Setting up such a program won't be easy. Most people don't even know marrow donor banks exist until someone in their own family needs a transplant."

"Educate them. Make them see how important this is."

With his gaze fixed on the water, Bryan let out a deep sigh. "Don't you think I've tried that? I must have spoken to two dozen groups while I was out there. I've sent literature to the doctors and health clinics on the reservations, begging for their help. Only time will tell if my efforts accomplished anything."

Merry could hear the animosity in his words and understood its source. She put a consoling hand on his shoulder. "You did what you could, Bryan. I suppose not finding a suitable donor for Linda only adds to your frustration."

"But I did find one. A secretary at the first tribal meeting I attended came forward when she heard my speech about Linda and children like her. The woman had lost her own brother to leukemia ten years ago. Linda's procedure is scheduled for the morning."

Merry's enthusiasm over the news was dimmed by Bryan's odd mood. "This is terrific, but why didn't you tell me about it sooner, Bryan? We spoke on the phone every day, yet you never mentioned a word before now."

Not looking at her, he shrugged. "Didn't want to get your hopes up before the woman's compatibility tests were in. The results came through two days ago. Besides having the enzyme, she's a five out of six match with Linda. It's not perfect, but it's the best we can do."

"If you're doing the procedure tomorrow, how soon will you know if the transplant worked?"

"That's difficult to say because every case is different. If Linda's system doesn't reject it, we could see an improvement in her condition in a matter of weeks."

"It would be a wonderful way for Linda to start the new year! But I still wish you had given me a hint about this over the phone. The possibility alone would have eased some of the loneliness I felt while you were gone. I missed you, Doc."

Bryan turned to face her. A thin smile curved his lips. "You missed me?"

Merry frowned in confusion. "Of course, I did. I told you that every time you called. I thought you would have gotten sick and tired of me saying it so often."

He stroked her cheek with his fingers. "So, besides missing me, what else did you do while I was away?"

"Nothing exciting. I visited Linda once or twice a day when I could, and worked at the shop. With Donald off for the month, I've had to put in a lot more hours. But I told you all this on the phone. Why are we discussing it now?" The cool assessing look in his eyes made her ask, "What's the matter, Bryan? Have I done something wrong?"

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"You tell me." Bryan put his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small pile of newspaper clippings. He held them toward Merry. "According to these, you've done a lot more than work and play the role of the Good Samaritan to a sick child."

Merry tried hard not to wince. She didn't have to touch the items he was holding to recognize what they were. The photos and stories from area papers about multimillionaire Simon Rand and his daughter gracing Palm Beach society with their presence.

"Where did you get all those, Bryan?"

"The flight attendant on the plane last night gave me her copy of the Palm Beach Post. When she saw me looking at your photo and reading a story about your father, she told me there had been many articles about the two of you during the past few weeks. She bragged Simon was the handsomest man she had ever seen. Her obvious fascination with him made me think she was exaggerating." He shook his head. "I didn't want to believe her, but I had to know the truth, so I spent the better part of today gathering these from the archives at the newspaper office."

She felt her cheeks flushing. "I'm sorry. I should have been the one to tell you that my father had come for a visit."

His brow rose. "You should have also told me your father was Simon Rand. The man's listed in the Fortune 500! And if he had only come for a visit, then why did he purchase one of the largest estates on Palm Beach? He even put it in your name!"

"Well, I didn't know a thing about that until a clerk at the county office contacted a reporter at the Post when the title was recorded." Merry tried to smile through her explanation. "Simon said he put it in both of our names to save on inheritance taxes later on. As for the article, I hardly saw why such information would be newsworthy."

"No doubt because it was the biggest single cash transaction made in residential property in the past decade. The real estate broker probably retired on his commission! When are you planning to move in?"

"I've no intention of moving into that house."

"Oh, yeah? Then explain this." Bryan dug through the stack until he found a certain article and read it out loud. "Mr. Rand told reporters that he and his daughter, Meredith, were looking forward to being active residents of Palm Beach. The world renowned art dealer also revealed his plans to open a gallery on Worth Avenue for his daughter—"

"The reporter misquoted Simon. I have my own business and home. You know how much the Emporium and my independence means to me."

Bryan shook his head. "I thought I knew you very well, but after seeing these, I realize I don't know you at all."

Merry touched his arm. "Of course you know me, Bryan. We love each other."

"The woman I fell in love with, *Merry Albright*, claimed she was a homebody who didn't like going out to a lot of fancy places. But the woman in these articles, Meredith Rand, seems to have attended every party and reception on Palm Beach this past month." He angrily tossed the clippings over the seawall, into the water. "This woman is a total stranger to me."

"Because I went to a some social functions with my father doesn't change who I am or what we have together," she assured him. "I love you, Bryan. Don't you know that you're the most important person in my life?"

"Evidently I'm not important enough to confide in," he scoffed. "I've called you every morning while I was out west, yet you never told me about your father's arrival or any of the rest of this."

Merry waited until a boisterous group of teenagers on roller blades skated by them before



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she replied. "I didn't want to burden you with my problems, Bryan. Having my father around here hasn't exactly been easy for me. Simon has a way of overpowering people with his presence, me included."

"People in love are supposed to share their problems with one another. I don't think you trusted me enough to tell me about your father."

She frowned. "Don't be ridiculous. I trust you. I was just waiting until you got back before I dumped this on you."

"Really? And are you going to introduce me to him as well?"

"Sure I am. The moment he returns from England, I want you to meet him."

Raising his brow, Bryan smirked. "Now, why doesn't that surprise me?"

"What does that mean?"

"Only that I've never met your Aunt Nora, so why should I expect to meet your father?" A bitter tone began to creep into his words. "What's the matter, Meredith? Afraid your wealthy family won't approve of your boyfriend? Maybe a hard working doctor isn't good enough for their beloved little rich girl."

Merry was perplexed and annoyed by his attitude. "How dare you make such warped assumptions! My family has nothing to do with my choice of friends, lovers, or how I live my life."

He chuckled dryly. "But you forget, sweetheart, I know about rich powerful families. I learned first hand how they can tear each other apart, all in the name of what they considered is the right and proper thing to do. My father disowned me, my mother can't supersede his wishes, and my sister is put in the most uncomfortable position, because she loves all of us."

"I'm sorry about your family, Bryan, but my father is nothing like yours and Aunt Nora only wants me to be happy. You're cruel to assume that they're anything but loving and understanding of my wishes."

"Then you've told your father all about me?"

Avoiding his compelling gaze, Merry turned her attention toward the darkening sky. "Not yet. You see, Simon learned what Dorian had tried to do to me and he's become very protective. I figured when you got back, I would introduce the two of you and tell my father about us then."

"I wish I could believe that, Merry, but I can't. Call me suspicious, but I've got a feeling you're still keeping something from me. And what's worse, it's not the first time I've felt this way." Bryan grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her toward him. "Can you honestly look me in the eye, right here, right now, and tell me it's not true?"

An attack of conscience hit Merry like a bucket of ice water being thrown in her face. *It is true. But how can I admit to being a witch after seeing how upset Bryan got because I didn't tell him about Simon? He might feel betrayed by my deception and refuse to see me anymore. Should I risk that by telling him the truth or should I continue to lie? Great Mother Earth! What can I say that won't destroy his love for me?*

"Damn it, Merry, why won't you answer me? If I'm wrong, tell me so, but don't stand here and let your silence condemn you," he demanded. "What's so terrible that you can't share it with me? I love you and I can deal with anything if you would only give me the chance to prove it."

Merry struggled to speak. "You...you don't understand, Bryan. I'm not what I appear to be."

He frowned. "What do you mean, you're not what you appear to be? Merry, you're a beautiful vibrant woman who has become a big part of my life. You may come from a wealthy,

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unconventional family, but I can deal with that. I also know you didn't have a string of wild love affairs before me. Hell, even if you did, it still wouldn't matter!" He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly against him. "Nothing else matters because I love you, sweetheart."

"But it will," she sighed. "You just don't know how much."

"Then tell me," he insisted, easing her away from his chest so he could look at her face. "We love each other, but how can we have a future together if you refuse to be honest with me?"

She felt the wall of her determination beginning to crack. "Honesty is important, but I need to be sure you don't—"

A strange ringing sound emanated from the pocket of Bryan's denim jacket. "Blasted cell phone! Something new the hospital has added to screw up my life! Give me a second to deal with them, Merry, and then you can tell me what's been troubling you."

He impatiently yanked the small phone out and stuck it to his ear. "Yes, Benton. What's up? I don't care what Ramus thinks. We can't do a thing until the results are in from the lab and that's final..."

As Bryan spoke to his colleague, Merry scoured her mind to come up with a way to divert his attention from their current conversation. It seemed like an impossible task, but when he completed the call, his words of apology gave her an idea.

Bryan tucked the phone into his pocket. "Ramus is a little too eager to suit my tastes, and Benton knows it. I'm sorry about the interruption. Now what was it you were going to tell me?"

"I should be used to the interruptions," Merry replied, calling up her best acting skills to sound bored and annoyed. "How many times have we been in the middle of something important only to have Benton or one of the others at the hospital summon you with that beeper you've got clipped to your belt? If I had a dime for every time that thing went off, I'd have a pocket full of change! Your fancy cell phone's just one more thing I'm going to learn to resent."

Bryan frowned. "What's gotten into you, Merry? You're beginning to sound like a spoiled child."

"I'm not spoiled or a child. What I am is tired of playing second fiddle to your career," she answered in a voice she hardly recognized as her own. "Just once I'd like to get through an hour alone with you without having to share you with your work."

"Now you're exaggerating. I've never treated you like that and you know it."

Merry shrugged. "Maybe you didn't do it intentionally, but it's happened time after time since we started seeing each other. Your work and schedule always comes first. Even when you aren't beeped during our dates, you call the hospital and check in. I know your practice and patients are important, but that doesn't mean I have to like it." To prove her point, she invoked a silent spell as he began to explain.

"Merry, with Ramus helping out, it's not going to be so—"

*Beep! Beep! Beep!* Right on cue, the shrill electronic sounds cut off his words. He glanced down at the beeper's small display screen and frowned. "I wonder what the lab wants now?"

Merry raised a knowing brow that clearly said "I told you so." "Go on and call them with your new phone. Far be it from me to intrude on your professional life."

"No, they can wait." Bryan turned off the beeper and covered it with his jacket. "You've known from the start I was a doctor with responsibilities, Merry. You never complained, never hinted at any of this. Why now?"

"Maybe I just hid my feelings before, or possibly the past few weeks with you out of town have finally gotten to me."

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Regarding her closely for a moment, Bryan shook his head. "I don't know who you're trying to convince with this tirade, but I'm not buying it. I think all these complaints are a smoke screen to hide what's really bothering you and I want to know what it is."

Merry threw up her hands in disgust. "There you go, over-analyzing things again. There's no mystery about it, Bryan. The truth is I'm feeling neglected by you and that makes me petty and jealous. Can't you just accept that?"

"For anyone else maybe, but never from you, Merry."

Bryan brushed a quick kiss on her cheek and began walking away from her. Catching up to him within a few steps, Merry grabbed his arm and pulled him to a halt.

"Wait a minute, Bryan! What's gotten into you? Are you angry because I was trying to be honest about this?"

Bryan tilted his head as he looked at her. "That wasn't being honest. You were making excuses and avoiding the truth."

"W-what are you talking about?" she managed to ask through the sudden tightness in her throat.

"I know you've been keeping something from me. When I finally convince you to trust me with the truth, my damn phone rings and you get second thoughts. Instead of honesty, you give me some cock and bull story about how badly you resent my work and how neglected you've been feeling because of it. That's not you, Merry."

"But of course it is," she insisted. "I'd have to be a saint not to be upset or ticked off by the way your work always intrudes on our being together."

Shaking his head, Bryan sighed. "No, you're not a saint, but you're pretty close to it. I've seen you with those kids and I know how you feel about Linda. Your generosity has no bounds when it comes to them. So don't insult my intelligence by trying to convince me otherwise. It's one of the many reasons why I love you so much."

"But if you love me, then why were you walking away from me just now? Don't you know how much I love you, too?"

"I know you love me, Merry. Yet you really don't trust me. And without trust, love is a delicate thing that is constantly in danger of being crushed and destroyed. I can't accept your love unless your trust comes along with it."

Bryan put his fingers against her mouth when she was going to object. "Don't bother trying to deny it. Just think about what I've said. When you're ready to be totally honest with me and can give me the gift of your trust, I will accept it gladly with your love." He replaced his fingers with his lips and kissed her. "Good-bye, sweetheart. I'll be waiting for your call."

In stunned silence, Merry watched Bryan walking away from her. By the time she realized what had happened, he was out of sight and she was alone.

"I can't believe it!" she sputtered. "Bryan thinks I've been keeping a secret from him, so he's left me. Why I could just—" Heaving a sigh, Merry pushed back the windblown hair from her face. "I could just kick myself for being a stupid fool."

Several pigeons poked at food containers in the nearby litter basket. A luxurious forty-foot yacht glided by the park, its running lights illuminating it against the encroaching night. There was a briny scent in the air. Sea gulls swooped down over the water, riding the breeze with the span of their wings.

But Merry didn't notice any of it. Sitting on a bench next to the lighted walkway, she gazed sightlessly at the darkening sky, not knowing or caring where she was or what time it was. Self-recrimination was her only companion.

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*This is my own fault. Aunt Nora told me to be honest with Bryan in the beginning, yet I couldn't do it! Telling him I'm a witch now might be even more disastrous. If he believes me, Bryan's curious nature as a man of mortal science could cause him to look at me like a lab experiment waiting to be proven. But magic can't be dissected or explained; it just is!*

Suddenly overcome by frustration, tears burned Merry's eyes and that made her angrier with herself. "Why did Bryan have to take such a stubborn stand on this now? The one time I want to ask Nora for advice, she's busy with her own problems. I'll just have to wait until she gets back. Merciful fates! I hope Nora comes home soon. I need to talk to someone.

*"Meow!"*

Merry turned toward the familiar sound as Harry leaped from the shadows to sit beside her on the bench. "What are you doing in the park, Harry? Is this where you've been hiding all day?"

The large black and white cat leaned over her to rub his cool damp nose along her jaw. His abrasive tongue lapped at her cheek. This feline gesture of affection made Merry smile. He arched up into her hand when she began to stroke his back. She couldn't help laughing at his loud contented purr.

"Well, it's nice to know you haven't deserted me too, Harry. Let's go home and I'll call Charlie Chan and have him make up something special for dinner. I'm not very hungry, but watching you eat Chinese noodles and shrimp in lobster sauce usually raises my spirits." Giving his back a broad stroke, she looked at her furry companion. "I don't think many people would want a cat with gourmet tastes such as yours. At least you seem to enjoy the foods I like. You should thank your lucky stars we found each other, Harry."

When Harry's left eye appeared to wink at her, Merry shook her head in denial. "Now my imagination is running amok! Keep this up Meredith Albright, and the guys in the white coats will be carrying you away for sure."

Scratching Harry behind the ear, Merry stood up. "Come on, my friend. It's getting late and I want to call Kate after dinner. Since I can't reach Nora, perhaps Kate can offer me some helpful advice. And with the mess I've made out of things with Bryan, I need all the help I can get."

Merry was nearly at the end of the path when she turned and discovered the cat was still sitting on the bench. "Let's go, Harry! You got here on your own. I'm not going to carry you."

She was close enough to see him jump to the ground, but never saw how his left eye winked at her again.

*"Meow!"* Harry cried and ran toward her. *"Meow!"*

## Chapter 16

“STAYING HOME ALONE on New Year’s Eve is un-American!” Lauren protested as she followed Merry out of her office and into the showroom on the last day of December. “You turned down all my invitations and spent the entire Christmas holiday by yourself. I refuse to let you do it again tonight.”

Merry put the bank bag on the counter and began removing the money from the cash register. “For the last time, I don’t want to go out with you and Bob tonight. Besides feeling like a third wheel, going to the hospital ball is hardly the way I’d want to celebrate the New Year.”

Lauren flinched. “Sorry, I forgot. You and Bryan were supposed to do a magic show for the ball. Is he going to do the act without you?”

“No. Evidently Bryan hired Billy Kerns to do the show in our place. Bryan was called out of town for a consultation over a week ago. Billy came in yesterday and picked up his supplies.”

Leaning against the counter, Lauren sighed with relief. “So, Bryan’s been out of town,” she concluded. “That’s why you haven’t been seeing him lately.”

The last person Merry wanted to discuss Bryan with was Lauren. Her friend would ask for too many details she wasn’t able to answer. And the very last thing she wanted or needed was Lauren’s sympathy or attempts at matchmaking. Keeping her eyes on the deposit slip she was filling out, Merry shrugged. “Bryan’s being away sure hasn’t helped. Could you drop this off for me at the bank, Lauren? I’m closing the shop early so I can spend the afternoon with Linda.”

Lauren picked up the small, framed picture that was sitting on the counter beside the cash register. “Look at those big eyes and dimples! Your Linda’s certainly a little doll in that Santa Claus hat. I know you go to see her every day. How’s she doing since her transplant?”

“It’s difficult to say,” Merry replied, gazing at the photo. “Some days are better than others. Her appetite comes and goes, and she sleeps a lot. It will be a few more weeks before they know if the procedure was a success.”

“Is she still in isolation?”

Merry nodded. “Yes. They can’t take a chance that Linda might catch something contagious from one of the other children so they’ve got her in a room all by herself. Any toys or gifts I bring her have to be sterilized before she can have them.”

“Wow. That must have made Christmas shopping for her a challenge.”

“It took some effort, but I really didn’t mind. Linda loved her presents and I had a lot of fun doing it for her.”

Lauren set the photo down on the counter. “This little girl is really getting to you, isn’t she, Merry?”

“Oh, yes. Linda has captured a big place in my heart. I only wish...” Merry’s smile became a frown. “Lauren, do you think I would be a good mother?”

“Huh! Where did that come from?” Lauren gasped. “My God, Meredith, are you pregnant?”

“No. No, I’m not,” Merry quickly assured her. “But I have been thinking about adopting Linda.”

“You and Bryan—”

“No, just me. Linda’s an orphan without much chance of being adopted through regular

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means because of her illness. Even though I'm single, I have plenty of money to provide a good home and care for her."

"And you already love her like crazy." Lauren grinned and put her arm around Merry's shoulder. "You'd be a great mom for Linda. If you need any character references for the adoption, you can count on Bob and me. Hey! Bob will be admitted to the bar in a few weeks. He'd be happy to handle the legal ends of this for you. Have you told Linda about this?"

Merry shook her head. "Not yet. I wanted to talk to her social worker first, but the woman won't be back until next week. I didn't want to get Linda's hopes up before I found out if my request would be approved."

"Well, you let me know when you're ready and I'll get you together with Bob." Lauren looked down at her watch. "Is your deposit ready? I've got just enough time to drop it off at the bank before I go to the salon. I'm going for the works today: hair, manicure, pedicure and a facial. I hope Bob appreciates my efforts."

"Bob loves you and thinks you're perfect already," Merry said, handing her the bank pouch.

The gregarious blonde chuckled. "Yeah, so he tells me. I can only pray that by the time my looks really start to fade, his eyesight will, too." Giving Merry a quick hug, Lauren started toward the door. "I'll call you tomorrow, girlfriend."

"Don't bother. I might not—" The door shut behind Lauren and Merry shook her head. "Why do I even try to dissuade her? Lauren's going to call and that's that. At least she didn't ask me any more questions about Bryan."

But what would she have said if her friend had pressed her for information about her relationship with Bryan Aldwyn? She hadn't seen him since that night in the park two weeks before. The only way she knew about his activities was what she heard from the staff in the hospital when she visited Linda.

Merry locked the front door and put up the closed sign. Turning around, she surveyed her silent shop. "No Bryan, Simon, or Nora. Kate's never called me back and even Harry's been out of sight since yesterday." Rolling her eyes, she smiled. "Maybe I'll go to bed early tonight and study another chapter in the *Grimoire*. Perhaps I can find a spell to conjure up a happier new year for myself. Anything short of an earthquake would be an improvement."

\* \* \*

It was nearly six o'clock when Merry left Linda's room. She was removing the hospital gown she wore over her sweater and denim skirt as Pauline Russell, the nurse in charge of the unit came out from behind the desk pushing a cart.

"Hi, Miss Albright. How was your visit with Linda?"

Merry pushed the gown into the laundry bin that sat in the hall. "Linda seems to be feeling well enough, but why is she so groggy? She barely stayed awake to finish her dessert and you know how much she loves chocolate pudding."

"I noticed Linda was listless myself. She's been running a low grade fever since early this morning." Pauline nodded at the tray of medical supplies and syringes on her cart. "That's why Dr. Aldwyn ordered a new batch of blood tests for her."

"Really?" Merry replied, hoping Pauline couldn't hear the note of desperation in her voice. "When did Dr. Aldwyn get back?"

"He's still in New York. Dr. Aldwyn called to check on Linda, just as he's done everyday

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since he left. He's such a caring man. We're really going to miss him when he takes that new position at Sloane Kettering."

Merry felt the bottom fall out of her stomach. "When is Bryan...I mean, Dr. Aldwyn, leaving Hopewell?"

The nurse shrugged. "Don't know all the details myself, but according to the grapevine, the folks at Sloane Kettering were so impressed by the work he did for them this week, they offered him a staff appointment at three times the salary he was making here. They also promised him a grant for a donor bank he wants to establish for special and rare blood types. Dr. Aldwyn would have to be a fool not to take advantage of such an opportunity."

"I suppose you're right." Inwardly, Merry sighed. *And Bryan is anything but a fool.*

Pauline slipped a sterile gown over her uniform. "Actually, I shouldn't feel bad about Dr. Aldwyn moving out of town. He knew I was looking for a home, so he offered me a good deal on his condo. My husband and I never could have afforded the place otherwise. Although the closing won't take place for several weeks, Dr. Aldwyn said we could move in next week. Wasn't that nice of him?"

Merry forced a smile on her face and nodded. "Yes, very nice. I hope you and your husband are very happy in your new home, Pauline. If you'll excuse me, I've got to go now. See you tomorrow."

"Good night, Miss Albright. Happy New Year!"

"Yeah, same to you, Pauline." Without looking back, Merry waved and hurried onto the empty elevator. The doors had barely closed when the tears she had fought so hard to contain, filled her eyes.

"Bryan's leaving me because I couldn't be honest with him. I thought I had time to talk to Aunt Nora about this, but now it's too late. He's moving, taking a new job, and never said a word to me about any of it. How could I have been so stupid?"

She was too distraught to notice the scent of roses and spice that suddenly filled the elevator.

"You weren't stupid, poppet, just in love," a soft feminine voice whispered near her ear.

Merry gasped and turned to find Nora standing beside her. "I thought you weren't going to pop in like that anymore. What if someone had been on the elevator with me?"

"Then I would have dealt with the problem. At this moment, my only concern is you." Nora brushed the tears from Merry's cheek with her fingers. "I came because you needed me. From the state you're in, I should have been here sooner."

Her aunt's concern dispelled Merry's irritation and brought back the pain of her present situation. "But how did you know? I never called you by phone or incantation."

Seeing the numbers lighting up on the elevator's display board, Nora put her arm around Merry. "We're about to have company, poppet. Let's get back to your apartment and I'll explain everything to you there."

"But my car's in—" Merry suddenly realized she and Nora were standing in the middle of her living room. Looking around, she shook her head. "Wow! You're pretty good at that."

"Being good at magic takes practice and natural ability. You could do this and so much more if you wanted to." Nora sat on the sofa and patted the cushion beside her. "But that's not why I'm here. You're hurting right now and from what I heard in the elevator, this has to do with that man you've been seeing. Sit down and tell me what he's done to make you so miserable."

"But it wasn't Bryan's fault, Aunt Nora. I'm more to blame than he is."

Nora's brow rose in an elegant arch. "I'll be the judge of that. Tell me what's been

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happening between the two of you. I want to know all of it, so don't leave out a single detail."

Instead of being vexed by her aunt's impervious command, Merry felt relief as she sat beside her and talked. Over cups of coffee Nora "snapped in" from Starbucks, Merry emptied her soul of the happiness, pleasure and pain she had found in loving Bryan Aldwyn. By the time she got to the part about the sale of his condo and his appointment at Sloane Kettering Hospital in New York, it was almost eight o'clock.

"So you see, Aunt Nora, I've no one to blame but myself. If I had taken your advice and told Bryan the truth about my being a witch in the beginning, I wouldn't have lost him like this."

Nora shook her head. Standing up, she sighed and moved toward the window. "I wouldn't be so sure of that, Meredith. Mortals are a strange sort. I know. I learned the hard way."

Her aunt's mercurial change of mood confused Merry. "What are you talking about, Aunt Nora?"

"Your mother wasn't the first woman in our family to fall in love with a mortal. That particular honor belongs to me."

"You were in love with a mortal? Why didn't you ever tell me this before?"

Gazing out at the dark sky, Nora chuckled. But there was no gaiety in its harsh dry sound. "I never mentioned him to anyone. How could I? Who would believe the beautiful and powerful witch, Nora Glendenning, was rejected by the one and only man she had ever loved? That he was a mortal only makes the story even more incredible to accept."

Merry got up and joined Nora at the window. "Will you tell me about him?"

After a hesitant nod, Nora sighed. "His name was David Jamison. He was a brilliant young chemist in product development at our family's corporate headquarters in New York. I was barely nineteen, full of enthusiasm for my first job as a lab tech, when I met him. David was very handsome. His smile could melt the polar icecaps with its warmth. He was working on a moisture replenishing skin cream and I was his assistant. During those weeks, I shared the joys of his accomplishments and felt his failures as if they were my own. I couldn't stop myself from falling in love with him."

"Did David return your feelings?"

"Oh, yes, he loved me very much. We became inseparable, working side by side during the days and making love every night. When he asked me to marry him, I said yes. But I knew my father would never approve of our marriage, so I convinced David that we should elope." Nora swallowed hard. "I didn't think anything could spoil our happiness. If only I had known..."

Merry placed a consoling hand on her aunt's shoulder. "What happened? Did your father find out you were going to marry a mortal and stop you?"

Running her fingers through her hair, Nora shook her head. "My father wouldn't have objected because of that alone. It was my decision to give up magic and not tell David I was a witch that would have angered my father."

Merry couldn't suppress her surprise. "You were actually going to live like a mortal for David?"

She nodded. "Yes. David was a devout Methodist, the son of a minister, and you know how Christians misunderstand witchcraft. But my love for David was so important to me, I was willing to give it all up to be with him. And I would have if there hadn't been an accident in the lab."

Nora wandered back across the room and dropped wearily onto the sofa. Merry could sense the pain her aunt was going through so she didn't prod her into finishing the story. After a few quiet moments, her patience was rewarded when Nora started to speak again.



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“We had planned to fly to his parents’ home on Friday evening after work and be married in a private ceremony the next day. On the way to the airport, we stopped at the lab to pick up the wedding rings David had left in his desk. We didn’t want to alert anyone to our presence, so we crept into the lab and didn’t turn on many lights. David was so busy going through the bottom drawer in the dark, he never noticed the odor of gas in the air, but I did...just a split second before I heard him strike a match to get some much needed light for his search.”

“My stars!” Merry gasped. “Was there an explosion?”

“Yes, there was an explosion. I didn’t have time to stop it, but I knew I had to protect David. Reacting with witchcraft, I cast a spell that shielded us from harm and transported us to safety outside of the building a moment later. Needless to say, the experience left David in shock. Bunsen burners and gas leaks are easily explainable. Dematerializing and coming back together again several thousand feet away in the parking lot was not.”

Closing her eyes, Nora sobbed. “I can still see the look on his face when I explained what had happened. Confusion became disbelief and then horror. Yet it was his once loving features fraught with anger that hurt me most of all. David was furious. He called me an unholy creature of the devil, using magic to get what I wanted in life. I tried to explain witches weren’t really like that, but he refused to listen. David shoved me away and said he never wanted to see me again. He drove out of the lot like a madman as the fire trucks arrived.”

Merry sat beside Nora and put an arm around her shoulders. “Did you ever see David again?”

Shaking her head, Nora brushed the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief that magically appeared in her hands. “No, I never got the chance. David was in a car crash minutes after he left me. The police said he lost control of his vehicle on a sharp curve, causing it to skid over a steep embankment. David was killed instantly. They said it was an accident, but I never stopped wondering if perhaps my revelation of being a witch had made David want to destroy himself.”

“It had to be an accident,” Merry rushed to assure her. “If David was as devout a Christian as you say, killing himself would never have occurred to him.”

Nora let out a trembling sigh. “I suppose you’re right, but at the time, I blamed myself. I’d never felt so alone. Fiona was off in Europe and there was no one else I could talk to about this. So I said nothing and swore I would never allow myself to be hurt by love or a man ever again.”

Merry nodded. “And several years later, when my mother told you she was in love with a mortal, you tried to talk her out of it. You didn’t want her to suffer like you had.”

She looked over at Merry. “That’s also why I told you to be honest with Bryan about your being a witch in the beginning. If he was going to reject you, it would have been easier to do it before you had fallen in love with him.”

Now Merry understood the warnings and arguments Nora had used to dissuade her from living as a mortal. She should have been very annoyed by her aunt’s maneuverings, but it wasn’t in her to punish Nora for trying to spare her a similar fate.

“Telling him sooner wouldn’t have helped, Aunt Nora. I fell for Bryan the day I met him. Love at first sight may sound like a mortal fairy tale, but that’s exactly what happened.”

“Ah, poppet, I wish I could have saved you from all the pain he has caused you.”

“The pain was of my own making. I was the one who wasn’t honest with Bryan. When he comes back to town, I’ll tell him I’m a witch. Whatever happens then will be up to him.” Masking her doubts, she gave her aunt an affectionate hug. “Now, tell me, how was your trip?”

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Was it a success? Is Uncle Mathias going to let you take his place on the council?"

Nora suddenly preened with confidence. "It's already been done. I've been handling council business for the past three weeks. Besides meetings and getting to know the two other women on the council, I attended the hearing for Dorian Laird."

Hearing this news, Merry felt the air rush out of her lungs. "Was he found guilty?"

"Of course he was, thanks to Simon's testimony. But because of the Laird family's important position on the council, they won a chance for an appeal before he is sentenced." Nora patted her mussed curls back into place. "But Simon made it abundantly clear to everyone there that he wouldn't stand by and allow Dorian Laird to get away unpunished."

"Well, you sound impressed. Did you spend a lot of time with my father?"

Nora frowned. "Not really. Simon was so busy, constantly in and out of meetings, talking to everyone. I never saw him sit down to relax or even take in a meal with the rest of us. Being the Grand Master, his time isn't his own. Simon's an incredible man. He's certainly gained my respect in the past few months."

Merry was pleased Nora and Simon were finally getting along. If things couldn't be resolved with Bryan, she would need the secure feeling of her family around her. And if her father and aunt weren't attacking one another, so much the better.

Another thought suddenly occurred to her. "Aunt Nora, how did you know I was in trouble and needed to see you today? You didn't have another secret spell over me, did you?"

Nora rolled her eyes. "Shades of Salem! There you go again, thinking the worst of me. Of course I didn't cast a spell over you. As a matter of fact, it was Kate who told me I should come home to see you."

"I tried to call Kate a couple of weeks ago when I didn't want to bother you. Did you see her at the council hearing?"

"Just briefly. Evidently she's been busy taking care of some special project during the past few months. Kate gave testimony at Dorian's hearing yesterday, spoke to me about her concern for you, and then she was gone."

"Why would Kate be concerned about me? I didn't let on that anything was wrong when I left a message for her."

Nora's shoulder lifted in a shrug. "Who knows what Kate is up to? Maybe she's becoming a mind reader or has turned into an alarmist where you're concerned. Either way, I can't figure her out." A loud growl emanated from her stomach and made her frown. "Starbucks coffee is great, but I haven't eaten a thing since breakfast. How about a couple of mushroom swiss burgers and buffalo wings from Duffy's Draffhouse? After a month of European cuisine, I could use some real food."

"Aunt Nora, I'm not really very hungry."

Ignoring Merry's objection, the elegant blonde witch waved her hand and three heaping platters appeared on the coffee table in front of them. "Come on, poppet. No use letting all this wonderful food go to waste."

As her own stomach grumbled in response to the succulent smells of grilled beef, spicy chicken, and crispy fried potatoes, Merry smiled. "I guess I could eat a little something."

Nora picked up her burger and laughed. "Of course you can! And when we're through here, maybe we can make plans for later tonight. No reason why two absolutely gorgeous witches should greet the New Year all alone!"

"But, Aunt Nora—"

"No buts, poppet! Food first, fun later." Biting into her sandwich, Nora moaned with

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pleasure. “Mmm. This is a bit of mortal magic I could get used to.”

Rather than trying to reason with her aunt, Merry began to eat. She had finished her burger and was nibbling on a chicken wing when the phone on the end table rang. Hoping against hope the caller would be Bryan, she licked the buttery sauce from her fingers and picked up the receiver.

“Hello.”

“Miss Albright, this is Pauline at the hospital. I’m sorry to bother you at home, but I thought you’d...want to know.”

The hesitation in the nurse’s voice put Merry instantly on alert. “What’s the matter? Has something happened to Bryan?”

“No. It’s Linda. Her fever spiked right after you left and the blood tests we took earlier show that her body’s rejecting the transplant. I think you should get down here right away, Miss Albright. Linda’s very weak. Dr. Ramus doesn’t expect her to...to make it through the night.”

“But what did Dr. Aldwyn say? Surely you called him and told him about the test results.”

“I tried, but I couldn’t find him. The people at his hotel said Dr. Aldwyn checked out this afternoon and he’s not at Sloane Kettering either.” There was an emotional hitch in Pauline’s voice. “I usually don’t let myself get involved in my patients’ personal lives, but this little girl has touched my heart.”

Merry swallowed against the strangling tightness in her own throat. “I know exactly what you mean, Pauline. Tell Linda I’m on my way. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

As Merry hung up the phone, she closed her eyes and shook her head. “It’s not fair. Damn it all, it’s not fair!”

“What’s the matter, Meredith? Bad news?”

“The little girl I told you about has taken a turn for the worse. They don’t think Linda’s going to...” Tears flowed from Merry’s eyes. Her body trembled in a mixture of anger and regret. “Damn it! I’ve probably lost Bryan and now it looks like I’m losing Linda, too. I’m sick and tired of the fates always cheating me of the people I love.”

Nora pulled Merry into her arms. “I know, poppet,” she crooned, hugging her close. “The fates can be cruel and most people don’t know life is a celebration that doesn’t need an invitation to attend. We should always value what we have and make each day count for something special.”

Merry eased from her aunt’s embrace to look up at her face. “You’re beginning to sound more and more like my mother.”

Brushing away the tears from Merry’s face, Nora smiled. “Since Fiona was the smartest and most courageous woman I’ve ever known, I thank you for the wonderful compliment. So, what are you going to do now, poppet, sit here and mope over your losses?”

A sense of renewed determination rushed through Merry like a tidal wave. “Absolutely not! First, I’m going to Linda and spend whatever time she has left at her side. She may die, but I’ll see to it that she knows how much I loved her. Then I’m going to find Bryan Aldwyn and tell him the truth about myself. Witch or not, I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to him and it’s about time he realizes that fact. He loves me and I’m not letting him go!”

“That’s my girl! Now get going. I’ll clean up this mess and see you tomorrow.”

Merry stood up and grabbed her purse from the table. She was nearly at the door when she remembered an important detail. “I forgot! My car is in the hospital parking lot.”

Nora shrugged. “Sorry about that. Want me to give you a lift back there?”

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“No thanks, Aunt Nora,” Merry replied. “I can do this one for myself.” With a snap of her fingers, she was gone.

Dropping back onto the sofa, Nora sighed. “Now, that really is my girl. There may be hope for her yet.”

## Chapter 17

MERRY GRABBED THE handrail on the wall of the empty hospital elevator to steady herself as she rematerialized. “It worked! I guess studying the *Grimoire* during the past few weeks was a good use of time after all.”

At that moment, the elevator door slid open on the pediatric floor. She hurried to the nurse’s station and asked the intern at the desk for Pauline.

“Sorry, miss,” the young black man wearing a tag that identified him as Dr. Wayne Lewis, replied with an easy smile. “We’re a little under-staffed tonight because of the holiday. Pauline’s gone to the lab for some test results. It’s after visiting hours. Are you here to see one of our patients?”

“Yes, Linda Craig. Pauline called me.”

“Oh, you must be Miss Albright.” At her nod, Dr. Lewis frowned. “I heard Pauline talking to you a few minutes ago. She wasn’t expecting to see you for at least a half hour. How did you get here so fast?”

Not wanting to fuel the man’s curiosity, Merry quickly came up with an answer she hoped he’d accept. “In the age of cellular phones, you can get a call anywhere, Dr. Lewis. Even in the hospital parking lot. Can I please see Linda now?”

The intern looked embarrassed. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry if I’ve delayed you, Miss Albright. Please, go right in. I’ll make sure you aren’t disturbed.”

Merry pulled on a hospital gown and stepped into the dimly lit room. Only the light over the head of the bed was on. Linda looked small and pale propped against the pillows. Several wires attached to her body allowed the monitors on the wall to track her vital signs. The electronic beeping sounds were low, their speed decidedly slower than usual. An IV bag of clear liquid dripped into the plastic tube inserted into Linda’s thin arm.

As if sensing Merry’s presence, Linda began moving beneath the covers. Her lips formed a single whispered word, “Merry?”

Carefully avoiding the wires and IV tube, Merry sat on the edge of the bed and stroked the baby-fine hair on Linda’s head. “I’m here, Linda, right beside you. How are you feeling, honey?”

“Sleepy. Don’t wanna sleep.” Linda struggled to open her eyes. She looked at Merry and smiled. “Glad you came back. Missed you.”

Merry gave Linda a smile she prayed would mask her sadness. “How could you miss me? I just left a couple of hours ago. My goodness! You should be tired of seeing me by now.”

“Never, ever,” the little girl answered, shaking her head. “Love you, Miss Merry. If I had my way, you’d never leave me. Keep you with me forever and ever.”

The lump gathering in Merry’s throat caused her to swallow hard several times before she could speak. “I love you, too, honey. I couldn’t love you anymore if you were my own little girl.”

“Wish I was. You’d be my mama then. But it’s only a silly dream and dreams never come true.”

The desolation in Linda’s voice tore at Merry and made her want to prove the child’s solemn words were wrong. “Some dreams do come true. I wasn’t going to tell you this until

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everything had been arranged, but right after the holidays, I'm filing papers with social services to adopt you."

"Really and truly?" A spark of excitement entered Linda's heavily lidded eyes. "You're just not sayin' that to make me happy? You wanna adopt me?"

Merry made an X sign over her chest and nodded. "Cross my heart. I love you and I want you to be my daughter. Would that make you happy?"

"Oh, yes. Then you'd be my mama and I'd go live with you in the magic shop." Linda frowned. "Don't know much about magic. But you're so good at it. Can you teach me about it?"

"Of course I can. And because you're going to be my daughter, I have a very special secret to share with you. But first you have to promise never to divulge what I'm about to tell you to anyone. Can you do that, honey?"

"Not even to Dr. Bryan?"

Merry ignored the pain hearing that name invoked in her and shook her head. "Not even him. Have we got a deal?"

"Sure." Linda lifted her hand and crooked her thin pinky finger toward Merry. "Pinky swear!"

Hooking her finger around Linda's, Merry nodded and leaned down to whisper to her. "I'm good at magic because I'm a witch."

A frown creased the child's brow. "But you can't be a witch. You're too pretty and you don't gotta wart on your nose."

"Witches are only described that way in fairy tales. In real life, witches look like regular people." Merry saw the look of disbelief on Linda's face. "All right, smarty pants! Let's see if I can prove it to you. How about this?"

With a snap of her fingers, the plain hospital room was transformed into a colorful garden of trees and flowers. A blue sky dotted with cottony clouds and sunshine replaced the ceiling. The walls were gone and a warm breeze rustled through the leaves. Birds sang as they flew among the boughs of the trees.

"Oh my," Linda gasped, her eyes round with excitement. "This looks like the garden in that storybook you read to me this afternoon. Only thing missing is the red roses the little girl gathered to take home."

"If you want roses, then roses you shall have." Merry waved her arm and a shower of roses in a rainbow of colors fell over the bed. She picked up a bright red bloom and put it in Linda's hand. "This one is for you. No thorns and the sweetest scent of all. Now do you believe that I'm a witch?"

The child nodded. A smile curved her lips. "Oh, yes! You must be a very special witch. Only real magic could bring all this to me. Thank you for letting me see springtime again."

Merry leaned over and kissed Linda's cheek as she tried to contain the tears pooling in her own eyes. "Anytime, honey. Can I bring you anything else? A clown or a puppy? A big chocolate sundae?"

"No. I just wanna look at the flowers and listen to the birds for a while. It's so beautiful."

Watching Linda respond to her magic-induced surroundings, Merry began to wonder if the doctors were right about her dire condition. There was color in her cheeks and her dark eyes were opened and alert. When Linda giggled at the antics of two tiny finches on a low hanging branch, Merry was convinced a terrible error had been made in her diagnosis.

*Maybe the tests were wrong and the transplant is working after all. Perhaps Linda's getting better. I wish Bryan were here so I could ask him—*

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At that moment, Linda held out the red rose to Merry. "Can you hold this for me? I'm feelin' a little sleepy and I don't wanna crush it."

"Sure, honey. You rest and I'll take care of it for you."

Handing her the rose, Linda wearily fell back against her pillows and smiled. "Thanks, mama. I love you."

The cruel weight of reality and the false hopes she'd been harboring suddenly crashed down on Merry. This precious child wasn't falling asleep. She was dying. The aura of life around Linda was dimming quickly and there was nothing mortal medicine could do to prevent it.

Merry sat up and looked around the flower filled room. *But what about witchcraft? Surely there must be a magic spell that could give Linda strength and make her well again. My stars! Why haven't I thought about this before?*

Passages from the *Grimoire* flew through her mind as she returned the room to its prior state and tried to compose the perfect incantation for the healing. After a few minutes, she took hold of Linda's small hand and invoked the spell.

*"Powers divine, this is my plea, take not this child away from me. I summon my powers and magic to cure, this dreaded disease she's been forced to endure. Grant her health and make her strong, into my care she does belong."*

Unlike other spells Merry had successfully cast during the past few weeks, this one did not work. Linda's breathing was more labored than before and the beeping monitor showing her heartbeat had slowed considerably.

"This has to work. I can't let her die. Magic has to help her." Still holding onto Linda's hand, Merry closed her eyes and repeated the incantation over and over again, putting all of her efforts into the task.

It was the continuous shrill beep of the monitor that gained her attention. The answer to the noise was displayed on the screen. The glowing electronic line was flat. Linda was dead.

Merry's pain turned into a scream of denial. "No! She can't be dead. The magic should have worked!"

Tears blurred her vision and sobs racked her entire body as several people she vaguely recognized as hospital staff ran into the room. She stumbled away from the bed feeling lost and alone, until she suddenly found herself enveloped by a familiar pair of masculine arms.

"It's all right, sweetheart. Go ahead and cry. Linda may be gone, but at least she won't suffer any longer."

Rubbing the tears from her eyes, Merry looked up at the man in street clothes who was leading her out of the room to the corridor. She thought her mind was playing mean tricks on her. "Bryan? Is it really you?"

Bryan pulled her into the storage closet and closed the door. Hugging her close, he gently kissed her. "Of course, it's me, Merry. I'm sorry I couldn't get back here sooner. I never meant for you to go through this without me."

His genuine concern touched her heart, but was quickly set aside by her self-inflicted guilt. She tried to free herself from his embrace. "You've done nothing to be sorry for, Bryan. Linda's dead because I didn't know how to help her."

He shook his head and refused to release her. "There's nothing you could have done to save her, Merry. Linda was a very sick little girl."

"But you don't understand," she protested, on the verge of hysterics. "If I had studied my magic and practiced my spells, I could have found a way to prevent Linda's death. She's dead because I was too busy playing the role of a mortal." Hot tears trickled down her cheeks. "Oh,

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Bryan, I'm the sorriest excuse for a witch that was ever born!"

"No, you're not. Linda's condition couldn't have been cured by the magic of a witch or a warlock, no matter how skilled and powerful they were. Only a miracle would have saved that child, and miracles are deemed by a much higher source than any found here on earth."

Before she could respond, Bryan tenderly cradled her against him. "Take joy in the happiness you brought Linda with your love, magic, and witchcraft. Because of you, she passed from this world knowing she was loved."

Merry rested her cheek on his chest and toyed with the buttons on his shirt while she accepted his comfort. Secure in his embrace, she considered his words and knew Bryan was right.

How could she have forgotten one of the fundamental lessons in the *Grimoire*? Magic had its limitations. While it could provide convenience, amusement, and material things, magic could not stop death or mortal diseases like cancer or leukemia. These were governed by powers far more considerate than a warlock or witch, who'd be tempted to use such knowledge for their own gain.

The guilt that clouded her thoughts lifted and Merry felt at peace. Linda was gone, but the memories of all they shared would be kept like a valued treasure in her heart forever.

As she looked up at Bryan to thank him for his understanding and help, Merry suddenly realized something else had happened in the past few moments that needed to be explained. Her eyes narrowed when she met his gaze.

"A couple of minutes ago, Bryan, I told you I was a witch, but you didn't seem surprised. As a matter of fact, you appear to know a great deal about magic and witchcraft. Why is that?"

Bryan's mouth dropped, his cheeks paled. A second later, he shrugged. "I guess there's no easy way to say this, because if there was, I would have done it by now."

Merry stepped back and poked his chest. "No more stalling, Dr. Aldwyn," she demanded, feeling the medallion he wore under his shirt with her finger. "I want an answer from you and I want it right now!"

He held up his hands in surrender. "Fine. But I know you're not going to like hearing what I'm about to say."

"I despise lying and evasive answers even more."

"All right," he sighed. "The reason I know so much about magic and witchcraft is really very simple..."

"And that simple reason is..."

Bryan grimaced. "I'm a warlock."

"You're a what!" The shrill tone in Merry's voice caused the glass beakers on the shelf beside her to rattle. "Of all the contemptible, deceitful, underhanded, fraudulent, hateful things to do to a person...I could just—"

Bryan shook his head and sighed. "I knew you weren't going to take this well. Merry, you must listen to me. I can explain everything."

Merry glared at him. "I don't want to listen to a single word you have to say, warlock. You lied to me. Seduced me and made me fall in love with you. Claiming my merging gift must have really added to your victory!"

"Now, wait just one minute," he interrupted. "As soon as I found out you were a virgin, I tried to stop what was happening between us. I even tried to tell you the truth about myself, but you wouldn't let me."

"Wouldn't let you? I thought you were trying to tell me you'd had an abusive childhood



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or a lot of bad relationships with women. That you were a warlock never crossed my mind. And now that I know what you are, I'm getting out of here."

Bryan grabbed her arm when she tried to push past him. "You have to listen to me, Merry. I love you. I won't let you leave me until you understand why I didn't tell you the truth about my being a warlock."

As Merry opened her mouth to respond, Bryan yanked off his glasses and tossed them aside. Snapping the gold chain from his neck, he clutched the medal in his hand. "*Shield of protection, hear me well, Restore my powers and end the spell.*"

A split second later, Merry found herself standing on a snow-covered hill with Bryan. A gasp escaped her lips. "Merciful Mars! Where on earth have you taken me? Siberia?"

He chuckled. "No. We're in the Green Mountains of Vermont. This is the spot I used for meditating every night when I was working in the children's camp. With the moon and stars shining above and the town below in the valley, it's like being on the top of the world. It's my favorite place to be, and I wanted to share it with you."

"Well, excuse me if I'm not impressed," Merry complained as she removed the hospital gown that covered her clothes and draped it around her trembling shoulders. "Couldn't we have had this conversation back in Florida? At least there I wouldn't be in danger of becoming a frozen Popsicle."

"But in Florida it would be too easy for you to escape me. Up here with my governing spell temporarily controlling your powers, there's little chance of you getting away before I can explain my actions since we met."

Turning away from him, Merry folded her arms over her chest. "Fine. Go ahead and explain. The sooner we get this charade over with, the sooner I can get back to civilization and thaw out. But the next time you want to have a chat, how about a location with four walls, a roof, and a place to sit down? Or better yet, let's do it in the tropics." She let out an indignant snicker. "What am I saying? There won't be a next time! Once you've said your piece, warlock, I never want to see you again."

Bryan shivered more with the chill of her response than the weather. He understood her anger and knew overcoming it would not be easy. But before he could begin stating his defense, he would have to warm Merry up, literally.

Flicking his wrist, he transported them to an A-frame cabin on the far side of the mountain. Its main room had a vaulted ceiling and was furnished with a large brass bed and a chest of drawers. Several lamps were lit, casting a welcoming glow over the cozy interior. A small kitchenette was built in the corner and there was a sofa covered with a patchwork quilt in front of the stone fireplace. Bryan snapped his fingers and the logs stacked in the hearth ignited into crackling flames.

"Sorry, Merry. I forgot how cold it gets up here in the winter. You should start feeling warmer in a few minutes."

Sitting on the braided rug on the floor in front of the hearth, Merry looked back at him. "Who does this place belong to? A lonely forest ranger who gets his decorating tips from *Field and Stream* magazine?"

"No, it's mine. I purchased a piece of my favorite mountain and had this lodge built a couple of years ago. It's a bit rustic, but I enjoy coming here when I need to retreat from the world. Would you like a cup of hot chocolate?"

She was already shaking her head no when he magically set a steaming mug of cocoa beside her on the floor. Its rich aroma and the promise of much needed warmth must have

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overcome her ire. Merry picked up the cup and took a big sip.

“Thanks. It’s nice to know your powers can be employed for something useful.” As she brought the mug to her lips again, she saw the medallion dangling from the chain in his hand. “I guess that amulet was another part of your guise. No doubt it’s a shield to prevent me or others of our kind from knowing you were a warlock.”

He tossed the chain and medal into Merry’s lap. “It was more than that. As long as I wore the talisman, I had no magic powers to speak of. It even affected my vision, so I had to wear glasses. But I was willing to make any sacrifice if it helped me in winning you and your love.”

“What a pretty little speech!” Setting down the mug of cocoa, Merry picked up the gold disc and looked at it. “To think I actually believed all that nonsense about your sister giving you the medal of your family crest so you wouldn’t feel cut off from them. I bet you’re an only child.”

“No, I’m not. I have a sister named Jade and she’s a witch. I don’t know who prepared the amulet, but she was the one who sent it to me.”

Merry arched a cynical brow and held the medallion up by its chain. “Yeah, right. And if I open a book on heraldry I’d find this dragon coat of arms depicted on the Aldwyn page?”

Letting out a sigh, he sat on the sofa. “No. You’d find the winged gryphon displayed on the one for the Griffin family.”

“Your last name is Griffin?” She frowned. “Now why does that name seem so familiar? I don’t recall ever meeting anyone with-” Her mouth suddenly gaped open. “You’re the son of Magnus Griffin in San Francisco, aren’t you?”

“Well, yes, Magnus is my father, but he hasn’t spoken to me since I legally changed my name when I was in college. Aldwyn is my mother’s family—”

Merry jumped up and threw the medal at Bryan’s chest. “You were one of the men on that blasted list the council gave Simon!”

“What list? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Shaking her head, Merry turned from him and moved to the large glass covered wall that faced the valley. “Don’t act so innocent, Bryan, because I’m not buying it. No doubt your father used his position on the council to get your name on that list.”

Bryan was perplexed by her accusations. “That doesn’t make any sense. My father gave up his seat on the Domain’s council over a year ago and I would be the last person he’d want to help in any way. What’s on this list you keeping referring to?”

“Prospective bridegrooms for the Grand Master’s reluctant daughter!” she angrily replied. “Since Simon’s only child didn’t want to live as a witch or assume his exalted office, the council came up with a list of four warlock candidates for Merry, the magical misfit, to choose a husband from. They wanted Simon to coerce me into an arranged marriage, so the chosen son-in-law could be groomed into being his successor.”

“Did your father go along with their plan?”

Gazing out through the windows, Merry heaved a sigh. “Thank the fates, no. Simon refused to even consider their suggestion. I just wish I had known that particular fact before Dorian came to see me on Samhain.”

Bryan’s jaw clenched when he heard the other warlock’s name. “What does Dorian have to do with this? Was he on the list too?”

She shook her head. “No, but he wanted to be. Dorian told me about the list and convinced me Simon was going to force me into marrying one of those men to appease the Council. Dorian didn’t think I’d be happy with a stranger, so he offered to marry me himself. I

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turned him down and he attacked me.”

“That bastard deserves to be punished for hurting you.”

Merry glanced back at him. “Dorian hurt me physically, but it doesn’t compare to the pain your betrayal has caused me, Bryan. Why didn’t you tell me you were a warlock?”

“For the very same reason you never told me you were a witch. Fear. Fear of being rejected, fear of being hurt, fear of losing the one person you loved.”

From the way Merry avoided his gaze as she returned to her place near the blazing hearth, Bryan knew his words had touched her conscience. He longed to take her in his arms and console her, but there were things he needed to explain first.

“Admit it, Merry, if you had known I was a warlock, I would have been as welcomed in your life as a patch of poison ivy in a nudist colony.” The hint of a smile he saw on her face gave him the confidence to go on. “When I learned of your distaste for warlocks and using magic before we met, I decided to keep that part of myself hidden from you when I arrived in West Palm Beach. It was the only way I could think of to get close to you.”

Her brow furrowed. “But if your father hasn’t been active on the council or been in touch with you, then who told you about me? Was it Simon?”

Bryan shook his head. “Not likely, since I’ve never met the man. No, the one who told me about you was my sister, Jade.”

“Why did she do that?”

“Matchmaking,” he admitted with a disconcerted grin. “Jade thought the perfect bride for her brother, the reluctant warlock, would be an equally reluctant witch. That you were beautiful, single, and as dedicated as I was to living in the mortal way only made Jade more determined to get us together.”

Merry stared at him as if she was searching for a sign of duplicity in his eyes. “Are you really a reluctant warlock?”

“Oh, yes, much to my father’s chagrin and horror. What I told you about him disowning me when I pursued a medical career is all true. Magnus once bragged, if he found a way to destroy my powers, he would do it without a moment’s hesitation.”

Merry sat beside him on the sofa. “What a cruel man! I don’t blame you for staying away from him.”

Bryan could sense her empathy, but knew he would have to go slowly to gain her total forgiveness. “Magnus really isn’t so bad. He’s just old fashioned in his beliefs. I wanted the challenge provided by medical science, while he thought I should be content with magic and running the family business.”

“But you didn’t want that, did you, Bryan?”

“No. All my life, I avoided using my powers. Magic was boring and too self-serving for my tastes. So I studied hard to become a doctor and lived as a mortal. Yet no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t walk away from being a warlock. Occasionally I would find myself using magic to do simple tasks and I would be overwhelmed with guilt.”

Merry nodded and turned to gaze into the crackling fire in the hearth. “Oh, I know that feeling all too well. Using magic is second nature to me. I do things without thinking and then I feel like a hypocrite. It’s a bad habit, like smoking, and I just don’t know how to stop myself.” She looked back at Bryan. “How do you deal with it?”

He smiled. “I stopped the guilt by learning to accept my abilities. Now I use the best of my skills, inborn and acquired, to succeed in my chosen profession. Magic has its limitations, but it sure comes in handy when I’m late for an appointment and my car has a flat tire. With a snap

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of the fingers, the tire is fixed and I'm on my way to see a patient who needs me."

"Merging magic and mortal reality into your life. You make it sound easy enough. Are you happy as a doctor, Bryan?"

"Extremely. The work is fulfilling and the challenges are endless. The only drawback to my way of living has been the loneliness. Dating while bridging both worlds isn't easy."

"Not much luck with the ladies, Doc?"

Shaking his head, Bryan leaned back into the cushions of the couch and sighed. "Not really. I tried dating a few witches, but that was a mistake. They didn't understand the life choices I had made and criticized me. Keeping my being a warlock from mortal women wasn't easy either. I constantly had to be on my guard not to do anything with magic in front of them."

Merry laughed. "I suppose people like us can't exactly go to a computer dating service."

"That's why Jade told me about you. When she heard Simon Rand had a lovely daughter who preferred living as a mortal to being a witch, she thought we would do well together."

"Your sister must care for you a great deal. Does she really run your family's company in San Francisco?"

"Yes, and she does it very well. Magnus was so impressed with her efforts that he gave her his seat on the council last year. Jade was the first woman to ever hold such a position in the Domain." Suddenly, Bryan sat up and let out a disgusted sigh. "Damn! Jade must have gotten my name on that list you were talking about. Knowing her, she probably thought it would be a suitable back-up plan in case the first one fell through."

As soon as the word "plan" came out of his mouth, Bryan knew he had made a dreadful mistake. Merry was back on her feet again and unmasked irritation had returned to her face.

"Ah, yes! The *plan* that brought you to West Palm Beach to captivate me with your mortal charms," she sniffed. "Whose idea was it to have you portray yourself as a bumbling magician? Considering how I have an affinity for helping those in need, it was a clever ploy. With your obvious powers, it must have been difficult to appear so inept doing those simple tricks."

Bryan shrugged. "Not really. Wearing the amulet left me totally dependent on my manual dexterity. My hands are too big and my fingers always seemed to be in the way when I attempted those illusions. I was so grateful when you began using your magic to help salvage my pride, I wanted to kiss you."

"And you did, the first time you completed the Blaze To A Blossom in my apartment. It was a sweet gentle kiss that made me tingle clear down to my toes. I was very disappointed when you suddenly ended the kiss."

Merry turned, yet not before Bryan saw how the recollection had brought renewed warmth to her eyes. This was the sign he'd been waiting for. Faith restored, he got up and walked to her.

"I remember that kiss, too. As our lips touched, I knew you were my soulmate and I was thrilled beyond belief. But a second later, I was overwhelmed by frightening thoughts that forced me to pull away from you."

Surprise colored her features when she faced him. "What kind of thoughts frightened you?"

"There were several, and all of them had to do with losing you. I was also very leery about the strength of the amulet. If it didn't work and you saw through my guise before I told you the truth about myself, I was afraid you would never forgive me."

Merry snickered. "Your talisman worked a little too well, if you want my opinion. Not

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only did it shield your abilities from me, but no one at my aunt's party realized that you were a warlock either."

"That's not exactly true," he admitted with a weary sigh. "I think Kate was on to me from the start."

"Why? Did she say something to you?"

"Yes, in your shop when you introduced us. Remember how Kate asked me to bend down to kiss my cheek? It took all my control not to react when she touched the medallion through my shirt and spoke to me in Gaelic. Her message was so unexpected, it threw me for a loop."

Merry arched her brow. "I also recall how you claimed ignorance of the language when you asked if I understood Kate's words. I see now why that would have concerned you," she sighed. "Go on. Tell me what she told you."

"Kate said my secret was safe with her. That a deception such as mine was allowed as long as my intentions were pure and my heart was true. She told me to treasure your love and never hurt you, or I would have to answer to her." Bryan smiled. "Kate may be small, but I'm not foolish enough to prod her fairy temperament. She probably knows more spells than any of us could ever imagine."

A frown creased Merry's forehead. "Kate also seems to know a great deal about my life. She never called me back two weeks ago, yet she told Nora I needed her. Now I discover Kate knew all about you. I wonder what my fairy godmother is up to."

"Perhaps Kate saw past my shield and in her own way was playing matchmaker herself. By not revealing my secret to you, she apparently approves of our being together." He took hold of Merry's shoulders and pulled her toward him. "In spite of what you think about me, I do love you. We are kindred souls trapped between what we are and what we want to be. I live as a mortal and I want you to be a part of my life."

A hint of a smile flitted across Merry's face before it disappeared. "Won't that be a little difficult with you in New York and me in Florida?"

Her question confused him. "What are you talking about, sweetheart? Why would I be in New York?"

Rolling her eyes, she heaved a sigh. "Sloane Kettering offered you a staff position at three times your salary and a grant for the donor bank you want to establish for special and rare blood types so patients like Linda would have a chance to survive. You'd have to be an idiot to turn down an opportunity like that, Bryan Aldwyn."

He shrugged. "Then call me an idiot, because I didn't take the job. My place is in Hopewell and West Palm Beach."

"But I don't understand. If you weren't moving to New York, then why did you sell your condo to Pauline Russell?"

Bryan laughed and hugged her. "I sold my condo to Pauline because I have every intention of moving in with you. Your place is only a few minutes from the hospital and it's large enough for two. Besides, a marriage usually works better when the wife and husband live together."

Merry suddenly jerked back from his embrace to look up at him. Her eyes glittered with mischief. "Marriage? Doc, if this is your way of asking me to marry you, you better try again. How can I be sure you're really interested in me and not just a place to live closer to your job?"

Bryan playfully swatted her bottom with his hand. "Meredith Albright Rand, this isn't the time for teasing! You know damn well I would live in an igloo in Alaska or a tepee in Arizona as

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long as you were there. I love you and I want you to marry me.”

Dropping her eyes from his, she began fussing with the buttons on his shirt. “You know, Bryan, I really should be quite angry with you. Besides not telling me you were a warlock, I’ve spent the last few weeks missing you like crazy. I overdosed on chocolate, cried myself to sleep, and had no one to talk to but my silly cat. Do you have any idea how miserable I’ve been?”

He lifted her chin with his hand until she was looking at him. “About as miserable as I was. Being away from you has been painful for me too. I’ve been searching for a way to be honest with you without endangering what we have together. Can’t you forgive me and just say yes?”

“Just say yes,” she mimicked with a frown. “Now, I’m not asking for roses, champagne, and a string quartet, but at a time like this, every girl deserves a little romance, Doc.”

The demanding tone in her voice made Bryan smile. “Well, if you want romance, how’s this?”

When he raised his hand to invoke a spell, Merry grabbed it and shook her head. “Magic comes too easy for us. Since we’ve done so well together without it, let’s do this the mortal way.”

Reaching for the old fashioned radio on the mantle, she clicked it on. Natalie Cole’s voice combined with her father’s filled the room with the old standard “Unforgettable.”

Merry turned into Bryan’s embrace. “This would be a perfect place to start. Dance with me, Doc?”

“My pleasure,” he replied.

Putting his arms around her waist, Bryan led her into the swaying movements of the dance. Her soft feminine curves were a perfect counterpart to his taller, muscular form. He held her close and inhaled the subtle flowery fragrance of her shampoo and the scent that was uniquely Merry. A feeling of completion swept over him.

With her head nestled against his shoulder, Merry sighed. “You probably won’t believe this, Bryan, but earlier tonight, I decided I was going to find you and tell you I was a witch. No matter what, I was going to convince you that I was the best thing that ever happened to you.”

He gave her an answering squeeze. “You *are* the best thing that’s ever happened to me, sweetheart.”

Not missing a step, Merry looked up at him. “I know that now, but when Linda died, I suddenly felt alone. Magic hadn’t helped me and I didn’t know what I was going to do. Then you came into the room and rescued me again. I have never been so grateful to see anyone in my entire life.”

Bryan stopped dancing and frowned at her. “Gratitude isn’t what I want. I’m a warlock and there’s nothing I can do to change that, Merry. I need to know that you love me.”

Merry smiled over the irritation in his voice. “Warlock or mortal, how could I not love you, Bryan? You bring a special meaning to my life. Loving you gives me strength and I couldn’t survive this crazy world without you.”

“Then end this torment and say you’ll marry me.”

Tears of elation filled her eyes. “Of course I’ll marry you, Bryan. All you had to do was ask—”

Whatever Merry intended to say was quickly forgotten when Bryan’s mouth captured hers in a long, mind-melting kiss. Pain filled memories of lonely nights and fears that had plagued her for weeks were instantly washed away. Love given and returned would be her companions from now on. Joy encompassed her heart.

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Merry suddenly became aware of a strange ringing sound in her ears. She eased back from his lips and laughed. "I've always thought you were a wonderful kisser, Bryan, but this is the first time I remember hearing bells."

Bryan chuckled. "Those bells have nothing to do with me. They're on the radio. It must be midnight." At that moment, the strains of "Auld Lang Syne" came from the radio's small speaker, confirming his guess. "Happy New Year, sweetheart." He drew Merry close and kissed her.

A few moments later, he eased his lips away from hers and tried to catch his breath. "If I don't stop kissing you now, I'm going to forget about how cold you are and make love to you right here on the floor."

"Between the fireplace and the heat we'll generate together, the cold won't bother me at all." Giving him her best siren's smile, Merry unfastened the buttons on his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. "Let's make love and start the New Year right, Bryan."

"But, sweetheart, maybe we should wait..." Bryan gasped as she began caressing his bare chest with her mouth. "You're playing with fire, Merry. Much more of this and I'll forget about being noble and...that feels incredible."

Merry stopped sucking on his nipple and ran her hands down the back of his denim-covered buttocks. "I know how good it feels and I'm hoping it's only a start." Massaging the taut cheeks under her hands, she pressed herself against him.

Her actions made Bryan shudder and groan with need. He made a half-hearted effort to move away from her. "After being apart all these weeks, I wanted to take things slower."

"We can have slower later." Merry pulled the quilt from the sofa and tossed it on the floor in front of the fire. Taking off her clothes under his watchful gaze, she held out her hands to him. "Make love to me now, Bryan."

His resolve destroyed, Bryan sighed and drew her into his arms. "You really are a witch, Merry."

"Yeah, I know," she quipped, "but that's one of the reasons why you love me, warlock!"

"By the fates, I do," he replied, lowering them both to the floor. "And for the rest of my days, I'll thank the powers above that you're mine."

Merry smiled as his mouth came down toward her. "Always, Bryan. Always..."

\* \* \*

An hour or so later, the two lovers cuddled blissfully content beneath the quilt in front of the hearth. The fire had burned down to a pile of glowing embers and music played softly in the background.

Bryan stroked Merry's unbound hair and kissed her brow as she rested her head against his chest. "I do love you, Merry. I never lied to you about that."

"I know, and I love you, too," she sighed in a sleepy voice. "I'm only sorry our being together has forced you to turn down the appointment at Sloane Kettering. I know how much the grant they offered for the donor bank meant to you. Perhaps you could apply to the board at Hopewell for a similar grant."

"I don't have to. Before I checked out of the hotel in New York, I got a call from a man representing a new health research group called the Nomis Foundation. They heard about my idea for the special needs bank and are willing to fund the project. He's going to call me in the morning so we can finalize the details."

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Merry was instantly awake. "Where did you tell him to call you, Bryan?"

"Your place," he said with a yawn. "Gave him your number. Didn't think you would mind."

Merry sat up. "But we're not there. We're in Vermont!" She jumped up and began gathering their clothes. "We better hurry up and get dressed. You don't want to miss his call."

Bryan leaned up on his elbow to watch her. "We don't have to rush back at this moment, sweetheart. If we're not home, he'll call back."

"Your confidence is admirable, Doc, but since I feel kind of responsible for losing your first grant, I won't rest easy until you've spoken to this guy and everything has been worked out." She tossed his clothes at him. "Come on, let's get going."

Bryan frowned. "We really don't have to rush."

"Oh yes, we do. Now hurry up and get dressed."

"But, sweetheart, I don't think--"

Merry suddenly lost all her patience. "Fine! If you won't do it, I'll do it for you." Blinking her eyes to invoke a spell, she and Bryan were instantly dressed. She nodded, pleased with her actions. "Hey! I'm getting pretty good at this."

"Showing off isn't a becoming trait," Bryan muttered with a wry smile as he stood up and tucked his shirt into his jeans. "I could have gotten dressed all on my own."

Merry finger-combed her hair and wove it into a braid. "I know, but I'm anxious to get back. Besides not wanting to miss that call, there's Harry to consider. He's an independent cuss with a penchant for disappearing, but if he gets home and there is no food waiting for him, I may never see him again. I really don't want to lose him like that."

While she watched Bryan clean out the hearth and return the cabin to its original state with a simple wave of his hand, a new set of doubts entered her mind.

"I just realized that you've never seen Harry. As a matter of fact, the two of you are never around at the same time. Why is that, do you suppose?"

Bryan shrugged. "Couldn't say."

*Couldn't say or won't?* Merry mused to herself. She moved to Bryan's side and touched his arm. "You're not keeping any other secrets from me, are you, Doc?"

He frowned and looked genuinely puzzled by her question. "Of course not, Merry. Why would you even ask such a thing?"

"Well, it's just that I can't help but notice how well you handle magic and invoking spells. And I...I've always felt there was more to Harry's presence in my life than sheer chance."

Bryan's frown grew more intense. "Are you suggesting that I sent that cat to your shop?"

"Either that, or perhaps..." Merry suddenly flushed with embarrassment and shook her head. "Forget it. I must be losing my mind to even consider such a thing."

"Consider what? Come on, Merry," he urged. "I deserve to know what you were thinking."

Merry let out a deep sigh. "Okay! I'll tell you, but don't laugh at me, Bryan. For just a moment I thought maybe you had transformed yourself into a cat so you could spy on me."

Bryan's laughter earned him a poke in the ribs from Merry. "I wasn't trying to be funny, Doc. My suspicions were well founded. Both you and Harry arrived in my shop on the same day. He's never there when you are and vice versa. Then you seemed to know an awful lot about me. So what else was I to think?"

"That your imagination had run amok! Oh, sweetheart, Harry's arrival and mine on that day is nothing more than a coincidence," Bryan insisted, putting his arm around her shoulders.



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“I’ve never mastered animal transformation. And if I had, you can be sure I would never be a cat. I really am allergic to them.”

Merry sighed and shook her head. “I feel like an idiot. Can you forgive me for even imagining such a crazy thing?”

Bryan pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she relaxed against him. “I’ll forgive you only if you promise to spend the rest of your life with me.”

She smiled. “That will be the easiest promise I will ever have to keep.”

“I know, sweetheart. For me too.” He gave her another hug. “Now, let’s go home. As soon as we check on your silly cat, I want to get you in bed and start making up for all the time we’ve been apart.”

“Sounds great, but let me handle things this time.”

“What things are you talking about?” he asked.

Merry winked at him. “Just this!”

A second later, they were gone.

## Chapter 18

BRYAN AND MERRY materialized in the middle of her dimly lit showroom. He clutched her to him until their equilibrium had returned.

“Not a bad trip, sweetheart, but you definitely need to work on your landings. If I hadn’t countered the momentum of our descent with a spell of my own, we would have ended up sprawled out on the floor.”

Merry laughed to cover her jangled nerves. “Sorry about that, but it was my first long distance transfer. I’m better on short jaunts across town, though to tell the truth, I prefer driving my own car.”

“I do too. Saves a lot of explanations when a friend or coworker asks you for a lift to the mall.” He dropped a kiss on Merry’s lips and hugged her. “By the fates, being myself and having the freedom to be totally honest with another person is an incredible thing. We’re going to have a great life together.”

Closing her eyes, Merry smiled and let herself bask in the warmth of the moment. No marriage could be perfect, yet the one she was going to have with Bryan was going to be very close to it. To live as mortals or with magic, the choice belonged to them. There would be problems and obstacles along the way, but they would survive because they loved one another.

“I love you, Bryan. I never thought I would be lucky enough to find someone like you.”

“It was a surprise to me, too.” He gave her another kiss before easing away from her. “Now let’s start searching for your cat. Where’re the light switches?”

“We really shouldn’t turn on any more lights,” Merry explained. “The police patrol this area quite often during the night and they would be knocking on the door asking what was wrong if the showroom was all lit up. I’d rather not deal with them right now.”

Bryan shrugged. “I suppose we can make do with the security lights you have on already. Does Harry have a favorite place staked out here in the store?”

Merry pointed toward the main counter at the rear of the showroom. “He likes to nap next to the cash register, but as you can see, he’s not there. I wonder if Harry’s up front in the display window. I found him there a few times looking out at the street.”

“You stay here and I’ll check the window bay for Harry. No reason both of us should stumble around in the shadows.” Bryan made his way to the front of the store. “Having eyes like a cat would certainly make this search a lot easier,” he muttered.

Watching him, Merry chuckled. “I must have been out of my mind when I accused you of being Harry. The two of you are nothing alike.”

“You’re telling me! Well, at least my nose isn’t itching.”

She nodded. “So I noticed. That could mean Harry hasn’t been back yet. Why don’t we forget about looking for him—”

“*Meow!*”

Merry turned to find Harry lounging on the counter beside the register. Rushing to him, she stroked his head. “There you are, you bad boy! Where have you been for the past three days, Harry? I was worried sick about you.”

Bryan came up behind her, but kept his distance from the large black and white cat. “So that’s Harry. From the healthy size of him, I don’t think he...he... ah-choo!”

## The Reluctant Witch by Susan Grace

As Bryan sneezed again, Merry gently pushed him away from the counter. "I'm sorry, Doc. This is all my fault. Can I get anything for you?"

Bryan shook his head and rubbed his nose on the handkerchief he'd taken from his pocket. "Not really. Must be some mortal blood up in my family tree that causes this weakness in me. I've had this allergy since I can remember. It's nothing for you to be concerned with."

Merry glanced back at Harry and then returned her attention to Bryan as she made a decision. "I love Harry, but I can't let you suffer like this. I'll start looking for a new home for him in the morning."

"Don't do anything drastic, sweetheart. Maybe I can invoke a shield around myself when he's around to prevent this from happening again."

Stretching up on tiptoe, Merry kissed Bryan. "Absolutely not. Pets like Harry are nice, but not when they cause problems. I love you and we're going to be married. You mean more to me than anything else in the world."

When Bryan opened his mouth to reply, the interior of the shop was suddenly flooded with bright white light. A cultured male voice called out from behind them.

"It's about time, Meredith, my love."

Once again, Merry spun around to face the counter. She could hardly fathom what she was seeing. "Simon, what are you doing here?"

Fashionably attired in a black tuxedo, bowtie, and a white pleated shirt, Simon hopped down from where he was sitting on the counter. "Is this any way to greet your father, Meredith? And when did you stop calling me 'daddy'?"

"I'm sorry, Si—Daddy. I wasn't expecting you to drop in like this." Her gaze fell to the counter behind him. "Where's Harry? Don't tell me you've frightened him away, Daddy."

Bryan put his arm around Merry's shoulder. "Sweetheart, I don't think you understand."

Merry tried to shrug off his hold. "There's nothing to understand, Bryan. My father has never liked my cat. Daddy, if you've done something to hurt Harry, I'll never forgive you."

"Sweetheart, your father hasn't harmed Harry," Bryan assured her, "but he does have a confession to make. Isn't that correct, sir?"

The warning edge in Bryan's voice made Merry look at him and then at her father. "A confession? Daddy, what's Bryan talking about? Were the two of you working together on some kind of plot against me?"

Simon casually leaned against the counter. "Not at all, my dear. I've never had the honor of meeting your young man before now, but it pleases me to know how astute he is. I heartily approve of your choice, Meredith."

"Your approval isn't necessary, Daddy. I'm marrying Bryan and that's that. Now I want to know what did you do to my cat?"

Taking hold of her arm, Bryan made her face him. "Simon did nothing to your cat, Merry."

"How can you be so sure, Doc? Harry was here before my father arrived and now he's gone."

Bryan gave her a quick hug, then turned to Simon. "The least you can do is tell her the truth about what you did."

Simon chuckled. "The truth? After the performance you've carried out these past few months, how can you stand there and make such a demand of me?"

"Because Merry is your daughter," Bryan countered. "She deserves to know what you've done."

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The odd exchange between the two men confused Merry. “Bryan? Daddy? What’s going on?”

Not responding to his daughter’s question, Simon moved toward Bryan. “If you’re so certain it’s the right thing to do, then tell her yourself.”

Bryan stood his ground and didn’t back away. “No. I’ve inflicted enough pain on her. Your daughter’s entitled to honesty, but this is your burden to deal with, Simon, not mine.”

Merry’s patience was racing toward its end. “Hey, will you two stop talking about me like I wasn’t here!”

The men seemed oblivious to her ire or her statement. Simon pointed at Bryan. “You might be a clever warlock, Bryan Aldwyn Griffin, but you are also a sanctimonious upstart who doesn’t know his place. You have no right telling me what I should do.”

“When it comes to Merry, I do,” Bryan declared. “I love her and she’s going to be my wife. Your hypocrisy will hurt her—”

Merry’s temper exploded. “That’s it!” she shouted. “Both of you, end this outrageous display of male dominance and lower the testosterone level in this room or I’ll show you how bitchy this witch can be when she’s being ignored.” She poked Simon in the chest with her finger. “Now, if you don’t tell me what you did to my cat, I never want to see you again.”

Simon looked very uncomfortable under her intense scrutiny. “Well, my dear, I’m not quite sure how to...say this...”

Bryan put his arm around Merry and drew her close. “Simon didn’t hurt your cat. Simon *was* your cat. Evidently, he transformed himself into Harry to keep tabs on you.”

The reality of what she’d heard caused Merry to shake her head in disbelief. “No, it can’t be. You never would have betrayed me like that, Daddy. Tell me Bryan is wrong. Tell me he’s mistaken.”

Simon shrugged, his face colored with shame. “I can’t, Meredith, my love. Much to my chagrin, Bryan is correct. I was your cat, Harry.”

Merry felt an emotional knot fueled by pain and anger forming in her throat. “But why did you do it, Daddy? Why was such a deception necessary? Were you spying on me?”

“Spying is such a harsh word. I was merely curious about you, about how you were living your life. I wanted to be sure that you were truly happy.”

“So why didn’t you just ask me? You could have called on the phone or dropped by for a heart-to-heart chat over coffee. You didn’t have to betray me like this.”

“But would you have told me the truth, Meredith?”

That question knocked most of the force out of her rage. As much as she’d like to deny it, she had been keeping secrets all her life, and many from him. Would she have told him the truth?

Before she could respond, Simon reached out to stroke her cheek. “No, my dear, I don’t think you would have. Then again, why should you? I’m the poorest excuse for a father that has ever been and you owe me nothing but your disdain.”

“That’s not true, Simon. You’ve been a good father, always thoughtful and generous with me. With your position as the Grand Master of the Domain, I understood how busy you were.”

Simon smiled sadly. “Yes, I was busy, but at what cost? Had I spent more time being a better father to my only child, perhaps she’d be able to call me *daddy* without having to think about it. By the gods, I’m such a failure when it comes to you.”

Merry didn’t utter a word when Simon turned away from her and walked toward the counter. He seemed so distant and remote. Regret hung over him like a storm cloud. Totally confused, she cuddled closer to Bryan and allowed his presence to comfort her.

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“Bryan, I’ve never seen my father like this before. I don’t know what to say to him.”

“Then let Simon do the talking. I have a feeling his masquerade as Harry has more to it than just finding out how happy you really were, sweetheart. Go to him and ask him why he did it.”

She nodded. “All right. But stay close to me, Doc. I may not like what he has to say.”

He kissed her forehead. “I’ll be right beside you, Merry. For now and forever.”

Merry silently approached her father. Simon was standing with his back to her, his hands braced on the counter. His head was down and he appeared too deep in thought to even know she was there. A moment later, he destroyed that assumption by speaking to her.

“Meredith, your father is a wretched arrogant fool who has made a career out of making mistakes in his personal life.”

Merry fought her tears and swallowed the tightness in her throat. “Was having me one of those mistakes?”

Simon whipped around and took her into his arms. “No, my precious child, you are the one thing I did right. Never doubt my love for you, Meredith. With every fiber of my being, I love you. I would do anything to protect you.” He eased back to wipe the tears from her eyes with his fingertips. “Too bad I couldn’t protect you from being hurt by me.”

“But you never meant—”

Simon pressed his finger to her lips to stop her words. “Don’t defend me, Meredith. I know what I’ve done to your life and it’s about time you learned of it as well.” He put his hands around Merry’s waist and lifted her onto the counter. “Now, sit there and listen.”

Bryan cleared his throat. “I don’t want to intrude...”

Simon looked at him. “Since you’re going to be a part of this family, you should hear what I have to say as well, Bryan.” The older warlock smiled. “If truth be told, your sister was the one who brought us together for this chat we’re about to have.”

Bryan frowned. “I admit it was Jade’s idea that I come to Florida and meet Merry. But how did my sister get you involved in this? Did she tell you about me and what I was doing?”

Simon shook his head. “No. Jade simply asked me about my daughter. As I was talking, I realized how very much I didn’t know about my only child and I was shamed by my ignorance.” He picked up Merry’s hand and gazed into her eyes. “I knew her name, age, where she lived, and what she did for a living, but little else. Although I knew she abhorred being a witch, I didn’t know why. I had no idea what her favorite color was or which flavor of ice cream she preferred.” He turned to Bryan. “I wager you know both those answers.”

Bryan looked slightly ill at ease. “Merry likes red and chocolate ice cream barely edges out strawberry as her favorite flavor.”

“Need I say more?” Simon turned his attention back to Merry. “So I sought a way of learning what I could about you without admitting my ignorance. By transforming myself into a cat and playing on your wonderfully sympathetic nature, I became a part of your life and got to know you without your knowledge. But all too soon, I discovered this plan had major drawbacks.”

Merry squeezed his hand. “Like hiding from Bryan and avoiding contact with Aunt Nora? You were afraid they’d be able to see through your guise. That’s why you went wild the day Aunt Nora tried to grab you here in the showroom.”

Simon’s smile was laden with remorse. “Oh yes, there was that worry to consider. And I do apologize for the mess I made during my retreat. But even more importantly than that, I found out what an incredible young woman my daughter had become. Caring, intelligent, witty,

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independent, and in many ways, wise beyond her years.”

Embarrassed by his praise yet confused by his inference, Merry frowned. “Finding I was...well, all those things was a drawback?”

He nodded. “Yes. Because you had grown into wonderful person and I had done nothing to contribute to it. How could I, when I was never there for you? I was always running about, taking care of other things instead of you, Meredith. The only part of your character I could lay claim to was your reluctance to use magic and live as a witch. I curse myself every day for doing that to you.”

“You had nothing to do with that. My decision to avoid witchcraft was based on the happiness I saw my mother achieve without it.”

Simon’s brow arched in speculation. “And who do you think was responsible for your mother’s determination to turn her back on magic? Me!” he declared, hitting his fist on his chest. “The pompous egotistical Grand Master of the Domain, who thought he was above making a commitment to one woman. I was such an idiot. No wonder Fiona despised me.”

“My mother never despised you. She told me herself she was the one who didn’t want to get married.”

Shaking his head, Simon turned away from Merry. “Of course she would say that. Fiona always was the peacemaker. If she had told you the truth, you would have hated me. After the wretched relationship she and Nora endured with their own father, she never would have subjected a similar fate on you.”

As Bryan put his arm around Merry, she took a deep breath and fought to ignore the sick feeling in her stomach. “So you’re saying my mother lied to me. That she wanted to marry you, but you refused. And because of your refusal, she turned her back on magic, witchcraft, and her family heritage, leaving me to be born a bastard?”

At his silent nod, Merry sniffed back her tears. “She was right. I would have hated you. Why didn’t you marry my mother? Didn’t you love her?”

Simon wiped his hands over his face. “Oh, yes, I loved Fiona. She was a bright shining beacon that lit up my life and made me feel whole. I’d never known such happiness. I probably would have married her if circumstances hadn’t arose to influence my judgment.”

Merry did some calculations in her head and knew exactly what *circumstances* Simon was referring to. “That’s when you became Grand Master of the Domain, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. The day before Fiona discovered she was pregnant, my father stepped down as Grand Master,” he sighed. “Suddenly, I was thrust into an office I hadn’t thought would be mine for many years. I was hardly prepared for the task of being a global leader, but I refused to admit that flaw to anyone. So there I was, overwhelmed by the future, yet eager to succeed, when Fiona arrived and told me about you. Since she’d obviously willed herself to become pregnant, I knew she was expecting a marriage proposal. But with all I had to do, I didn’t think I could take on the added responsibility of having a wife and family, and I told her just that. Rather than offer her marriage, I asked Fiona to be my consort.”

Inwardly, Merry winced. “Knowing how proud and stubborn my mother was, she wouldn’t have been pleased by your offer.”

Simon chuckled, but there was no mirth in its hollow sound. “Fiona was absolutely livid! I tried to explain how unfair it would be to her having a husband who would never be home, but she wasn’t buying my explanation for a second. She said I was drunk with power and blinded by the grandeur of my station. She cursed the Domain for coming between us and said I would rue the day she walked away from me forever.”

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“And did you?” Merry asked.

Simon turned to face her. His usually luminous eyes were dulled with sadness. “Ah, yes. Your mother was quite correct in that prediction. My work for the Domain has nearly consumed me. I’ve been surrounded by people, yet I’m the loneliest man in the world. Not marrying Fiona was the biggest mistake of my life. It robbed me of the opportunity of raising my child and caused me to lose the only woman I have ever loved.”

Merry nodded in solemn agreement. “It also caused my mother to turn her back on magic. No wonder she had such disdain for witchcraft and the Domain.”

“Chances are, had I married Fiona, you would have been content as a witch and taken joy in the use of your powers. Now you can see why I blame myself for the way you feel about magic. I’m so very sorry, Meredith. Someday I hope you’ll be able to forgive me for everything I’ve done to ruin your life.”

“You didn’t ruin my life, Daddy. As a matter of fact, in an odd way, your actions have enriched it.”

His brow puckered with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Trying to fit into the mortal world has shown me that I’m capable of doing many things on my own. That hard work, and not magic, can help you achieve your goals.”

Simon shrugged. “I suppose there is that to consider, and you should be very proud of your accomplishments. Though truth be told, I still wish you would reconsider your plans to live as a mortal. I fear you will never know true happiness unless you stop trying to avoid magic and embrace the powers you have been blessed with. You are a witch and nothing on earth is going to alter that fact. Live as you choose, but accept what you are with an open heart, dearling.”

“I know, Daddy. With Bryan I intend to do just that.”

Simon’s attention and amber gaze turned to Bryan. “Ah, yes, the young warlock who used my magic to capture the heart of my unknowing little girl. I hope you appreciate what I’ve done for you. Without my assistance, you never would have succeeded in fooling her.”

Bryan frowned. “Your magic and assistance? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No reason you should,” Simon replied with a smile. “But I was the one who created the amulet that shielded your powers these past months.”

“Why did you do it, Simon? I can’t believe Jade told you I was going to use the talisman in an attempt to win your daughter’s trust.”

Simon shook his head. “She didn’t. A little investigating into your sister’s background and the Griffin family, and I figured it out on my own. Finding your name on the list Jade and the council put together of prospective grooms for Meredith only confirmed my suspicions.”

“It sounds like you actually wanted me to meet Merry. That’s why you created the amulet.”

“Of course. I liked what I read about you, Bryan. When Jade came to me for advice about obtaining a shielding device, I sent her to see Kate. Your sister never knew the fairy was merely acting as my agent.”

“That explains what Kate said to me in Nora’s garden on Samhain when she touched the medallion through my shirt.”

Simon nodded. “Our Kate is quite perceptive of such things. She probably felt the amulet’s aura and presence the moment she saw you.”

Shaking his head, Bryan sighed. “Then my big plan to gain Merry’s love and acceptance was actually orchestrated by you.”

“Not really. I merely aided your cause, Bryan. You won my daughter’s love all on your

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own.”

Simon picked up Merry’s hand and kissed it. “I’m going to miss being with you, Meredith, my love. The time we’ve spent together during these past few months has meant more to me than you’ll ever know.”

Tears pooled in Merry’s eyes. “Me too, Daddy. I forgive you for the deceptions, but I’ve grown accustomed to having Harry around. Besides being something wonderful to hug, he was a great listener.”

Lifting her from the counter, Simon set Merry on the floor and took her into his arms. “But this way, I get to do the hugging and I like it much better. And if you ever need to talk, I’m only an incantation away.” Simon suddenly pulled away from their embrace. “Or a phone call will do just as well. You won’t have to use magic to find me.”

Merry smiled at her father’s nervous attempt to appease her usual demand to avoid witchcraft. “Yes, phone calls are great, but magic is so much easier and cost effective. Even with the ten cents a minute plan from AT&T, a girl could rack up quite a bill talking to you as you travel around the world.”

“Magic is easier?” Simon arched his brow in surprise. “The fates abound! It actually sounds like you’re going to use some of your powers without torturing yourself with guilt. Do you know how that would please me?”

She nodded and put her arm around Bryan’s waist. “Then you’ll have to thank Bryan for my change of heart, Daddy. He’s the one who convinced me that I didn’t have to sacrifice magic to find peace within myself. I can have the best of both worlds, mystical and mortal, just as he has. As Bryan’s wife, I can have it all.”

Simon gave Bryan a nod of recognition. “My gratitude, sir. In a few weeks you have undone some of the damage my rash actions imposed on my daughter’s life. For this I shall be eternally grateful to you.” A strange expression came over Simon’s face as he regarded the younger man. “Could I possibly interest you in being my successor? With my daughter at your side and your innate understanding of the mortal world, you would be an excellent choice for the next Grand Master.”

Merry was about to scream out a refusal when Bryan gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze and signaled her silence. “Thanks for the offer, Simon, but I’m really not interested. Between my medical career and my life with Merry, there won’t be time for anything else.”

“Oh, well, you can’t blame a wizard for trying,” Simon sighed. “I’ll just have to put off the council for another decade or two.”

An idea for a possible solution to her father’s dilemma suddenly popped into Merry’s head. “You know what you need, Daddy? A wife and another child. Who knows? Maybe your next offspring will be a boy and you could groom him into being your heir.”

Simon’s eyes grew round with shock. “Me? Get married and start a family? Have you totally taken leave of your senses, Meredith? I’m a stubborn workaholic who travels constantly and is up to his neck in Domain politics. What woman, mystic or mortal, would put up with me at this stage in my life?”

“One who is exactly like you: my aunt Nora.”

Simon shook his head and moved away from the counter. “No, it could never work out between us. Nora’s a fabulous, beautiful woman, but she hates me. She still blames me for Fiona’s death. She’d sooner see me burned at the stake than have anything to do with me on a personal level.”

“At one time that may have been true, but things have changed in the past few months.



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Nora's seen a whole new side of you and she's been favorably impressed. I'd even go so far as to say that she's attracted to you. With your charm and looks, you could take that attraction and coax it into a real relationship with Nora. Won't you at least consider it, Daddy?"

Looking up at the ceiling, he shrugged. "While I can see the possibilities in such a pairing with Nora, I doubt if she will. Why would she even consider marrying me?"

The vulnerable tone in his voice touched Merry's heart. "I think you're selling yourself short, Daddy. You are a fantastic man with a great deal to offer a woman. You need a woman like Nora at your side. Besides, if the two of you married and had a child, it would also give Nora what she's been wanting for years. A Glendenning-Rand as the next Grand Master of the Domain."

Simon turned to face her. He was smiling and there was a flash of new interest in his eyes. "You know, darling, I think you may have something there. I'll call on Nora in the morning. Who knows? We all might come out of this with a happy ending."

Merry looked up at Bryan and grinned. "I certainly hope so, Daddy. Everyone deserves to know what happiness really is."

"Well, with that profound statement, I will take my leave, Meredith." He shook Bryan's hand. "Take good care of my daughter, young man. She's my greatest treasure and the very best part of me."

Bryan nodded. "I will, Simon. Never doubt that."

"Good. I'll be counting on you." Simon kissed Merry's cheek. "Since you aren't going to turn your back on magic, you've got a lot of studying to do. If you like, I can tutor you in the finer elements of the craft."

Merry shook her head. "No thanks, Daddy. I've got my *Grimoire* and Bryan can help me if I get stuck."

"But learning magic properly is very important, Meredith."

She smiled. "That's true, Daddy. But I don't need lessons. You see, I've already discovered the greatest magic of all is love."

Simon winked at her. "I always knew you were a clever girl. See you tomorrow, my heart."

With a snap of his fingers, he was gone.

Holding Merry in his arms, Bryan let out a sigh and fell wearily against the counter. "Thank the gods all of this has finally been worked out. No more deceptions, shields, or lies between us, sweetheart. I can hardly wait for us to begin our lives together."

Merry nodded. "I know what you mean. We have so many wonderful things to look forward to."

He nibbled on the side of her neck. "And I know exactly where I would like to start."

"So do I. Our wedding. My stars, I've got a lot of work to do," she said, shaking her head. "I'll have to call Nora and send word to Kate. They'd be crushed if I didn't let them in on the planning."

"Merry... sweetheart..."

"Then there's your family to consider. I want you to contact Jade as soon as possible. Maybe if your father knows you're marrying the daughter of the Grand Master, he'll stop being such an insufferable ass and start treating you with the respect you deserve. I know how we will get Magnus to come to the wedding. I'll have Simon issue the invitation. Then your sister won't be caught in the middle anymore..."

"Merry, can't this wait until—"

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“And then there’s the problem of your coworkers at the hospital and my friends around town like Lauren, Bob, and Charlie Chan. Cosmic catastrophe! They’ll expect an invitation to our wedding, but I don’t think it would be safe to bring them together with our mystical friends and family...”

Bryan frowned. “Merry?”

The warning tone in Bryan’s voice went by Merry’s attention unnoticed. “I’ve got it!” she declared with a nod. “We can have two weddings. One for the mortals and another for the mystics. That way no one will be offended or frightened out of their—”

Bryan suddenly spun her around in his arms to gain her attention. “Meredith Albright Rand, there is only one thing I really want from you at this very moment. Do you have any idea what it is?”

Merry grimaced. “My stars, Bryan. I’m sorry for being such a terrible hostess. What would you like? A glass of wine? A cup of coffee?”

“No, silly woman. Just shut up and kiss me!”

And she did...

# About the Author

SUSAN GRACE WRITES historical romance novels for Kensington Publishing and romantic comedies and paranormal thrillers for LTDBooks. Besides being a multi-talented author with books published in three genres and two medias, she's also a professional singer, a born empath, a teacher, an events planner, and the program director for the Romantic Times Booklovers Conventions.

Susan's dynamic personality has also made her a popular motivational speaker. She travels across the United States and Canada teaching classes in writing, research, characterization, New Age interests, personal empowerment, and promoting the romance genre.

One of Susan's favorite activities during the past twelve years was writing and producing comedy sketches that deal with the trials and tribulations of the publishing industry. Staged at local and national conventions with other published authors (including Heather Graham, Joan Johnston, and Marilyn Campbell), these shows are always well attended. In funny, poignant, and very truthful ways, Susan explores this crazy business from the point of view of editors, agents, authors, aspiring writers, and their families.

You can visit her website at [www.AuthorSusanGrace.com](http://www.AuthorSusanGrace.com)

Susan Grace resides in Palm Beach, Florida.

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*by*

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*1997 Spring Break Ends*

*Reece University - New York Campus*

Kelly should have listened to his brother. Nevery was his boy, his closest, older sib who'd never steered him crooked, had only taught him right from wrong, good from bad - more like their now-dead father than a brother.

He should have listened and gotten out of the life sooner, when Nev had first started warning him about the dangers.

But now it was too late, Kelly thought, his adumbrative gifts useless and squandered.

"I don't use, bro" had been Kelly's invariable response to any of his brother's well intentioned, I've-been-there-I-know-what-I'm-talking-about harangues.

Nevery would raise his eyebrows as if he were looking at an alien who'd just landed in their living room and would clench his hands at his sides as if he were readying to punch some sense into his younger brother's head. He'd finally take a deep breath and would release it on a long tired sigh.

"You sell. It's the same thing. Can't you see that?"

His brother understood the Wiccan Rede better than Kelly ever had because Kelly hadn't seen it then. Hadn't wanted to.

*Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill; An' it harm none, do what ye will....*

Words to live by, Kelly thought and wished he had as he now watched Ben pull Amire - *his* girl, *his* shorty - into his arms, stroking her hair and whispering in her ear.

Terms of comfort or affirmations of what a no-good-hood Kelly Butler had been? *Had* been? But he still was. Wasn't he? He couldn't be -

"No Ben." Amire shook her head, adamant as she pulled from Ben to stare at the lifeless body sprawled across the bottom of the concrete steps. "He's not dead. He can't be."

Kelly watched the crowd of students, curious onlookers and a couple of toy cops - part of the campus security force, gunless but with trusty walkie-talkies at their sides and an abundance of mindless guts to match - as they hovered over the body. His body.

*Oh shit. Oh, hell no. This isn't happening.*

"We've got one victim down...African-American male, early twenties...wounds to the chest and abdomen..." Toy cop, barking into his radio, giving out vital statistics. His statistics. He was now an official number. A downed brother. If he *wasn't* dead already, Nev and his moms would kill him.

Kelly listened to the responding squawk. Squads dispatched. Ambulances on the way. Everything right out of a TV drama. His fifteen minutes of fame. And he wasn't liking it.

Kelly noticed Ben leading Amire several feet away where he gingerly helped her to a seat on the bottom step of the campus stairs. She was bleeding from a shoulder and a leg.

What the hell had happened to her? Had she been shot too? Who'd done it? A rival crew? His boys?

One of the toy cops lifted each of his eyelids in turn, touched four fingers to Kelly's neck then sadly shook his head.

Amire's wail pierced the air again.

Wait a minute, wait a minute. How come he hadn't felt that? And if he was standing up, a couple of feet away from Ben and Amire, how could he be on his back with his eyes closed several feet away? Something was up in a mean way and Kelly didn't like it one bit.

"Not Kelly...not Kelly."

Ben rubbed Amire's back as she mumbled. He pulled her head down to his chest then slid off his belt, wrapped and tightened it around her thigh to stop the bleeding from her leg.

*Bastard!* Kelly screamed, wondered why no one seemed able to hear him except Amire, who jerked up her head. Kelly waited. She glanced in his direction as if she sensed him nearby, but only stared through him.

"He's not dead, Ben. I know he's not."

Word *Ben*. Listen to the sister.

Ben thumbed away her tears, pulled her head back to his chest. "I know you don't want to believe it. It's hard. But he is gone, Mire. He is."

Kelly waited for the "good riddance" but only heard it in his own mind.

"He wasn't like you think, Ben. He was...he was special..."

He was listening to his own obituary, Kelly thought.

"I know, Amire. I understand."

And so now did Kelly. In a sudden flash of realization, before the last sentence had left Ben's mouth, he knew who had been behind today's shooting. Behind his own death.

Kelly saw red, gritted his teeth and balled his hands.

Ben must have felt his rage because he looked up, glanced in Kelly's direction, grimaced and convulsed as if to shake off his confusion or a sudden chill.

So many times in the past homeboy had been the supportive savior, always available to lend an ear to Amire after things had gone wrong between her and Kelly. Trusted confidant and Good Samaritan. Patient friend and sympathetic listener. Mr. Ben Quick the Hero.

*Larcenous bastard!* Kelly thought, regretting now that he had easily played into Ben's hands, providing him with so many different opportunities to be Amire's knight in shining armor.

Kelly had waylaid Amire at her school today with vague and minute hopes of reconciliation. And since he had made such a total ass of himself the last time he'd seen her - had, in fact, stepped over that imaginary line all black women drew against men striking women - he hadn't expected that she'd even give him the time of day, much less silently stand by while he'd pleaded his case. But she had.

Kelly had talked his game and Amire had listened. He'd pleaded and she'd cried. He'd promised no more like offenses and she'd believed him. He'd asked for her forgiveness and she had given it with conditions. Like so many times before.



But this time Kelly had meant it and had been on his way to proving it when Ben had appeared at the top of the steps carrying an armload of books and looking ready to jump Kelly and play the hero yet again.

He'd gotten his chance when a car had sped by, spraying bullets from the back and front seats. Kelly had gone down under the first deluge. Ben had barreled down the stairs to drag Amire out of harm's way.

Everyone else in the vicinity - panic stricken students and faculty passers-by alike - had gone for self, screaming, running and ducking for cover.

Kelly now glanced at the bottle of Moet - a shattered part of his peace offering-champagne spidering from brown paper and glass, down the stairs and towards the street like a foamy surreal waterfall. Amire and Ben's abandoned books were scattered on the steps and on the sidewalk a few feet away, like a toddler's blocks kicked around by a schoolyard bully.

Kelly looked at Ben comforting Amire, finally lost it and stalked over to them, intending to peel homeboy off his girl and slam him to the concrete.

He reached for Ben, tried to get a grip, but homeboy was as elusive as a shadow.  
*Oh no, oh no.*

Kelly's legs buckled. He collapsed against a nearby pillar and slid down until he had plopped onto the ground, gasping for air and holding his side as if he had just finished running a marathon.

Several EMS units and NYPD squad cars screeched to a halt at crazy angles behind and surrounding the campus police cars.

Two attendants jumped from the back of an ambulance and loaded Kelly's body onto a stretcher before covering it from head to toe.

*No.*

Paramedics surrounded Ben and Amire. One looked after her leg and arm wounds as she sat zombielike, staring at Kelly's lifeless body under the sheet as the two EMS guys lifted it onto the back of an ambulance.

The paramedics led Ben and Amire to another ambulance.

*No!*

Kelly felt a chill like ice pushed down the back of his shirt. He shuddered right before the Pull. Something pulling him away from the scene. He fought it, knew that if he gave in or tired, the last nail would go banging into his coffin.

Instinctively, he reached for his neck, searching for the comfort and strength of his lamen and was surprised when his fingers only met skin. He slid his hand down further to his chest, finally fisted the crystal pendant instead.

Would his pentacle have protected him today, better than his crystal? Kelly wondered, slipping away. Fast.

"He's not dead," Amire murmured as the ambulance doors closed and blocked her tear-stained face from his view.

*You're wrong, he thought. I am.*

### *The Summerland*

Believe. Believe in the Tooth Fairy. Believe in Santa. Believe in God. Believe in the goodness of man. Believe in your elders, especially your parents and older siblings, for they're always right. Believe in the birth of Christ. Believe that time heals all wounds.

Believe that a tree with Bazooka leaves will sprout in your stomach if you swallow your gum. Don't believe in the bogeyman, witches, vampires, ghosts and werewolves. Don't believe in little green men and the UFO's rumored to be their preferred mode of transport.

Well, Kelly had believed in it all. The lies, the myths, the fables, the truths. He'd believed in Christ the Savior and vampires and werewolves and ghosts. He'd believed that man had walked on the moon. He'd believed in the beneficial healing results of positive thinking and mind over matter. He *hadn't* believed in God in a long time, though he had been assured throughout his twenty-four years, by an assortment of well-meaning, holy sanctified aunts and relations that *He* believed in Kelly Butler. In fact, by the end of his life, the Christianity that his Moms and Pops had shoved down his and his six older brothers' throats had long since lost its appeal to Kelly. By the time he'd reached his late teens he had already begun to look for another system in which he could apply his beliefs. Consequently, he'd begun to question his consumption with the idea of the almighty green instead of the idea of an Almighty. He had believed in money more than he'd believed in his moms and his brothers, more than he'd believed in Amire, more than he'd believed in kingdom come.

He'd believed in money for the way it made people stand up, deliver and respect when he'd produce more than enough. He'd believed in money for the powerful way having it made him feel. He'd believed in money for the things it could buy his loved ones. He'd believed in money for the things it could get him.

Money could get Kelly the latest fashionable rags instead of hand-me-downs that had clothed six sets of limbs before his own. To Kelly, the things that money couldn't buy were, hell, obviously things that weren't worth having anyway. Word.

By the time he'd learned the truth and had come to the glaring conclusion that money was the root of all evil - as his parents and everyone else without an abundance of it had always tried to make him believe - and not the root of getting Kelly everything he wanted, it had been too late.

And now there was nothing. No green. No fancy clothes and kicks. No beepers. No fly wheels. No foxy freaks hanging onto his every word. No God. No Satan. No family. No Amire.

Just nothingness. Just all bullshit.

*"It's time, Kelly. You have to go back now."*

Kelly frowned. Or did he? He wondered if a frown was a frown when you were floating around in nowhere. If a tree fell in the forest where there was no one around to hear it, did it make a sound?

He wanted to speak to the gatekeeper, the manager, whoever the hell was in charge and tell them they had made a mistake. He wasn't supposed to be here.

*"That's why you must go back. You have a job to do."*

He felt the Pull again. No pleasure, no pain. Just pressure to move. A force pulling. Evil? Good? Heaven? Hell? What was the destination, Major Tom?

*"You'll know what to do when you get back. We have every faith in you, Kelly. Every faith."*

What did They want from him now? What was he supposed to do? Use his gifts differently? Not use them at all? Would he even have any?

*I wanna go home. Please don't take me. I wanna go home.*

*“You’re on your way now.”*

## CHAPTER 1

*Spring 1997*

*New York Downtown Hospital*

Something was sitting on his chest like a nightmare. Sitting and watching. He'd had the sensations in the past, had smelled the musty smells, heard the shuffling sounds of evil spirits, experienced suffocation and the levitation. Another time, in another hospital where he'd been recuperating after having been struck down by a car. Two broken legs. Months in casts that had seemed like a thousand pounds weighing down his skinny, seven-year-old limbs.

One morning, he awoke and found himself, in his cast, stretched across a chair on the opposite side of the room. When a nurse had come in to check on him a little later, and had demanded to know how in the world he'd gotten out of his bed by himself, he'd answered with the truth: "I floated."

He'd later repeated this tale to several visiting well-wishers and relatives, only to be met with chastising stares from the adults and teasing jeers and cuffs upside the head from his older brothers. And from then on he'd vowed never to again share any information concerning weird goings-on with or around his person. He'd decided it was better to hold his cards close to his chest rather than be ridiculed about gifts over which he had no control and for which he hadn't asked.

Kelly woke now sputtering like a drowning man breaking the surface one last time before his final submersion. He jerked his eyes open, saw the white-clad man standing at the foot of his bed, glancing over a chart, humming. He turned his head a little to the left, then back to the right, to take in his locale. The sight and feel of sterile partitions and crisp, sanitized sheets greeted him. Half the room was surrounded by wired glass, the other half by institutional-green walls. A hospital room. Not heaven. And if this was so, he assumed the man with the clipboard was a nurse or a doctor. An angel of mercy. Not an angel period.

True dat. He was back on earth. He was home.

"Ah, you're awake."

The doctor had hooked the clipboard to the foot of his bed, was now standing at his side, reaching for a wrist.

"You had us worried. We thought you'd decided to check out without paying your bill."

Kelly's lips curved up automatically. A white boy with a warped sense of humor. Just what he needed. He cleared his throat to speak, but his tongue felt alien in his mouth.

"Don't try to talk just yet."

Kelly lay still and endured the exam. It was quick but thorough. Pulse, blood pressure, heartbeat, penlight in his eyes, circling his pupils. Deep breath. Breathe. Breathe.

The doctor lowered his stethoscope from his ears to rest around his neck and proffered a hand. "I'm Dr. Gibson. You've been unconscious for quite a while."

Kelly shook his hand, tried to sit up but the doctor gently stayed him with a palm, caressed his shoulder as he gave him a tender look. Made Kelly uncomfortable to the tenth power.

“Not so fast. You’ve got plenty of time to catch up, honey.”

“Where...” Kelly cleared his throat, tried again. “Where...”

“You’re in New York Downtown.”

“No.” Kelly shook his head. “Where...Is Amire Reynolds here?”

“Amear Reynolds? No. Can’t say that he-”

“She.”

“No. There’s definitely no Amear Rey-”

“What about my moms?”

Dr. Gibson nodded and smiled. “Your husband and your parents are here. Been here for a couple of weeks off and on, waiting for you to come out of your coma.”

*Husband? Parents? Coma?*

“Yo, hol’ up. There’s some mistake.”

“No mistake, honey.”

Kelly wished this ofay motherfucker would stop calling him “honey.” He didn’t know whether to be insulted or honored. He guessed it was better than “boy” or “sonny” or, worst of all, “nigger.” But on top of the condescending tone, the guy kept staring at him with these big cow eyes, like he was looking at one of them anorexic supermodel bitches homeboys craved to bone. It was seriously giving Kelly the creeps. ‘Cause yo, he wasn’t living like *that*. He wasn’t playing no jungle fever and he definitely wasn’t swinging with no dude.

Something was wrong. Definitely wrong. Definitely different. And something was definitely missing.

“Can I have a mirror?”

Dr. Gibson raised an eyebrow at the sudden request, but went to a bedside drawer and withdrew a white hand-held mirror.

“Want to make sure all the hairs are in place before your audience. I understand.” He winked as he handed Kelly the mirror and smiled.

Ha-ha, very funny, Kelly thought. Frigging weird-ass sense of humor, considering Kelly had almost no ha -

He took one look at his reflection in the mirror and goggled.

*What the fuck!*

This wasn’t happening. This wasn’t happening. They’d made a mistake. Somebody had made a big mistake.

“Are you all right?”

“Y - no...”

“You’re not going to pass out on us again, are you?” Dr. Gibson placed a palm on his shoulder and gently squeezed.

Kelly shook his head. But it wasn’t his head anymore. Nothing was his anymore. Nothing was him. He was gone.

“Mrs. Diaz? Come on now. Don’t leave us again.”

He vaguely heard the mirror when it crashed to the floor and Dr. Gibson as he called for a nurse and an orderly.

There is a hell, Kelly thought right before he passed out.

And he was in it.

It had been a dream. It had to have been a dream.

Kelly lifted his left arm. It was weightless and free. The I.V. must have been in the right one, he reasoned, surprised at how calm and clear-headed he now was, considering how bad a shock he'd earlier been dealt.

He touched his face, felt the unprecedented smoothness and dimensions of high cheekbones, tiny button nose in the middle of his face, almond-shaped eyes. His fingers traveled back down over hollow cheeks to soft Cupid's bow lips.

Smaller. Everything. Well-formed and symmetrical, maybe even pretty - if his memory of the strange woman's face served him right - just small. And different.

Kelly slid his hand down further to an unadorned, swanlike neck. Nothing. No crystal, no lamen, no Star of David. Not any kind of talisman or amulet or piece of jewelry for which he'd have given up his left nut rather than have left home without.

He felt naked. Naked and vulnerable and he wanted this game to end but knew he would keep playing along just to see where this all was heading. He had no choice.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and raised his left hand before his face. He braced himself before he finally opened his eyes, dreading what he'd see, dreading the sight of long slender fingers. He turned the hand this way and that. Examined the porcelain fineness of creamy-white skin. Stared at the network of blue-green veins working their way through the back of his hand, studied the limb as if his very life depended on his knowledge of its complexion.

God. It wasn't a dream.

What had They done to him?

Kelly lowered his hand to his chest, palmed supple mounds in turn, acquainting himself with the alien equipment. He slid his hand down further, glancing over new curves, caressing soft tender skin until his hand finally landed on his center. He almost screamed when he discovered how complete the metamorphosis had been.

Everything he'd been - everything he'd recognized and understood himself to be - all of it had been replaced. Everything new. He had yet to see if everything had also been improved. His instincts told him no. No way was this current berth an improvement.

A picture of a woman's face - his new face - flashed before his mind's eye: long wavy honey-blonde hair framing delicate wane features and blue-gray eyes.

Kelly's hand instinctively went back to his groin and he silently groaned, seething at the injustice.

What the hell had been on Their minds? Were They punishing him? Was this his hell for what he'd done to Amire? It sure felt like it. Because if They'd wanted to punish him, let's face it, this here trick was a damn good start.

Kelly cradled his sex - what there was left of it - tried to reconcile himself to his new situation. He couldn't. Didn't want to. At least not now. Maybe not ever. It was too much. Just...way...too *much*.

He closed his eyes tight, overwhelmed by his loss, too tired to deal.

Kelly didn't know if it was the voices from the screen or the three real life ones in the room that had woke him. It didn't matter which 'cause he was frigging up now, whether he wanted to be or not.

He opened his eyes and raised them to glance at the TV screen across the room, gaped when he saw a picture of his face - his old face - flash across the screen. A file photo. And then a live-action shot of his mother and Nevery leaving a funeral home behind six of his uncles - his father's older brothers - bearing a coffin on their shoulders. His moms was leaning against Nev, her wet face buried in his chest as he supported her small frame.

*No.*

Amire and Ben followed Kelly's three remaining brothers and several aunts and cousins as they marched past the news cameras, all grim-faced and teary-eyed.

The studio anchor's voice filled the air.

"There are no leads in the case at this time. The police however do believe the shooting at the campus was either drug- or gang-related..."

*Drug- or gang-related.* How nice and easy for the police. Too damn lazy or busy to look for his murderers so they'd just tagged the case with the convenient drug-or-gang-related label. Later they'd probably put it in a dead, "unsolved crime" file.

He hadn't been in anybody's damn gang. He hadn't been no Blood or Crip. In fact, he'd rolled alone on the streets, just as he had when he'd practiced Wicca. He'd preferred being solitary, had wanted to protect his privacy.

Okay, so he'd sold weed, even some crack. Big deal. What homeboy nowadays didn't? Not too many that Kelly knew.

"Next up, a woman dies in Cedars Sinai Medical Center in L.A. The victim of vanity or malpractice?"

From murder in the hood to some rich fat white bitch dying under the vacuum of liposuction in Beverly Hills. What was the world coming to?

*"No."*

He hadn't meant to say it. It had slipped out. A lone denial croaked out when a picture of the funeral home flashed through his memory.

He was dead. He was really history.

Kelly closed his eyes tight, mumbled "No" again.

"See? I told you to cut that thing off. It's only upsetting her."

"I just wanted to catch the stock reports."

"That's just like you. Our daughter is lying here, practically at death's door-"

"Don't be so melodramatic, Angela."

She continued as if he hadn't spoken. "And all you can think about is your money."

"Our money, dear."

"Dagny could die any minute, Curtis."

"She's come through the worst. She's out of the coma."

"Hmph."

"Besides, it's good to go about business as usual. Keep up a steady flow of conversation and outside stimuli."

"Oh, where did you hear that rubbish!"

"The same place you did. If you'd bothered to listen."

"*Positive* stimuli. I was listening. That's how much you know. And there is nothing remotely positive or life-affirming about Eyewitness News."

Kelly opened his eyes in time to see some young Latin - a soap-opera-hunk-looking motherfucker - lean forward from his bedside chair and reach across Kelly to punch off the remote.

"There. Are you happy now? It's off. I wish I could do the same thing to both of you."

Homeboy's accentless bass didn't go with his Latin looks, Kelly thought. Was this *Mr. Diaz*?

"There's no need to get snippy, young man."

The Latin guy rolled his eyes at the older woman - Angela - and sat back in the puke-green vinyl chair. He reached for Kelly's right hand and held it in both of his.

"Dagny? How're you feeling?"

*Dagny?*

"Let her sleep. She's obviously not ready to wake up yet."

"She's slept enough."

Kelly vaguely realized they were talking about him. She. Not he. "He" was a "she" now.

God, how was he supposed to get used to this?

"Are you her doctor now, Tyler?"

The Latin guy ignored the question, stared over at Kelly and squeezed his hand. "I'm her husband. Besides, the doctor said she's out of the coma. As *your* husband just pointed out."

Boy, there was some serious animosity flowing from this bunch, Kelly told himself.

"Let her sleep," Angela said and came to the head of the bed across from Tyler.

The older guy, Curtis, remained standing at the foot of the bed, still staring up at the black TV screen. "Angela's right. Just because she's out of the coma doesn't mean she's ready to wake up. After all, a coma's not exactly a restful sleep."

"If it were up to you two, she'd sleep the rest of her life away. And I bet you would like nothing better."

"I'd like to know who died and made you king, young man," Curtis said.

"Please...will you just please...stop it..." Kelly's head pounded. Too many unfamiliar voices coming at him all at once. Talking about him as if he wasn't in the room.

"Both of you just need to shut up and step off."

Now *that* was a brother's accent, Kelly thought, if he'd ever heard one. Curious, he peeked up at Tyler from hooded lids, not quite sure of what he was looking for.

"You see, Angela. I've always said, you can take the man out of the ghetto but-"

"Don't finish that, Curtis," Tyler warned.

"There is no place for that tone or the street attitude in this room." Angela stepped to her husband's defense.

"*Ay Dios mio...*for the love of God..." Tyler sighed and ran a hand over his face as if ready to throw in the towel on these two, but Angela wasn't finished.

"She doesn't need the tough narc routine. I'm sure she's had enough of that from you to last her a lifetime."



Who were these people? Kelly wondered. Did he really belong with them? The pasty-faced couple and the Latin lover-boy here? What was their connection to his death? Was there one? What was he supposed to do from here?

"Dag? It's all right to open your eyes." Tyler glared across at Angela and then Curtis at the foot of the bed.

"Where...who..." Squeaks. His voice wasn't his anymore either. Had that faggoty sound just come out of *him*?

"Don't talk if it hurts you." Tyler put a hand on Kelly's shoulder the way Dr. Gibson had earlier.

This tenderness-for-the-delicate-and-sickly-flower routine was getting tired. Kelly was certain he could have taken Dr. Gibson, pasty-face Curtis and the Latin shorty-rock all at once. Had he been in his old body, that is. 'Cause, he had to face it, he wasn't. He was in this fragile white woman's alien body and it was damn frustrating. He didn't know how strong it was, how healthy, how athletic, how capable.

What was her history with the Latin homeboy? From his memory of her reflection in the mirror, the Dagny bitch did not look like Tyler-boy's type. She seemed WASPy, like she came from the upper crust. And Tyler looked straight-up street. Had Angela mentioned something about his being a cop?

"This is just ridiculous. It's plain to see what she needs more than anything in the world is to be home. With her family," Angela emphasized.

"*I'm* her family."

"We're her parents." Angela went to her husband's side where they both stood staring down at Kelly and Tyler.

"I'm her husband," Tyler repeated and glared at Kelly.

Was he mad at this Dagny chick or Dagny's parents? The look he gave Kelly made it hard to tell which. He had to give the boy his props though, for being able to stand up to the Dagny girl's parents. No easy feat. He must have had a lot of practice.

"So, how about it, Dag? You wanna go home with me? Or them?"

"What kind of question is that to put to her now?" Curtis sputtered and Angela put in her two cents.

"How can you make such a demand? It's not fair of you to fling something so heavy at her."

"No less fair than the underhanded stuff you've pulled to keep her under your thumb. Besides, you brought it up, Angela."

"Hmph!"

Kelly grinned at the well-I-never look on Angela's face, had to stop himself from laughing out loud.

So, what now? Was he supposed to choose? Would that make everything go back to the way it had been? Would it get him back home to his real family? If he made the wrong choice, then what?

The decision was his to make, he realized. And he didn't want to make the wrong one.

No way was he going home with The Whiners. Even if they were supposed to be this Dagny chick's parents, he didn't like them and he sensed they didn't like Dagny very much either. Maybe they loved her. But they did not like her. Probably even resented her.

The Latin on the other hand was, so far, a total enigma that Kelly needed to figure out. Besides, Kelly felt comfortable with his aura. At least the dude did have some color to him. This Kelly could get with. Not that he got down like that. Helllll no!

It wasn't like he had much of a choice. He couldn't very well go back home to the hood looking like this. He certainly couldn't go back to Amire. Damn. Amire. His girl.

"Well? What's it going to be, Dagny? Your father and I or the Neanderthal?"

Tyler glared at Angela.

And Kelly looked at their three expectant faces in turn - the Pasty Faces and Ms. Dagny's Latin lover-boy. He realized that they were all waiting on him.

"I..." He cleared his throat. This new voice was going to take some getting used to. It sounded...sexy. Hoarse from disuse but sensual and at least three octaves higher than his remembered bass-tenor. "I'll go with Tyler."

Homeboy didn't even flinch or crack a smile. Kelly wondered if he was pleased or disappointed with the final verdict. Had he only thrown down the gauntlet out of a sense of duty? Or did he want Dagny to come home because he had nothing but love for the honey?

"Dagny, don't you realize you're making the same mistake you made years ago? There's no need for you to continue rebelling like this. There's no need - "

Kelly watched Angela choke back a sob before she continued, trembling-lipped and tearful. "No need for you to continue punishing us. Have we been awful enough parents to deserve this, Dagny?"

Hell if Kelly knew. But he did know he couldn't take any more of the woman's tears. It made him think of his own moms crying at his funeral. His brothers. Amire....It hurt too much to think about the ones he'd left behind. The pain was so overwhelming, Kelly felt as if his heart had imploded inside his chest again.

He turned away from Dagny's mother and Tyler stepped in, saved him from answering.

"She's coming with her husband. Where she belongs."

Did he? Belong? Anywhere anymore?

Kelly wondered and hoped he had made the right decision.

L uring Jesse  
Sylvie K aye

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any person or persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Luring Jesse

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# Chapter One

So the mountain had come to Mohammed.

Lynda Mason a.k.a. Talbot knew the exact moment Jesse Talbot entered the foyer of the penthouse apartment. The hairs on her forearms stood at attention. They would've saluted, too, if she hadn't run her hands over her arms.

Markie Elliot, society maven and notorious gossip, zeroed in on him as well. She arched one finely plucked eyebrow and cleared her throat. "Hubby's here...down from the Black Hills." With a swish of her purple-highlighted dark mane, she gestured toward the marble entranceway.

Markie's nasal grate and her heavily sprayed, wine-colored tresses hit Lynda at about the same time.

"So he is." Lynda spat the words out along with a strand of Markie's metallic tasting hair. A quick gulp of Perrier water washed away the tinny flavor. On an impulse, she clinked her teeth to the fluted glass in a private victory toast.

*To us, Jesse Talbot...to our inhaling and exhaling the same air at last.*

Markie elbowed Lynda. "Jesse looks very GQ, despite the boots."

"Thanks," Lynda murmured. Through heavy-lidded lashes, she glimpsed black slacks, black shirt, and a charcoal-gray sport coat. She glanced at his feet and smiled. He had on flat-heeled, lace-up black ropers and not some fancy-tooled, pointed-toed, high-heeled cowboy boots.

She watched him work the room, or should she say the room work him - hand shaking, shoulder clapping, everyone pandered to Jesse. And the "King of the Mountain" accepted it as his due, only sidestepping Cleo.

"Poor Cleo." Lynda shook her head.

"You mean Jesse's snub?" Markie rolled her eyes. "She brings it on herself. If Cleo has one failing, besides marrying too readily, it's wanting to get one over on her cousin Jesse."

Lynda nodded reluctantly. Cleo hadn't brought it on herself this time though. However willing, she'd been innocent of Lynda's plan. A couple of parties, a few well-chosen words, and Cleo had scampered off to launch an all-out Jesse attack. A successful attack, too, from the looks of it. She'd gotten the reclusive rancher to venture down off his mountain.

Lynda watched as the banker pointed Jesse in her direction, watched as her adversary closed in. Over six feet of stalking manpower headed her way.

What a shame. At five feet ten, with an added two inches for high heels, Lynda couldn't help but notice that Jesse Talbot was the only man at the party she could look up to.

And *what* a look. He redefined handsome with his determined jaw, prominent nose, and

great bone structure. He had great hair, too. His sun-streaked brown locks were a bit on the longish side, due no doubt to a barber shortage up there in God's country.

She guessed the newspaper photos she'd studied had been out of focus.

Handsome didn't change a thing. Mr. Talbot was the opposition, or would be as soon as she confronted him. No, Jesse wasn't going to like his imposter bride nor her recent inheritance from her Aunt Fanny that laid claim to a section of his mountain - not one bit.

"Absence doesn't seem to make his heart grow fonder," Markie said in a nasal undertone.

"No...no rush to arms." Lynda gritted a gleaming smile at the gossipy woman. "Too provincial."

"You seem to think you've got him where you want him." Markie patted Lynda's hand with a patronizing tap. "Never rely on a man's heart. That's why, unlike Cleo with her multiple marriages, I indulge in very long, very intense relationships that don't end at the altar...or in divorce."

"Never fear. It's not Jesse Talbot's heart I'm after."

"Better fear," the woman clucked her tongue, "until you know what Jesse's after."

With a crook of her finger, Lynda pawned both her empty glass and Markie off on Edward Ferdy. The banker usually hovered somewhere within elbow distance of the purple-haired socialite.

"Markie, darling," the eager banker gushed and kissed her cheek. "I've been meaning to talk to you about the stock options offered by the bank."

Lynda suspected Edward had the hots for the sleek lines of Markie's portfolio more than for her svelte figure.

While Edward fawned over his lucky break, Lynda strayed away to the floor-to-ceiling window. She stared out at the black, black night and the glittering skyline of the South Dakota metropolis.

She needed a moment to herself. She couldn't believe she'd gone to such lengths to capture the rancher's attention and to lure him down off his mountain. Pretending to be his wife of all things. But there seemed to be no other way to fulfill the terms of Aunt Fanny's will in the time allotted. The funeral had taken place three weeks ago and Lynda's deadline was closing in. She had only one week left to stake a claim to a section of Talbot Mountain and then sell it back to Jesse Talbot.

Weeks had dwindled away while the letters her uncles, Skeers and Skeers the realty lawyers, had sent to Jesse went unanswered. They were supposed to inform him of the inheritance. More than likely they'd gone unopened. The Skeers' Uncles had been sending proposals for subdivision of Talbot Mountain since well before Jesse's Uncle James had died. Offers the Talbots either rejected or ignored.

But this was different. This was personal. This had nothing to do with subdivision. This had to do with Aunt Fanny Skeers, her last will and testament, and a timeline that was running out. Lynda had merely a week left to persuade the rancher to buy or else.

Or else what? She really didn't know. She guessed the codicil to the will would reveal that when it was read next week. Although Lynda surmised the money from Talbot's buyout

would go toward her aunt's favorite charities, she wasn't positive what she was supposed to do with the money or what she was supposed to do about Jesse if he didn't buy her out.

All too soon her moment alone ended, interrupted by Jesse's image reflected back at her in the glass. Sombre-faced, wide-shouldered, narrow-hipped, he ambled slowly, but methodically, toward her.

He looked as impregnable as his ranch up on the mountain. She'd tried to get by the ranch's barbed wire fences and the locked main gate to see him. No sooner had she mentioned the Skeers name than the ranch hands chased her off like some hungry wolf. But, with Cleo's unwitting help, Lynda had gotten Jesse to come to her. So maybe he was not the formidable opponent everyone claimed him to be. Maybe Jesse Talbot would concede easily.

Right. And maybe he'd roll over and let her tickle his tummy, too.

Time out for a reality check. Don't underestimate the opponent.

As steely gray eyes closed in on her, Lynda pivoted and faced Jesse. He had unusual eyes: storm cloud gray with a flicker of lightning. Her heart fluttered in anticipation of their awaited meeting, then stopped mid-beat as he got within shave-lotion-sniffing distance.

He smelled good. She smiled at the wayward thought. That was a distraction she couldn't afford. She snapped her mind back to the matter at hand. Somehow she had to get Talbot to own up. Quietly.

"Jess-e-e-e." Cleo's screech of vowels seemed to break the sound barrier. "Wait up." Snatches of emerald suede and auburn tresses followed on his boot heels. Evidently Cleo had no intention of missing out on what she hoped was a knock-the-chip-from-Jesse's-shoulder greeting by his neglected new bride.

She was in for a disappointment. Lynda had no interest in publicly airing their differences - and from what she'd read and heard about Jesse's tight-fisted control of the Talbot holdings, they'd have differences.

Lynda's nerves twanged like guitar strings. She was about to rock the unsuspecting Talbot's world.

When he halted within a foot of her, Cleo collided with his back. He didn't even flinch. His face looked like granite: strong, unmoving, craggy.

Cleo's looked triumphant: glowing, grinning, sort of like a jack-o-lantern.

Lynda tried to keep her own face passive. She stood her ground.

Flashes of a cowboy in a long linen duster on a dirty cow town street played through her mind. Jesse's legs were braced with his feet apart and his hands on his hips. His stance said, *Hit me with your best shot.*

Lynda took aim. She pecked a wifely kiss to his cheek. Oh, but didn't he smell good enough to eat.

She swallowed back that thought in a hurry. Brushing her thumb lightly to his jaw, in a pleasant wifey gesture, she flicked at the lipstick smudge. His skin felt warm and surprisingly soft.

"Good evening, husband."

He rested his hands on her waist, but held her firm, making it clear that escape was

impossible. Of course, he had no way of knowing that he was in her clutches and not vice versa.

His steady grasp caused her some worry. Forget El Niño and its warming trend. The man created his own phenomenon. Her heated body felt as if it had just emerged from a relaxing hot tub. This was not good.

Those gray eyes weren't making it easy, either. She blinked as her warm gluey brain cells translated his hypnotic message.

*Nice shot. But if you throw down your gun it can get even nicer.*

Well, Mr. Sex Appeal had better forget about that. She was immune. Or she would be as soon as she rolled her lolling tongue back into her mouth.

"Hello, wife."

Her eyes dropped to his mouth. What a voice. Deep. Low. Husky. What a mouth. That mouth performing "nice" on hers flashed a mildly erotic image through her mind. She shook the idea right out of her head, fast.

Underrating Jesse Talbot could be hazardous to one's health. He was a walking, talking, shoot-from-the-hip menace, but with "curb appeal" as they liked to say down at the real estate office.

And why was he smiling? She didn't like the look of that smile.

Didn't much matter, because in the next instant with a sweep that would make any movie director proud, Jesse bent her backward over his arm and planted a lusty kiss to her lips.

Only one thought penetrated that steamy kiss. He tasted every bit as good as he smelled. Better than good. He tasted like *more*.

Too bad.

She hadn't met a man in a long time that tasted like more. Why did it have to be Jesse?

When his hold tightened, she figured he'd end the kiss and restore her to her former posture. Instead, he deepened the kiss. His lips were hot, firm, pliant. Jesse had very talented lips.

She sighed. Being held in his strong arms and leaning against his hard body tottered her equilibrium. While she teetered on the brink of dropping her six-gun, her balance restored. Not on its own, though. Or his.

Cleo's singsong voice jolted things along. "Jesse," she chanted, "I see you brought your mountain manners with you."

On that off-key note Jesse jerked upright, and Lynda with him. As the gun smoke cleared, Lynda was able to see and think again.

Well, almost. Cleo looked a bit blurry. And Lynda's brain waves trickled instead of flowed.

Soon the cause became apparent. Jesse's palm cupped Lynda's butt. She yanked his hand up to her waist. There, now her thoughts streamed crystal and clear. Cleo's image even became sharper.

Cleo was propped in front of Jesse with her regal jaw jutted out. "I still haven't forgiven you for not inviting me to the wedding."

"Not now, Cleo," he hissed through a forced smile. "We're starting in on our belated



honeymoon.”

*Honeymoon.* Lynda beamed up at her groom with cow eyes, while she subtly pinched the skin on his wrist, firmly. He flinched. Good. At least the man wasn't terminal.

While his kiss had thrown her motor into overdrive - with a loud knocking that sounded like either her heart pounding or her bones rattling - his never revved beyond an idle. She had begun to think the man was fossilized.

A murmur rippled through the room bringing her attention back to the party at large. Eyes peeped from behind cocktail glasses, linen napkins, potted fronds, over shoulders, around elbows, beneath fringed bangs. Ears perked, straining in their direction. The last thing Lynda wanted were the eyes and ears of the city's who's-who watching her and Jesse's alleged reunion.

Jesse didn't seem to mind though.

“Newlyweds,” he announced with a grin and winked at the crowd.

Jovial laughter broke out.

Lynda's fidgety fingers smoothed down the skirt of her basic black dress, then fumbled with the Mikimoto pearls nestled at her throat. The necklace had been part of her inheritance from Aunt Fanny. Tonight she'd worn the pearls for luck.

Flicking her tongue along her bottom lip, she glanced sidelong at Cleo for help.

“Don't let him have his way,” Cleo gushed almost on cue. “He'll drag you off to that mountain. You'll be eating beef daily and wearing never-been prewashed jeans.”

“Cleo, that attitude of yours is why your daddy entrusted me with the mountain, ranch and businesses.” Jesse raised his brow. “And with you.” Then he hugged Lynda to him. “Besides, Lyn loves denim and cows. Isn't that right, hun?”

Lyn? Nobody called her Lyn. Especially her soon-to-be opponent. And hun? Her vertebrae locked, throwing her shoulders back and her chin up. Her blood pressure elevated, flaming her cheeks to what she guessed was a splotchy red.

She hoped her guests didn't misinterpret her fluster as a sign of a gushy, blushy bride. Her strategy called for this bride to be cool and indifferent. The man was messing with her cool.

Lynda stared up at him. His hand had drifted higher, to her midriff. His thumb was making circular movements beneath the cup of her Wonder bra. The mesmerizing strokes were zinging glowing promises to her womanhood. He was grinning. He was enjoying himself.

This definitely wasn't part of the plan.