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CAST A  
*Lover's*  
SPELL

CLAIRE  
THOMPSON

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Cast a Lover's Spell

ISBN 9781419909818

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Edited by Mary Moran.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication June 2007

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# ***CAST A LOVER'S SPELL***

**Claire Thompson**

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## Chapter One

Stout-bodied pigeons strutted on the flat stones of the square, bobbing their heads as they greedily pecked at bits of stale bread. Paul Windsor moved slowly past the young woman, noting the downward cast of her head, the dark brown hair shiny but unkempt, falling in unruly curls around her shoulders. She held a bag of old bread from which she was crumbling pieces, throwing them out to the cooing birds gathering at her feet.

*What's the point? Why do I bother? It's so hard to care.* Paul paused, appearing to examine a flower as he turned his body slightly away from her. *God, Greg, why did you have to die? Why did you leave me here all alone? Now I'm not only alone, I'm unemployed. Bennett was right—I don't have what it takes anymore.* The woman sighed aloud as she dispiritedly tossed more bits of bread to the clamoring birds. Paul felt the heaviness in her mind like a damp fog settled over her spirit.

He sat next to the young woman. He was intrigued by her thoughts, upon which he had eavesdropped more out of habit than a desire to know her secrets. He cocked his head very slightly toward her as he listened to her unspoken words. He couldn't help the tiny smile that tugged at his lips as he continued to eavesdrop. *Shit. Why'd he have to sit next to me? Now he'll make stupid small talk and expect me to smile and give a damn. I wish I could just evaporate.* The woman stole a sidelong glance at Paul. *Don't talk to me, you jerk! I swear to God, if you try to hit on me, I'll deck you.*

She turned her body sharply away from Paul, who was used to women turning their bodies toward him. He sent a mild receptivity spell in the young woman's direction, a magical suggestion that made her turn slowly back toward him, her head lifting to meet his eyes.

Paul had been expecting the reaction mortal women usually gave him—the dilating pupils and the little gasp of pleased surprise as they fell under the spell of his dark smoldering stare. Paul Windsor was devastatingly handsome with a broad high brow, Roman nose, firm square jaw and full, sensuous lips. But it was his eyes that caught the heart and slipped into the fevered dreams of the women he chose.

Dark and wide, the color something between brown and black, fathomless, mesmerizing, dangerous—Paul's eyes could captivate any mortal he chose to seduce. For Paul Windsor was no ordinary man. Paul Windsor was a warlock—one of the most powerful warlocks in the secret magic circles that permeated mortal society.

Unlike mere mortals, witches and warlocks enjoyed greatly extended life—spanning centuries rather than decades, impervious to mortal illness and disease. The more skillful and practiced in magic lore one became, the longer the lifespan. The most seasoned witches and warlocks could live close to a thousand years. Though the body

aged, the process was dramatically slowed. Warlocks and witches changed their guise at will, usually adopting a shape most admired during a particular era.

Paul found no need to shift and change, preferring to keep his natural looks—the olive-toned supple skin, the even-featured classic face, the broad shoulders, strongly muscled torso and long lean legs never out of fashion. If he maintained a youthful look that belied his several hundred years on this earthly plane, who could blame him? The women he chose to amuse himself with seemed to prefer a man in his mid-thirties and this was the age he projected. He wasn't especially vain, but he was practical.

As the woman raised her head, Paul waited for the predicted reaction, ready to bestow his slow, easy smile upon her. Instead it was he who gave the slightest involuntary gasp, a small intake of breath as he beheld the loveliest mortal he had ever seen. Her eyes were huge, almost too big for her face. They were luminous, the color of the sea, clear as glass. Her face was delicate, almost childlike, with rounded cheeks and a pointed chin. The mass of tangled curls tumbling to her shoulders added to the impression of youth. Her mouth however, with its full red lips was sensuously lush, bringing to Paul's mind a ripe, soft peach. He resisted a sudden impulse to bite her lips, to lick them, to possess that feminine, erotic mouth.

Along with the beauty however, was pain, stark in those clear green eyes. An aura of loss seemed to hover over her. Paul released his magical hold on her, hoping she would continue to look at him, searching for the spark of desire he was so used to seeing. For a moment, just a moment, when returned to her own free will, the woman did look at him, desire clear in her eyes. Yet the moment passed as she turned away, scattering the last of her crumbs to the birds.

She stood, her face again averted, her thoughts a tangle of whispered longing and sadness. Through the tumult he detected a response—despite herself, the young woman had been attracted to the stranger next to her. He'd felt the flash of attraction zip through her mind before it was again overtaken by her self-absorbed misery.

Paul watched as she strode away, an enigma in jeans and a man's oversized shirt. He felt a curious sense of loss as she walked away. It made no sense. She was nothing to him. A total stranger. Yet in the brief moment their eyes had locked, she had entered his being, whispering her need, arousing his desire.

He waited a moment before rising to follow her — this one would not get away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anne Kaliner let her late husband's shirt fall from her shoulders as she moved toward her bathroom. Her shoulders were in knots and her head was throbbing. She took off her jeans and pulled down her panties, kicking them away into a pile of dirty clothes heaped in a corner of the bathroom. She ran her fingers through her tangled curls and sighed.

This had not been a good week for Anne. It had not been a good year. She had watched helplessly as her husband of three years died from pancreatic cancer despite

painful and invasive chemotherapy. Only thirty-eight, he had been diagnosed too late. In the course of a few months he had changed from an energetic joyful person to a withered, beaten shell of a man—emaciated, jaundiced, the spark gone from his eyes. When he had died after slipping into a coma, a part of her had died with him.

Anne, widowed at thirty-two, had been a successful investment banker, tagged at her New York firm as an up-and-coming go-getter. She and Greg had met at the firm, falling in love over commodity trades and equity investing. They had been happy to spend sixty hours a week at work, assuming they had all the time in the world together. Who could have predicted a mutating cell could wreak such havoc on a strong young man in the prime of his life?

Unable to reconcile his senseless death, Anne focused on something concrete to be angry about. She became bitter toward the firm, resentful of the expectations placed on the young bankers to devote their lives to the business. Forgetting she herself had been more than willing to put in the time necessary to earn the ridiculously high salaries she and Greg pulled down, she now felt the company had robbed her of the precious little time she had had with her husband.

Her work had suffered, even after the two-month hiatus they had allowed her to take as she struggled to continue a life without Greg in it. She couldn't seem to focus anymore, indifferent to capital markets and innovative fund-raising techniques, her heart and mind lost in a past she could never retrieve. Her bosses had at first been understanding, but after six months their patience had worn thin and she had been warned to adjust her attitude.

When Bob Bennett, her immediate boss, had summoned her last Friday to his office, she'd known from his face the news wasn't good. After hemming and hawing a while about the grieving process and how they were all "in her corner", he finally got down to the reason he had called her in.

"Anne, we've tried to work with you but you just aren't putting together the deals necessary to sustain your salary. I've tried to cover for you but you don't seem to have your heart in the game anymore. You know what it takes to make it in this business. You have to be willing to kick ass, to give it your all. I just don't see it anymore, Anne. Since Greg—well, you know, since all that—you've lost your drive. You've lost that killer instinct necessary to compete with the big boys."

Had he expected her to protest? To beg for another chance? To promise to buckle down and "give it her all"? If so, he was disappointed, because Anne just looked at him, unable at that moment to feel even anger as she realized the last six years she'd devoted to the firm had come to nothing in the space of a few months. He was right—she'd lost her drive. She felt numb. She couldn't get excited about money and schemes when the one man she'd ever loved had been torn from her arms, ripped from her heart...

"Jesus," she said aloud as she turned on the hot water in the tub. "You sound like something out of a soap opera. Get a grip, Kaliner." Speaking of soap operas—the image of the stranger on the bench at the park floated back to her. Where Greg's looks had been open and sunny, blond and puppy-young, the stranger had a dark almost

dangerous edge. He was naturally tan with thick dark hair curling in a sexy way over his ears and down a strong, masculine neck. He was the kind of man she thought of as too handsome for his own good. He probably considered himself God's gift to women and was used to having his choice of young hotties.

Despite herself, his image remained her mind. What had made her look up at him? She'd been determined not to look, not to give him an opening for stupid small talk. Yet something had compelled her to raise her head, to seek his eyes with her own. Was it his scent? She recalled it now vividly – something warm and spicy, almost intoxicating without being overpowering or cloying in the slightest.

What had gotten into her? Anne Kaliner did not moon over strange men! Since Greg had gotten sick, she'd barely socialized at all, never dated and certainly didn't fantasize about strangers. Yet this man...what was it about him? Was she wrong to have walked away? To have run from the unfamiliar pull of desire? No, surely she had done the right thing.

He was probably shallow and vain, obsessed with himself, using women as objects to satisfy his own self-love. Yes, she told herself, his smooth good looks with those delicious dark eyes and the hint of passion in the half smile he'd deigned to bestow upon her probably hid the vacuous, empty mind of a conceited oaf.

Anne added scented oil to the now steaming water filling the old-fashioned lion-clawed tub. She and Greg had spent many lovely evenings soaking together after a long day at the office before moving to the bedroom for a night of sex and cuddling.

Anne lit several fat scented candles she'd placed on the low shelf next to the tub. She sighed with pleasure as the hot water enveloped her body. As she soaked, she moved her hands idly over her body, enjoying the silky feel of the hot fragrant water gliding over her flesh.

Despite still being in mourning, lately Anne's body had begun to reawaken, its dormant sexual needs pushing through the soil of her grief like pale green blades of new grass. She was visited sometimes by dark and sensual dreams in which the old Greg would return to her, eager to make love. She would awaken with her fingers on her sex, her nipples hard. Anne found herself confused by the feelings, as if she were being disloyal to Greg's memory.

Anne had no close girlfriends. If she had, perhaps one of them would have told her it was natural to begin to feel again after a time. They might have consoled and reassured her Greg would not want her to totally shut off her feelings for the rest of her life. Anne would have answered with some vehemence that Greg had only just died – it wasn't even a year! She would have said there's no time limit on grief and she couldn't imagine ever loving another man.

Anne was rather reserved, though with Greg she had been able to relax more than with anyone else. If only he were still alive, she would give him every ounce of herself, nothing held back, no corner of herself kept secret and aloof, afraid of being hurt.



Anne leaned forward and turned on the faucet, adding more hot water. Taking a cake of moisturizing soap, she began to lather her body beneath the water, her hands lingering over her sex as she lifted a leg over each side of the tub. She closed her eyes, expecting Greg's image to drift into her mind.

Instead to her surprise and consternation, the stranger eased his way in. Tall, dark, dangerous, he smiled slightly as he gazed at her. Oddly, Anne had the strange sensation he was *actually* watching her—not just in her fantasy but in fact. She sat up quickly, gripping the sides of the tub as she looked around the bathroom. She shook her head, trying to dispel the strange sensation—half desire, half fear.

Leaning again against the porcelain, she closed her eyes, her fingers seeking the sweet, hot spot at her center, rubbing and swirling in the oiled water against hot, soft flesh. "Greg," she said aloud, but it was another man she saw behind closed lids.

His hair was black and his eyelashes were fringed with dark, velvety lashes. Hooded eyes flashed with lust as he stared at her, his tongue slipping between parted lips as if she were a meal and he a famished man. As Anne's defenses dropped in proportion to her arousal, the handsome man stood and unbuttoned the white shirt he was wearing, letting it drop from his strong, masculine shoulders. Leaning down, he scooped the naked, willing Anne into his arms, lifting her effortlessly as his head dipped for a kiss.

The fantasy shifted from the park where she'd actually seen him, the background melting into a bedroom. Soft, silky sheets cradled the now naked lovers as the stranger's hands began to move deliciously down her body, his lips caressing her neck, his cock nudging itself insistently between her legs.

Anne arched up, rubbing her pussy as the stranger draped his strong body over hers. His lips were warm, his tongue entwining with hers. She felt his hand on the back of her neck as he pulled her closer. Anne moaned, her fingers acting for the man as she found and rolled each nipple, squeezing them as he pressed his body to hers.

She felt the head of his heavy cock teasing her wet opening. Wantonly, desperately, she tried to pull him into her, wrapping her bare legs around his back. The man laughed, pulling back, holding himself just away from her, just out of reach. Anne moaned with frustration, her pussy now aching to be filled. How she longed for the nearly forgotten sensation of a man's shaft pressed deep inside of her, her body trembling with lust as she reacted to the tumult of delicious sensation.

Anne clamped hard with her strong thighs, gripping him as she arched up to feel his hard, thick manhood penetrating her slick, hot tunnel. "Jesus," she whispered aloud, almost feeling a real cock fill her, almost tasting the salty tang of sweat on his strong neck as she licked his skin, wanting to bite him, to consume him, to take him into her body completely—to recapture the closeness with another person that had been all but lost to her.

"Fuck me!" Anne cried to the silent stranger as he began to move inside of her, finally giving her what she so desperately needed. The heat of the bathwater became

the heat of his strong, hard body draped over hers. Her fingers moved in rapid tattoo over her spread sex, her breasts rising out of the water as her hips gyrated in rhythm to her fantasy lover's movements.

Unlike the usual spasm of release her fingers caused, sometimes little more than a tremor of pleasure, Anne felt a climax rising like a tide through her body, lifting it as water sloshed over the sides of the tub. As wave after wave of pleasure roiled through her, Anne felt her body go rigid with shuddering pleasure. Finally her fingers fell away from her sex as her body continued to tremble and spasm. Slowly she sank back, submerged to her chin in the warm water.

She lay still some moments as her breathing and heart rate returned to normal. She could scarcely admit it to herself, but this orgasm had been more intense than any that had featured Greg as the focus of her fantasies. She felt a stab of guilt as she shifted in the tub, sitting up and pushing back her tangled wet hair. How could she be so disloyal to the only man she had ever loved?

Who *was* that man on the bench? She couldn't seem to shake the image of his dark smoldering eyes glittering in the spring sunshine with some dangerous, enigmatic secret. Whoever he was, New York City was a big place. The odds of seeing him again were slim to none. She was, after all was said and done, alone. Alone without her husband, without a friend, without a job. She wasn't even sure she had retained the capacity to connect with another human being. She was truly bereft.

As Anne looked around the empty bathroom, silence seemed to drop like a shroud over her. Loneliness bore down so hard she gasped, shivering in the cooling water, the pleasure of her orgasm nearly forgotten.

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul gazed up at the second-floor window of the charming brownstone near Washington Square where he had observed the young woman enter. With a stealth natural to witches and warlocks, he had easily followed her unobserved. He liked the way she walked—long confident strides with a feminine grace but also a certain strength.

Her luminous eyes were haunted with loneliness, but it was the loneliness of one who had once loved well. Paul closed his eyes, focusing on the image of the young woman, whispering an incantation to connect with her. Without actually seeing her, it was much more difficult to enter her mind or sway her thoughts. Paul concentrated, seeking her in his mind. Ah, he felt her presence! She was on the second floor. He sensed she was naked, her body wet. The thought grabbed his cock and pulled it to erection. She must be having a bath.

What did her body look like when she'd taken off the oversized shirt and jeans? He recalled her face—the fragility of her bone structure juxtaposed with a strong, sensuous mouth and those large intelligent eyes. Beneath the clothing she was certainly slender, probably lovely.

He imagined the curve of her breast, its nipple sweet and dark at its center. He imagined the tapering waist, the gently flaring feminine hips, the rounded ass. Paul sought the girl's mind as he gazed up at her window. She had rejected him in the park—why was he bothering with her now?

It was a strange feeling for Paul—to have been rebuffed and so quickly. He'd clearly read her thoughts to stay away. She'd threatened to hit him, for heaven's sake, if he even tried to speak to her! Paul smiled, amused at the vehemence of her unspoken rejection but at the same time intrigued. Women did not reject Paul Windsor. Even witches fell prey to his inimitable charms. He wasn't vain about it, but had simply come to accept his form and features pleased the opposite sex.

Paul Windsor genuinely liked mortals, especially mortal women. Many of his brethren derided and scorned their non-magical counterparts—ridiculously short-lived with no ability to read minds, to weave magic, to cast spells. But Paul liked them.

He had developed a hobby over the years—that of finding and nursing broken women back to health. He didn't nurse physical wounds, but rather wounds to the heart. He truly loved women—he loved their bodies so soft and yielding, so sweet and delicate. He loved their underlying strength, appreciating how much more difficult it was for a woman to make it in just about every arena one cared to contemplate. Even in the supposedly enlightened United States where he'd spent the last decade, he saw mortal women were still discriminated against in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Paul sought out women who had bought the messages bombarded at them by society—they were too fat, too stupid, too hopeless, to find true love. He found it a challenge to take these women and lift them up, courting them, loving them, empowering them, until they no longer needed him. Then he would gently reverse his spells, turning their attentions from himself to a deserving mortal man.

Paul's gift for reading minds and feelings was especially sharp, a natural gift he exploited and developed as he reached maturity. Within the magical community it was considered impolite to enter another's mind but mortals were considered fair game. The community of witches and warlocks was very small compared to the mortal world. Less than fifty thousand still roamed the world. Conception was difficult and rare between magical beings. They lacked the fecund qualities of the short-lived mortals. It did happen, but only a handful of full-fledged magical babies were born each generation. Witches and warlocks could also be born to mortals, though this was rare, and unless discovered and mentored by one of the magical folk, they would live and die as mortals.

Paul himself had been discovered by a warlock passing through his father's stables in England in 1763 when he was only ten. Paul had become known, even at his tender age, for his unusual skill in calming and taming the skittish wild stallions his father would procure for eventual resale once they were broken in at his stables. Even the most seasoned trainers would sometimes give their most violent and difficult horses to young Paul. Unaware of the source of his gift, Paul was nevertheless able to subdue the

wildest horses, calming them with his magic. Word spread throughout England of his unusual gift, most sought after in a land and time when horses were the primary means of transportation.

Theodore Stuart, a warlock who resided in London during this time, heard about the boy and was intrigued. When he arrived at the Windsor Stables, a simple spell ascertained Paul's magic potential. Theodore had taken Paul under his wing, teaching him the basic spells and incantations any warlock worth his salt must know. There were few witches or warlocks who could match Paul's ability to see into the hearts and minds of others.

What was in the heart of the woman bathing on the second floor of that narrow old townhouse? The image of those beautiful sad gray-green eyes continued to haunt him. He sensed something wild, something untamed, in the girl who reminded him of his beloved horses from long ago.

Perhaps he would seek her out and charm her with magic. He would bend her to his will with incantations against which she would be powerless. Even as these thoughts drifted in his mind, Paul knew he would not. Somehow it seemed improper – unfair. There was something almost too special about her. To take her through trickery and magic would be like cheating.

Turning away, Paul raised his hand toward an oncoming taxi. He barely noticed his ride through the city, barely recalled paying the cabbie, nodding toward his doorman or ascending his private elevator to the top floor of his apartment building. He was lost in a fog of daydream, mooning over a young mortal about whom he knew next to nothing.

Paul laughed ruefully as he stared out at the New York skyline rising into a haze of smog. He knew he was acting like a lovesick schoolboy. The idea his heart had somehow been captured by the odd woman feeding pigeons in park was beyond absurd. She was not even a witch, only a pathetic mortal doomed to her few years of toil and misery before her frail body gave out.

Yet now she was at the height of her beauty. He imagined her through the window of the brownstone into which she'd disappeared. In his mind's eye he could see her lying naked in her bath, her breasts rising above the water, soft and round, the pale skin tipped with dark pink nipples, erect and begging for his kiss. He imagined the supple curve of her throat, the delicate skin flushed pink from the heat of the water as she soaked, her eyes closed, her thoughts wrapped around his, dreaming of him...

Paul reached into his trousers, adjusting his rising cock as his phantom lover slipped from the tub to kneel naked between his knees, her soft, small hands leaving a trail of lust over his body as she lowered her sweet mouth to his cock...

Paul shook his head and the girl evaporated like fairy dust. Paul Windsor did not fantasize or moon over mortal women. What was happening to him? Though he could wield powerful magic, he didn't know what the future held. Would he cast a lover's spell her way? Or had she unwittingly already cast one on him?

## Chapter Two

Anne stared critically at herself in the mirror. She was standing in her bedroom, naked but for a towel wrapped around her head, her skin still pink from her second hot bath of the day. After the earlier bath she'd taken a nap. She had meant to start reading the new book she'd gotten out of the library earlier in the week but she'd been tired.

Now it was dark out. She could go to sleep soon and wait for a new day, maybe a better day. Or just more of the same.

"What have I become?" she asked the mirror. She ran her hands down her sides, tilting her head as she noticed the faint outline of her ribs. She was getting too thin, she knew. Food had lost its appeal but she knew she had to eat. She would get some fruit tomorrow, something enticing, and make a nice fruit salad.

She continued to look at her naked body, turning slightly to see her profile. Though she was slender, her breasts were full and round with large well-shaped nipples. Greg had loved to play with her nipples, pulling and patting them, delighting as they rose like fat little gumdrops at his attentions.

Anne knew she had a good body but it had never given her great pleasure. Her sense of worth was not derived from her looks, even though she knew men found her beautiful. Their attentions, while meant to be complimentary, usually ended up just making her uncomfortable.

She had fallen in love with Greg precisely because he hadn't been fixated on her looks. He'd barely noticed she was a woman at first or so he teasingly had claimed once they were dating. They had been partnered for an especially complex securities offering, she the junior partner assigned to assist him. He hadn't put any sexual pressure on her as men so often did even in a supposedly professional environment. As they worked together, he had treated her as an equal, indifferent to her sex, more appreciative of her attention to detail and analytical prowess as they put the deal together.

It was only afterward he'd asked her out and then only to celebrate the success of the deal, or so he had said. When they began to see each other outside the office, each step of the way he'd let her take the lead, never pressuring her, never forcing a declaration of love from her nor offering his own. He didn't mind that she had never had close girlfriends. He didn't think it odd that she didn't yearn for babies or long to be married. He didn't care if she orgasmed or not. He was happy with her just the way she was. Yes, he was the only man who had ever understood her. Or, if he hadn't understood her precisely, he hadn't minded.

Perhaps it was her upbringing in a strict, emotionally cold home that had impaired her ability to connect easily with others. She was an only child born to older parents. A

rather unhappy accident, she would later think, as her mother never seemed happy to have her there. When she'd left for college, her mother immediately redid her room, putting all her things in a box in the attic. When she came back for winter break, she stayed in what her mother now called the guestroom. The point was not lost on Anne.

Anne sighed as she unwound the towel, her hair cascading wetly to her shoulders. She turned away from the mirror. Now that she was out of a job, she no longer got up at dawn. She was lucky if she got up before noon. What was the point? She knew she was behaving like a depressed crazy person. She knew she probably should seek help. She had no support system. Her few friends from work had stopped coming around, never having been close to start with.

Eight months was time enough to recover from her loss or so she guessed they must suppose. And if she were entirely honest, while she did still mourn his death and miss him deeply, what was going on now was less about Greg and more about herself. She seemed to have lost the ability to focus on anything for any amount of time. Really they were right to fire her—it was only through luck she hadn't cost the firm money with her lack of attention and indifferent attitude.

She thought about the man in the park—the handsome stranger. She recalled her orgasm in the tub after she'd practically run away from him. It had almost felt like he'd been in the room with her, watching her touch herself, those dark, hooded eyes glittering with unspoken possibility...

Imagine how disgusted he would be if he knew she spent her days sleeping, lolling in the tub and walking aimlessly around Washington Square. Her whole world seemed to have shrunk to a few square blocks. She bought food at the convenience store or the deli on her block. She never cooked anymore, instead ripping open packages of prepared meals, reading as she ate, not tasting the food.

What if she hadn't left so abruptly? Would he have struck up a conversation? She imagined his voice—something deep and sexy to go with those dark eyes and that sensual mouth. Why had she practically run away? Did she regret it now? A foolish thought! She only had eyes for Greg, hadn't she?

Sighing, she pulled an old nightie over her head and crawled into bed. Tomorrow she would go back to the park and feed the birds. If she happened to choose the exact bench she had sat at the day before, it didn't mean anything. She often sat there. If he happened to come along, well, it was a free country, wasn't it? This time she wouldn't let him force her away. She had as much right to sit there as he did, hadn't she?

Anne closed her eyes, letting the stranger's handsome face float into her mind. If her fingers slipped between her legs as he bent to kiss her in her dreams, Anne didn't remember it in the morning.

She awoke to sun streaming through the window, bathing it in a lemony spring light. A walk in the park would be just the thing. He might be there, sitting on the same

bench, waiting for her... For a moment Anne felt almost happy, the day seemingly ripe with potential.

Then the censuring curtains lowered. "Anne Wilson Kaliner, what in God's name has gotten into you?" she demanded of herself. Greg barely dead and here she was daydreaming about another man the second she woke! Feeling properly chastened Anne got up and dressed, made a cup of strong coffee and took a long look around her cluttered, dusty apartment.

The shades in the living room were drawn. She surveyed the room with its boxes of papers cleared from Greg's office still taking up an entire corner. Even after all these months she hadn't had the heart to look through them. What was the point after all, except to remind her with each report and scribbled memo he was no longer there?

Newspapers and magazines were piled on the coffee table in front of the antique overstuffed sofa Greg had bought at an estate sale when they'd first married. There were old coffee mugs here and there and a bowl with popcorn kernels covered in congealed butter in the bottom of it. A pair of her jeans lay crumpled in a corner from one evening when she hadn't had the energy to move, falling asleep in front of the television with no one to wake her and guide her lovingly to her own bed.

Anne realized she hadn't really looked at this room, at the whole place, for quite a while now. There was a vase of dead flowers on a stand, the dried, wilted stalks settled in an inch of fetid water. Greg had been fastidious and by far the better housekeeper of the two of them. He would never have tolerated the state of disarray the place was in. She could almost hear him chiding her in that slow, teasing voice, "Why, Anne Kaliner," he might say, "if you ran your portfolio like you're running this household, you'd be bankrupt in a week!" For a fraction of a second she was glad he wasn't there to say it—his constant comparisons of their private life to their work had sometimes grated on Anne. She felt a stab of guilt as she quashed this almost treasonous thought.

Anne raised the blinds, allowing the sunlight to pour over the fine layer of dust covering the bookshelves and windowsills. All right then! She would not go to the park. Not until she'd straightened this place—dusted, mopped and vacuumed.

She hauled Greg's office papers to the guest bedroom, which also served as their home office, though they'd rarely been home enough to use it. No guest had ever slept on the futon sofa bed either. She would worry about that room later, she decided. Marching back to the living room, she removed the clutter, dusted the shelves and tables, vacuumed the throw rugs and washed the wood floors. She even wiped down the windows.

Afterward she plopped down the couch, completely exhausted. Anne hadn't done that much physical activity since she'd had to fetch and carry for her dying husband. After a rest however, she was ready to go again. Pulling on fresh jeans and a T-shirt, Anne went out to the fruit market and bought two bags full of fresh fruit—bananas, oranges, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and a mango. She would make a fruit salad and have it for lunch along with a loaf of fresh bread she had bought as well.

Once home again, she busily chopped and sliced, feeling better than she had in over a year. What was happening to her? What was this spark of happiness, this whisper of renewed life within her? It was a perfect spring day, after all. Perhaps her body was only responding on a primal level to the weather. She did tend to get depressed sometimes during the long winters, the leaden gray skies and bitter cold wearing her down.

The image of the stranger drifted in her mind and she shook her head. This was not supposed to happen. It hadn't been a year yet. She had been in love with her husband! She knew in theory one could not mourn forever but until yesterday, it had felt as if she would. The loss of her job the week before had seemed the final stroke, the final proof her new identity was to be cemented as the grieving young widow, falling into a decline as she fed her birds and read her romance novels, drifting through life, longing for the one man she had ever loved...

Anne realized with a small, rather unpleasant shock on some level she found herself and her plight rather romantic! Like the great heroines of classic fiction, she would mourn her man for the rest of her life, never to find another to fill the hole torn in her heart by his loss.

Greg would have laughed at that, she bet. To Greg and to all the world, Anne had always presented a different persona—a cool customer, a tough cookie. One had to be tough to make it in investment banking, especially as a woman. Anne knew what it took to make it—at least she used to. Suddenly she wondered if Greg had ever wished she was softer, less strident, less intent on proving she was just one of the guys. Sometimes she wanted to be, but she didn't know how. Maybe she was more her mother's daughter than she cared to admit.

"Enough analysis," Anne said to herself. "I've cleaned the place. I've made a nice meal. I've earned a trip to the park!" Smiling a little at her own foolishness, Anne stripped off her T-shirt, instead selecting a green silk tank top, just the color of her eyes. Why not wear something nice? And why not a touch of rouge? Anne moved back to the bathroom, pulling out her makeup bag. She applied a bit of color and eyed herself in the mirror. Not bad for thirty-two. She brushed her lustrous dark brown hair, the sunlight catching glints of red in the curls, which bounced back from her brush, refusing to be tamed.

Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine Greg coming up behind her, pushing her heavy hair aside as he kissed her cheek. She opened her eyes, looking in the mirror as if she expected to see his blond head, his snub nose, his smiling eyes. Instead she saw the dark, handsome stranger behind her, his large hands closing over each shoulder as he bent to kiss her neck. Anne shivered, letting her head fall back. She could almost feel those hands gripping her, almost feel those lips grazing her skin, his lips parting, the nudge of teeth, his tongue gliding on her flesh as he licked up her neck, biting her earlobe, pulling her around to face him, pressing her to him so her breasts mashed against his strong, bare chest...



Anne opened her eyes, turning abruptly from the mirror that revealed her too-bright eyes, her flushed skin, her nipples poking through silk. Her imagination was definitely working overtime! What she needed was some sunshine and fresh air. Armed with her bag of bread, she moved into the daylight, headed for Washington Square, pretending to herself she had no agenda.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Have you got something of hers? A bit of her clothing, a lock of hair? I need something more to go on, Paul. It's quite difficult to just conjure her up out of nothing!"

Paul nodded, feeling ridiculous. What had made him confide in Amelia anyway? Amelia was one of Paul's oldest friends. She would tease him mercilessly if she thought his interest was any more serious than his usual meddling in mortal affairs. Not that this was any different, he told himself. The girl really did seem woebegone—a woman in need, lost and alone.

"Well," he admitted. "I don't have anything actually. Not yet."

"What's her name?"

Sheepishly Paul admitted, "I don't know."

"So you don't know her name, you have nothing personal of hers for me to use, yet you come to me and ask me to find her in my orb. I may be good, Paul, but I'm not that good." Amelia Chevalier was renowned for her skill with crystal orbs. She could locate a person within the magic orb, tracking their movements, viewing their past, their present and sometimes a bit of their future as well. Though as she cautioned those who used her services, the future was only a possibility—a potential easily affected by the slightest change in the present.

Paul stood in front of one of Amelia's beautiful crystal balls, this one about two feet in diameter, resting on a dais in a large airy room of her spacious home in New Rochelle. There were dozens of other orbs placed about the room, each one covered in a satin cloth. The room retained the sweet, slightly acrid scent of her viewing potions, which she brewed to assist in the effectiveness of the orbs. It was into these potions a bit of the person in question's personal effects would be added. In this way she could home in on the essence of the soul, reading their secrets as well as their activities.

When Paul had decided to go see Amelia, he hadn't admitted the reason to himself. It had simply been a while since they'd seen one another. She always cheered him with her sharp tongue and clever wit. Amelia liked to embroil herself in intrigue and mortal affairs. He would get her to tell him of her latest escapades in the halls and bedrooms of power.

Yet when he'd arrived at Amelia's the hour before, he hadn't asked about her latest adventures at all. He'd dived right in, blurting, "I want to find out about a particular mortal woman I saw in the park yesterday. I need to learn about her. Can you find her for me in your orbs? Can you tell me who she is?"

After her lecture about the absurdity of his request, Amelia had relented, wanting to help her old friend, sensing his need. She lifted the red satin veil from her most powerful orb. As Paul stood by, she dropped several crushed herbs and a bit of magical oil into a small cauldron that simmered on a low heat near the orb. As the sweet smell filled the room, she placed her hands on the black crystal.

"Come here," she said. "You place your hands here as well. We'll try to draw the image from your thoughts. Close your eyes and concentrate on her. Imagine her face, her scent, any thoughts you might have pulled from her."

Paul obeyed, the image of the lovely young woman appearing easily in his mind's eye. He saw the large, gray-green eyes, clear as one of Amelia's crystal orbs. He saw the shiny, curling hair around the delicate face and the long, slender neck. He pictured her sitting on the bench in the park, recalling his one brief moment as their eyes had locked.

The orb lightened from black to purple to gray as the witch and the warlock moved their fingers over it. Amelia whispered an incantation as Paul concentrated on what little he had to offer. The orb finally cleared and the image of a woman sitting on a bench appeared for a moment through a swirling fog.

"That's it! That's her!" Paul shouted, dropping his hands from the crystal in his excitement. But as his hands fell away, so too did the image sputter and disappear, only a swirling pink fog now moving inside the darkening glass.

Hastily Paul put his hands back on the globe but to no avail. Despite Amelia's best efforts and Paul's desperate concentration, she couldn't get the image to return. Finally she stepped back and said gently, "It's not going to work. I'm sorry, Paul. You need more than that to capture her in the orb." Paul nodded his defeat as Amelia carefully wiped down the crystal ball with its satin coverlet before replacing it lovingly over the orb.

She turned off the fire beneath the potion and said, "Let's have a cup of tea, Paul. You can tell me about this mystery girl of yours. If I didn't know better, I'd say you're smitten! Smitten with a mortal woman!" She laughed, as if certain this were ridiculous. She had never known Paul to be smitten with anyone. As gracious, gallant, pleasant and sexy as he was, Paul Windsor did not get smitten. He was in control all the time and had been since she'd known him.

"It's nothing really," Paul said once they were seated and with a wave of her hand, Amelia had commanded cups and a kettle to the table. "Just someone I saw in the park at Washington Square. There was something about her. Something fragile and vulnerable. She was in mourning. But it was more than that. I don't know. Something about her eyes..."

"So this is just another of your ridiculous charity cases. You finish with one and are off in search of another. Why don't you just open a mission, for God's sake? A home for wayward girls. You can 'save' each and every one of them, giving them the benefit of your advice, your charity and your cock!" She laughed gaily, enjoying the slight blush on Paul's face.

When he didn't answer, she continued. "Why not just go back to the park, for heaven's sake. Go there and wait for her. She probably lives nearby—"

"She does. I followed her home."

"You followed her home?" Amelia burst into peals of laughter, which irritated Paul. "You followed her home?" she repeated. "Then, my stupid darling, you don't need orbs to find her! Just go knock on her door! What in heaven's name is the matter with you! Has this obsession addled your poor brain at last? Go find her! Say hello. You know that's all you have to do to get them to spread their legs for you. Go find your mystery girl just like the mortals do it! Take a cab!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Anne's heart began a patter in her chest. She sensed his arrival before she dared look up. His body cast a shadow over her cooing birds as he came up to her. "Hello," he said in a rich smooth voice. "What a lovely spring day. I rather think I saw you here yesterday. Am I right?"

Anne looked up. The sun was behind him, making him glow like a dark angel, his face hidden in shadow. His body was outlined in golden light, its strong, lean curves enough to make her mouth water. She swallowed. "Yes. I'm—I'm here a lot. The pigeons expect me, you see. I bring them bread just about every day. I know you shouldn't feed them—they come to rely on you. But I like them, all fat and ridiculous, strutting around fighting for bread while trying to look dignified." She laughed and blushed, looking away. She had promised herself if he came—not that she was expecting him to!—but if he came, she would play it cool, super cool, Ms. Cool, Calm and Collected. Instead here she was yakking on and blushing like an idiot.

"Mind if I join you?" Anne nodded, moving over. That accent! The rich, rounded vowels and ringing tones of a pure English accent. Anne, like most American women, was a sucker for it. To think she'd run from him yesterday, assuming he was a jerk. Not that she had any intentions now either way...

The man sat down. He watched the pigeons moving busily at their feet for a moment before turning to her, his smile dazzling. Anne thought if she hadn't been sitting, her knees might have buckled. "I'm Paul. Paul Windsor."

"Anne." Damn, what was her last name? Ah, yes. "Anne Wilson, er Kaliner. Well, my full name is Anne Wilson Kaliner. Wilson is my maiden name, you see. My mother didn't give me a middle name. Said she hated hers and wasn't going to saddle me with one. I always resented that as a kid though. I wanted a middle name like everyone else! I used to make them up—Anne Michelle, Anne Elizabeth..." Anne gulped and clamped her mouth shut. She had not said this many words in a row out loud in months.

Greg wafted woefully in her mind, his face a mask of reproach. She looked down, guilt assailing her like a bitter wind as she let her hair fall over her face. Paul smiled gently at her. "I have somewhat the opposite problem. My given name is Paul Andrew

George Herbert Bennington Windsor III. Rather too many names, wouldn't you agree? I quite prefer just Paul Windsor."

Anne laughed despite herself. Greg's image drifted to the back of her thoughts, nestling down for a snooze while she turned her full attention to the man beside her. "So I take it you're British nobility? One of those old families too pure to marry beneath them until you're so inbred your mother is your aunt twice removed?" Anne brought her hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

But Paul only laughed, his dark eyes sparkling as he tilted his head slightly. Jesus, the man was good-looking! Anne felt suddenly naked – exposed – as if he were looking past her face right into her head. She looked away confused, her cheeks hot.

"May I?" Paul said, pointing toward the bag of old bread Anne was clutching in her hands, the pigeons forgotten.

"What? Yeah, sure." She held out the bag. As Paul took it from her, their fingers touched. Anne couldn't help the intake of breath as skin met skin. She resisted a very strong impulse to grab his hand, to kiss his palm, to press it against her breasts...

Paul reached into the bag and pulled out a piece of bread. He crumbled it and tossed the crumbs toward the birds. They crowded around him, cooing and chortling their thanks.

Anne was glad for the distraction as she tried to pull herself together. Her heart was racing, her palms were sweaty, she felt dizzy! Maybe she was getting sick! That must be it. She would go home, lie down and let whatever had come over her pass. She would get away from this way-too-sexy guy before he made her behave like a crazy person, instead of the widow in mourning she in fact was.

Paul lightly touched her arm. "Don't go," he said softly. "Not yet."

"How did you know –?"

"I have a sense about people. Don't run away, Anne. Not when we've just met."

"Trust me, you don't want to know me. I'm a mess. My husband died and I'm not interested in other men and –"

"I know."

"You know?" She looked at him quizzically.

"Yes. I know you have lost someone dear to you. It's in your eyes."

Anne sat back, gratified on some level. So her mourning did show then! She was a good and faithful widow.

"When did he die?" Paul asked gently.

"September of last year. Eight months ago." Tears closed her throat as the image of Greg during his last days filled her mind. Almost as if he too could see the image, Paul's face expressed a grave sympathy.

"You miss him."

"Yes," she whispered, feeling on safer ground now, almost enjoying the part of bereaved widow.

"But life goes on. He would want you to keep living. To do more than throw old bread to birds each day."

Anne looked up, affronted. "You don't know what I do! I do plenty more than that!" As he waited, a half smile of those sensuous, perfect lips, Anne struggled with what to say. "I was an investment banker! Just like him! I worked sixty-hour weeks! I didn't have time for much else but I loved it!"

"And now?"

"Well. I, uh, I quit. Just before they fired me, I quit." She looked up at him, her expression rueful for a moment until they both laughed.

"Okay. So you *retired* we'll say for the sake of argument from the grueling world of high finance. And now you spend your days..." He raised his eyebrows, waiting.

"Well, I, um. That is. I..." Anne blew a breath from pursed lips. "Look. I don't even know you. Who are you to cross-examine me like this?"

"My apologies. I have no right whatsoever. Please forgive me." He paused and then said, "We can fix that, you know."

"Fix what?"

"The fact we don't yet know one another. Would you care to join me for dinner tonight? I could pick you up. I presume you live near here?"

Anne started to automatically refuse. She didn't go out with strangers! Especially not now as she had no interest in other men. She hadn't dated another man in five years! She had no intention of beginning now! Even if Paul George John Ringo whatever his name was turned those dangerous dark eyes on her as if he were casting a spell...

"I, yes. That would be lovely. Seven o'clock." She told him her address, feeling as if she were enchanted, saying words she hadn't prepared, giving him information she hadn't meant to share. And yet at the same time it felt perfectly right. Of course she wanted to have dinner with Paul Windsor. What woman in her right mind wouldn't?

## Chapter Three

Anne jumped as the intercom buzzed. She glanced at herself in the hall mirror by the front door as she pressed the button. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Yes?"

"Hi. It's Paul. Paul Windsor."

Jesus. This was it. Her first date in forever. Anne's stomach hurt with anticipation. What in the world would they talk about? What did she know about this guy? He could be a stalker, a serial killer, a crazed psychopath intent on kidnapping her and keeping her caged in a dungeon for twenty years. And who would miss her? Who would know she had disappeared?

Anne realized with a start that though her silly imagination was certainly working overtime, the fact of the matter was she was going out with a virtual stranger and not a soul in the world knew where she would be.

What had made her say yes? She had been about to refuse but something had changed her mind. It was almost as if she had been possessed for that moment. Now she regretted it. She would just go down and tell him it had been a mistake, she was sorry, maybe another time... Resolutely she walked down the two flights of stairs to the outer foyer on the first floor of the brownstone.

Paul was standing just inside the door. She stopped at the bottom stair, struck anew by the magnetism that seemed to emanate from the man. He had no right to be that handsome! She tried to look away from those dark, dangerous eyes but found she could not.

She could feel her nipples stiffen. Awkwardly she put her arms in front of herself, clasping her hands. She would let him down gently. Surely he would understand she wasn't ready. As he stood smiling at her, she mentally rehearsed some polite, vague excuses in her head but what came out of her mouth was, "I can't do it. I'm sorry. I can't." Ah well, it was the truth anyway, even if she'd failed to couch it in diplomatic terms.

She waited for his protests, his insistence, his demands. Instead he said softly, "I understand. It's too soon for you. Why don't we forget dinner? Perhaps a walk in the square? Maybe a cup of tea in your rooms?"

A cup of tea in her rooms. How quaint. She glanced at him, relieved he wasn't going to press the issue, though curiously deflated he'd given in so soon without a fight. Wasn't she worth fighting for? Paul smiled broadly and Anne blushed, ducking her head. Damn! It was almost as if the man could see inside her head. What was he grinning about?

*A walk would be lovely. Safe enough. Then I can decide from there.*

The words landed in her head and she was reasonably sure she hadn't put them there. Yet, they did make sense. A walk around the square—what was the harm? They would be in a public place and she could plead a headache if she felt uncomfortable. Paul was standing quietly, awaiting her decree.

He did look very handsome standing there. He was wearing a pale blue button-down shirt of some very high-quality cotton—it looked soft as silk and Anne resisted a sudden impulse to run her hand down the fabric covering his firmly muscled chest. The shirt was tucked into black fine-spun wool pants that hung beautifully on his body, hinting at the masculine bulge between his legs without making it a focal point as the fabric draped elegantly over his strong legs. His shoes were a soft black leather, probably boots. She bet he had nice feet.

"All right then. Just let me get my keys and I'll be right down." She turned away, walking up the stairs to avoid his penetrating gaze.

They were silent as they headed toward Washington Square. As they passed a street vendor, Anne realized she was hungry. Since yesterday she'd suddenly had an appetite, though she couldn't explain why. On an impulse she said, "Let's get some hot dogs, want to? I know it isn't a chic trendy café, but if you didn't mind?"

Paul laughed. "There's nothing like a New York City street vendor hot dog. I've been all over the world a hundred times over and nothing compares!"

Anne grinned, pleased to discover he wasn't pretentious as she'd feared he might be, despite the air of understated wealth the longtime rich seemed to carry about themselves.

They sat on a bench armed with hot dogs and soda cans. Anne bit into her hot dog, the chili spilling messily over the sides. She couldn't remember tasting anything so delicious in her life! She looked at Paul, who seemed to be enjoying his food as much as she was.

When they'd finished and were licking their fingers with satisfaction, Anne said, "I forgot the bread for my birds!"

"I think the pigeons will forgive us, don't you? Looks like someone else has got the job this evening anyway." He nodded toward an old woman. She was sitting on a bench, a bag of old bread clutched in her hands. She was muttering softly to herself as she crumbled bread over the birds. Her gray hair was thinning and wispy around her wrinkled face. Anne had a sudden, horrible feeling she was looking at herself forty years from now, still on the same bench, still mourning the loss of her husband, all alone with only the fat, stupid pigeons for company.

She stood abruptly. "You know, I think I feel a migraine coming on. I do hope you'll forgive me but—"

Gently Paul took her hand, gazing into her eyes. "Don't send me away," he said simply. "Please. We've barely had a chance to get to know one another." He looked so sweetly earnest, his expression as open as a small boy's pleading for a new toy or some

candy. Anne relented, unable to stop the small smile forming on her lips. What after all was the harm?

Again words seemed to tumble into her brain—*Some tea would be lovely*. Yes! A nice cup of hot tea—she had a new tangerine herbal she'd been planning to try. Anne loved teas of all sorts and had a whole cabinet full of different varieties. And Brits loved their tea, didn't they?

They walked back to her place, not touching, but closer than the walk out. When they arrived at her brownstone, Anne hesitated. "Listen, the place is a mess—I wasn't expecting anyone."

"Please don't worry. I like a place that's lived in. I can't abide those pristine houses with every item in its place, no book spine cracked, no sign of life. One wants a home, not a museum." Well, it was lived in, all right! At least she'd cleaned up some of the clutter and dusted earlier! No way she would have let him upstairs if she hadn't.

As she opened the door and gestured him inside, Paul said, "What a beautiful old place! These brownstones remind me of London in the last century. The fine woodwork, the beveled molding, the attention to detail and the solid workmanship." Anne puffed with pride. He hadn't seemed to notice the piles of old papers and books crammed into the overfilled shelves or the fact the sofa needed reupholstering.

"What's this?" Paul walked over to a small oil painting on the wall. He gazed at it appraisingly for a moment. "The way the light falls makes one feel one is there, just at dawn. Who did it?" He was admiring a small landscape that depicted a hayfield, newly plowed, its grass neatly bundled into large rolls. It was a simple scene, one of Anne's favorites.

Blushing but hugely pleased, she admitted, "I did actually. I paint. Well. I used to paint. Before..." She turned away. When had she stopped living? When had she let everything she held dear fall away from her? Was it the moment he'd died? It wasn't quite that simple, she realized. It had been slipping away, bit by bit, as he had fallen more and more ill. Would Greg have wanted that? Had he expected her to stop living because he was no longer in the world?

"You have real talent, Anne. I hope you'll paint again. Where was this taken from? Upstate New York?"

"Yes, actually," she answered, glad to be distracted from her thoughts. "The Hudson Valley. We were driving along on our way to see friends and the scene just struck me as so idyllic. I don't know why but I love those hay rolls. They make me happy for some reason."

"Well, you've captured the beauty of the place and your love for your subject." Paul's tone was sincere. He turned from the painting to Anne, bestowing one of those dazzling smiles on her.

How could she have thought he was a murderer? The man liked her art! He couldn't be all bad. She grinned back at him and said in an overdone British accent, "Shall we have a spot o' tea then?"



Paul laughed and answered, "We shall indeed."

As he sat at the table, Anne bustled around the kitchen, pouring water into the kettle, putting out a pot of sugar cubes, some lemon and a pitcher of cream. The tiny pitcher was shaped like a small cow, its spout the cow's open mouth, faded black spots painted on its china body, the tail curled over into a handle. Paul picked it up. "Wherever did you get this? It's delightful."

Anne smiled, realizing as she did she hadn't smiled and grinned as much in a year as she had in these past few minutes. "That was my grandmother's. I always loved it as a child and she actually left it to me in her will. I was really touched she'd remembered I liked it."

They smiled at one another until Anne felt the heat of another blush coming upon her. Turning away she asked, "What sort of tea do you prefer? I've got a whole cabinet full."

"Earl Grey?"

"You bet. I've even got one of those cute little tea houses to steep it in."

"A true tea connoisseur—you would be at home in an English country kitchen." Anne smiled again—her cheeks were practically aching! She realized with a guilty start she'd barely thought about Greg since Paul had walked into her house. What was wrong with her!

They sipped their tea in silence, Anne now lost in a funk of guilt and confusion. She could almost feel Greg's presence, as if his spirit were drifting sadly through the room, his emaciated, jaundiced face a mask of reproach. Paul was quiet, his dark eyes upon her when she looked up. This wasn't going to work. She just wasn't ready.

"I'm sorry," she finally said in a low voice, "I can't—"

Paul put his hand over hers and Anne suddenly found her mouth dry, her tongue thick. She couldn't seem to speak. She'd been about to tell him he had to go. She wasn't ready to go out—or even sit in—with another man. She might never be ready. Something inside her had been ripped out, tattered possibly beyond repair. She tried to swallow and say the words, but she could only stare helplessly at Paul.

"Anne. Everything is fine. Everything is as it should be." His voice was soothing, almost hypnotic. For a moment she wasn't sure if he'd spoken aloud or somehow entered her head. But that was ridiculous. Paul's mesmerizing dark eyes focused on hers and all at once Anne felt a sort of peace descend over her.

"Would you care for more tea, Paul? Or would you perhaps like some wine? I have a Merlot I've been saving for someone special."

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul sat on Anne's couch, staring out the window of her living room at the starless night. Anne was in her bathroom freshening up. The evening had been delightful, at

least on its surface. They had taken their stroll through the park as the sun set over the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

Anne had looked so adorable eating her hot dog, the chili spilling out between her fingers as she tried to contain the mess. She had laughed and flushed like a young girl, promising him she wasn't always such a slob. He had found her utterly charming.

It wasn't just her wide-eyed beauty that disarmed him. Paul was used to being with beautiful women. Yet most of them bored him even if he admired their form and features.

Anne was a natural beauty with those shining corkscrew curls spilling around her face and her skin clear and soft, tinged with pink on the apples of her cheeks. She had dressed in a long, flowing silk skirt with batik patterns of dark blue shot with gold. Her sleeveless blouse was a softer shade of the same gold and her flat sandals revealed slender, elegant feet. Her large eyes looked more gray than green in the twilight and they softened when she looked at him.

Paul twisted his hands and tried to examine the tumult of feelings churning inside him. Naturally her eyes had softened—he had enchanted her! No, he hadn't given her a love potion but he'd meddled nonetheless. She had clearly been about to refuse him, not once but twice, and each time he'd stayed her words and her thoughts with a spell. She'd only agreed to see him at all because of his first invasion of her thoughts, planting words in her head, twisting her desire in his direction.

He took some solace from the knowledge they weren't especially strong spells—just a suggestion to reconsider, to be more receptive to him. Yet he couldn't deny, despite his own promise to himself earlier that day he would win Anne's affections without the aid of magic, he'd given in.

He had been surprised by Anne's intelligence and quick wit, more used to the vacuous beauties powerful men in Amelia's social circles seemed to favor. This woman was educated, opinionated and quirky. At the same time she was funny and there was something of a little-girl quality to her that touched his heart. Beneath the obvious sadness at the loss of her husband, he sensed a deeper longing—a yearning for something she had yet to find, perhaps yet to even identify.

The particular enchantment he'd wrought didn't actually make Anne do something she didn't want to do—it merely released her from the fears and concerns that held her back. At least he knew she found him attractive and enjoyed his company, had circumstances been different. Taking a chance, he'd tried releasing her from the receptivity spell from time to time, hoping the sparkle of pleasure in her eyes would remain.

But each time he had released her she had quieted, her eyes clouding. He could hear the whispered guilt and confusion swirl into her head as the spirit of her dead husband poised to leap back into her mind. Paul knew the spirits of the dead could linger, as real as any living thing in the hearts and minds of their bereaved. He

understood far better than Anne the danger of clinging to a spirit who was ready to depart this earthly plane.

Yet he also sensed within Anne she wasn't yet ready to let this spirit go. She was keeping him inside of her, the suffering and pain he'd felt as the cancer ate away at his body still festering inside of her as if she herself had been the one to fall ill and die.

Paul sat up as he heard Anne coming out of her bedroom. She had changed from her skirt and blouse into a flowing robe of dark crimson satin. The fabric cascaded over her high, firm breasts like a rippling red waterfall. Paul caught his breath at her beauty.

Anne smiled shyly, still in the grip of his subtle enchantment. "I hope you don't mind my, uh, changing into something a little more comfortable." She said the words with a toss of her head, trying to mimic the starlets of old movies who slipped into something silky just before the scene cut to waterfalls and trains going into tunnels. She laughed and Paul laughed with her, unable to help the bulge in his pants at the sight of her fragile but lush beauty.

*Release her*, a voice whispered in Paul's conscience, yet he was afraid. And would it be fair to her, to suddenly allow her to revert to her natural self? Would she feel humiliated to find herself in a scarlet robe, her lovely nipples poking alluringly against the satin that moved like water over her naked body?

Thoughts flew from Paul's mind as Anne sat next to him. Her perfume assailed him, something subtly floral with a hint of lemon. "Paul," she whispered, "I've been waiting all night for this." She lifted her face to him, her eyes fluttering closed, her full lips parting, clearly inviting his kiss. Succumbing to her charms, artificial or otherwise, Paul leaned down, unable to help the small sigh as their lips touched. He gathered the young woman in his arms, crushing her to his chest as they kissed, their tongues twirling in a sweet dance.

He felt her breasts, soft against his chest as he held her close. She clung to him, holding his head in her hands as she pulled him even closer. As they kissed, his hands roamed her sides, feeling the long, smooth curves of her tapering waist and feminine hips. Lifting her, he hoisted her onto his lap, her thighs pressing against his erect cock.

Lust exploded in the warlock. Even knowing she was not acting of her own volition, at that moment he didn't care! How different from a strong drink of liquor was his mild enchantment? If she hadn't wanted this, the spell he'd cast would have been useless. It wasn't as if he'd used a strong incantation, requiring magic potions and dust, and great skill and care to create and administer. Had he done that, she would have been powerless, bent to his will regardless of her own desires. No—he'd sent only the mildest of receptivity spells into her psyche. This kiss was from her heart—it had to be!

Lifting her into his arms, Paul stood. Anne released her mouth from his, her head falling back, her lustrous hair streaming down over his arms. He carried her into her bedroom, dropping the young woman gently onto the bed. She lay where he'd set her, her clear green eyes shining up at him, her lips parted, her chest heaving slightly.

The scent of her perfume overlay another scent—the scent of her arousal. Paul hurriedly pulled off his shirt, spraying the buttons as he impatiently ripped it from his torso. Keeping his eyes locked on hers, Paul kicked off his boots and socks, unbuckling his belt. He could feel his cock, rock-hard and eager to plunge into her buttery softness.

Taking a deep breath he paused. How many hundreds, how many thousands of times over the centuries had he taken women just this way? Through magic or not, he had rarely stopped to consider the spirit inside the lovely bodies, the willing arms and spreading legs of his conquests. Paul rarely needed to resort to magic to get a woman but when he had, he'd given it barely more than a moment's thought.

Yet as he looked down at Anne, he hesitated. Was this any different than rape? Was he taking what wasn't freely offered? If he released her now from the spell, would she jump up in horror, demand that he leave, threaten to call the police? Could he bear it if she did? Would his heart, which felt exposed and unprotected around her, simply cleave in two at her rejection?

*Coward*, his conscience whispered, even as he unzipped his pants and let them fall down his strong, firm thighs. As he dragged his silk bikini briefs from his body, Anne's eyes widened, her mouth curving into a saucy grin. Paul's cock was large and thick, ramrod straight and at the moment bobbing toward the girl, a drop of pre-cum glistening at its tip.

She held out her arms, her fingers curling in a clear invitation toward him. Paul fell forward onto the woman, his hands sliding under the satin. Her skin was so soft! Softer than the satin that covered it. She shivered and sighed, igniting his lust even further, if such a thing were possible. He had to have this woman!

He rolled to her side, pulling open her robe. Anne, still under his spell, flushed but made no effort to cover herself. Reason had vacated Paul's mind, overtaken by lust and a natural dominant impulse. He leaned down, taking a nipple between his teeth, lightly pulling it erect before licking it with his tongue. Moving to the second nipple, he did the same thing. Anne sighed, her head to the side, her eyes closed.

His cock felt heavy with the need to feel her velvet sex envelop him, take his full length, submit to his masculine desires. He drew his hand down her belly, cupping the thatch of dark pubic curls covering her sex. "Spread your legs. Show yourself to me," he commanded, his voice deep with lust. Anne obeyed, though her face was now in full blush, the flush covering her neck and chest as well.

Paul knelt between her legs, inhaling the delicious, intoxicating feminine scent. Her pussy was beautiful, the labia small and delicately shaped like the petals of a rare orchid. He bent down, his tongue gliding along the outer petals as his finger lightly touched the little entrance already slick with her desire.

Anne moaned and let her legs fall wider. Eagerly Paul licked and kissed the delicate folds, loving the taste of her, the silky feel of her, the heady aroma of desire. As he explored her pussy, Anne shifted and moaned, her body shuddering with pleasure as

he found the sweet spots. He thrust a finger inside her hot wetness and felt the tight hug of her vaginal walls.

When he could stand it no longer, Paul leaned up over the girl and positioned his cock at her entrance. Anne's hands were on his hips, pulling him down onto her, into her, leaving no doubt she desired him as much as he desired her. He slipped into her hot grip, his body covering hers as he bent down to kiss her mouth. Anne moaned and swiveled beneath him, her lust spurring him on as he claimed her with his cock.

He wanted to make it last, but the pleasure was too great. With a cry he shuddered and released his seed deep inside her. Anne clutched him, wrapping her strong legs around his hips, holding him tight until his body's trembling eased and his heart slowed to something near normal.

Anne slipped from beneath him and knelt next to him, stroking his cock from its semierect state to full hardness. "So beautiful," she crooned in a singsong voice. As he watched her long, slender fingers moving over him, Paul felt a surge of desire tingling through his balls, engorging his heavy cock. Though he'd just climaxed, her skillful attentions quickly brought him fully erect.

Her mouth closed over the flared head, her tongue swirling down the shaft as she moved down its length. Paul watched Anne through eyes hooded with lust. Her hair was falling over her face, the curve of her smooth back rising over him like a swan. He reached out, cupping her small, rounded ass as she moved sensuously up and down his cock, rendering him weak with pleasure.

When he knew he was again close to orgasm, Paul lifted the girl, placing her over his hips so she straddled his cock. Her wet, willing pussy accepted his girth as he gently eased her down onto his shaft. Holding her hips, Paul urged her to move, to sway as her body dictated, letting the sensation of his cock filling her guide her movements.

Anne was still at first, her eyes burning into his. A mild whisper of magic released the final vestige of Anne's inhibitions. She began to move, her hips swaying over his like a snake charmer over a cobra. She began to pant, gyrating with increasing abandon, her clit rubbing his pubic bone with each shimmy and thrust.

"Oh, oh, oh! My God, I don't know what's happening!" she cried. Paul knew what was happening. Grabbing her hips, he moved beneath her, the friction on her clit coupled with the deep thrusts of his cock sending her over the edge of ecstasy.

Anne shuddered, her head back, keening her passion as wave after wave of orgasmic pleasure racked her body. Paul held her, pulling her forward onto his chest as she continued to shudder and tremble with the aftershocks of a powerful climax. Finally she stilled, her cheek resting against his heart as he stroked her unruly, soft curls from her face.

He felt something wet on his chest and realized they were her tears! "Anne?" he whispered. "Are you okay?"

But Anne did not answer, turning her face away when he tried to look at her. Troubled, Paul peeked into her thoughts. He realized with a shock that in his own

passion he'd let the magic spell waver and Anne had been left defenseless in his arms. She was confused, the pleasure of her orgasm fighting with the guilt of lying in another man's arms.

Not knowing what else to do, he gently whispered the silent spell to affect her receptivity and ease her pain. Anne's body relaxed against him, a sweet sigh escaping her lips as she drifted into a contented sleep.

*What a tangled web we weave...* Paul could almost hear Amelia, who would chide him, not for casting a spell on a worthless mortal, but for caring her passion was not freely given.

But he did care. More than anything in the world, Paul realized that he did care. And he had no idea what to do about it.

## **Chapter Four**

The angle of the sun slanting into her eyes told Anne it was late. With an effort she twisted her head to see the clock next to the bed. Twelve-twenty. She let her head fall back, pulling a pillow over her face. What had happened last night? She recalled everything—every moment was recorded in her brain and now she let it scroll past her mind's eye.

When they'd finished their wild lovemaking, she had felt a great sadness fall over her like a net, but almost as soon as it had engulfed her, it was lifted and all she felt was a delicious euphoria—her body sated, her mind at peace. Now the sadness and confusion had returned—with a vengeance.

She hadn't wanted him to go at first—why not stay the night? Stay forever! But he'd needed to go, he'd told her, and as he'd fixed her with that mesmerizing dark stare, she'd succumbed to his magical suggestion. It was time for him to go and for her to sleep.

Yet when he'd gone, it was as if she'd suddenly awoken from a dream. Unable to sleep, she had climbed out of bed, moving into the bathroom. She poured herself a bath and lit the candles around the tub. As she lay there, staring into the wavering flames, she tried to understand what had happened.

Paul was the most amazing man she'd ever been with. She kept trying to compare him unfavorably to Greg in her mind and she kept failing, which only heightened her sense of guilt. Yet she couldn't deny it. Paul had been so fun, so easy to be with. She'd felt so relaxed around him once she'd somehow gotten over the ambivalence of being with him at all—an ambivalence that had returned full force once he'd left her.

But more than the ease she'd felt when they'd still been fully clothed, she had to admit it was the sex that still held her in a grip of fevered memory. Never in her life had a man touched her as Paul had. Up until Greg, she'd assumed she just didn't like sex that much and hadn't worried a great deal about it. When she had fallen in love with Greg, lovemaking had been sweet and sometimes passionate. She enjoyed being in his arms and she liked the feminine power of making him shudder and cry out her name in his lust for her.

Yet if she were honest, sex with Greg paled into a mere whisper of sensation when compared with Paul Windsor. It was almost as if she'd been enchanted in his presence. Every fiber of her being seemed to be connected to him in some magical way. While she had lain with him, she had felt she could die in his arms and her life would be complete simply from having experienced his kiss. Now in the cold light of day with Paul's dark lovely eyes no longer boring into hers, she realized it must have been her devastating need that had made her so open and vulnerable to him.

Anne had soaked in the tub until at last exhaustion overtook her. Wrapping herself in a towel, she flung herself into her bed and fell into a troubled sleep, dreams laden with sensuality twisting into eerie nightmares, all of which thankfully ebbed away upon awakening.

Anne stretched and sat up. She had to admit though her mind was not at rest, her body felt wonderful, as if each cell still recalled the euphoria wrought by his exquisite touch. Even now with guilt wrapping her like a shroud, she had to admit Paul was the most compelling man she had ever known. It was more than just his manly good looks, his liquid black-brown eyes and wide, sensuous mouth. It was more than his deep, beautifully modulated voice and that delicious English accent, or the way he seemed genuinely delighted by her. These things on their face might be enough, but it was more than that—so much more.

It was the way he tilted his head toward her when she spoke, his expression one of interest and concentration. He was really listening to her, to what she had to say. He seemed to value her opinions and wanted to know all sorts of details about her life and work. His attention wasn't patronizing or condescending, nor was it just a preamble to making love to her. He had really seemed to want to know her.

Instead of her usual lazy bath, Anne took a shower. She made herself a cup of coffee. Just as she sat down to drink it, the intercom buzzed. It could only be Paul! She realized she didn't want to see him. Or more accurately, her body was longing to see him, her nipples actually perking at the thought of him standing downstairs at her door, her pussy moistening in perverse anticipation. But her mind was not ready. How could she face him?

She wasn't ready for a relationship with another man—she might never be. She was still grieving the loss of her husband. Yet she knew if she saw Paul again, she would succumb to his magical charm. Even last night, when she'd planned to reject him, to push him away, to retreat, at each step somehow she'd been prevented. Her attraction to him must be so great she was unable to behave rationally around him. The only solution was not to see him.

The intercom buzzed again. Ingrained politeness forced her to answer the call. "Yes?" she said into the box.

"Good morning. Well, afternoon really!" Anne steeled herself to resist him. After a pause Paul added, "May I come up, Anne?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not feeling well. Perhaps another time." There was a silence while Anne realized what a cold bitch she must sound like to him. Here they'd made the most passionate love of her life the night before and she was sending him away with an "I have a headache" excuse. Yet she didn't know what else to do. She felt certain if she saw him, her resolution would crumble like dust in his fingers.

"Anne?" The single word was more eloquent with longing than any string of attempted persuasion would have been. Anne felt an actual physical pain in her heart as she took a deep breath. For a moment she wondered why she was clinging so to her



role as inconsolable widow. Then the image of her dying husband just before he slipped into a coma flashed in her mind.

"No, Paul. I'm sorry. I'm just not ready to see you. I have to sort things out."

The silence stretched into several moments. A secret part of Anne wanted Paul to protest. To tell her he loved her and would die if she didn't open the door and give him immediate access to her body and heart. Yet she stood firm, her lips pressed together as she waited, suddenly wondering if he'd simply walked away.

"I'll be waiting." The words were soft, even wistful. Then he was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

How simple it would have been to enchant her. He was close enough, even with two stories separating them, to have magically influenced her sufficiently to get her to at least open the door. He knew once he saw her face-to-face, the magic would sway her completely.

Yet he found he couldn't conjure the necessary words to break her resolve. He didn't want to steal her love or affections any longer. Though he knew it was absurd, the love he felt blossoming in his heart for the fragile, troubled girl had nothing to do with magic. It went beyond lust for her pink-tipped breasts, the curve of her soft thigh, those perfect lips parting to kiss him. It was more than her huge clear gray-green eyes that sparkled with a passion and fire he suspected at first and was confirmed when they'd made love. It went beyond his delight in her quirky humor, her sharp intelligence, her talent as an artist.

What was happening to him? How was it possible he of all people found himself in this ridiculous position? Paul Windsor, sought by witch and mortal woman alike, did not fall in love. He loved the women he allowed to adore him after a fashion, but it was only a partial kind of love—a giving of his kindness, his body, his time, his gifts, but never his heart.

He realized as he walked aimlessly through the busy streets of New York City, his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his jeans, he was hopelessly, pathetically in love. With a mortal! He fingered the red ribbon in his pocket, drawing it out to look at it.

He had seen it lying on the floor beside her bed when he'd slipped away just before dawn—it must have fallen from her robe. Something had compelled him to take it—a remnant of her, a keepsake.

After he'd sent her into a charmed sleep, he'd thought about staying the night but he had too much to process, too much to absorb. He had taken Anne under false pretenses, or at least magical ones, bending her mind to slip past her reservations and her fears. A part of him had hoped maybe it wasn't the magic at all that had driven her but rather a genuine outpouring of real feeling on Anne's part. Perhaps after all she would awaken in the morning and, even without the benefit of his spells, long for his return. She would greet him with joy, wrapping those slender, lovely arms around him, holding him tight as she whispered her undying love.

Alas, that hadn't happened. If he had to fall into this ridiculous pit called love, why couldn't he have chosen one of the many women who would have given their eyeteeth for his affections? He had to fall in love with the one woman who would not have him.

He went over and over every detail of the time he'd spent with the lovely young woman. He realized she was especially sensitive to his spells. She could almost sense his invasion of her private spirit when he had gently cast his charmed net over her. It was rare for a mortal to be so sensitive to the workings of his magic. Yet she was no match for it—easily swayed by his whispered suggestions to forget her fears, her guilt, her loss, her reservations, and simply open herself to him. It had never troubled him before, his use of magic to get what he wanted. Yet with her he found himself wanting more—wanting her passion freely given.

Paul slipped into a seat at an empty table at an outdoor café. He was oblivious of the people around him, lost in thought. He had to pause a moment to remember where he was when the waitress asked him what he'd like. "A cup of tea. Earl Grey. A bit of lemon."

He thought back to their amazing night. When she'd straddled his cock, her hair obscuring her face as she leaned over him, panting and mewling as her body trembled toward orgasm, he'd had a flash of insight as her thoughts tumbled in sexual abandon around him. The woman had never orgasmed during intercourse!

It was almost hard to believe such a beautiful, obviously passionate woman hadn't achieved that kind of satisfaction, especially having been married to the supposed man of her dreams. Paul had known of women who didn't orgasm during intercourse, but that, he knew, was because they weren't with a lover who understood their bodies or bothered to take the time to make it happen.

Most men, especially mortal men, were in a hurry. They wanted their satisfaction and they wanted it now. A woman became a means to an end, instead of the end in and of herself. Paul sighed, sipping the hot tea he hadn't noticed the waitress bring.

Paul realized with a sudden shock his life had been empty, like a vast desert of his own making. He'd held himself apart from others to avoid the pain of loss. Anne was like an oasis of utter sensual abandon and pleasure. He longed to return to its abundance, leaving everything behind, spending the rest of his life making love to her. Paul shook his head. This was absurd.

Something was wrong with him. He was in infatuation, not love, probably made the stronger by her refusal to see him. Paul wasn't used to challenges. Everything came very easily to him, and with his magic powers, there was very little he couldn't get once he set his mind to having it. Yet he knew if he took Anne again by magic means, its meaning would diminish. Even though her passion and pleasure were real, he'd had to bend her will to his in order to allow her the freedom to express what she felt inside.

He didn't want that. With Anne it would never be enough. He had to have her completely or not at all.

Paying for his tea, he wandered along the long city blocks, finding himself again near Washington Square. He looked up at her window but made no move to cross the street to her townhouse. Instead he walked to the park. He would just sit on a bench for a bit. Maybe she would come out to feed her pigeons. He wouldn't approach her. He wouldn't embarrass her by forcing his unwanted attentions upon her.

No, he would just look at her, committing her beautiful features to his memory. If she saw him, he would turn away. He would not compromise her. He was too proud to be rejected yet again.

"Get a hold of yourself, man!" Paul said aloud. He wouldn't go to the park and sit mooning on a bench like some love-struck idiot! He would go see Amelia. She'd snap him out of this puppy love insanity.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amelia sat at her dining room table sipping coffee. A large spread was before her, including toast, bacon, scrambled eggs, smoked fish, fresh juice and pastries. As her butler showed Paul in, Amelia looked up and smiled. "Care for some breakfast, old friend?" Like many witches and warlocks, Amelia considered any time before noon the crack of dawn. This three o'clock breakfast was typical for Amelia, who would have already had her bath and perhaps taken a stroll on her grounds while her food was being prepared.

Paul sat down at the table, helping himself to a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice mixed with ice-cold Champagne. He watched Amelia gracefully skewer some egg with her fork. Amelia had a huge appetite, though one wouldn't know it from her figure. Unlike most witches, who chose to maintain a more youthful guise, Amelia preferred to present herself as a mature woman by mortal standards—perhaps fifty or fifty-five.

Her olive-toned skin was smooth and flawless with fine smile lines at the corners of her large dark eyes and on either side of lips that curved naturally into a somewhat devilish smile. She was thin as a rail with no breasts to speak of, yet men young and old found her utterly captivating. Her silver white hair was cropped close to her small head and she usually wore lavish, long-dangling earrings and slinky designer gowns that showed off her angular, boyish figure and long, lean legs. She had the sheer style to carry off her unusual looks, as if she were the rule and everyone else the exception.

"What's the matter, Paul?" she finally asked, after having polished off a large cheese Danish. "You look like you've lost an old friend."

"I've lost a new one," he answered ruefully.

When he didn't elaborate, Amelia said. "It's that girl again, isn't it? The one you wanted me to track for you in the orb?"

Too miserable to deny it, Paul nodded. He waited for the barrage of teasing taunts as Amelia chided him for getting his heart tangled up with a mortal woman. Instead she was quiet a while. When she finally spoke she said, "I was in love once with a mortal man."

Paul looked up in surprise. Amelia in love? Impossible. She saw his disbelief and laughed. "Don't tell anyone—I'll just deny it. I met him in 1732 at the French royal court. You weren't even born yet but I was already a seasoned witch with no excuse for such behavior! Gerard de Saint Marc was a high-ranking officer in Louis XV's army and when I saw him standing there in his formal military uniform, his plumed hat by his side, I was smitten. It was that ridiculous thing you've heard tell of no doubt but never believed in—that thing called love at first sight.

"So it was with me. Something connected between us as our eyes met. He asked me to dance and we were inseparable after that. We married within months and even now I cherish each day we had together."

"Amelia! You never told me! All these years I've known you and you never told me about the one man you loved?"

She waved her hand dismissively, though her eyes were suddenly bright with tears. She laughed and shook her head. "It was centuries ago and I've loved men since then, just not with the same intensity, the same passion. When you feel you shall die if you have to spend another moment without him—when the world seems to be on hold until you are again in his arms..." She sighed and stared off into the middle distance while Paul marveled at her. To think of Amelia in love! And with a mortal.

"How did he die? Did you spend his life with him? How did you explain your appearance or did you age along with him, adding wrinkles and gray hairs, letting your skin sag and your muscle separate from bone to give the appearance of aging at a mortal rate?"

"I would have but I didn't get the chance. He was killed in a military skirmish when we'd only been married two years. It took me a century to get over him and I promised myself after that, never again! A ridiculous waste of energy and pointless really. They wither and age so rapidly, why involve your heart?"

She watched Paul, a knowing expression in her eyes. He looked up at her and said softly, "I'm afraid it's already involved. But she wants nothing to do with me."

Amelia was speechless for a moment. Finally she sputtered, "Nothing to do with you! With Paul Windsor? What is she, blind? Or just plain stupid?"

"She is neither. She is the most hauntingly beautiful, damnably stubborn mortal woman I've ever met." He sighed. "She's a widow—her husband died eight months ago and she's decided to assume the mantle of professional mourner. She's lost her job over it. She spends her days feeding birds at a park. Though she would deny it, she takes a certain perverse pleasure or pride in her status as bereaved. I think on some level it gives her an out from the strictures of her life."

"Well, that's not so unusual," Amelia responded. "People often make marked changes in their lives when their spouse dies. Start a new career, move to a new place or, as you say, retire from this world in a way, as if a part of them died along with their true love."

"Yes, except I don't believe he was her true love!" Paul said with more vehemence than he'd intended. Amelia smiled and started to speak but he stopped her with his hand held palm up. "No, I know what you're thinking. I think *I'm* the one who should be her true love. Be that as it may," Amelia arched her delicate eyebrows at this statement but didn't interrupt, "this fellow was *not* the one. She is too young, too inexperienced, to realize it, but he didn't love her. Not as she deserved to be loved! He didn't appreciate her exquisite delicacy of feeling or her innate talent as an artist. He didn't appreciate her body or her capacity for passion. He just used her! Took what he wanted and tried to mold her into something she was not!"

"And you've known her how long to learn all this about her?" Amelia said archly.

Sheepishly Paul admitted, "Just a day and a night." Gathering force in his voice he went on, "But think back! Think back to your Gerard! One dance was all it took! For me it was the same. She looked up into my face with those eyes, the passion lurking beneath a sorrow that occupies too much of her heart, and I was captivated."

He fell silent, his throat suddenly thick with tears. Amelia put her hand gently over his. "Shall we look for her now? In the orb?" How had she known he now had something of Anne's to use in the viewing potion? Wordlessly he reached into his pocket, withdrawing the small strip of red satin.

Once the orb and viewing potion were readied, the satin now swirling amidst the magic herbs and oils, Amelia and Paul placed their hands on the glass. This time Anne appeared within moments, a lone figure in the middle of the crystal globe. She was sitting on a bench dressed again in jeans and an oversized shirt, tossing bits of bread to fat pigeons pecking eagerly at her feet.

Paul's heart clutched in his chest as he stared down at her. "We're in the present," Amelia said, interpreting the scene. "Her lips are moving. Let me watch." Amelia, like most witches who specialized in orbcraft, was quite adept at reading lips.

"What's she saying?" Paul leaned forward eagerly, craning to see.

"She's saying," Amelia paused and then said, "she's saying, 'Paul. Oh Paul'." At this, Paul felt his heart soar like a bird winging its way in a clear blue sky. He wanted to dance, he wanted to shout with joy. Amelia went on. "Paul, I wish I'd never met you."

As Paul's heart plummeted back to earth, Amelia turned toward him. "Don't lose hope, you silly man. I have a plan."

## Chapter Five

"You did the right thing," Anne said aloud to herself, after drying her tears and wiping her red, dripping nose. "It would never have lasted. That kind of sizzle flares up and dies out. Love at first sight? Ha!"

Anne lay on the bed, her window opened to let in the warm spring air and the sounds of the city around her. She just wasn't cut out for love—not any longer. The specter of loss was just too great, she realized. Better to stay alone. Why risk that kind of pain again?

Anne rolled over, dropping her feet over the side of the bed as she sat. She sighed. "Go do something useful. The pigeons are hungry."

When Anne arrived at her favorite bench, she found someone sitting there. An old woman hunched over the bench. She was dressed in a shapeless brown dress that covered spindly legs bound in thick, stockings rolled just to the knee and pooling at the ankles. She held a bag of old bread in her gnarled hands.

Anne started to move to another bench, mildly annoyed someone had taken her spot. But as she passed in front of the bench, the woman looked up, button black eyes peering from a crisscross of wrinkles. Wisps of yellow-gray hair fluttered loosely around her face, having come undone from a tight bun on the top of her head.

"Plenty of room for two," the old woman said in a quavering high-pitched voice as she hoisted herself to a far side of the bench. Anne glanced around the square, observing all of the nearby benches were occupied, either by young lovers entwined in each other's arms or tired-looking mothers with strollers and sticky-faced toddlers demanding their juice boxes.

Tentatively she perched on the far side of the bench, turning her body away from the old woman. *Probably some homeless, crazy old bag lady*, she told herself. The pigeons were clustered at the woman's feet. They didn't care if she was old or crazy—her bread was as good as anyone else's. Anne turned farther from the woman as she reached into her own plastic sack and ripped off a piece of bread. Immediately a few of the pigeons defected, marching in goose-step, heads bobbing toward the newly offered crumbs.

"How long have you been a widow, girl?" Anne started, not certain if the old woman was speaking directly to her.

"Excuse me?" she said rather formally.

"I said, how long have you been a widow? You've got the air about you. The aura of loss and self-pity. I can spot it a mile off."

Self-pity! "I'm sorry," Anne said coldly. "Do I know you?"

"You know me well. I am *you*. I am you fifty years from now, sitting on your bench, throwing bits of stale bread to pushy, filthy birds pecking at your feet. All your friends dead, all your lovers long gone, consigned to a life alone due to some misguided loyalty to a man who never would have wanted this for you."

Anne felt breathless, as if someone had slapped her face or poured cold water on her head. "Who, what...?" She was so taken aback by the strange old woman's words she found herself unable to form a sentence or even organize her thoughts.

The old woman scooted closer to Anne, who, already being on the edge of the bench, couldn't move away unless she stood up altogether. "What's your name, child?" the woman asked softly.

"Anne," she answered automatically.

"Anne, when did he die?"

Still too surprised to react with anything but the truth, Anne answered, "Eight months ago. Eight and a half actually." Anne felt tears prick her eyelids though she suddenly wondered if they weren't more from habit than sorrow. She squelched the disloyal thought.

The old woman peered at her thoughtfully, her eyes narrowed. "You know, in most cultures, there are time periods allotted for mourning to allow the full expression of grief but then the mourner must gradually return to a normal life. From the look of you, Anne, you got stuck somewhere back in the initial phase of mourning and forgot for those of us still living, life goes on."

Anne finally found her tongue. "I beg your pardon, ma'am. No offense, but you know absolutely nothing about me."

The old woman reached out a gnarled hand, gripping Anne's forearm with dry bony fingers and a surprising strength. "But I do. Look at me." Her voice had deepened suddenly and lost its quaver.

Almost against her will, Anne felt compelled to stare into the woman's eyes—small, round black eyes that glittered as she held Anne spellbound. Words seemed to drop into her mind, violently startling her though she felt frozen, rooted to the bench and unable to turn away.

*I am you, Anne. I am you if you don't stop this foolishness. If you don't wake up and begin to live the life you were meant to live! If you don't let the spirit of your dead husband move on, you will wither and waste away even before the short time allotted to you on this earth is up.*

*You have a chance at true love. There is a man who loves you with all his heart, a heart far too worthy for your flimsy mortal soul. Yet he has chosen you. Will you let this man go, only to cling to the shadow of one now gone? To a ghost who deserves to rest in peace?*

Anne felt as if she were falling down some kind of well. She was dizzy, her heart pounding, her body at once hot and chilled. She couldn't fill her lungs with enough air. She found she couldn't move, her eyes glued to the face of the wizened old crone. She felt the old woman's hand on her arm, still gripping her tightly. Who was this woman who knew so much about her?

*There is a man who loves you with all his heart...* Anne felt the words like an elixir spreading an incredible warmth and quiet joy throughout her body and soul. Was she talking about Paul? He loved her...he loved her...

*Yes, the woman's voice continued to echo in Anne's head, though her lips did not move. Paul Windsor... I can understand his attraction to you, Anne. Not just your obvious beauty. I can see the passion and the honesty beneath that ridiculous mantle of self-indulgent mourning with which you insist on covering yourself. You are stronger than that! You don't need magic to release you! You need to find the courage to let go and live again.*

*The old woman's voice deepened, intoning the words like some kind of ancient chant. Anne Wilson Kaliner. You will open yourself to life again. You will experience the fear, the vulnerability, the trust, the joy and the love that are all a part of living life.*

The old woman released Anne's arm and stood. With a whispered incantation and a wave of her hand she stepped back, seeming to melt into the shadows of the trees just behind the bench as if she'd never been there – as if she were no more than a dream.

Anne sat still for several moments, her mind in a fog. As she slowly became aware of her surroundings, she realized she had just sat down to feed her pigeons, delighted to find her bench unoccupied. She felt a lovely sort of peace falling over her – the tight ball of misery and pain she kept knotted in her gut somehow dissolving. She smiled at some children who ran squealing with glee just behind a puppy newly acquainted with its leash. A quiet happiness settled over her.

After some moments she became aware of the bag of bread clutched in her hands, its contents undistributed. A few hopeful birds still lingered but most of them had moved on to more plentiful offerings.

As Amelia watched from the shadow of a tree, her more common guise now restored, Anne slowly stood, dropping the entire contents of her loaf in bits on the ground to the delirious joy of the overfed pigeons. Slowly she walked away, her eyes shining as if she'd been visited by an angel.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I promise, she will have no overt memory of meeting the old woman," Amelia assured Paul for a second time. "I wiped the event from her mind but not from her heart. She clings to her mourning out of fear rather than loss. I know that sounds harsh. I did perceive a real love for the mortal husband she lost. But I also sensed a keenness in her – a desire to live again, though she seemed caught in a web of her own making. All I did was sweep away some of the cobwebs. I didn't tamper with her feelings, I promise you. If you are to win her love, you'll have to do that on your own!" Amelia bestowed an impish grin and Paul smiled uncertainly back, wanting to be convinced.

When Amelia had first offered her plan, Paul had been resistant. "I don't know, Amelia, I don't want her affected by magic. If I wanted her under my spell, I would



have kept her in my thrall. I want her love freely given, not altered by magic. It becomes meaningless then. Don't you see?"

"Not entirely, I confess," Amelia had admitted. "But then, I can't see desiring the love of a mortal at all." Gently she laid her hand on Paul's arm. "I do see she means a great deal to you. I will offer the gentlest magical suggestions designed only to rub away some of the overlay of resistance she has to moving on with her life. Just watch out for your own heart, if you please. This thing called love can be a dangerous game indeed."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Anne walked along the beach, holding hands with her husband. Their cheeks were kissed with sun, Greg's golden hair gleaming almost white. They walked in companionable silence for a while, their arms swinging together in an easy rhythm.*

*"Anne," Greg said as she turned to him smiling. "It's time, dear."*

*"Time for what?" Anne felt her stomach clutch at his words but she tried to ignore it.*

*"You know, Anne. I can't stay here anymore. It's hard for me, too hard. I love being with you, but I have to go. Really I should have gone already."*

*"What are you talking about?" Anne demanded angrily. She gripped his hand harder, her fingers curling tightly around his.*

*Greg slowed, forcing Anne to slow as well. Coming to a full stop, he turned to face her. She noticed with horror his face seemed to be melting – losing its elasticity as the skin slid from bone. "You can't go! I won't let you!" she screamed, and to her profound relief his face resumed its normal appearance, his blue eyes still bright beneath thick blond brows, his mouth curved in a sad smile.*

*"You know it's time, Anne. You're keeping me here by sheer force of will. The mourning is over – this is habit now. This is self-indulgence."*

*Anne felt her legs give way, buckling as she sank to the sand. Greg knelt next to her. She felt if she could only explain it properly, he would stay with her. "Greg. The mourning period lasts at least a year."*

*"According to whom, dear?" Greg responded, a hint of a smile on his lips.*

*"Well, I don't know. Convention! Tradition!"*

*"There are time periods allotted for mourning to allow the full expression of grief. Now it's time to return to a normal life."*

*Anne stared at her husband. These words were familiar, as if someone had recently said them to her, but she could not recall whom or when. Greg continued gently. "Look into your own soul, Anne. You are no longer mourning for me or the loss of me, but for yourself. Somehow you've allowed the process to overtake the feeling. You're hiding from yourself! You're using my death as a shield to protect you from having to feel again!"*

*"No! It isn't true! I loved you! I love you!" Anne began to cry, great wrenching sobs, her shoulders heaving, her face hidden in her hands. She felt Greg's hand, as light as a ghost's on her arm.*

*"Yes. I know you did and do. And I loved you, Anne, as best as I was able. But Anne, that wasn't very well. I know that now. I did not love you with all my heart because I didn't know how. Perhaps in time we could have learned together but it wasn't meant to be."*

*As Anne looked up at him in shock, he nodded, reading her thoughts correctly. "That's right. I didn't love you in the way you deserve to be loved because I didn't know how."*

*"You weren't any different, Anne. You were as shutdown as I was and that's why you chose me. I was safe. I was easy. I wouldn't force you to grow up or to risk the pain that can go along with the happiness of true love."*

*"But my death has freed you. Though it was a horrible price to pay – the loss of your husband when your lives were just beginning – it has forced you to feel. It has given you a chance to live, Anne! A chance to find true love. We just go one time around and this is it!"*

*Anne continued to cry but more softly as Greg's ghostly arms went around her. "Don't cry for me, my love. It was my time to go. I was ready. I have other things to do now. I can't tell you – it's not for you to know yet what awaits you. We all have our own paths to travel. But I do know if I am to continue on my new journey, you must let my spirit go. You need to find the courage and the grace to go on living, my darling."*

*He stood and Anne stood as well, reaching out to pull him closer, to wrap him up in her arms and rest her head against his shoulder. She clung to him, gripping him tightly as if she would never let him go.*

*"Let me go, Anne," he whispered into her hair. "It's time."*

*She shook her head, refusing to hear him. To her horror he began to shift in her arms, the skin again melting and falling away like wax held over a flame. His eyes ran blue down his cheeks, leaving the empty sockets of his skull. In only moments his skin had sloughed off and she was left holding a skeleton.*

*With a cry of horror she dropped her arms and leapt back, watching as even his bones disintegrated, mixing into the sand and blowing away with the ocean breeze.*

*For a moment she stood stunned and then she felt herself falling, falling into a chasm, walls dark as night closing around her. She fell for hours, for days, until time lost all meaning. Finally she came to rest gently on a soft velvety bed of rose petals, their scent delicately perfuming the warm night air. As her eyes adjusted to the pale glimmer of the moon high above, she saw the petals were of many colors – lush red, creamy white, dusty pink, pale yellow and tangerine orange. She vaguely recalled the colors had significance – red for love, red and white together for unity, orange for desire, yellow for joy.*

*"Do you know the Greek myth about the rose?" Anne turned to see Paul was sitting beside her. Rather than being startled or afraid, she realized this was just as it should be.*

*"Tell me," she said softly, smiling at him as he took her hand.*

*"According to the myth," Paul said in his deep, sexy voice, "the goddess Chloris stumbled upon a beautiful dead nymph. She couldn't bear the thought of her death and so turned her into a flower. Aphrodite added beauty, the three Graces added brilliance, joy and charm, Dionysius donated fragrant nectar while Zephyrus, the west wind, blew away the clouds so Apollo could shower the rose in sun. The flower was then given to Eros, the deity of love."*

*Paul handed Anne a single red rose. As she took it, its thorn pierced her thumb. She watched as a drop of blood beaded on its tip. "Love is like that sometimes, Anne," Paul whispered. "But it's worth the risk, I promise you."*

*Anne awoke the next morning, the dream at first vivid in her mind but it quickly faded, only the feeling of it left like a gossamer net draped lightly over her spirits. She couldn't remember a time when she'd felt so light! Yes, that was the word!*

*Dressed in a red top with a flowing skirt and pretty red sandals—clothing she hadn't touched in well over a year—Anne left her apartment, stepping into the warm sunshine. She closed her eyes a moment, lifting her face heavenward. "Wherever you are, Greg, you'll always be in my heart as well," she said softly. Instead of the desolation thoughts of Greg usually invoked, she felt only a gentle sadness.*

*She bought a container of strawberries at the fruit stand near the square and began to eat the delicious sweet berries as she walked. She realized she would love to see Paul Windsor again. He had been so exciting! So dashing, so sexy, and yet also gentle, thoughtful, intelligent and kind. She had been deeply drawn to him, yet she had sent him away, her own fears keeping her from him.*

*She sighed deeply, realizing how ridiculous the situation was. She didn't know his phone number or where he lived. She was pretty sure he'd said he had a place near Central Park. They'd made passionate love on their first night together and they hadn't even exchanged phone numbers!*

*He knew where she lived but she'd sent him away. Told him she didn't want to see him. And he'd left, no doubt confused and hurt by her sudden rejection of him after the heated sweetness they'd shared the night before...*

*Anne sighed. This was how life was, she supposed. One came to the edge of happiness, only to be yanked away. And yet, even if she never saw Paul again, what they'd shared that one glorious night couldn't be diminished.*

*Perhaps he would return to her! What had his last words been? She recalled them now, tears pricking her eyes. I'll be waiting...*

*An Asian family walked by her, the three children running ahead of their parents, chattering in Japanese and pointing toward the entrance of the park. The parents were laughing indulgently. Anne noticed they were holding hands.*

*As they passed near to her, the man turned in her direction and bowing slightly said, "Excuse me, miss. Would you mind to please take our picture?"*

*He handed her his camera while the woman called and gestured toward her children, who came scampering back to their parents. Obediently they clustered into a family huddle, all five grinning broadly as Anne snapped several pictures for them.*

*"Thank you, thank you," the man said several times, again bowing toward her as she returned the camera to him.*

*Anne smiled back, pleased to have helped them, for a moment not thinking about Greg or even Paul, or any of her perceived and real woes. She laughed as the youngest child, not more*

*than seven, bowed low to her with a solemn expression and said with very little accent, "Thank you, miss beautiful lady. We will always remember you."*

*As they moved away toward the entrance, Anne trailed behind, feeling a bit wistful as she watched them move together with such ease, a happy family on vacation. They walked toward the hot-dog vendor – the same fellow who had served Paul and her. She watched as they got their hot dogs and their sodas and moved to a low stone wall where they perched for their picnic lunch.*

*Her heart registered the tall, dark man standing a few yards to the side of the street vendor before her eyes did. Turning slowly, Anne saw him silhouetted against the sun. She moved as if in a dream toward him. He made no step toward her but only waited, his face still in shadow until she was quite near.*

*As he held out his hand, Anne saw the single long-stemmed red rose. "I told you I would be waiting," Paul said softly.*

## Chapter Six

Paul stood very still, his face betraying nothing of the turmoil inside of him as he held the flower out toward Anne. She took it, looking up at him with those huge gray-green eyes.

"Hello," she said softly.

"Hello," he said back, all the lofty and elegant phrases he'd planned for this moment vanished from his mind.

Anne lifted the rose to her face, closing her eyes as she inhaled its delicate perfume. Paul could feel her hesitation, coupled with a longing of her own. He resisted the urge to read her mind, whether from respect or fear of what he might find there he wasn't entirely sure.

They stood mutely for several moments. The silence was uneasy and awkward. It was as if the intense intimacy they'd shared a few nights before had been a dream, something Paul had created through spell and incantation, ultimately worth nothing.

Hesitantly Anne said, "I missed you. I'm sorry I was so abrupt in refusing to see you." Paul saw the pain flash across her face. She looked so fragile standing there, her shiny hair curling around her delicate face, her eyes pleading, nervously biting her lip. He wanted to reach out and pull her to him, to bury his face in her soft hair and never let her go.

Instead he said, "I'm the one who should apologize, Anne. I rushed you. I took advantage of your vulnerability."

Anne looked down at the ground and then up into his face. "I know you don't know me very well, but I don't usually fall into bed with a man on the first date! Especially not the first date out after my husband—I mean, you know..." She sputtered to a stop, her face red, her expression chagrined.

Well naturally she was confused, Paul thought. For what she had done, she had not done of her own free will. Though she had given her body willingly, she would never have done so without his subliminal trickery. Yet he could never admit this to her—he would surely lose her forever.

"Please don't apologize for sharing with me the most wonderful night of my life! I've thought of little else since we parted." Paul forced himself to stop talking. He didn't want to frighten her away again. Instead he said rather stiffly, "You're looking well, Anne," Now he sounded like a stuck-up prig! Trying again he said, "You look beautiful. Red suits you."

Anne smiled shyly, glancing down at her red silk sleeveless blouse. "A nice change from the old frumpy stuff I was wearing when you first saw me, huh?"

"Much," Paul agreed. "Say," he said with studied casualness. "Would you perhaps care for a late lunch or early dinner? There's a charming place I know of in the Village. From the front it looks like just another storefront, but they have a large patio in back, shaded by trees with a little fountain right in the center. It feels like a bit of Italy transported to New York. And the food is quite good. What do you say?" He waited, barely daring to breathe. If she declined, he would accept it graciously. He would not press. He would not sway her with his witchcraft.

"Are we dressed for it?" Anne asked, looking at Paul, who was wearing a black T-shirt and faded blue jeans.

"Sure. It's not a fancy place, not upscale. Just good food."

"That sounds great." Anne smiled, her left cheek dimpling. Paul resisted his urge to kiss that cheek. He couldn't help the feeling of hope that stirred inside him.

They passed a large crowd near the fountain in the square, small children perched on their fathers' shoulders straining to see the juggler tossing brightly colored balls in the air. They walked past the bench where he'd first seen her, where he'd first eavesdropped on her funny, sad thoughts.

As they walked, Anne asked Paul about his life—what he did for a living, how long he'd been in the States, where he lived—all things she would have asked their first time together had she not been enchanted by his spells to focus solely on their lust.

He told her the usual half-truths. While he acknowledged he invested in fine art for several collectors in New York and Europe, he didn't mention he also invested for himself and had a sizable and very valuable collection of paintings from all over the world. When he admitted to living in the States for the past ten years, he omitted the fact this was far from his first visit. Imagine her surprise if she knew he'd first come to the United States just after the Civil War.

"This is lovely!" Anne said as the waiter led them through the dimly lit dining room to the beautiful patio beyond. It was late afternoon—too early for the dinner crowd—and they had the place to themselves. The sunlight dappled through the trees and the splashing fountain and high walls muted the sounds of the city.

After they'd scanned the menu, Paul ordered a cheese and fruit platter and a bottle of red wine for them. "And could you please find a vase for the lady's rose?" he said, nodding toward the flower Anne still held in her hand.

They sat across from one another at a small wrought iron table. Anne leaned forward, resting her chin in her hands. As the sun lowered, a glimmer of red-gold shone through the branches, lighting her face like an angel's.

Anne said, "I have to say this one more time and then we can move on." She took a breath and plunged on, "I'm not the type who usually just falls into bed with a guy I just met. Especially not like this. I don't know what got into me. You have to believe me."

"Please, don't waste another moment's thought on that, Anne. I believe you implicitly. What happened between us was unplanned. I hope you don't feel

compromised by what happened and if you do, I apologize. I have no expectations, I assure you. Though," he lowered his voice, looking deep into her gray-green eyes, "for me, it was magical. I will cherish our time together all the days of my life, no matter what happens or doesn't happen going forward."

"Well!" Anne laughed, her cheeks flushed. "You certainly can turn a pretty phrase, Mr. Windsor, I'll give you that!" Her expression became more serious as she added, "We were rather thoughtless though, in the heat of the moment. I'm not taking any kind of birth control." She took a breath, her expression worried.

Paul felt stricken. "I'm so sorry, Anne! I should have told you. I couldn't get a woman with child if I wanted to. I'm sterile." He watched her face until he was certain she accepted this. He could have gotten a woman with child during his first hundred years, but now, though he appeared in a youthful guise, his seed was no longer potent.

Anne seemed relieved, though still self-conscious about the sexual intimacy they'd shared. It was clear she didn't plan on a repeat performance any time soon, at least not without magic, which Paul had promised himself he would not use, not on Anne, not without her knowledge.

He couldn't help think back to that night, Anne lying naked and splendid before him. He had to shift in his chair to hide his erection as he recalled her face twisted in passion as she'd sat astride his hips, impaled on his shaft. How he longed to taste her lush, ripe mouth again, to let his tongue slide down her rounded breasts, teasing the perfect nipples to attention. To taste her musky sweetness and feel her body tremble to his touch before he plunged his manhood into her velvet heat.

He leaned toward her, aware his yearning must be apparent on his face. She didn't pull away as he moved closer. Tentatively he reached out, daring to touch her soft, rounded cheek with his finger, tenderness and lust at war inside of him. Anne's eyes closed slowly, the smoky lashes grazing her cheeks as she sweetly lifted her face as if for a kiss.

The moment was shattered as the waiter reappeared, armed with a huge platter of soft and hard cheeses, fresh summer berries and a crusty warm loaf of bread nestled in a basket covered with a linen napkin. A second waiter followed carrying a narrow crystal vase for the rose and a bottle of wine, which he proceeded to open and pour for Paul, waiting for his nod before filling both their glasses.

"This is delicious," Anne said as she bit into a piece of warm, fragrant bread smeared with a rich creamy Brie. "I didn't even know I was hungry!" Paul watched with pleased amusement as she piled her plate with cheese and fruit, eagerly tearing off pieces of bread from the basket between them.

He too ate and drank but he barely tasted his food. It was wonderful to see the new sparkle in her eye—a sparkle that wasn't there the last time he'd seen her. Amelia had said Anne would remember the witch's admonition to begin to live again—not with her mind but with her heart. Was that all it had taken—a magical suggestion to let the spirit of her husband depart? Was Anne truly ready to live again? To love again?

As if she were the one who could read minds, Anne, who had been gazing at the red rose suddenly said. "I had a dream last night. About Greg. About my husband. I thought I had forgotten most of it, but suddenly I can recall it, at least some of it. You were in it too."

"Tell me."

Anne stared at the rose a while longer. Without turning to face Paul she said, "Greg and I were walking along a beach. He turned to me and said he had to leave me. It was time to let him go. I didn't want to. I tried to hold on to him and he—" She paused, her face troubled. Paul put his hand gently over hers and she didn't pull it away.

Taking a breath she continued. "He started to melt. I don't know how else to say it. He just sort of melted—his skin sloughed off his bones. His eyes were like blue wax on his cheeks. It was horrible in a way and yet in another way I was expecting it. I mean, I knew he was right. That it was time..."

She looked up at Paul. "I knew it when I woke up. That something was different. This is going to sound really weird but it was like he had sort of—gone. I mean, he'll always be in my heart, that's not what I mean. But it was like a weight had been lifted. Or I don't know, a shroud taken off. Sounds melodramatic but that's what it's like. Like I can breathe again somehow. Like I'm supposed to breathe again. To start again."

"To live again," Paul added softly.

"Yes," Anne nodded. She looked at the rose. "And there was more. I was with you, sitting in this field of rose petals. And you gave me a rose! Just like this one. Only it had thorns and one of them pricked me. I remember staring at the blood on my thumb and you said something. You said—"

"I said, 'Love is like that sometimes'."

Anne stared at him, her eyes wide. "How did you know?" she breathed. "How did you know?"

"I can read minds, didn't I tell you?" Anne stared at him a moment longer, her mouth parting in surprise. Then she laughed. "For a second I almost believed you."

They sat in the courtyard long after they'd finished their small meal, drinking wine, talking of this and that, things of little consequence. She was with him—for now—that was all that mattered, he told himself. He would let her guide the conversation, steer the evening, make the choices.

As the dinner crowd began to arrive, they decided to take a walk. Anne, Paul was pleased to note, took the rose as they left. They moved easily together. Paul resisted his desire to take her hand. They walked along window-shopping at the antique shops and along one of the streets, a string of adult novelty shops filled with mannequins dressed in leather, sporting whips and chains. Both longtime New Yorkers, they weren't in the least fazed by the patrons going into these shops, though they did grin at one another as a man well over six feet, heavily made up and dressed in a red satin gown and very



high heels sashayed down the steps into the Pussy Cat Boutique, his bright blond wig slightly askew.

Finally they ended up back at Anne's townhouse. Paul waited as she unlocked the front door. She turned to him. "I've had so much fun. I don't want the evening to end. I honestly can't remember when I've had such a nice time." She smiled at him though he discerned the shadow crossing her face as if she did recall when she'd last had such fun, with a different man, a man now gone.

"I've had a wonderful time too," Paul said. "Next time we'll have to get up our courage and check out the Pussy Cat Boutique."

Anne laughed. "I had my eye on the Red Leather Whip."

"Did you now? That can be arranged." Paul twirled a pretend moustache between his fingers and Anne laughed, tossing her curls back.

Before he realized what he was doing, Paul bent down and kissed her, his lips finding hers, her taste at once new and achingly familiar. After a moment she kissed him back, sighing against his mouth as he cupped her face in his hands, drawing her closer to him.

All of Paul's held-back longing came rushing to the fore. He wanted to scoop her up into his arms and carry her off like some conquering Viking. Anne was the first to pull away, looking flushed and embarrassed. Laughing self-consciously she said, "Would you like to come inside for a while? I mean, just for a while. You know..."

He read her mind, aware she was promising herself she wouldn't "do anything stupid" this time, meaning let him make love to her. He forced himself to accept this. He wanted her desperately—but only on her terms. "That would be nice," he said. "Though I can't stay too long," he added to let her off the hook she obviously felt she was hanging from.

"Oh well then," Anne said, clearly relieved. "Come on up for a spot of tea, guv'ner." Her faux British accent made Paul laugh as he followed her into the foyer and up the stairs.

Anne made tea and they carried their mugs into the living room. Paul again admired the painting of the farm and asked, "Have you got any others?"

"Yes," Anne said, waving vaguely toward the hall that led to the bedrooms. "I have a bunch of stuff. Most of it's garbage though. Just dabbling, nothing much. I haven't painted seriously in years. I just didn't have the time when I was an investment banker..." She paused and her mouth opened as if she had more to say.

Paul waited and when she didn't continue prodded, "Yes?"

"Wow," she said, looking at him with surprise in her face. "I just used the past tense. I guess I really am done with it all! It's hard to believe because it was such a part of my identity for so long. And now it's like—I don't know, it's like it doesn't even matter! It's like I was kind of borrowing the whole money-power thing, pretending it meant something to me. And it's weird, because now it doesn't. God, what would Greg say if he knew I was such a traitor to the cause!"

She laughed ruefully. Paul said, "People change. Death changes people and not every change is always for the worst. As you rearrange your life, sometimes you find new paths to explore. It can be quite exciting really."

"I don't know. I love to paint but I never thought it meant much. I mean, my dad, well, he said it was just a hobby. A waste of time really."

"Something that brings joy and pleasure to yourself and others is hardly a waste of time."

"Well," Anne shook her head dismissively. "I don't know about that."

"Will you show me your other paintings?"

Anne looked a little uncertain but finally she nodded and said, "Okay. But it's really just a stack of old canvases I stashed in the study when we moved in. I've been meaning to go through them and throw out the really terrible ones and the ones I know I'll never finish."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't! Who knows what masterpieces are lurking in your study."

Paul was delighted by the series of paintings of the farms in the Hudson Valley – more pastoral scenes of upstate New York with rolling green hills and fields dappled with flowers as well as some of cows and horses. He loved the use of color and light that made them not simply renditions of photographs but vibrant, interesting work that somehow captured sunlight and wind as a living part of the work.

But it was the series of self-portraits that really caught Paul's eye. They were clearly of Anne but a younger Anne, her hair pulled back in a ribbon, her large gray-green eyes staring from the canvas with a sad somewhat fragile look. There were five of them, some only partially completed. As Paul began to look at them, Anne put her hand over his and said, "Don't look at those. They're horrible! I was trying to capture something of myself in them but all I succeeded in doing was creating some odd-looking waif. I hope I don't really look like that!"

"I can definitely see they are of you," Paul answered. "You have a real skill with the brush, Anne. You can capture the essence of things with a few strokes. You don't overwork the canvas as so many artists who use oils do. I wouldn't sell yourself short. Truly. I know something of art, Anne, and your work has real potential, real talent."

"Hush," Anne said, but he could see she was pleased. He had to turn away to keep from pulling her to him, wrapping her in his arms as he leaned down for a long, lingering kiss. "Thank you," she added. "I don't mean to be abrupt. I'm rather shy about my work, you see. Hardly anyone has even seen it. Greg used to say I should sell the farm scenes to motels for their rooms but I could never do that. Each one has a part of me in it, if you know what I mean. It's like I put a bit of my soul into each piece. I know that sounds corny but –"

"Not at all. It's the mark of an artist, Anne. The desire – the compulsion – to put a part of yourself into your passion. I suspect you put your soul into your work at the

bank too until it was no longer right for you. I admire a mortal who isn't afraid to give so completely of themselves."

"A mortal?" Anne grinned at him. "Is that a British thing? Are you excluding yourself from us *mortals*?"

Paul flushed, turning away. It was very rare he dropped his guard like that, speaking to a mortal as if she were a magical being, an equal. He would need to be careful if he intended to keep his true nature a secret from her. For, though there were mortals who knew of witches and warlocks, who knew of magic in the world, they were rare beings who had the capacity to understand and the ability to keep their knowledge secret. Most mortals would not tolerate magic in their midst—it threatened them and made them unruly. Witches and warlocks had learned discretion and it was second nature—or should have been.

Deciding to couch truth in a joke, he responded, "I, a mere mortal! Heavens, no! I'm a warlock. I can weave magic spells and keep you in my thrall, bending you to my will." He laughed, his eyes twinkling, his stomach suddenly churning. That had been foolish. Anne tilted her head at him, her expression bemused but she said nothing more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anne lay in her bed, reliving the wonderful day in her head. It had been so long since she'd simply had fun! The constant ache in her heart seemed to have eased at last. And Paul—with a silent apology to Greg, she had to admit Paul was the most handsome man she'd ever been with. His dark hair and dark eyes, his chiseled features and elegant nose, the hint of dark stubble on his strong jaw, the flash of white teeth against red lips when he laughed...

Anne sighed histrionically and then laughed at herself. If she didn't know better, she'd say she had a rather huge crush on the dashing mysterious Brit. She turned her head to what had been Greg's side of the bed. "Is it okay? Are you really okay with this?"

She waited for the familiar spirit to drift mournfully into her head but felt only a whisper of melancholy. Was Greg really at peace now? Did he really want her to love again?

Anne recalled Paul's kiss. They had been sitting side by side on the old overstuffed couch, each with a glass of wine. Paul had set his glass down and had taken hers from her hand as well. Leaning over, he'd brushed her lips with his, his hand moving along her bare thigh where her skirt had slipped.

The kiss had thrilled her—his hand left a trail of desire along her skin as it moved from her knee, pushing the full skirt aside as his fingers teased higher. Anne had pulled away, not because she didn't want him but because she wanted him too much. Recalling the last time they'd sat kissing on her couch and how she had ended up

naked, riding his cock like some kind of wanton slut—Anne didn't trust herself to go further. Paul would get the wrong idea about her or more accurately, the right one.

Instead she'd stood, brushing down her skirt, adjusting the strap of her blouse, taking a deep breath. Smiling perhaps a little too brightly she had said, "I had such a good time, Paul. Thank you for today." And dropping the false smile she added, "And thank you for understanding. I have to take this slow, Paul. It's so new for me. Not just because of Greg but because..." she paused, blushing suddenly as she realized she'd been about to admit how fiercely attracted she was to Paul, and how no one had ever made her feel the way he did. Amending what she'd been about to say, she continued. "Because I've just got a lot of things to work through. You know. I need time."

Paul had smiled, tilting his head as if he were reading her true thoughts along with taking in her spoken words. He had stood as well, saying, "Anne, thank you for a splendid time." From his pocket he took out what looked like a business card and handed it to her. Anne took the card, not sure for a moment if she were relieved or chagrined he was giving in so gracefully, so easily. She knew that wasn't fair—she could still recall his dark, burning eyes, their silent pleading just before he'd kissed her. Though as he'd said good night, those eyes were only dark, no passion firing, almost as if he'd cloaked the soul behind them. "Perhaps you would write your number on this one for me?" He'd handed her another card and a pen. She scrawled her number on the card and handed it silently back.

Paul bowed slightly as he took it, always the elegant European. "Call me when you wish—if you wish."

*When I wish...* Anne closed her eyes, wishing she didn't feel trapped by her own fears and insecurities. *What if I had said what was really in my heart? What if I'd pulled him to me, pushed his shirt up, pressed my face against that strong, smooth chest, rubbed my breasts against him like a woman in heat? What if I'd thrown caution to the winds and pulled his face down to mine, let him kiss me again, this time not pulling away if his hands strayed over my body...*

Anne closed her eyes, letting her own hands roam her naked form, pushing the sheets aside as she spread her legs. Her pussy was wet, hot to the touch, swelling under her fingers as she moaned softly in the darkness, Paul's strong body rising in her mind's eye. She licked her lips, imagining his hard cock as she knelt up beside him, taking its girth deep into her throat.

The blanket of rose petals in her dream was suddenly beneath her as Paul pressed her down against them. He kissed her lips, moving down her neck, biting her nipples, pulling them taut with his white teeth as he covered her body with his.

Gliding down, his tongue trailed along her thighs, leaving paths of tingling desire. He teased her, moving from one thigh to the other, his tongue licking along her inner thighs. Her pussy throbbed, desperate for his hot kisses. Grabbing his head, she forced his mouth into position. The fantasy Paul looked up, his eyes dark, his tongue sliding over his top lip. His dark wavy hair had fallen over his eyes and he shook it back, lowering his head to taste her at last.

As Anne feverishly rubbed her own pussy, she felt Paul's velvet tongue moving in steady circles toward her clit. "Paul," she whispered, as she neared orgasm, "Paul! Oh Paul! I want you. Oh, oh, oh...!" Paul reared up, grabbing her arms, pinning her wrists above her head against the crush of soft rose petals. As her own fingers entered her body, Paul's hard shaft slid in as well, making her groan and lift her hips to receive him more fully.

With his image painted on the inside of her mind, his body covering hers, utterly claiming her in fantasy, Anne cried out, her body succumbing to her fingers as her mind and heart succumbed to the man she barely knew yet longed for at that moment with every fiber of her being.

The orgasm she managed to wrest from her body was a pale imitation of what she'd experienced at his skilled and sensual hand, but still her heart pounded, her breathing quickening and then slowing as her hands dropped to her sides in the big, empty bed.

She lay still for several minutes, her mind shut sweetly down, her body thrumming with post-orgasmic pleasure. Finally she glanced at the clock. It was nearing midnight. What was Paul doing now? she wondered.

Paul lay in his bed, staring at the sliver of moon that showed itself in the skylight over his bed. He was naked on top of the covers, one hand under his head, the other lightly stroking his cock.

*It would be so easy, he thought, to give her a love potion. Just enough to ease her silly fears about becoming involved with someone again. Just a bit of my secret herbs slipped into her tea and she would be mine again.*

He sighed as he gripped his cock more tightly, sliding his fingers up and down the shaft as the delicious memory of the naked woman astride his cock, her hair wild, her face flushed with wanton passion, her breasts tipped pink and swaying softly, formed itself in his mind. God, how he wanted her! How he had wanted to take her tonight! To bend her with magic to his will.

Yet he had refrained. How odd to care what a mortal woman felt or thought about him. And yet he did! He wanted Anne, but on Anne's terms. The frustrating thing was she did desire him! Unable to resist, he'd eavesdropped on her thoughts as they'd kissed and as his hand had slipped up her satiny-smooth thigh. She had been on fire for him! Her passion was flaming inside of her yet she'd pulled away. She resisted him and denied her own impulses. She sent him away yet again.

Paul thought of the many women he could call right now. Women who had no need of witchcraft to entice them to his bed. He knew he was a handsome man, a man very few women would resist, no matter their circumstance. Was this part of Anne's appeal? That she rejected him? Was he so shallow, to be challenged by her refusal? Was she simply playing hard to get?

No, he knew it went beyond that, well beyond. Something between them had sparked the moment their eyes had first locked. Something Paul couldn't explain but nor could he deny.

Paul moved his hand more quickly over his cock, his breathing coming in staccato pants as he closed his eyes, remembering the naked girl, remembering the curve of her breast, her pale throat, the heady lush scent of her sex when he'd tasted her feminine sweetness.

He felt an almost violent impulse as his lust peaked, his cock hard as steel beneath his fingers. He wanted to take what should be his! Throw her down, tear her clothing from her body, force her legs apart. He wanted to press his cock against her silky, sweet wetness, to enter her without regard for her fears or hesitation. With primal lust he would fuck her until he was spent, claiming her body with his, pinning her beneath him as he plundered her sweet, hot perfection.

With a moan Paul arched up, his seed spurting over his hard belly and strong chest. He lay still some moments, recovering himself until his breathing slowed. Into the empty darkness he declared, "I will have you, Anne Wilson Kaliner, mortal woman who has captured my heart. No matter what it takes, I will possess you completely – body and soul. I swear it on all things magic."

## Chapter Seven

"This Saturday night? I'd love to go!" Paul had waited two days to call her—a situation that had at once relieved and annoyed Anne. She was glad he respected her need to go slow. Lovers called each other every day—they were not lovers. Had he waited a third day however, she might have broken down and called him herself!

He hadn't just called for a walk in the park however. Paul had invited her to the Donner Charity Ball—one of the most glamorous events of the season, this year to be held at the Waldorf-Astoria. Paul told her it was a black-tie affair. That meant she had to get a gown—something elegant and understated but dripping with good taste.

Anne grinned to herself. She hadn't been shopping in ages. She'd lost weight since Greg's death—too much—but she found she had a better appetite now. She could probably get away with one of her old gowns from when she and Greg had attended the lavish parties of the movers and shakers in the city, but she knew even as she thought this she was going to buy something new. Something never worn for another man.

"How do you know Harold Donner?" she asked. Anne knew of him by reputation but had never met him. She approved of his charitable work for the homeless and for medical research but had never been invited to any of his soirees or fundraisers.

"He's an old friend of mine from years back. He likes fine art and can afford to buy it. We met at an auction of French symbolist art."

"He's supposed to be fabulously wealthy," Anne said. "I wonder what beautiful starlet or model will be draped over his arm for the ball."

Paul laughed. "I guess a five-foot-four-inch balding man with a pot belly looks pretty damn good when clothed in a billion dollars!" They'd talked a while longer and Paul had ended the conversation with, "I'll pick you up at eight o'clock tomorrow then. I look forward to seeing you."

Anne hung up the phone, a smile lingering on her face. She sat in the study, her canvases still piled around her. She hadn't put away the self-portraits since Paul had looked at them. Did he really see talent in her work? He certainly seemed to know about art.

Anne moved to the old roll-top desk and opened the bottom drawer, feeling for the indentation at the back that allowed her to lift the false bottom. She hadn't been in the desk since Greg had died. Lifting the wooden slat on the bottom of the drawer, she felt beneath for the soft leather binding. Carefully she pulled it out, the faint lavender scent assailing her nostrils like an old friend. What would Paul think if he saw her reading this! She took the small, much thumbed-through book and sat back down on the loveseat in the corner of the room.

*Spells & Witchcraft for Mortals with a Magical Bent by Clara de Absinthe*

How intrigued Anne had been when she'd discovered the little tome, half buried beneath a pile of old, musty books. It had been on one of their many antique bargain hunts, this time in Mystic, Connecticut. Greg was bargaining with the owner over a library chair that served as a ladder when it was unfolded. Anne had been idly sifting through the old books when the soft red leather binding had caught her eye. Unlike the other books with their broken spines splotted green with mildew, this one seemed barely touched, its cover of supple leather, its pages gilded with gold, thin as tissue paper but easy to turn and all intact.

She had slipped the book out from beneath the others, intrigued by its title. Anne, who always considered herself a practical woman with no time for nonsense, had a secret poetic sensibility. It manifested itself in her painting but that was as far as she let it go. Yet this book had somehow spoken to her. There was no other way to describe it. She felt it warm in her hands, if such a thing were possible, as if it had finally found a place to go.

She'd flipped open the cover. There was no copyright date but someone had written *Isadora Francesca* – 1824 in a faded, spidery hand on the title page. The book was priced at one hundred fifty dollars, five to ten times more than any other book in the box but Anne didn't care about price. She wanted the book for its quaint appeal, she told herself. Oddly, she didn't tell Greg she was buying it. As he continued to haggle with the proprietor, she bought the book from his wife, slipping it into her large bag to examine later.

When they'd gotten home, Greg triumphant with his chair, Anne still didn't mention her purchase. She knew Greg wouldn't have minded her buying it but somehow once she'd purchased it secretly, she found she wanted to keep it a secret.

It had been several days before she had a chance when alone to take the book from her night table drawer. Sitting on the bed, she opened it and scanned the table of contents.

*Herbs and Gem Stones – The Ten Must Haves for the Novice Witch*

*The Power of Magical Suggestion*

*Simple Love Potions for the Inexperienced*

*Simple Incantations for Everyday Use*

*Binding Spells*

*Unbinding Spells*

*A Word of Caution*

Anne, considering herself a cautious person, at once flipped to the section on caution, which noted magic was not a parlor game but a serious business with potentially devastating results. *Even a mortal who is only dabbling in the magical arts can*



*unwittingly wreak havoc upon herself and those around her. Use this manual with care. It is not for the weak or the doubting. True witchcraft is contained in these pages, for those with the capacity to unleash it.*

Anne was intrigued despite her disbelief in anything magic. She was delighted by the detailed spells outlined on the pages, complete with illustrations of the various herbs and gemstones needed, along with incantations with pronunciation guides to aid in the effectiveness of the charms.

She wondered how one was supposed to come up with all the items necessary to concoct the various brews for making someone fall in love, fall out of love, get rich, become beautiful, wise or younger than their years. Where did one buy myrrh, dried yarrow blossoms, calendula blossoms, wild rose, jasmine, cinquefoil, fennel, carrot seed oil or blue chamomile? Did all "witches" keep a stock of crushed gemstone powders, including rose quartz, amethyst, amber, topaz, turquoise, ruby, tiger's eye and lapis lazuli? Did everyone's potions cabinet contain the dried, powdered and pressed animal claws, ears, tails and entrails necessary for some of the less noble spells?

Though she knew it was just fanciful, Anne enjoyed poring over the strange spells and charms but never dreamed of doing anything with them herself. What would Paul make of the book, she wondered? Paul had made several allusions to magic, she recalled, even referring to himself as a warlock, though obviously in jest. Perhaps he wouldn't laugh at her fascination and could appreciate the peculiar book for its eccentricity without judging her for buying it.

With no one to hide the book from any longer, she left it lying out on the desk.

Meanwhile she had a gown to buy! Not to mention matching shoes and an evening bag. Dressed in jeans, T-shirt and sneakers, her credit card and cell phone tucked safely in her pocket, Anne ventured out to make her purchases, humming under her breath, unaware of the appreciative stares and glances of the men who passed her, her mind entirely on Paul Windsor.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come in. Don't you look elegant!" Anne said admiringly as she opened her door for Paul. She'd buzzed him through, allowing him to come up the stairs himself. Now he stood in his tuxedo, the black jacket elegantly cut, emphasizing his broad shoulders and tapering torso. The silk bow tie was perfectly hand tied and the cufflinks and studs were of onyx set in platinum. Paul's dark wavy hair was slicked back, his cheeks smooth shaven, his cologne hinting subtly of juniper and tangerine.

Paul smiled broadly. "I can clean up nicely when I need to. But Anne!" He paused, taking in the sight of her. She was dressed in a satin gown the color of the ocean, the color of her gray-green eyes. It had delicate shoulder straps, a square neckline and a fitted, seamed bodice cut close to the body, the long skirt flaring at the knees. For the occasion she'd put up her unruly curls, now swept into a French twist held with silver and turquoise combs, her only ornament. Her makeup was minimal but effective, her

lips dark pink, her eyes rimmed in a thin line of kohl. "You are going to put all the other women there tonight to shame!"

Anne laughed. "Don't be ridiculous! This is right off the rack. Most of those women are going to be wearing designer gowns made just for them!"

"You could be wearing a potato sack and still be more charming than most of the jetsetters of the Manhattan scene, I assure you! But honestly, that color and style are stunning on you. You look like a queen. All that's missing is a diamond tiara. The silver combs however, will stand in nicely."

He produced a bouquet of red and creamy white roses from behind his back. Anne took them with a gasp of pleasure, burying her nose in the rich blossoms. She took them to the kitchen for a vase, feeling as excited as a high-school senior going to her prom.

Paul trailed behind her. "You know, I can't get those self-portraits of you out of my head. I would love to take another look at them, if you don't mind. We have some time. The limo will wait as long as we like."

"The limo!" Anne called back, as she arranged her flowers.

"That's the only way to arrive at one of these events." Paul grinned. "It'll be fun! We can have Champagne on the way if we like."

Anne came out of the kitchen with the vase of just-opening buds at the peak of perfection. She said, "Thank you for these lovely roses."

Paul nodded with a gallant smile. "About those paintings?"

"Really, Paul, I can't believe you're interested in the half-completed work of a college student but if you want to, why not?"

She led the way to the study where the canvases were still piled against the walls as she and Paul had left them. Paul moved toward the stack containing her self-portraits. As he started to lift them his eye was caught by the small red book laying on the desk, its title embossed in gold serif.

*Spells & Witchcraft for Mortals with a Magical Bent by Clara de Absinthe*

As Paul read the words, he felt the blood draining from his face, Anne's paintings forgotten. How in God's name had Anne come across this particular book! Had she any idea what she had? Paul turned to Anne. Trying to control his emotion and surprise, he asked, "Where did you get this? It's very rare. I think it's the only one of its kind."

"The only one?" she said, surprise in her voice. "So you're familiar with it? I found it in an old antique store in Mystic. I've had it a few years. It's just a trinket really. An oddity I found amusing."

"It's much more than that," Paul said, before he could stop himself. Clara de Absinthe had been notorious in the witch community for her lack of discretion. She thought nothing of sharing her witchcraft with mortals, teaching them spells that usually ended up getting them in far worse trouble than they'd been in to begin with. There was no overt law forbidding the passing of witchcraft to mortals but it was at best a risky business and at worst a fatal one. Witch hunts had ebbed and flowed over the

centuries, but anyone over a hundred and fifty years old remembered them well and shuddered at the prospect of history repeating itself.

Paul had met Clara once in France a few years before she'd died. She was an eccentric woman who presented in the guise of a redheaded vixen—voluptuous, sensuous, dangerous. She enjoyed ensnaring mortal men and had left a bevy of them longing for her, their hearts firmly in her grip for as long as she cared to hold them.

This spell book, so legend had it, had been written for a mortal woman with whom Clara had fallen hopelessly in love. Though she dabbled with men, it was women who enthralled her.

The woman in question was Eliza Asbury, a mortal with magical pretensions. Eliza coveted Clara's secrets and longed to become a witch herself. While Clara could teach her charms and spells, she could not imbue her lover with the essence of magic—that was a gift bestowed by nature.

Yet Clara had been able to extend Eliza's mortal life, using charms to keep her youthful form far past its natural age. In the end Eliza had died, her life extended by perhaps fifty years, but finally her heart simply gave out. When she died, Clara lay down next to her and drifted away to her own death, declaring she no longer wanted to be in the world without her Lizzy.

Paul glanced at the title page, seeing the unfamiliar name inscribed there. How many mortal hands had this book passed through? He turned to Anne, torn between a desire to share Clara's story and a lifetime habit of discretion when it came to magic and witchcraft. Assuming a light tone he said, "I'm, uh, familiar with the author. She was quite an eccentric personality. She wrote this spell book for a dear friend of hers."

"Was she a real witch?"

"Pardon me?" Was Anne teasing him? Or was there more to this mortal than he had thought?

"Well," Anne said, flushing. "I've never actually tried the spells but I can't help wondering if they really work. I mean, if you could ever find all those ingredients and figure out just how to mix them, who knows? Is it impossible? Do we really know everything there is to know of this world?"

Paul was thoughtful. He battled a momentary desire to confess all to Anne. If they were to be lovers—true lovers, not just play partners—didn't he need to tell her all his secrets? Yet his very nature argued against this. Paul Windsor, while open and friendly on the surface, was really a very private warlock. He'd always guarded himself against the sticky, awkward dangers of love. Why, in just the little time he'd known Anne, he'd experienced more heartache and pain than in a century of dallying with wenches and ladies of every walk of life.

Yet by the same token, he'd never felt so alive! So joyous. He awoke to a little birdsong in his heart each morning before he was even fully conscious. *Anne, Anne, Anne...* He realized with an embarrassed jolt the girl of his dreams was watching him, her expression quizzical. It was a good thing *she* couldn't read minds.

Looking at his watch, he said, "We should go down. Wouldn't want to keep Harold Donner waiting."

\* \* \* \* \*

A tall heavysset man with a shaved bullet-shaped head looked over the invitation Paul had handed him and then down at his list. Slowly he nodded. "Enjoy your evening, Mr. Windsor," and toward Anne, "ma'am." He nodded formally, the collar of his stiff white shirt too tight on his thick neck.

As they stepped into the large room at the top of the hotel Anne's eyes widened. Donner had secured the entire Starlight Roof for his charity ball. This evening the ceiling was partially retracted, revealing what stars there were bright enough to compete with the city lights. A full orchestra was playing big band music from the forties and many couples were already swaying together on the dance floor.

"It was recently renovated," Paul said, watching as Anne took in the Art Deco design with its marble floors in intricate patterns of black and white and the heavy damask silk curtains framing the floor-to-ceiling views of the New York City skyline. Crystal chandeliers sent cascades of sparkling light across the fanciful grilled ceiling, reflecting in the diamonds gleaming on the elegantly clothed women below.

There were already perhaps a hundred people there and at least a hundred more were expected and arriving in a steady stream. Paul could sense Anne felt a little overwhelmed as she leaned against him for both physical and moral support. "Just imagine them in their underwear," he whispered, smiling down at her. "And remember, you are the most beautiful woman in this room. The air around you fairly shimmers with your beauty."

"Paul, cut it out!" Anne said, laughing. "You do lay it on a bit thick at times." She elbowed him playfully, but he could feel her tension ease. She noticed someone waving toward them and said, "Is that someone you know?"

"Why, that's Harold Donner himself. Let's go say hello, shall we?" They moved toward Donner, each accepting a flute of Champagne from a waiter along the way. Donner was a short dumpy man, remnants of dark hair draped thinly across the top of his head. His face was kind, his small blue eyes squinting into half moons as he smiled up at them from a throng of men in black and white and women in every color of the rainbow, their gowns shimmering in the soft light of the chandeliers.

"Windsor!" he bellowed when they were close enough to be heard over the music. "Welcome, welcome! I'm so glad you finally decided to grace us with your presence. Been flitting about Europe, eh? Gadding about Asia, what? Too busy for your old friend Harold, am I right?"

"Harold, you know I wouldn't miss one of your parties." Paul genuinely liked Harold. He was what Paul's friends back in England would call "a good egg". He'd contributed and raised millions for any number of worthy causes, having made his fortune by marrying a diamond mine heiress from South Africa who had died

tragically, drowning at the beach while they were still on their honeymoon. Since that accident thirty years ago, Harold had never remarried, though he was not immune to the attentions of eager women, young and old, who found his money, if not his person, most alluring.

He'd multiplied his late wife's fortune many times over, selling the mines and investing in a number of successful real estate ventures in and around New York City. Now he turned his gaze to Anne. "And who is this lovely creature? You mustn't keep her a secret a moment longer."

Paul smiled, turning to Anne, proud to be with her. "This is Anne Kaliner. Anne, may I present Harold Donner, our host."

Anne offered her hand, which Harold kissed with some affectation, making her giggle. Harold began to introduce them to the circle of some of New York's most elite when he was interrupted. "Now I know where I know you from." A man of about thirty-five with a deep voice spoke up suddenly, leaning closer to Anne. "Granger Finch, isn't it? The investment bankers. You work for Bob Bennett, am I right? I never forget a face and certainly not one as beautiful as yours. You were an assistant on the Samson and Son deal, correct? Bet you enjoyed tagging along with the big boys, eh?"

"Actually I was in charge of that particular venture," Anne said coolly. She looked at him, trying to recall his name. He was quite tall with thick blond hair and an aristocratic face. Pale blue eyes bracketed a long, thin nose. His mouth was curled into a sneer that masqueraded as a smile. He was holding a large tumbler filled with amber liquid, probably whiskey. He took a long drink as he waited for Anne to recall his name. "Surely you know who I am?"

*Robert Langley.* Paul sent the name into Anne's mind, annoyed with the man for putting her on the spot. He'd plucked the information from the man's head, aware he was taking a perverse pleasure in embarrassing Anne. As the words settled in her consciousness, Anne smiled and said, "Robert Langley. Now I remember."

Langley nodded, though his smile touched only his mouth. Clearly the man was affronted. Paul could tell he was drunk and hoped that was his excuse for behaving so rudely. "Harold," Paul said smoothly. "Do forgive us but I'm afraid I'm being hopelessly drawn to the gorgeous buffet over there. Perhaps you'd care to join us for a bite of food?"

"I've already had two platefuls!" Harold laughed. "Forgive my lack of hospitality! I hate to think of anyone being hungry at one of these things with the food practically piled to the ceiling! Go on, go on. The beluga is heaven on earth. We'll catch up later. It's good to see you, Paul. And wonderful to meet you, Anne." As they turned away he whispered, "She's a keeper, Paul. Though I know you're as hopeless as me when it comes to commitment."

They sat at a small table, focused on the delicious food for the moment. Anne's plate included the caviar Harold had suggested along with a goat cheese tartlet, a few

stuffed mushrooms, a marinated chicken kabob in peanut sauce and some smoked salmon. She intended to go back for the praline éclairs, the chocolate dipped strawberries and the caramel cheesecake.

"You know," she said between bites. "I didn't remember that guy's name for a minute. I realize now I'd blocked it out. He was a jerk. Doesn't think women or I should say *ladies* have a place in investment banking. We're to be eye candy or at home cooking." She shook her head with disgust. "I always find it strange when young men hold such outdated beliefs, don't you?"

"I do. But prejudice in its many forms is handed down and carefully cultivated. There are more men out there like him than we'd care to think, though most in his position are more subtle about it." Paul snared two more glasses of Champagne and set one before Anne.

"He was never overt," Anne said. "He talked about it when I wasn't around. When the guys sit around drinking beer and spitting or whatever they do." She laughed. "But Greg told me later. Langley didn't realize we were married when he'd made the remarks. I imagine he was embarrassed when he found out."

"One can only hope," Paul answered. She looked at him as he sipped his Champagne, glancing around the room at the many guests now filling its space. He had seemed completely unaware of the lascivious stares he'd received from just about every woman in the place, old and young alike.

There were lots of good-looking men here, make no mistake. Anne recognized several famous television and movie personalities among the guests, though she herself wasn't especially impressed by fame. But even those who made a living by their looks couldn't hold a candle to Paul's easy grace and charm.

She loved the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he drank. She wanted to lean over and kiss his throat. To run her fingers through his hair, dark as a raven's wing, curling down the back of his neck. To loosen his perfectly tied bowtie and unbutton his shirt so she could kiss the smooth, hard chest just below.

She realized Paul was staring at her, his head tilted in that way he had when it seemed he was reading her mind. Feeling heat lick her cheeks, Anne focused again on her food, wondering if Paul were thinking about her in the same way.

The orchestra began to play a slow romantic tune and Paul said, "Would you care to dance?"

Anne looked over at the dance floor, the couples gliding over the marble floor, and hesitated. "I don't really know how to dance," she admitted. "My husband used to say I had two left feet," she grinned. "An old boyfriend once told me I try too hard to lead."

"You just haven't had the right partner," Paul said, standing and holding out his hand. Anne stood as well, somehow believing him. With Paul she felt she could do anything. The two glasses of Champagne probably added to this feeling but suddenly Anne felt a new confidence. She would dance with Paul Windsor, the handsomest, most elegant man in the room.

They moved to the dance floor and Paul took Anne in his arms, one hand on the small of her back, taking her hand in the other. He began to move across the floor, drawing her along in a natural rhythm, their hips swaying together. Gently he pulled her closer and bent to murmur, "You dance beautifully. And you smell wonderful." He kissed the tip of her ear and somehow the gesture was more erotic than a full-fledged kiss on the lips. Anne shivered and moved closer. Paul pulled her in, still guiding her with a light but steady pressure on the small of her back, making it easy to follow.

They danced through three numbers until finally Paul said, "Would you like to rest a bit? We can dance again later, as much as you like." Anne nodded and they moved back to their table.

Anne drank a third glass of Champagne, now feeling positively giddy. It was fun to just sit and watch all the glamorous people pass them. The party was in full swing, the liquor flowing freely, elegant couples laughing and dancing in a swirl around them.

A man was approaching the table. Paul said in a hushed voice, "Oh no. It's Joshua Cummings. A nice guy but he'll talk your ear off. Quick, before he gets over here, if you don't mind, you go off to the ladies' room or something for a moment. Then come back and rescue me. Say something like, 'Paul, we have to go now. Say goodbye to the nice fellow.'"

Anne laughed, standing a little unsteadily. She knew she had had too much to drink, but hey, they had a limo to take them home! Taking her beaded evening bag, she walked toward the ladies' room, suddenly keenly aware of her full bladder.

The ladies' lounge as it was called, was located down a long hallway. It took Anne a few minutes to find it. As she was about to enter, Robert Langley suddenly appeared – tall, blond and drunk.

"It's the stunning Anne Kaliner. We meet again," he said thickly. Anne gave him a small smile and tried to sidle around him.

When he didn't move she said, "Excuse me. I'm trying to get by."

"Yeah," he sneered, not budging. "I know all about your type. Just trying to get by on the coattails of your betters."

"Excuse me?" Anne said coldly, again trying to push past him.

"Does your husband know you're out at this gala affair with another man? I seem to recall another Kaliner at Granger Finch."

"My husband's dead," Anne spat, now thoroughly upset.

"Oh," Langley replied, still not moving. "My condolences. Glad to see it isn't getting you down. Found another guy, eh? Too bad I didn't know you were free. Beautiful babe like you."

"Look, I didn't like you when I worked for Granger Finch and I don't like you now. If you don't move aside I'm going to –"

"You're going to what? Beat me up? Sure, why not? Women are as strong as men, right? All liberated, pumping iron at the gym, sweat pouring down between those

gorgeous breasts." He put a hand on either side of her as she shrank back against the wall. He was leaning over her so she could smell the liquor on his breath. Why was no one coming in or out of the bathrooms? She tried to see around him, to find someone to call for help.

"Get away from me! You're drunk. You don't know what you're doing."

A smile curved his lips upward but there was derision in it rather than pleasure. "Don't I? I'm going to kiss a beautiful woman. You know you want it. All women want it. I'm rich. I'm handsome. What has that limey got that I haven't? Is his dick uncircumcised? Is that it? Does that turn you on?"

Anne struck the man in the face, stunning him for a moment. He grabbed her wrist, bending it painfully. Anne started to scream but he clamped a heavy hand over her mouth. *Paul!* Anne cried out silently, her eyes filling with tears, nearly wetting herself in her panic. This couldn't be happening on the roof of the Waldorf-Astoria with two hundred people dancing and laughing just down the hall. *Paul, help me!*

As Langley bent down, his mouth open, spittle gleaming on his lips, the sound of feet pounding down the corridor preceded shouting. "Get away from her, you bastard!" It was Paul flying toward them, as if he'd somehow heard her call and come to her rescue.

Langley stepped back a moment, looking confused. His face settled quickly into a sly grin as Paul came upon them. "She came on to me, buddy. Threw herself at me. You've got yourself a slut for a girlfriend, pal."

Anne, nearly sick with adrenaline, sagged against the wall, fully expecting Paul to slam his fist into Langley's finely featured face. But to her surprise and no doubt Langley's, Paul didn't raise his hand. Instead he murmured something, something in a strange tongue, the vowels rounded, the consonants sibilant.

All at once Langley seemed to crumple in on himself, his eyes rolling back, his legs simply giving way as he slid to the ground, his head hitting the marble floor with a resounding thunk.

Anne stared at the unconscious man and then at Paul. In an awed whisper she said, "You did that, didn't you? You did that! How did you do that?"

Taking her in his arms, Paul debated what he should say.



## Chapter Eight

"Is he all right?" Anne asked, worried despite her intense dislike of the man.

"He'll be fine. He'll come to in an hour or so with nothing worse than a headache. He was quite drunk already. A whisper of a suggestion was all it took to render him insensible."

Paul had waited while Anne at last had the opportunity to use the bathroom. When she came out, he was standing near the still-unconscious man lying sprawled ignominiously on the floor. "We'll leave him here. Let his friends come to his rescue, if he has any. They'll assume he was drunk." Touching her cheek he asked, "Did he hurt you, Anne? Did he compromise you in any way?"

Anne had to smile at Paul's quaint turn of phrase. "No, he didn't get a chance. But he frightened me. I called to you. Not out loud but in my head. You heard me, didn't you? Somehow you knew to come to me. And you did that too," she said, pointing to Langley. "Tell me what's going on."

They were distracted by three women walking toward them, laughing and talking as they moved in a pack toward the restroom, their coiffured heads gleaming blonde, red and brunette, their diamonds glittering. The blonde squealed when they were close enough to see Langley lying inert in front of the ladies' lounge. "Is he okay?"

"I can call 911," the redhead said breathlessly, whipping a slim pink cell phone from her evening bag. "Or did you do that already?" She stared at Anne and then looked up at Paul, her expression softening as she took in the man's handsome face and tall elegant form.

"He's had a bit too much to drink, I believe," Paul said. "I was just going to get him over to that couch—let him rest a bit. If you think medics and sirens are in order, by all means, make your call."

The woman flipped open her phone, looking very self-important while the other two women went off to find someone from the hotel to assist. Anne couldn't help grinning as she said, "He's not going to enjoy all the negative attention, I shouldn't imagine."

As Paul dragged the large man, lifting him by his armpits and hauling him toward a couch set along the wall, he agreed, "No, I don't imagine he will." He settled Langley in a semi-sitting position, still out cold, his mouth slack, a line of spittle running down his chin. "I suggest we make our exit before the hullabaloo ensues. Shall we?"

Paul offered his arm and Anne took it as they moved down the hall back toward the strains of music and gay laughter. After making their farewells, they were settled into the limo at last.

Anne said, "Okay. Now you can tell me what's going on. How did you read my mind? How did you make Langley pass out? What other magic have you been working on me without my knowledge?"

Paul gazed at her intently, as if weighing her trustworthiness. Finally he said, "Remember Clara's book?"

"My spell book, you mean?"

"Yes. The one written for mortals. For a particular mortal actually."

"Mortals. As if she were a real witch! As if there were such a thing." Anne said, laughing. When Paul didn't laugh with her, she faltered. Turning toward him, she worriedly scanned his face in the reflected lights of the city outside the car windows.

His expression was serious, his gaze intense. "My God," Anne said softly. "You're saying there *are* witches. Are *you* a witch?" She was confused a moment. "I mean, a...a warlock? Can you do magic? Cast spells? You're kidding, right? There's no such thing as magic! Everyone knows that."

Paul smiled. "Normally I'd encourage your disbelief, Anne. I don't make it a habit of sharing my true nature with mortals. They are rarely discreet and usually too simple-minded to process the concept of real magic. But with you it's different. I sensed it right away. Your intuitive awareness of the magic on some deep level—that's rare in a mortal. To even be aware of my magical intervention is highly unusual. But beyond that..." He paused as if gathering courage. "With you it's a matter of..."

He paused again while Anne waited, her expression incredulous. Paul laughed a short mirthless laugh. "Look at me! I've had centuries of experience but I can't even say out loud what has been ringing in my heart since I first laid eyes on you." He took a deep breath, looking as if he were about to plunge into a river of ice water. "I love you, Anne!"

"Oh," Anne said softly. A part of her wanted to answer in kind but somehow the words wouldn't reach her tongue. As she sat there mute, she began to process the rest of his statement...*centuries of experience*... Was this just a turn of phrase or did he mean it literally?

The effects of the Champagne were wearing off but Anne still felt dizzy. Paul continued. "Because of that love, I want to be honest with you. I want to share who and what I am. Finding Clara's book at your house was a kind of omen to me. A sign I could confide in you without scaring you away or making you think I was delusional."

"Confide in me..." she echoed inanely. This was too much! And yet, hadn't he been presenting her with evidence all along? The way he seemed to read her mind, the way she'd felt enthralled that first night, as if under a spell. And then tonight! He'd come to her when she'd called him in her mind! And with a few strange words he'd made a man fall unconscious to the floor! It was too much to take in. "I'm sorry," she said, finding it hard to breathe. "I don't understand."

"There's time. Let's get to your place first. We can talk more freely there." The window was up between the driver and their large passenger compartment but Anne nodded, needing time to gather her thoughts.

They rode along quietly for a while until Anne turned to Paul and said, "If you're magic, prove it."

"Excuse me?"

"Prove it. You know, turn me into a toad or something."

Paul laughed. "I don't think you'd really want to be a toad! I could do it actually, but it's not just a matter of waving one's hands over you and shouting, presto chango! Changing someone's form is quite complex and requires skillful magic, the proper powders and herbs and cooperation of the subject."

Anne stared him, not sure if he was putting her on. He had to be surely! "Okay then," she acquiesced. "Do something simpler. What's something easy to do?"

Paul pondered a moment. "I can make people do things by dropping suggestions into their minds. It's a kind of telepathic coercion, I suppose. I don't generally engage in it but I can do it. Less invasively, I can drop thoughts into your head and you think you've thought them yourself."

Anne looked skeptically at him. He added, "I told you Langley's name. You didn't remember his name at first, did you? I plucked the name from his head and put it into yours. I didn't like him even before he revealed what a cad he was. He was taking pleasure out of trying to humiliate you."

Anne remembered how his name had seemed to drop into her mind. But one often suddenly recalled things when one concentrated. That proved nothing. He'd have to do better. "What else you got? Show me some real magic."

*You don't need parlor tricks to convince you, do you, Anne? You already know in your heart I can weave spells. You've woven a spell around me with your beauty and charm, my love.*

Anne jumped in her seat and gasped. "Hey! You're in my head! Get out of there! This is so freaky! Paul, how did you do that? You weren't speaking but I heard you in my head. I heard your voice."

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to upset you. It's a knack I have. Most witches and warlocks can read minds or plant thoughts in the minds of others, but as with anything, there are levels of skill. I've always had a natural ability. It's what caught the attention of the warlock who became my mentor. I could enter the minds of the horses I trained and —"

"Horses! You talk to horses!" Anne practically snorted in her incredulousness.

Paul laughed. "Anne, I'm getting way ahead of myself. Let's get home first. Maybe I should take you to my place. Show you a few of the objects of my craft. It will make it easier to convince you and to explain the nature of my magic."

Anne thought about this a moment. She had yet to see how the mysterious Paul Windsor lived, though she was sure it was lavishly. He'd certainly proved himself the

gentleman since that first night when she'd practically thrown herself at him. "All right, as long as you have no expectations about, er, anything else." She blushed, realizing she had revealed her own thoughts, instantly turned toward sex. Paul only smiled as he pushed the intercom button, directing the driver to his address.

They were quiet as the limo weaved through the traffic. Anne's mind cast back to that amazing night. She felt heat in her cheeks as she recalled how she'd felt enchanted, all inhibitions lowered as if she had been under a spell. Whipping her head toward him she demanded, "Did you do *that*! Did you make me have sex with you with your witchcraft! Did you?"

She didn't need to be a witch or mind reader to see the guilt in his expression before he turned away. Anne sat back in the seat, feeling sick, feeling—violated. Had those feelings she'd felt for him been a sham? Had he created a sexual desire in her with his devilish magic? Was he no better than those creeps who put pills in their date's drink in order to get sex?

"Anne," Paul said softly. "Please. Please don't do this. Give me a chance first to explain. You have no idea how that spell has haunted me since. It's why I left you alone. It's why I promised myself since that night *not* to use even the most innocent spell or incantation with you."

Anne continued to look away from him but she was listening. "This is not easy for me. I do not fall in love. As confused as you feel now, I am doubly so! For a warlock to love a mortal—it's absurd!"

Anne roused herself from her wounded indignation long enough to be insulted anew by this remark. "What! We aren't good enough for you, is that it?"

"Please, this is not going as I had hoped," Paul said earnestly. "Look, we'll be at my place soon. I want to explain myself to you. If you'd rather I took you home at once and not trouble you again, I'll do that instead. It's your call. But if you agree to come with me, I want a promise you'll hear me out before making your judgment. That's all I ask. Where we go from there is up to you."

Anne nodded. Whatever he was, warlock or mortal, magic or just a magician, Anne knew her heart was too involved to pretend she could just say goodbye. "All right, Paul." She touched his hand, her mind still grappling with the stunning evidence of a reality that if true turned her whole world on its head.

"Thank you," Paul said, smiling gently at her. Anne did her best to smile back. She didn't succeed but hopefully he took the intention for the deed.

The doorman at Paul's apartment building nodded deferentially as he opened the door for Paul and the lovely young woman on his arm. The building was imposing with a large center courtyard and an impressive arched entrance. Paul moved through the marbled lobby to a separate smaller lobby. Using a key, he opened the private elevator that would take them to his penthouse suite. They were quiet on the ride up.

It was disconcerting to know Paul could read her mind at will. Anne wasn't sure that was something she could get used to. She stole a sidelong glance at him, but he was

staring up at the numbers as they flashed by. She was distracted by their arrival on the top floor of the building. Paul's was the only apartment on the floor. He unlocked the massive front door and said, "Welcome to my humble abode."

Anne couldn't help the small gasp of appreciation as Paul flipped on the lights to a large living room. The wall facing Central Park had huge windows from floor to ceiling set at intervals. There were numerous bookshelves and display shelves full of unusual artifacts and crystals. The furniture was primarily of black leather and silver chrome, highlighted by dramatic lines and elegant curves. Vivid geometric area rugs were scattered over the blond hardwood floors.

It was the paintings on the walls that caught Anne's eye, that made her gasp with admiration. "Gustav Klimt," she breathed. "*Danae*."

Paul followed Anne over to the large, very good reproduction of Klimt's painting of the Greek legend of Zeus' mating with Danae. The erotic image of the naked woman, her thighs drawn up with a stream of gold and silver flowing between her legs had always been one of Anne's favorite.

Paul's magic revelations for a moment forgotten, Anne peered closely at the painting, remarking, "Look at her fingers. The way they're curled like that. I always wondered why she would curl them as if she were tense or stressed when the rest of her body shows such erotic languor."

"She's having an orgasm," Paul offered.

"What?"

"Her fingers are clenched in ecstasy. At least that's what I always assumed. She is in the act of being made love to by a god in the form of liquid gold. Bound to be a rather ecstatic experience, wouldn't you say?"

Anne flushed as she turned to the next picture, this one much smaller, framed in gold with no glass to protect it. She peered closely at it—a small portrait of a woman with huge gray-green eyes and unruly curls falling about her face. She was sitting on a chair in a room cluttered with ornamentation in the trademark rich and lavish colors that marked Klimt's work. In sharp contrast to the colors behind her, the woman was dressed in white, perhaps a wedding gown, her face very young, the eyes wide and innocent.

"I've never seen this one," Anne said. "Where did you get it? It looks like an original." Her voice was hushed with awe.

"It is. It was one of the lesser-known works, stolen by the Nazis along with hundreds of Klimt's pieces. This one reappeared about thirty years ago in a private collection. When it went up for auction a few years back, I had to purchase it. You can see why I had to have it."

"What do you mean? I don't understand." Anne felt strange. The girl in the painting could have been her, though the nose was slightly longer and the hair a lighter color.

"I don't either, not entirely. When I saw the picture, I fell in love with it. With the delicate beauty of the girl depicted there. When I saw your self-portraits, I was reminded of the painting at once. This sounds very odd, even to my own ears, but it's as if we were destined to meet, Anne. Destined to be together. You with Clara's spell book, me with this painting."

He turned toward Anne, who was swaying, the world seeming to shift as her legs failed to cooperate in holding her up. "Here, let's sit down. It's been a long, very strange night for you, I'm sure." Paul led her to a black leather couch. Anne sank back gratefully, clutching a red silk pillow she found there, holding it over her belly as she rocked slightly forward.

Paul sat next to her, close but not touching. Anne could feel desire for him well up in her like a live thing. His scent was intoxicating—despite herself, she closed her eyes, breathing him in, longing for him. Her pussy felt swollen between her legs and her nipples stiffened. Angrily she shook her head. "Don't do that! Don't trick me into desiring you."

"Anne! I promised you—I promised myself—I wouldn't do that. I have not used magic with you since that first night. You have my word on that. Please believe me." She looked into his dark, clear eyes and sensed he must be telling the truth. The sexual desire she felt for him was entirely of her own making! Anne hid her face in the red silk of the pillow, aware what her outburst had revealed. She felt Paul's warm hand upon her bare shoulder.

"Anne, please don't fight this so. I'm delighted you find me desirable, at least on some level. I'm not asking for you to love me. No one can ask that of another. I know you've only just found the will and desire to begin to truly live again. But don't shut me out arbitrarily. Don't shut me out because of fear or because you don't understand things. Give me a chance. Give us a chance. Please."

Slowly Anne looked up. "Okay. I'm listening. Tell me about witches and goblins and ghosts. Wriggle your nose, say abracadabra and turn me into a pumpkin. Wait, not a pumpkin—a fairy princess!" She laughed, feeling a little better. He was right—why did she have to cling to worry and fear with such ferocity? When was the last time she had just let go and truly trusted someone?

"Thank you," Paul said softly. He began to tell her about witches and warlocks. About their place in mortal lives, about their secrets and their abilities. He told her about his own past and how he had been discovered by another warlock interested in his special way with animals.

When he mentioned the year of his birth, 1753, Anne blurted, "So you're over two-hundred-fifty years old! Yet you look like a man of thirty-five!" He explained about guises and the magic it took to maintain a guise or change it.

"This is actually how I look—how I looked as a young man. We magical folk age much more slowly than mortals but we do age. Many witches and warlocks change their guises entirely over the centuries, perhaps selecting whatever is most popular and

admired during a particular era as the basis for their looks. I never cared much for shape changing—I like being myself.

"I appear to be a man in my mid-thirties because I like this body—it works well, it's strong and my mind is sharp. It's a vanity perhaps, but it has its uses."

Anne laughed despite herself. "I imagine it does! You're way too good-looking for your own good. That's the first thing I thought when I saw you!"

Paul grinned. "As I recall, your first thought was that I was a jerk and you fervently hoped I wouldn't try to talk to you."

"Well," Anne looked embarrassed but retorted, "If you're going to eavesdrop in people's heads, you deserve what you get!"

"Agreed," Paul said soberly. "And just so you know, I have to make a conscious effort to listen in to people's thoughts. They don't just come tumbling into my head. If it will give you comfort, I can probably teach you a very basic blocking spell to keep nosy parkers like myself out of your head entirely!"

"You could teach me? Real spells? Magic stuff?"

"Certainly. Why do you think books like Clara's are so popular? Simple spell books have been written for mortals and by mortals for centuries. Most of the spells in them don't work or require magic to be effective. But some simple incantations can be quite effective if you know the words—the way to arrange the sounds to change what is to what you want it to be."

They fell silent a moment. It was well past midnight. Should she ask him to take her home? Get her a cab? Or should she give in to her body's yearning, though her head still didn't know what to make of the amazing revelations she'd heard tonight.

"Paul" she said, turning toward him as he turned toward her, saying her name at the same precise moment. "Anne."

Their heads touched as their lips met, a kiss each had waited all night for. His lips were so sweet, his tongue dancing into her mouth in a way that made her shiver with pleasure. She pulled him closer so their bodies touched, her breasts brushing his chest. He was the first to pull away, gently disengaging himself from her embrace.

"Will you stay, Anne? Will you stay the night with me? Without magic to protect either of us, will you share my bed? If you're not ready, say so. I'll see you home and court you as patiently as any man who has found a woman worth waiting for."

He stood, still in his tuxedo, though his bowtie was askew from their embrace, his hair falling into his eyes. Anne wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anyone. At the same time, she felt nervous, her heart fluttering, her breath catching.

Paul had already seen her naked and at her most vulnerable. He'd made delicious love to her and she'd responded as she'd never been able to with another man, even Greg. Yet how much of that response was due to his magical manipulation? Would this time pale in comparison, devoid of magic?

Yet despite her trepidation, Anne found herself longing for the feel of his hands on her body, his mouth on hers, his cock deep inside of her... She flushed, aware he was waiting for her to answer. To speak aloud.

"I want to stay," she said at last, her voice hoarse with lust. Paul held out his hands and Anne placed hers in his. He whispered, "I want you, Anne. God, how I want you."

He led her down a hallway, past several rooms to the master bedroom. The room was large with original oil paintings and watercolors hung on the walls. A black lacquer framed silk screen partially obscured the four-poster bed set against one wall.

Paul led Anne to the bed and she sat on the edge, watching him undress. He removed the silk tie, the jacket and the linen shirt, setting the cufflinks on a high mahogany bureau and hanging the clothing over a chair. He returned to her, his chest bare, his eyes blazing.

He removed the rest of his clothing, standing naked before her like a Greek god. Anne couldn't help raking his body with her eyes. He defined masculine perfection, from his strong, smooth pecs to his six-pack abs and narrow hips, his erect thick cock a testament to his desire for her.

Anne was as aroused as she had been that night at her townhouse, yet she felt different—no longer cocooned in a magic spell of desire. It was more frightening as a result—her first *real* time with a man since Greg's death. Yet in spite of this or perhaps partially because of it, she was all the more on fire.

Standing, she slipped the satin straps of her gown from her shoulders. Paul moved closer, reaching around her to unzip the dress. He whisked it away as she stepped out of it, laying it carefully over another chair. The dress had a fitted bodice, making it unnecessary for Anne to wear a bra. Stepping out of her shoes, she rolled her pantyhose down her thighs and tossed them aside. She stood now in her silky panties, at once shy and full of lust.

Paul took the silver combs that held her hair, gently pulling them away. Her curls cascaded around her face and she shook her head, tossing her heavy mane of hair back, though most of it fell again around her cheeks. Paul touched her face, gently tucking her hair behind her ears as he bent to kiss her.

He pulled her close, his hands running over her back and ass as they hungrily kissed one another. Anne couldn't control the shudder of pleasure as his strong fingers stroked her flesh. Lowering her to the bed, he knelt over her. His lips were warm and soft as he suckled her nipple to a stiff point. She gasped at the nudge of his teeth, which created a dual sensation of pleasure and pain that confused but aroused her. He did the same to her second nipple, and though she was expecting it this time, still she couldn't contain her gasp.

She felt his fingers slip along the side of her silk panties, grazing her labia. Instinctively Anne closed her legs, shyness winning out over lust for the moment. Paul cupped her mons with his large hand, his fingers slipping down between her closed legs, sending sparks of electric sensation through her body. Despite herself, her legs fell



open, her body aching for his hot perfect touch. Slowly he rubbed over the silky panties, her own heat and moisture dampening the fabric.

Anne moaned, her legs falling wider apart as her desire overcame her modesty. When she felt him tug at the sides of her panties, Anne lifted her hips, nearly desperate for his touch. She felt him pull them down her legs and still she kept her eyes closed.

His fingers sought her most private place, dipping into her wetness, drawing it up over the soft folds of her pussy. Paul began a slow tease, moving his hand over her rapidly swelling sex, gliding in light circles toward her clit, only gracing it now and again with his touch.

Anne squirmed, at once on fire and frustrated. Laughing softly, Paul relented, touching her as she needed to be touched, drawing a long, low moan of pleasure and approval from her lips. His fingers were more skilled than even her own at seeking out the little hard nubbin at her center, applying just the right pressure for just long enough to make her pant before he pulled away, again teasing the whole of her sex, entering her vaginal tunnel with a perfect thrust of two fingers, withdrawing them silky wet with her desire to lubricate her delicate folds.

She felt his tongue lightly touch her clit and it took a second to realize it was his mouth now against her, not his fingers. A moment's self-consciousness returned, but even if Anne had wanted to close her legs, she couldn't as Paul now knelt between her thighs, his hand on either leg to keep her open to his caress.

As he licked and kissed her, Anne became lost in pure sensation. Her mind shut down at last, every fiber of her being now focused at her sex. When Paul again slipped a finger into her wetness, his mouth still locked at her clit, Anne felt the world shift and she began a tumble into orgasm. Unable to control herself, she arched up against his mouth and fingers, thrusting and gyrating, panting rapidly, intent on her pleasure. "Oh, oh, oh, oh..." she moaned a steady mantra as the world narrowed to her need for release.

What was happening! Her orgasm, instead of subsiding quickly as it did when she masturbated, seemed to go on and on, intensifying into something close to pain, but still this side of mind-shattering pleasure. Weakly she tried to push his head away. "I can't—you have to..." She couldn't seem to finish her sentence, his tongue for the moment obliterating the words. Again she pushed at his head, trying to dislodge him from her throbbing pussy. Lightly he gripped her wrists, ignoring her feeble protests as he continued to lick and suckle her oversensitive flesh. Sagging limply into the soft sheets, she surrendered, nearly unconscious from overstimulation. Yet though she might have thought he'd wrested every possible ounce of ecstasy from her, now she felt a rumble of rising orgasm moving through her loins with the inexorable determination of a tidal wave. As it washed over and through her body, she heard a keening squeal, unaware it was her own voice. Her body writhed and shuddered beneath his skillful attentions until at last she was completely spent, a rag doll splayed and inert on the bed, her heart pounding, her pussy throbbing, her mind utterly blank with pleasure.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was lying naked and splendid on the rumpled sheets, the moon through the skylight silvering her body. Her hair was wild on the pillow, her body languid, her firm breasts rising and falling lightly as she recovered. Paul drank her in—the sweet flush of lust staining her throat and chest, the dark pink nipples still at attention, the long line of her torso tapering at the waist. Her legs were akimbo, bent and spread where they'd fallen open as his lips and tongue had kissed and suckled her pussy until she'd shuddered, pulling his head close with her hands, crying out as she trembled and heaved against him.

As he tasted her spicy sweetness, lust had pounded through his veins like a tribal drum beating its sensual rhythm. Power spurred him on—the power of controlling her orgasm, pressing her past her own envelope of pleasure, drawing climax after climax from her hot, delicious little cunt. He hadn't let her go until he was certain not another drop of pleasure could be wrested from her body. She lay now like a plundered wench, a victim of passion. His own passion still raged unchecked within his loins but Paul controlled himself, at least for the moment. He knew his mortal lover needed time to recover. He would not claim her with his cock until she was again on fire, begging him for what he longed to give her.

Paul stroked Anne's soft cheek. She smiled a dreamy smile but didn't open her eyes. He couldn't remember a time when he hadn't used at least a modicum of magic in his lovemaking. Yet true to his promise to them both, this time what magic there had been was of the mortal variety. Unlike the first time they'd made love, when he'd altered her mind sufficiently to allow her free rein with her lust, tonight her passion was freely given. Paul found the gift of it worth infinitely more as a result.

Anne turned her head to snuggle against Paul's chest. He took her into his arms as his cock nudged itself between them. To his delight, Anne reached down, lightly gripping his shaft, causing it to harden even farther, if that was possible. She opened her eyes, their clear green gray capturing him anew. They were like the sea on a calm day, clear and brilliant, fringed by dark soft lashes.

He couldn't suppress a small moan as her fingers teased his cock. His eyes fluttered shut as her fingers wrapped more tightly around him. Her touch was exquisite, so much so Paul knew he would come if she didn't stop soon. As if reading his mind, Anne released his cock and pushed him gently to his back.

Lifting herself over him, she straddled his hips, pressing his shaft between their bellies as she leaned over to kiss him, her nipples grazing his chest. Slowly she sat up and Paul lay still, waiting. Again her fingers curled around his cock as she maneuvered to lower herself onto him. She was still wet from his kisses and her own arousal, and his cock slid in easily. He felt the tight grip of her vaginal muscles milking him as she began to lift and lower herself, her hands pressed against his chest for balance. "Paul," she whispered as she began to move backward and forward and from side to side. The

friction was perfect. Paul brought his hands to Anne's slender hips, lightly gripping her as she rode him.

Anne opened her eyes, pushing her hair back from her face as she leaned down to whisper throatily, "No magic, right? You promised. This is just us."

"Yes, I promise. No magic but your beauty. You lovely, sexy girl, you don't need any magic to drive me wild. Feel me inside of you. Take me, my love. Take what I have to give you." He gripped her hips, pulling her hard against him, his touch no longer gentle as he thrust deep inside of her.

Anne responded with a grunt, her eyes squeezing shut, her lips parting in a primal pant. He swiveled beneath her, making her cry with pleasure at each skillful twist. Anne moaned, rocking his cock in a delicious clench. She began to shudder over him, her body no longer in her own control. Her hair whipped wildly around her face as she rode his cock with utter abandon.

She began whimper, little mewling cries of desperate pleasure as she rocked and gyrated over him. Paul opened his eyes, watching her through the haze of his own lust. Her head fell back, her breasts lifting with her movement, drawing his eye up the long, smooth line of her throat. "Oh God!" Anne screamed. Her eyes were squeezed shut, her teeth biting her lower lip as she gripped his shoulders, still rocking against him.

Paul let his body go at last, no longer able to hold back his pent-up desire as Anne climaxed against him and fell forward, the beating of her heart like a drum against his chest. Ecstasy consumed him as her name was wrenched from his lips.

He held her for a long while, his cock slowly easing from her sex as he gently rolled her to her side, his arms still around her. She smelled wonderful! Like lavender with a hint of ginger plus some indefinable sweetness all her own. Paul knew for certain he was firmly in the grip of love—love for a mortal woman.

A wall around his heart built from a lifetime of holding himself aloof and apart, impervious to the love of any woman, had come tumbling and crashing around him at the hands of this delicate, beautiful young woman lying sweetly in his arms. He felt as defenseless as a mortal, certain his magic was no match for her charms.

## Chapter Nine

Paul drew back the heavy velvet curtains that kept the area in near-darkness to protect the priceless objects within. At once the room was bathed in golden sunlight slanting through the huge picture windows on the east wall, reflecting and refracting into a prism of color over the dozens of crystal orbs set on shelving on the opposite wall.

"Wow," Anne breathed as she stepped into the room, her eyes wide. The orbs were of various sizes with diameters ranging from three inches to twenty-four. Each one rested on a pedestal of gold or silver. The orbs weren't clear like glass but opaque, mostly dark grays, golds and reds. The colors almost seemed animate, swirling and shifting in the sunlight.

Paul smiled as he watched Anne turning slowly round the room, her eyes wide, her mouth slightly open, reminding him of a small child on Christmas morning. Bottles of every color and size were neatly but closely lined along the shelves of one wall, some sealed with wax, some stoppered with cork. Nestled between them were bags of silk and leather, some tied with string or ribbon, some sewn shut. Along the third wall were shelves of books—ancient-looking tomes bound in cloth and leather with brilliant lettering along the spines of some, others with no titles at all. Next to the bookshelf was a high wooden bureau with two columns of narrow drawers. The bureau's marble top was lined with more mysterious glass bottles, leather pouches and gemstones strewn carelessly amidst the clutter.

But it was the crystal balls that drew Anne. She crouched near a shelf, Paul standing just behind her. "They're so beautiful! Do they really work? Can you tell the future by looking into one of these?"

"No, I can't. There are those far more skilled than I who can catch glimpses of what will be or more accurately, what might be. But a crystal orb's real power lies in its ability to see the present and the past."

"Whose present and past? The person looking into it?" She stepped closer, peering into a ball on a lower shelf, watching it swirl in pearly gray. "I can't see anything at all."

Paul laughed. "I would have been very surprised if you could! While the crystals themselves do contain magic elements, it takes a skilled user to harness that power. Some witches devote themselves almost exclusively to the study of crystal orbs. I have a friend who excels in the crystal arts. I myself can use them to some effect, but not with anything like the skill and power she possesses."

Anne turned to Paul, her delicate brow furrowed. "Who is she?"

He read her jealousy on her face without the need of telepathy and grinned. "I can't decide if I'm pleased you're jealous at the thought of another woman or annoyed you

could be so silly! The woman in question is over four hundred years old and more like a sister to me than anything."

"Well," Anne responded, "I was just asking. Don't assume I'm jealous—that's ridiculous!" She turned away. "And stay out of my head!" Paul laughed. She added, "That's the first thing you have to teach me—the nosy parker spell or whatever you called it."

"The blocking spell."

"Yes. That one. But first, show me a crystal ball. I want to see something in it."

"Well," said Paul, stepping forward to select the largest orb on the shelf—a dark gray ball shot through with eddies of swirling black. "This orb works best for me. I have the most success with my own past. That's the easiest crystal magic to master—one's own past and present. I'll need to get a vision potion going."

When Anne looked blank he explained, "That's a potion prepared to aid in the distillation of memory and thought." Paul selected two small bottles from the shelf, one a mottled green, the other a deep royal blue. He also opened a drawer of the bureau, rifling through its contents for a moment before withdrawing a small sachet of powder.

"We'll do the spell in here," he said, opening a narrow door next to the bookshelves. Anne followed him into a smaller room, this one dark, its walls draped in black velvet. Instead of turning on a light, Paul lit a number of thick tall candles set about the room on tall tapering iron stands. He gestured toward a daybed, "You might as well relax. This will take a few minutes."

Anne, who was wearing one of Paul's pajama tops, its sleeves hanging past her hands, obediently plopped onto the daybed, sitting with her legs crossed in the center of it while she watched the warlock in his preparations.

Carefully Paul set the crystal orb on a stand near the daybed. Moving to a sideboard, he lit a fire under a burner upon which rested a small iron pot. He poured liquid in a silver stream from the green bottle until it was empty. From the blue bottle he added only a few drops, which sizzled and hissed as they touched the silver brew. Finally he added a pinch of vivid pink powder, whispering something guttural and unfamiliar to mortal ears as he stirred the potion with a silver ladle.

As the potion began to heat, the room was filled with a strange, pungent scent. Retrieving the crystal ball, Paul said, "Let's get comfortable here. I'll sit back and you lean against me." Paul, who was wearing the bottom half of the pajamas that matched the top Anne was wearing, settled on the bed. He put one strong leg on either side of Anne, who snuggled back against his bare chest. Carefully he placed the ball on the bed between Anne's legs, gently gripping it in his large, capable hands as his arms went around her.

As he murmured, his eyes closed in concentration, the dark gray orb began to change, its colors shifting, first to a pale silvery gray then to an opaque white and finally to a clear crystal so the faded velvet bedspread showed beneath it. The heady scent of magic was ripe in the air of the small room, the vision potion now at its most potent.

"I'm not that good at this really, but I can show you something from my past. Let me think." He paused, staring up at the ceiling as if the answer might be there. "How about way back when I was ten? I was just a dormant fledgling then. It was before Theo, my warlock mentor, discovered me. Before I learned my natural instincts with animals had more to do with magic than any innate skill on my part."

Paul fell silent as the orb began to darken again. Anne's soft warm body against his made it somewhat difficult to concentrate but he didn't care. He wanted her there. Closing his eyes, he moved his hands over the orb. Slowly it began to glow, seeming to light up from inside. All at once it revealed a pastoral scene of rolling hills and waving fields of purple and gray-green heather.

Anne breathed softly. "It's like a movie in there," she whispered. "That's amazing. Look at that castle!" She shifted against Paul's chest, her lower back pressed at his groin. Paul forced himself to ignore the sweet pressure against his cock, focusing instead on the moving images contained in the crystal.

"That's Windsor Castle actually. And that winding river is the Thames. But the memory is more personal. My father owned horse stables. See there." He moved his finger over an area of the globe and the scene enlarged, revealing a large wooden building and an even larger fenced-in enclosure. A young boy was clinging to the back of a black stallion.

"Is that you, Paul? Just a boy on such a huge horse! What was your father thinking, to allow you on that horse, barebacked at that?"

"My father knew I could handle that particular horse when others could not. He came to us for a song because the previous trainer couldn't control him. They were going to put him down or set him back in the wild—he was that difficult. We'd had him for about a week I think, when I finally dared to mount him.

"This memory remains with me because I have never forgotten that horse, even these centuries later. I called him Shadow because he was black. Not very original, I grant you." Paul laughed and then sighed, remembering. "My father allowed me to keep him for my own and I loved him more than most humans I have known."

In the orb the boy was very still on the horse, more draped over his neck than sitting on his back. He was stroking the horse's mane, his face pressed against the horse's head. Paul remarked, "It took me about four hours to get to that point. This is after a week of just staying near him. Not too near but close by. I would leave him treats—apples mostly, he loved apples. That day was the first time I'd actually mounted him. I knew once I'd done that, I'd win him over.

"Though I didn't realize it at the time, that was my magic kicking in. I could focus and actually enter the beast's mind in a way. Not as easily as I can penetrate a human mind with its cognizant thought processes and sentience. But a horse has a mind too, you know. They have feelings as well, that can be tapped into and harnessed.

"Once I'd succeeded in getting close enough, I would hum into their sensitive ears. A tuneless hum that somehow lulled the animal into a trancelike state. Then I could

telepathically suggest the behaviors I wanted, suggest that they were calm, they were safe, I was to be trusted. I didn't understand then it was magic or that I would develop and hone the skill, using it on mortals to much greater effect."

He grew silent as they watched the horse suddenly rear up. Anne drew in her breath sharply, her eyes locked on the image. The boy clung to the horse's neck, his strong legs tight against its flanks, his face still pressed flat against its head. The horse calmed after a time, again standing still.

Anne shifted against Paul. "This is so much to take in. I don't know whether to believe it's real or just some elaborate trick you've been playing on me."

The orb darkened, the image lost as Paul's concentration was broken by her words. Paul stroked Anne's bare thigh, her skin soft as satin. "Perhaps you don't need to decide anything at all right now, except whether you'd like me to make love to you right here or carry you back to my bedroom where I can ravage you in greater comfort."

Anne giggled and pressed her cheek against Paul's bare chest. "Well, wench. Answer when you're spoken to." Paul's voice had become stern but the twinkle in his eye belied his words.

"How about the bathtub?" Anne suggested shyly.

Anne hadn't properly appreciated Paul's lavish master bath the night before, having only used the toilet located in a side stall next to the bathroom and splashing water on her face before tumbling back into bed with her new lover. Today she looked around the room in awe, impressed not only with its elegant luxury but the beautiful attention to detail. Instead of traditional sinks, there were two large bowls of hand-blown green-tinted glass resting on a long black marble counter, gold faucets perched over them. A large antique-framed mirror hung over each bowl. Wall sconces were set into the sea-green tiled walls on either side of the mirrors. There was a tall armoire along one wall. The floors were white marble with thick black bath rugs scattered about. The windows were of stained glass in simple but pleasing geometric designs.

The sunken bathtub was huge with gold faucets curving over either end like lilies swaying on their stalks. The curving wall surrounding the tub was inlaid with Italian mosaic tiles. But what most enchanted Anne was the chandelier suspended over the tub. Instead of light bulbs, long white candles were set in concentric circles amidst the crystal.

"That's so beautiful! But how do you light it? And don't the candles drip? It doesn't look very convenient but it's lovely nonetheless."

Paul smiled at her and said, "Not all witchcraft is devoted to casting spells on innocent mortals. Sometimes it's just a matter of practicality." He waved his hand toward the chandelier, murmuring his strange secret language and voila! The candles lit by magic, the light of the fire sending a rainbow of color through the prisms of the cut crystal teardrops. Anne couldn't help but clap her hands in delighted approval.

Paul next turned his attentions to the tub, bending to touch the tall gold faucets. The water began to fill the tub as the room swirled with steam. Again Paul murmured, this time dropping something into the water as he did so.

"Now *this* I have got to learn!" Anne laughed as a tub that should have taken half hour was in a matter of seconds filled with hot, delicately scented water. Paul turned to her, his expression suddenly serious as he gazed at her, the tub for the moment forgotten. Slowly he began to unbutton the pajama top and Anne stilled, her large gray-green eyes watching his long, strong fingers.

He slid the top from her shoulders, dropping it on the floor as he pulled her close, bending to kiss her. Anne closed her eyes, lifting her face to his, torn between a desire to see more of this mysterious man's amazing magic and just accepting the magic of his kiss. The room was warm with steam from the tub but still Anne shivered as Paul bent lower, catching her sensitive nipple between his teeth.

He pulled it erect, drawing a moan from the girl. Moving to the other breast, white teeth flashed against her pink nipple now darkening and engorging with desire. His hands moved down her slender sides, pushing the silky fabric of her panties as they went. Paul knelt, wrapping his arms around Anne's waist, resting his cheek against her soft pubic curls, his hands cupping the round globes of her ass.

All at once the image of Greg suddenly loomed in Anne's mind and heart. She'd barely thought about him these past twenty-four hours, caught in the loving grip of this amazing warlock. Guilt assailed her as she recalled how Greg used to kneel like this, wrapping his arms around her, whispering his love for her.

She reached down to stroke the masculine head at her waist, almost expecting for an instant to see Greg's head, not the balding wrinkled scalp he'd been left with after chemotherapy, but the full head of sunny blond hair usually in need of a cut.

Paul's dark tresses gleamed darkly beneath her hand. He dropped his arms and slowly stood again. "I am not entering your mind," he said softly, "but I can read in the way you're holding your body, suddenly stiff and withdrawn from me, that something is troubling you. What is it, my love? Are your memories haunting you?"

Anne nodded, tears filling her eyes. "I shouldn't have suggested the tub. Greg and I used to take baths together on lazy Sunday mornings. It was our snuggly time. That's what he called it." Her voice cracked a little.

Gently Paul took her hand, leading her to the edge of the huge sunken tub. Light danced over the water's surface, reflected from the candles shining through the cut crystal above. "Water is healing. Soak in the tub, sweetheart. I'll shower if you prefer. We don't need to rush whatever this new thing between us is. We have as much time as you need, I promise."

Despite the sudden sadness, Anne couldn't resist the allure of the steaming, richly scented water. She put a foot into it, testing its heat and then climbed in. She let out a sigh of pure physical pleasure as the water enveloped her. She sank back against the softly sloping side of the tub until she was covered to the chin.



Paul stood smiling down at her though his eyes looked sad. Anne felt a tug in her heart for this strange, beautiful man who had somehow fallen into her life. Greg was gone—she knew that. She also knew he couldn't have wanted her to mourn forever. Yet the overlay of his spirit pressing over hers made any thought of lovemaking in the water untenable. Still, Anne reached out her hand and said softly, "Please. This is your home. We've made love and slept in the same bed. It's ridiculous that you shouldn't bathe with me. Come in while the water's hot."

"It will stay hot, another perk of witchcraft." Paul grinned as he slipped off his pajama pants, needing no further invitation. Anne couldn't help but admire his strong, graceful physique as he slid into the water across from her, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

Anne unconsciously licked her lips as she devoured the sight of his strong, masculine neck and the smooth, beautifully sculpted pectoral muscles, flexed as he stretched his arms out along the thick marble edge of the bathtub. She could see his naked body through the water, though it was tinted a pale blue-green from the fragrant oil he had added.

Her body recalled his as she gazed at his masculine beauty. She had thought until Paul had taken her in his arms she was defective, sexually speaking. She had never orgasmed with a man, not through intercourse. Yet with Paul she had come each time, and not just timorous tremors that left one wondering if it had been a climax or just a shudder of pleasure. No, what she had experienced in his arms and by his cock had been unquestionably orgasmic.

The first time she had later chalked up to his devious magical manipulation of her body and soul, but last night there had been no witchcraft. Magic, yes, but of the mortal kind. Anne shifted in the hot, soft water, her pussy tingling and swelling between her legs. Paul sat immobile across from her, his head back, his eyes closed.

Slowly Anne sidled along the smooth marble seat that ringed the inside of the tub. Paul didn't move as she slid next to him, cautiously leaning her head against his chest. She could feel his heart, a steady strong pulse against her cheek and it calmed her. If he had taken her in his arms at that moment she would have succumbed, letting him kiss her, letting him do as he would.

But Paul did not move. He sat still as stone, a warm, living statue with blood and water heating his skin. Anne waited, closing her own eyes, pushing slightly closer so he could feel her lithe soft body nestling into the curve of his side. Paul shifted very slightly to accommodate her movements but otherwise remained still and blind.

After a minute or two Anne opened her eyes and sat up, turning to see why her lover wasn't responding as she'd expected. Was he rejecting her now since she'd rejected him? Was he hurt because the spirit of her dead husband still lingered from time to time in her heart? That was petty surely! Was he going to deny her now as a result?

*Stop it, idiot.* Anne admonished herself. Hadn't she just five minutes earlier rejected his overtures? Hadn't she told herself the thought of making love now was quite impossible? Yet here she was, pressing up against him like a slut in heat, affronted because he didn't take her there and then.

Anne grinned ruefully and leaned back next to Paul, staring up at the candles, their flames casting a soft glimmering light over the water. She felt she could soak here forever. This luxury had ruined her for her humble old claw-footed tub waiting back home.

Anne let her hand fall on Paul's thigh. She resisted her desire to squeeze the strong muscles or to move her fingers upward toward his groin. She slid her eyes toward him and then turned her head as she saw he remained in repose, his eyes shut, his breathing slow and even. Was the man asleep?

Tentatively Anne reached down again, this time shamelessly feeling for his cock. Ah! She couldn't help the self-satisfied grin. Perhaps he was sleeping, but his cock was not! It was fully erect, bobbing gently in the water as her fingers closed around it. She recalled his earlier words — *We don't need to rush whatever this new thing between us is.* So, he was giving her space. He was playing it cool while she found herself getting increasingly hot!

Yet his body couldn't lie. He could pretend to be asleep, but his cock was very much awake. Anne's grin was wide now as she gripped his member more firmly, slowly gliding up and down its length, pulling it to an even more erect state. With her other hand, Anne gently cupped his balls, feeling them tighten against her fingers.

Standing, she moved in front of the warlock, looking down on his still-featured face. She bent to kiss his mouth, her lips only grazing his. Paul did not react, unless a flutter of eyelids could be considered reaction.

Taking a deep breath, Anne lowered herself completely into the water at Paul's feet, her head submerged in the warm wet silence, her eyes closed as she guided herself to his cock. Anne slipped her mouth over it, swallowing its length until she closed her lips tightly at the base of his shaft.

She felt Paul's hands grabbing handfuls of her streaming wet hair as he held her in place a moment, savoring her hot mouth on his penis. Anne needed to resurface for air but his hands were firmly entwined in her hair, holding her locked below the surface. In a panic she pulled back and at once Paul released her.

She felt his hands gripping her under the arms, lifting her not only out of the water but high up into his strong arms. She didn't realize what he was doing as she found herself held firmly in his grip, her legs on either side of his head, her ass balanced against his strong forearms as he gripped her hips, her sex splayed wetly at his mouth.

The statue had come alive with a vengeance. Anne squirmed and struggled a moment in his strong grip but stilled and sighed as his tongue made contact with her pussy. Slow, long licks like a cat lapping its cream made her moan and go limp, completely trusting in his strength to hold her.

"Oh, oh, oh," Anne murmured, unaware she was making a sound. His tongue sent wave after wave of intense pleasure through her nerve endings as he angled her just so to make the most intimate contact possible. Anne grabbed Paul's head, holding tightly as he kissed and suckled her sensitive flesh, drawing orgasm after orgasm from her until she began to squeal, jerking in his strong arms, her body shuddering in spasms of pure sensation.

Paul lifted himself out of the water, perching on the thick edge of the marble surrounding the tub. Slowly he lowered the shuddering, moaning girl into his lap, his movements easy and confident as if she weighed no more than a child. He held her in his arms and she could feel his heart thudding sweetly next to her own pounding pulse.

She could feel his cock, hard as iron pressed beneath her thigh. Shifting, she lifted herself slightly, allowing it to nestle at her swollen, tender sex. She moved so the tip was just touching her entrance, poising herself over his heavy shaft, eager for him despite the multiple orgasms he'd just wrested from her.

Paul kissed her, lifting her slightly by her hips, holding her so she couldn't lower herself onto him. She kissed him back, loving the taste of him, the feel of his lips and tongue, the sandpapery roughness of his stubbled cheek against her soft one. She tried to lower her body, her pussy wet and in need of filling, but his strong hands held her at abeyance.

Frustrated, unaware of the subtly of his control, Anne pushed down, but still he held her fast. "Paul!" She moaned, drawing out the syllable in a whining mewl of need.

"What is it, wench? What is it you want, hmm?" Again she pushed, telling him with her body she needed to feel his cock thrust up inside her. She needed it desperately, all the more desperately because of his refusal. "Tell me," he commanded.

"You," she managed, lust overtaking her completely. "I need you to fuck me! Now! Just like this! Fuck me hard! Please!"

"Ah," Paul's voice was low and throaty, his cock like a sword ready to plunge into her. "I never refuse a lady's plea." With strong arms he lowered her, controlling the penetration with agonizing slowness. Anne's vaginal muscles clamped down, spasms of desperate pleasure arcing through her with each inch of his offered manhood.

When at last he'd settled her fully against his lap, his cock buried deep inside the hot clench of her sex, Paul began to move, tilting and undulating beneath Anne. He was breathing hard, the tendons in his neck standing out as he moaned his pleasure into her ear.

Together they danced, Anne safe and tight in Paul's strong embrace, his cock sending delicious spirals of pleasure swirling into every nook and cranny of her being. Anne felt her climax rising, swelling over her, consuming her. She was no longer Anne, or at least no longer aware of herself, except as she pertained to Paul's cock, pummeling and thrusting inside of her, drawing the tidal wave of pleasure over them both, obliterating the world for one perfect, sustained moment.

The water was hot, its soft oils easing and soothing Anne's muscles as she came to herself. Somehow in the moments after that searing orgasm, Paul had slid back down into the water, his cock still buried inside of her, his arms still firmly around her. Anne felt an incredible languor, as if she couldn't move, every muscle completely fatigued, perfectly used.

"That was amazing," Paul whispered into her hair. Anne felt a flush of embarrassment and pleasure at his words. With what strength she had left, she eased herself from him and with his help, settled herself next to him in the tub.

Paul pressed a button in a panel along the wall and a shelf folded itself down. On the shelf were several bottles of shampoo and conditioner. He selected one and squirted a dollop into his hand. Lifting Anne's heavy mane of wet hair, he began to lather it, carefully and thoroughly washing it. He rinsed it with a detachable showerhead, running the clear, warm water over her head as Anne closed her eyes, surrendering herself utterly to his spa treatment.

He wrapped her hair in a thick white towel and then proceeded to wash his own. No one had ever washed Anne's hair before. She felt something inside her soul shift and open, like a secret door to a tiny reserved place. More than the wild sex, the amazing magic, the incredible tenderness, this single act of ministration moved Anne. She began to cry, not raging sobs, but cleansing, pure tears of gratitude.

"Thank you," she whispered, too softly for Paul to hear.

## Chapter Ten

Anne sighed happily. It was hard to believe she was the same person she had been before Paul had entered her world – weary and disconsolate, feeling on some level her life was over at thirty-two. Then it had been an effort just to drag herself out of bed.

Now she felt more than alive! Was this what it was like to fall head over heels in love? She had to admit her beginning relationship with Greg had been nothing like this. It had been a slow easing into camaraderie, friendship and finally love. This sort of fiery passion she and Paul were experiencing – Anne had always been convinced such feelings only existed in love songs and romance novels.

Perhaps it wouldn't last. Perhaps this was just some kind of reentry into the world of potential love, a short bridge of passion to be crossed over before reentering real life. Paul would tire of her – the magical, stunningly handsome warlock probably had a bevy of beautiful women eagerly waiting for his call, his visit, his charms...

Anne shook her head. If that were the case, then so be it. If she never saw him again, what they'd shared these past two days had been incredible. Just to realize such intensity of feeling could exist! That alone was worth the pain of loss, should he choose to leave her now.

And the magic! How utterly thrilling to discover a whole secret world, a world intricately interwoven into mortal life with most people never aware of the secret spells and incantations swirling around them!

Paul had said the magical community was small and even dwindling, yet nonetheless, there were others like him. Human but not quite human – able to change their physical guise, able to live centuries where mere mortals lived decades! It was hard to fathom, mind-boggling to attempt to grasp the significance of such extended life and enhanced ability. A part of Anne naturally still rejected the whole concept of witches and warlocks, magic and spells. Could it really be an elaborate hoax or some kind of hypnosis?

Yet another part of her thrilled to the concept, eager to accept the notion of a secret, magical world somehow nestled between the folds of mortal reality she had always assumed was all there was. And how else to explain the amazing things Paul had revealed to her? The simple spells, his telepathy, the crystal ball, even the magically filled and heated tub?

Anne thought about the modicum of magic she herself now already knew. Paul had promised he would teach her several simple spells. He'd begun right after their lovemaking in the bathtub with the blocking spell, at her request. Though she trusted Paul, the thought of anyone poking about in her head was disconcerting.

He'd taught her the words—strange words that required a twisting of the tongue she hadn't yet mastered. He explained for the spell to work most effectively, she had to look the witch or warlock straight in the eye, and while it wasn't necessary to speak the words aloud, unless one was quite skilled, the spell was much more effective with the spoken word.

Anne had practiced, staring into Paul's dark beautiful eyes. She had only his word to go on if the spell was working or not. She'd been frustrated as he'd kindly but honestly admitted she wasn't making much headway. "I'm afraid you're definitely not a dormant witch," he had said, laughing. "But don't worry. These things take time. Your tongue isn't yet used to shaping the sounds you'll need for magic."

He'd suggested something easier—an immobilization spell, one of the simplest incantations that all fledglings were taught to give them confidence in their ability at the start. In Paul's large kitchen he kept a birdcage, a huge affair with enough room for the lovebirds housed there to fly and swoop, if they so chose.

"We can practice with the birds," he said. "I'll make us some breakfast while you give it a go. This spell also works best if you can see the face of your subject, though it's not essential. I know it's hard to catch a bird's eye, but they will look at you if you come close to their cage."

"It won't hurt them, will it?" Anne didn't want her first bit of magic to harm a bird!

"No, of course not. It only prevents mobility for a time. It doesn't last very long—perhaps five minutes. Long enough to get away from someone or to prevent them from doing something stupid. The subject is frozen in a manner of speaking. They are completely unharmed but also completely immobile. When the spell wears off, they have no recollection of it."

While Paul had toasted bread, fried bacon and made coffee, Anne practiced her spell. "*Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey.*" Over and over she tried these nonsense syllables, attempting to mimic Paul's rendition precisely.

"The r on the first syllable of *rathra* needs to be farther back in your throat. If you're familiar with Arabic, that's the guttural feel you're going for," Paul offered, listening as he prepared breakfast. "And you need to pause a fraction of a second longer between the two *woiyek*s."

Though she didn't speak Arabic, Anne had always been good at foreign languages in school. She tried very hard now to imitate him precisely. Over and over she said the spell, tilting her head in an attempt to catch the beady eye of her subject. On the seventh try one of the birds suddenly stiffened, swaying on his perch, his birdsong cut off in mid-tremolo.

"Wow!" Anne cried. "I did it! I did it! I cast a magic spell!" She couldn't take her eyes from the seemingly frozen bird. Its partner darted and hopped near it, no doubt agitated by the sudden change in her mate.

Paul stepped over, his voice admiring. "That's my girl. I honestly didn't expect it so soon. Perhaps I was too quick to judge earlier. While you are no witch, you do have

some ability as a novice. There have been mortals known in the magical community for their skills with simple spells and potions that do not require innate magic to perform. Perhaps you are destined to enter their ranks."

Anne wasn't particularly sure she wanted to enter such ranks but the spell had been thrilling. To know she had cast a magic spell, just with the way she shaped sounds in her mouth! Now several hours later she sat in her living room, practicing the sounds again and again, wrapping her mouth around the strange words.

The intercom buzzed and Anne pushed it to release the front door. Paul was early—they'd agreed to meet again that evening around six and it was only a little after five. Anne smiled to herself, pleased her lover was so eager to see her again he couldn't wait a moment longer.

Paul was going to take her around Central Park in a horse-drawn carriage at sunset. Anne knew it was a touristy thing to do but she loved the idea just the same. Greg and she had always meant to do it but somehow had never found the time.

Glancing at herself in the hall mirror she moved to the door. She could hear Paul's footsteps on the stairs. He knocked and she swung the door open, her lips already tingling in anticipation of his kiss.

"Well, I must say, I didn't think I'd receive such an easy welcome, Anne. Do you release the lock for anyone who buzzes? Or were you expecting someone?"

Anne stared for a moment at the tall man, trying to place the ice blue eyes, the long narrow nose, the thick blond hair brushed straight back from his high forehead. Adrenaline began to pulse like a drug through her body. Langley. Robert Langley.

Anne tried to close the door but Langley stuck his foot in the way. "Hey," he said, his voice gentle, even contrite. "Don't shut me out without giving me a chance to apologize. I just wanted to say how sorry I was for the horrible way I behaved at Donner's party." He thrust out the hand he'd had behind his back, revealing a huge bouquet of lush roses, deep red and clustered together amidst baby's breath, wrapped in a funnel of green tissue paper.

Confused, Anne stepped back and Langley pressed his advantage, pushing the door with his shoulder as he stepped across the sill, smiling down, the flowers held in front of him like a peace offering.

"I'm sorry," Anne said coldly. "I *am* expecting someone. That's why I buzzed you up. I thought you were him." Anne glanced at her watch.

"I understand," Langley said smoothly. "And I won't keep you. I just wanted to apologize again and to offer these roses as a small token of my sincerity."

Anne took the roses. There must be two dozen there—by the quality she knew he must have spent a small fortune on them. "Well," she said uncertainly, somewhat mollified by his gesture. "Thank you. I guess you'd had more to drink than you'd realized."

"I must have," Langley said, his voice rueful. "I hope I didn't behave in a way that was improper but I have a feeling I did. I honestly don't remember what happened. I

remember being at the party. I had quite a bit to drink. I remember you there—the most beautiful woman in a room is hard to forget.” He paused as if waiting for Anne’s reaction. She simply stared up at him, the flowers cradled in her arms. He went on. “Then it’s—blank. I think it’s what they call a blackout. It’s a wakeup call, I guess. A warning to me that whiskey and I don’t mix, at least not well. I came to on a couch in a hallway, my head splitting in two, several nervous hotel employees hovering over me. My first thought was of you, Anne. You’ve been through a tough year—losing your husband, your job...”

“I didn’t lose my job,” Anne interjected, annoyed. “I quit to pursue other interests. And how did you get my address anyway?”

“Bennett gave it to me. I’m quite tight with your boss, er, with Bob Bennett and the boys down at the firm. I told him I’d just heard of your loss and wanted to send you flowers. He gave me your address. All harmless, I assure you. I just wanted to come by and apologize for anything I might have done and, as I say, offer my condolences on your bereavement.”

Anne stood uncertainly. Perhaps she had been too quick to judge Robert Langley. She’d seen alcohol make more than a few people act in ways they never would have when sober.

“Aren’t you going to put them in water?” He smiled at her, perfect white teeth in a handsome if somewhat cold face. His features were regular, his body long and lean, the body of a natural athlete who looked as if he’d developed his muscles sailing his boat and playing tennis on private courts. Dressed in a white button-down shirt and khaki pants instead of the tuxedo he’d been wearing the night before, Robert Langley still seemed to carry himself like an aristocrat, someone a cut above the rest, at least in his own estimation.

His mouth was sensual or would have been except for a perpetual sort of sneer that seemed to curl one side slightly upward. This sneer, coupled with the piercing blue eyes gave his face an animation it might have otherwise lacked. He had a sort of dangerous look many women seemed to find appealing.

Anne’s natural inclination toward good manners now that the man stood in her home, now that she’d accepted his roses and his apology, made her uncomfortable to keep him standing in her foyer. If he really was trying to make amends, she should respond in kind.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll put them in a vase. I am expecting company, as I said. But this was kind of you. I appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

“Thank you, Anne! That’s all I wanted to hear. Listen, do you think before I go I could have a glass of water? It’s a bit warm outside.”

Anne took a breath, her instincts telling her to refuse him, etiquette making her say, “Of course. I’ll just get you a glass. I won’t be a moment.”

“I’ll come with you. I love to see how these old brownstones have been redecorated.” He looked admiringly around the room as they walked toward the



kitchen. "So much you can do with these small spaces." Anne set the huge bouquet on the counter by the sink. She poured him a glass of water and handed it to him, watching as he drank.

He sat the empty glass down on the counter and smiled at her. "Hit the spot," he said. Moving closer to her, he added, his voice suddenly soft, "It's been hard, hasn't it? Being alone. A widow. A young, lovely woman such as yourself with no one to care for you."

Anne swallowed and took a step back. Langley moved forward. He reached out his hand, touching her cheek. "I said I was sorry, Anne, for whatever I might have done. The truth is, I've always found you incredibly attractive. Even when Greg was—I mean, before, when we worked together. You were so no-nonsense then, all business. I loved seeing the softer side of you last night. So beautiful and feminine in that gorgeous gown, your hair swept up like a queen's." He touched a long, curling tress of Anne's hair and she took another step back.

"Listen, Robert. I'm seeing someone. He was with me last night, if you'll recall. It's very nice of you to have brought me roses and at another time I might be more receptive to your, uh, compliments, but I'm not available. I'm sorry but that's the way it is."

The sneer returned to Langley's mobile mouth. He stepped back, his eyes cold, though his voice remained pleasant. "I'm sorry to hear that, Anne. I didn't realize you'd already have a lover so soon after—" He broke off, perhaps observing Anne's scowl. Trying another tack, he continued. "I have to admit I find you very attractive. I always have. I'd love the chance to get to know you better. I could offer you a lot, Anne. At the risk of being immodest, I'm probably worth twenty times whatever that guy is worth. I know how to treat a lady right, I promise you. These roses are nothing. I could fill your house with them if you liked. There are a lot of women who'd love to go out with me. I'm listed in the *Who's Who* as one of New York's most eligible bachelors. Of all the women I could have, I'm choosing you, Anne. I hope you realize that."

Anne couldn't help a snort of laughter. Was the man for real? "No offense, Robert, but you sound like you're campaigning for a girlfriend. You obviously don't know me at all if you think the promise of a bunch of flowers and being seen on the arm of someone listed in some stupid society vanity publication is going to sweep me off my feet!"

Langley's expression darkened. "I apologize if I seemed to be trying to *sell* myself to you. I remember you as a go-getter. Someone with her eye on the prize who would stop at nothing to get a deal done. I thought you'd appreciate my direct approach."

"That was business, Robert. I was an investment banker, a professional. I don't apply that sort of thinking to affairs of the heart." Taking the roses from the counter, still in their green tissue paper, she handed them back to Langley.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have accepted these. It wasn't fair, given what your intentions are. I can't take them. I accept your apology for last night. I think you should go now."

Langley's eyes flashed as he blocked her effort to hand him the flowers with his forearm. "Keep 'em," he snarled. "Take them to your husband's grave next time you visit." Turning, he left the kitchen. Anne heard the front door slam. She stared unseeing into space, his last words echoing in her brain as the roses slipped from her fingers.

\* \* \* \* \*

When he saw Anne's number on his cell phone caller ID Paul flipped it open, suddenly afraid she was canceling their evening. He had been moving too fast, he knew it. The lovemaking, the magic — she was backing off.

Yet when he said hello, she said, "Paul! Thank God, you picked up. Please come sooner. Come now."

"What is it, Anne? What's happened?" Even as he asked, Paul grabbed his wallet and keys, hurrying from his penthouse suite to the elevator. He was already in a cab by the time she finished telling him about Langley's unwanted attentions. If he had known where the bastard lived, he might have gone there first to set the little shit straight once and for all.

"He can't come back, can he? He can't get in unless you buzz him in?"

"No, he can't. Unless someone else lets him in, but the people in my building are pretty careful about that. It's not that I think he's coming back. It was just so—I don't know, invasive. It was one thing when he was an asshole at work—we had lots of asshole clients—it went with the territory. And last night as frightening as it was, well, I could pass it off to alcohol. But today," she expelled a breath into the phone. "Today he was in my home! I feel violated. I feel like fumigating the place!" She laughed nervously. "I know I'm overreacting but there's something about the guy. He gives me the creeps."

"I don't think you're overreacting at all," Paul interjected. "Hold on a sec." The traffic was snarled, the cars caught in gridlock at the intersection. Annoyed, Paul leaned his head out of the back window of the cab and waved his hand toward the traffic light, fixing it on green to break the gridlock. Turning his attention back to Anne he said, "I've learned over many years to trust a woman's intuition. I know that sounds sexist but women tend to be more in tune with underlying emotions—with subtle cues about people's behavior, overt and otherwise. You've never trusted this man, so I gather. Not since you were first forced to work with him at your firm. Your fears obviously have merit. We're going to keep our eye out for this one, Anne. I have a bad feeling about him. If he took the time to find out where you live and to go there uninvited, I doubt you've seen the last of him."

"Are you almost here?"

"Yes, sweetheart. Just a few more minutes."

"You know, he said he didn't remember a thing about last night. About any 'bad behavior' he might have indulged in. I think he was feeling me out in that regard. To see what he'd done."

"It's hard to say what he actually recalls without probing his mind. He'd certainly had a good deal to drink. You behaved perfectly from the sound of it—telling him only that you were otherwise involved and asking him to please leave." Paul felt a secret thrill as he said the words—she'd told another person she was "seeing someone"! Really, he had to get a hold of himself! He was acting like a schoolboy instead of the seasoned old warlock he actually was. Did love make a fool of everyone?

When Paul finally arrived at Anne's place, she buzzed him up. "I'm so glad you're here!" She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her cheek against his chest. "I'm sorry to seem like such a kid. I mean, it's not like he did anything. And he did leave once I made it clear I wasn't interested."

Paul held Anne, stroking her back. "I had meant to bring a bottle of wine to share before our carriage ride but I was in such a hurry when you called I forgot it."

"I have wine," Anne said. She stepped back, smiling up at Paul. "Come see what you'd like." She moved toward the kitchen. As they entered, Paul saw the roses, long-stemmed red roses still in their green wrapper, stuffed in the kitchen trashcan. Anne followed his gaze. "I didn't want them. Not from him. He wouldn't take them back. He said to—to put them on my husband's grave." She turned away. Paul clenched his fists. Robert Langley had crossed the line one time too many. He now had a warlock for an enemy.

Anne had moved to a small wine rack in the corner of the kitchen. "I have a nice French Burgundy here. I hadn't wanted to open it without someone to share it."

Paul took the bottle, examining the label. It was a Roumier just at its peak. "An excellent burgundy," he nodded with approval. Anne allowed him to uncork it and poured it in two crystal wineglasses. They settled on Anne's large living room couch. Paul sipped his wine, thinking about Robert Langley, angry that the man had upset Anne so. He noticed Anne hadn't even tasted her wine yet.

"Try it. It's really quite good."

Anne set her glass down with a sigh. "I have such a headache," she said, massaging her temples. "My jaw is clenched, my neck is tight. I can't believe I'm letting that asshole get to me like this. It's not like he tried anything. Nothing physical anyway. He left when I told him to, thank God."

"Well, you have a right be upset. He pretty much forced his way into your home, roses in hand or not. He essentially tried to bribe you to be his lover with offers of material wealth, he wasn't graceful about taking no for answer and then he left, slamming the door. He behaved like the bully and cad we already know him to be."

Gently Paul touched Anne's hand. "I want to take you out for a lovely dinner and carriage ride, Anne. Just the two of us. No pigeons, no Manhattan elite to mingle with, just you and me. But I want you relaxed and happy before we go." Gently tilting her

chin toward him with one finger, Paul said, "I know just the thing. I'll give you a massage. You just lie on the bed and let my magic fingers ease the tension from your body. Then we can have a lovely evening. What do you say?"

"I couldn't ask you to do that. I'm just being a big baby anyway."

"Nonsense. You've had a lot to cope with over the past few days and you've barely had any sleep on top of it." He smiled as Anne blushed. They'd gone from the party to his house, staying up most the night making love. They'd caught cat naps here and there, but certainly nothing near a full night's sleep. Witches and warlocks didn't require as much sleep as their mortal counterparts and Paul knew Anne must be exhausted.

As if to prove his point, Anne yawned. "Excuse me! You must be right. I didn't even realize I was tired until you said that." Paul reached out, gently massaging the back of her neck with one hand as he lifted the heavy hair with the other. Anne sighed appreciatively, leaning back against his hand.

"Okay, you win. This just feels too good to say no to. But do we have the time?"

"All the time you need, my love." She preceded Paul into her bedroom and lay across the bed, remaining fully clothed. She was wearing a pale green sleeveless blouse and a long skirt of darker green with a pattern of abstract fish painted in gold over the fabric.

Paul sat on the edge of the bed, removing her silver leather sandals from her pretty, high-arched feet. He began to massage one foot, using both hands to knead the arch and smooth the toes. Anne again sighed her appreciation, but remarked, "My feet don't hurt—it's my head."

"I know," Paul said. "Usually tension manifests itself throughout the body. I'm going to start at your feet and move right on up, releasing your negative energy and tension as I go." He continued with the first foot for a while, admiring her toes, the nails painted a seashell pink. He moved to the other foot and then to her slender, smooth calves. His strong capable fingers moved over her legs, pushing the skirt aside but keeping her panties covered.

Gently he lifted her blouse from the skirt, sliding his hands up under the silky fabric to her narrow back. As he began to work the muscles there, Anne squirmed and giggled. "You're tickling me!"

"That's because most of your tension is held in your back and neck muscles. I'll be gentler at first but to really release the tension I have to apply significant pressure." He continued to press the tight, knotted muscles, his movements partially hampered by the blouse and her bra. It was Anne who sat up, pulling her blouse from her body. She lay back down, reaching around to unclasp her bra, which she tossed by the side of the bed.

Paul felt his cock respond to her gesture. He wanted to flip her over, to cup her luscious breasts and lick those perfect dark pink nipples to hard little points. He wanted to pull the skirt down her long, sexy legs and tear the panties from her body. His cock hardened as he climbed over the half-naked woman, crouched over her luscious ass. He

didn't dare straddle her, though that would have made massaging her easier, as he knew he wouldn't be able to control himself if he felt those perfect round globes beneath his thighs and pressing against his balls.

He could have sent a magical suggestion into her mind. He could have dropped the commands into her head to make her roll over of her own accord, pulling off her clothes, opening her arms and her legs to him. Sheer self will and the knowledge her love freely given would be worth infinitely more than whatever he might steal, kept his magic firmly in check.

Instead he continued to massage her supple flesh, silently marveling at how soft and supple her skin was. Her muscles eased under his fingers as he smoothed the tension from them. Finally he moved his hands to her neck and into the soft, luxurious tresses of her shiny hair.

Gently he massaged her scalp, aware she had fallen into a light sleep, her breathing deep and even, her body utterly relaxed. Paul glanced at his watch. If they left now, they might just make their reservation across town, but obviously they weren't going to leave now.

Paul slipped his hand into the waist of his pants and past his underwear, adjusting his erect cock against his belly. Withdrawing his hand, he lay down next to the lovely young woman, lightly putting his arm over her back as he snuggled next to her. Anne needed her rest—he'd kept her up far too late. They had made love the night before and again that morning, yet here he was, as eager as a boy to take her again—to taste her sweetness, to feel her primal heat as she locked her pussy around his cock, his hands gripping her pert, sexy ass.

Now he contented himself with moving the swatch of hair that had fallen over her face, tucking it behind one small, delicate ear. How young she looked in repose! What was he doing, he wondered for the hundredth time. For as long as he could remember, he had always been the one firmly in control. His primary concern, once he'd satisfied his physical lust for a woman, was how to let her down gently—how to send her on her way without hurting her feelings or leaving her longing for him. How ironic that now it was he who lay unrequited, longing to declare his love to this innocent young mortal, terrified she would break his heart.

He needed to turn the magic on himself—to cast an impervious spell over his own heart to harden him to this fledgling love. Yet to do that would be to deny the heady sweetness, the fresh, rare joy of newfound love! As he listened to Anne's soft, even breathing, Paul tried to remember when he had last been in love. Had he ever been in love? What would happen now? A few short years with this mortal woman and then he would be bereft, alone, cast adrift with only her memory to sustain him...

Paul shook his head, ruefully smiling at himself. Was his predicament not precisely the same as Anne's had been when he first came upon her on that bench in the park? Just because magic folk walked the earth longer than mortals, was not the concept of love the same for them all? The old adage that it was better to have loved and lost than

never to have loved at all – for the first time in his long life, Paul understood and knew this to be true.

He closed his eyes, willing himself to let go of his fears, to still his churning mind and just enjoy the feel of Anne's warm, sweet body next to his. He put his face to her hair, inhaling her sweet, fresh scent. "I love you," he whispered.

Anne, lost in dreams, did not hear him.

## Chapter Eleven

"Come with me! We'll go first-class. We can stay a week—longer if you like. I'll attend the two art auctions early on and we'll spend the rest of the time exploring Paris."

Anne stared at Paul. Who could say no to such an incredible invitation? They'd been together nearly two weeks. Two inseparable weeks. Though they hadn't spent every single night together, not a day had passed that they hadn't at least shared a meal. Emotionally Anne knew she was in love with Paul. Beneath the love however was fear. Fear of how vulnerable she had become, nearly desperate for his love, terrified of its loss. Intellectually she knew they were moving too fast. Joy and terror seemed to be on a collision course and Anne had no idea who or what would survive the crash.

Never in her life had Anne let herself open up with another person as she had with Paul. She had shared her secrets, her dreams, her fears. She had shared her body in a way she'd never dared with another person. Always somewhat reticent, with Paul she felt more at ease than she ever had.

Their passion was sometimes tender, sometimes fierce, always satisfying in a way completely new to Anne. Paul didn't just have sex, he made love. Sometimes he had her simply lie there, her legs spread, her arms over her head. He would kiss every inch of her body, starting with her face or with her toes, invariably ending at her sex, driving her into a fit of delirious passion.

No man had ever paid this sort of attention to her. She wouldn't have allowed it. Still comparing Paul to Greg in her mind, she knew Greg would never have had the interest in her form for its sake that Paul seemed to. Greg had regarded her body as a means to an end. This hadn't especially bothered Anne as she had had no idea of her body's capacity for pleasure—not until Paul had come along and opened the floodgates of her passion.

For the first time in her life, Anne examined her own body with almost as much interest and reverence as Paul. The shyness was gone or nearly so. Though one day he'd crossed the line and the old Anne had resurfaced, blushing hotly. He'd insisted she look into the hand mirror he'd brought to her bed for the purpose.

Anne had slammed her legs together, wrapping her arms protectively around her knees. "Female genitalia is ridiculous-looking," she'd announced primly.

Paul had burst out laughing. "You silly girl! You are so American in your prudish, absurd sentiments!" He shook his head. "What is it about Americans with this obsession to airbrush away the most beautiful parts of a woman? A man worth his salt seeks the poetry of each individual woman's shape, as unique and lovely as a

snowflake. That poetry, that beauty, extends to a woman's sex. Each one as beautiful as the next, delicate as an orchid, its scent as rare, its petals as precious.

"Come on. Look at it. Look at how beautiful it is!" Anne had fallen back on the bed, hiding her face in her hands, her legs pressed tightly together. Gently Paul had pulled her legs apart, his strong, large hands resting on either thigh. Forcing the issue, he had continued. "The labia are like flower petals, so delicately formed, demurely hiding your sweet little clit, drawing the eye down to your impossibly hot, tight entrance. Come here."

Gently he'd pulled her hands from her face, forcing her to look at him. "You are the artist, Anne, but I know beauty when I see it. I've made my fortune exploiting my knowledge and I know beauty not only in art but in life. Your sex is exquisite. Let me show you. See it through my eyes."

Moving behind her on the bed, he'd settled her back against his chest, wrapping his arms around her. Reaching forward, he'd held the mirror in front of her, angling it so she could see her own pussy, nestled below dark curling pubic hair, the lips pouting between her legs.

For a moment she had seen her body as he did—the labia like a spreading flower, the lips darkening and engorging as his fingers gently traced the curves, sliding down to her entrance, making her shiver with pleasure. It *was* beautiful. He wasn't only pretending as she had known other men to do—men she had overheard when they thought no women were about, lewdly discussing females in terms of tuna fish and hairy slits, holes to be filled, used and discarded as quickly as possible. She realized on some level she'd taken these grotesque, misogynistic stereotypes into her own psyche, a part of her sharing the disgust and dismay.

With Paul it was different. He made her feel sexy and good about herself—not only her obvious attributes, but every part of her. He loved the backs of her knees and the bridge of her nose. He made her laugh, flushing with pleasure and embarrassment as he endlessly complimented each part of her body as if she were the most perfect, unique human on the planet.

When they were together, it was wonderful. Paul showed Anne parts of the city she hadn't known existed, taking her to wonderful restaurants, strange shops and secret gardens hidden amongst the glass, brick and steel of the bustling metropolis. His focus on her was absolute—at times Anne felt overwhelmed by his constant, loving attention.

Sometimes she had to pull away, to pull back, to find a way to let him know she needed more space. This trip to Paris, while it sounded exciting and exotic, meant she would be completely dependent on Paul while there, always at his side with nowhere of her own to retreat to. Feeling at once attracted to and overwhelmed by the idea, Anne gently said, "I can't, Paul."

He looked so crestfallen she almost relented, just to see the smile return to his handsome face. How much of her life had she done things she hadn't really wanted to



do in order to please someone else? How much of her married life had been focused on keeping Greg happy, no matter the price to herself?

Did she want to compromise this new relationship, so desperate to please she would deny her own impulses? Ironically she knew Paul would insist she be true to herself. They'd talked for many hours about that very thing, with Paul gently encouraging her to let go of old patterns.

Yet she owed it to him to explain. "Paul, it's lovely of you to invite me. Truly it is. Someday I know we'll travel the world together! I would love that! But right now I think I need a little time to myself. I'm just, you see, I'm not used to all this, that is..." Anne found herself unable to continue. Tears filled her eyes. This magical warlock who could have anyone, literally anyone in the world, had chosen her! At least for now. She knew she might lose him and wondered if her newly awakened heart could bear the loss. How did she dare to refuse him even a single thing? She waited for the world to collapse as he took in her words.

Instead he tilted his head, saying softly, "You're afraid to hurt me. You needn't be, darling. I'm glad you feel safe enough to tell me no." Anne, looking down at her hands, didn't respond. After some moments Paul said softly, "As long as you're waiting for me when I get back, that's all I ask."

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Paul leaned back in his first-class seat by the window, stretching his long legs. He was glad the seat beside him was empty as he wasn't in the mood for cross-Atlantic chatter. That seat should have been occupied by Anne—beautiful, delicate, delicious Anne. Damn, it was his own fault she wasn't! He should have been more sensitive to her need for some distance in the relationship. Just because he couldn't get enough of her didn't mean she felt the same way toward him. He'd pushed himself on her, ignoring the need to go slowly. He knew even his last request might well have been too much to ask. It might simply be too soon for Anne to learn to love again.

"Excuse me, sir, would you care for the filet mignon or the chicken Marsala this evening?" Paul glanced up at the flight attendant, a pretty blonde with large blue eyes smiling down at him. Her breasts were very large, he noticed, the blow-up balloon variety mortal women had begun sporting in the last thirty years or so that confounded Paul. Who would want to implant balloons into their body? He understood the rationale—the desperate desire to be found appealing, but it made him sad. He imagined she probably had looked a good deal better with her natural A or B cup breasts or whatever she'd had before.

Misinterpreting his gaze on her purchased perfection, the woman's smile turned sly, her eyes narrowing as she allowed the tip of a very pink tongue to glide over her lower lip in what was meant to be a seductive gesture. Paul didn't have to peek into her mind to know the thoughts there.

"I'll have the filet mignon, very rare," he replied, not responding to her sexual subtext. Without invitation the woman slid into the vacant seat beside Paul, lightly touching his thigh with a well-manicured fingertip.

"Are you enjoying the flight, sir? We have a stopover in Paris, the crew that is. I'm very familiar with the city, if you'd like a tour. A very *personal* tour..." Lightly she squeezed Paul's thigh, moving closer so one plastic breast grazed his arm.

Paul sat up straighter, pulling away. He was used to women making a move on him—it was a price he had to pay for his very good looks, usually a price he didn't mind paying, he had to admit. But not today. This strange new feeling—this yearning melancholy—was something he needed to work through, to try to understand. It should have been Anne's hand touching his thigh, a lover's touch. Anne's soft lovely breast teasing him, the round little nipples hidden beneath her blouse, waiting for him and him alone...

"My name's Stephanie," the flight attendant added. "I'll be serving you for the duration of the flight, in *whatever* way you need." Again the pink tongue revealed itself. Paul looked over at the girl. She couldn't be much more than twenty-five. Her heart was probably intact, not yet moved by real passion, not yet scratched by a love unrequited. Though just a month ago Paul might have availed himself of her charms, today his heart was firmly in the thrall of another.

"Thank you, Stephanie. A glass of orange juice would do nicely about now." Paul caught the petulant flash of annoyance that flitted over the young woman's features, though it was only for an instant. Gracefully she stood, smoothing her short skirt over her slender thighs.

With a radiant smile she leaned forward, pressing her breasts to show her cleavage to advantage. "Yes, sir. I'll be right back with your juice and a nice plump pillow in case you'd like to take a nap before dinner."

Ten hours later Paul fell back gratefully against the pile of down pillows on the king-size bed in his Paris hotel, imagining for the moment Anne was beside him. The flight had been uneventful and on time. With nothing to declare, he'd breezed through customs at the airport. Paris was beautiful this time of year. How he would have loved to see Anne's expression as she saw the city for the first time—the flowers blooming everywhere, the famous sights, the romantic cafés. They could have shared piping-hot buttery croissants and café au lait as they watched the boats sail by on the Canal St. Martin...

*Stop it, you idiot.* Paul knew he was mooning like a lovesick boy. Really she had done him a favor. She was right too, and he knew it. They *were* moving too fast. Anne was just coming out of mourning, she needed time to adjust to someone new. He had been unfair in seeking to monopolize her every moment. He had pushed her away—frightened her with his intensity. Like the horses he used to train—he'd failed to read the signs of her skittishness. By the time he'd realized, she'd bolted.

No, this week was just what they needed, what he needed. A chance to get his own head on straight. To give himself some space to figure out just what the hell he was doing. Away from her hypnotically beautiful eyes, away from the sweet curve of her breast, the sighs of pleasure when he stroked her, the intoxicating scent of her sex—away from Anne he could regain his bearings. Recall he was a warlock, impervious to love, most especially the love of a mere mortal!

Yes, he would enjoy his week alone! He would take a stroll down the boulevard in the morning to the café on the corner that advertised fresh *crêpes d'orange*. He would attend his auctions, see what Paris had to offer. For now he would sleep, dreaming of no one.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ah, Mr. Windsor. What a pleasant surprise to see you again." Paul looked up from his second cup of very strong, quite delicious coffee. He was reading *Le Monde*, the French newspaper of record, and thus took a moment to switch back to English in his head. It was Stephanie the flight attendant, looking even younger now in low-cut blue jeans and a tight top that barely covered her substantial bosom. A little jewel glimmered at her bellybutton.

"Please, call me Paul," he said, rising politely.

"Paul then. We're staying at the same hotel." She pointed to the large pink marble building. "I saw you this morning. May I?" She pointed to the empty chair at the table and Paul could hardly refuse. As they both sat she observed, "I see you're reading *Le Monde*. Très impressive, monsieur." Her accent was excellent.

"Not really," Paul answered. "I used to live in Paris, a number of years ago." Seventy years ago actually, though he didn't tell her that.

Stephanie smiled. "So my offer of a guided tour obviously won't be necessary. Perhaps *you* could show me something of the city. Something off the beaten path. I love to learn new things about a place. I've been here over forty times but each time I learn something new. *J'adore Paris*. I've got a three-day layover and not a thing to do." She put her hand on his thigh. "If you had time, that is. I don't want to be a nuisance."

Why not? He had no one else he wanted to see. Anne was half a world away. Perhaps the love he thought he felt for Anne *was* mere infatuation. That would be a good thing really. Why give his heart to someone he was sure to lose, if not to her own fickle youth, then to mortal death, here in the blink of an eye? Surely it was better to return to his more familiar ways, enjoying the attentions of many women, letting them adore him, lust for him, spread their legs for him? This Stephanie, why not start with her? If the desire was there, wouldn't this be proof what he had thought he shared with Anne was nothing more than a passing fancy however intense it might have seemed?

Stephanie was watching him, he realized. Paul smiled at her, his face now a mask of pleasant inscrutability. She smiled back, a blaze of white teeth against red painted lips. He slipped into the young woman's mind. To his surprise he saw she really *was*

interested in learning more about the city. She was bored and lonely and had a genuine fascination with Paris. Though just beneath this he detected her sexual desire toward him. He couldn't suppress the slight smile as he noted she thought of him as an "older man" – though he presented as a man in his mid-thirties. To her he supposed that was old – for these mortals with their truncated sense of time that was already a third or more of his life over!

As Stephanie turned her blue-eyed gaze soulfully upon him, Paul could feel her sexual desire overtake her interest in sightseeing. *Jesus, you're hot.* He thought for a moment she'd spoken out loud but no, the thought was merely pressing in her mind. She was imagining the two of them naked in a hot tub, drinking Champagne, their heads back in laughter. He was lifting her onto his lap, lowering her onto his no-doubt erect shaft. He really had to stop this eavesdropping – it wasn't a gentlemanly thing to do. Stephanie smiled, drawing a finger along his leg. He didn't stop her.

"What're you thinking?" he asked innocently.

Her candor took him by surprise. "I'm thinking how good it's going to feel when you fuck me."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Maybe a nice hot bath." Anne knew she had to do something. Sitting staring at the wall just wasn't going to cut it. The thought of slipping into the warm water, closing her eyes, forgetting everything...why not? She'd just sent away the best thing to ever happen to her. She'd told the most incredible man she'd ever known she needed "space", whatever the fuck that meant.

No. She would not take a bath! She would not slide back into that old life, the life of a depressed widow, behaving as if she were eighty-two instead of thirty-two. And she *hadn't* sent Paul away, not forever. She had just declined his invitation to join him in Paris for a week.

Though she hadn't admitted it to Paul and it certainly hadn't been the deciding factor in her refusal to go with him, Anne was afraid to fly. Even though she understood the physics of it, just the thought of being that high up with only the wind to keep those tons of steel aloft made her jittery. Though she'd been forced to take the occasional business trip, she had white-knuckled it the whole way, irrationally convinced they would never make it. Yet somehow she'd always been delivered safely to her destination.

Now, if she were to be involved with the cosmopolitan warlock, he would probably expect her to jet around the world with him on a regular basis. Maybe he could give her a magic potion to alleviate her anxiety.

If he still wanted her when he came back, that is. Anne sighed. She knew she had taken a risk in refusing him. Paris was full of beautiful available women, eager to attach themselves to the dashing warlock. He might compare them to her, growing weary in

his mind of her hesitation and her reservations—of her American prudery, Anne thought bitterly.

She knew that wasn't fair. Paul had been nothing but gracious, nothing but loving toward her. It wasn't his fault she'd been frightened by the depth of their connection. It wasn't his fault she'd never been with a man who could unlock her passions. Paul had found a sensuality in her she didn't know she possessed, didn't believe existed. While it was wild and exhilarating, it was also frightening. It was the most powerful experience of her life, yet she never felt more vulnerable or exposed as when Paul made love to her. Sometimes she longed to retreat back to the safety of being alone. Or to being with someone like Greg—someone who wouldn't press her sensual envelope, to use Paul's words, someone who wouldn't expect so much from her in terms of sexual honesty.

Greg had been content to take what he wanted, believing her when she said she needed nothing more. Back then she hadn't. Back then Anne had been closed as tight as a rosebud, all potential. Now she was in bloom, to continue the metaphor, open and eager for Paul's sensual sunlight. It was frightening to want someone so much—to need him.

Yes, she finally acknowledged, it was good he would be gone for this week. It would give them both some perspective. It would give her a chance to regroup, to batten down the hatches that had come unhinged around her heart. In the meantime, she'd practice the spells he'd begun to teach her. Along with the incantation to render someone immobile, he'd given her a spell book less flowery than Clara de Absinthe's but more practical. He had written it himself for another mortal a century before, he'd told her. None of the included spells and potions required genuine magic to perform, though a few of them did require oils and herbs with magic properties only a witch or warlock could create. The bulk of the items, mostly herbs, flowers and plants, could be found in a marketplace and she only needed a stove and iron pot to concoct the brews.

She was especially interested in the truth powder, a mixture of herbs and magical oils that was to be blended in precise proportions and cooked down to a powder. He said she'd know she'd gotten it right if the powder, once thoroughly dry, was a very pale lavender. Any other color meant the results could be suspect.

The powder was tasteless and dissolved easily in liquid. When imbibed by the unsuspecting subject, it compelled the person to be completely honest for a period of thirty to sixty minutes, depending upon the strength of the brew. She could think of any number of glib self-satisfied people she and Greg had used to work with, people she would love to serve some truth tea. She would demand the truth about their business dealings, their sense of ethics, their attitude toward women in the workplace and beyond—the list was endless.

Not that she would actually follow through. She had no desire, she realized, to see any of the people who had comprised her world back then. Just the same, she had decided to try her hand at the concoction, to see what came of it. One never knew when a packet of truth powder might come in handy!

Anne dressed in a light cotton sundress as summer had made an early debut, today warm and humid. She wrote a list of things she would need for the powder, copying them carefully from Paul's angular, neat script. She didn't know where to find the magical oils necessary to complete the potion but Paul had given her several small bottles, each meticulously labeled as to their contents and properties.

Though it was only nine o'clock, the sun was already high and warm, making Anne glad she'd dressed accordingly. She didn't notice the tall man moving back into the shadows along the side of her building as she walked down the stairs of her stoop and along the sidewalk toward the open-air market several blocks away.

But he had noticed her. In fact, he only had eyes for her.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What have I done? What am I doing?" Paul looked down at the blonde head bobbing between his thighs. Her mouth was warm, the lips gliding over his cock as she cupped his balls. Her long nails were poking into his flesh, distracting him. She glanced coyly up at him, drawing her tongue seductively along his shaft in a display clearly designed to arouse him. Then down she went again, moving her head rapidly like a piston, no nuance, no subtlety, but plenty of tongue and practiced moans he knew were also designed to excite him.

He should never have succumbed to her charms at the café. It had disarmed him when she'd admitted she wanted him to fuck her. In a moment of self-pity, he'd decided why not? Why not have a fling with this pretty young girl? She would take his mind off Anne, at least for a moment. He'd allowed her to lead him back to the hotel, to her room where she'd stripped for him, doing a sexy dance as she pulled each item from her hard over-tan body, tossing it toward him with a flourish.

He knew before they began it was a mistake, but as he watched her undulating, naked and yearning, he let thoughts slide away from his mind. His cock took over, rising to greet the girl as she knelt in front of him, unzipping his pants and taking his semierect member in her hands. She'd pulled him to the unmade bed by his cock, pressing him to sit down against the sheets before kneeling between his thighs. She hardly seemed real—little more than a fantasy and someone else's fantasy at that.

How foolish this was—letting this poor girl seduce him when he knew his heart was a thousand miles away. It was unfair to Stephanie, unfair to himself, unfair to Anne. *I'm no better than any mortal man, letting myself be led by my cock instead of my nobler instincts. What an ass I am.*

For though he'd wanted to pretend it was a relief Anne had sent him away, inside he had to admit at last it had cut him to the quick. He tried to remind himself Anne had simply expressed her honest need to take a breather, to make sense of their tumultuous love affair without the distraction of her lover to confuse her. She hadn't said it was over—only that she needed time.

Stephanie drew up beside him in the large hotel bed. She lay on her back, her breasts defying gravity. She crossed her arms beneath them, her face a pout of angry disappointment. Paul realized he'd lost his erection, so distracted by his musings he'd forgotten to focus on the frenzied attentions of his would-be lover.

Leaning up on an elbow, he said gently, "I'm sorry, Stephanie. I must be tired. I'm not used to transatlantic flying like you are. Must be jet lag."

"Yeah whatever." *Old fart. Figures I picked a dud. Probably a closet fag.* Paul startled to hear her thoughts, thoughts he hadn't meant to listen for. He couldn't help the small smile at her words. If she only knew how old he really was! Poor girl—he couldn't take offense at her silent rebuke. He knew the sort of woman she was—someone who derived her sense of self-worth almost entirely from her appearance and ability to seduce a man. He'd committed the ultimate sin by failing to be properly impressed by her beauty or properly aroused by her attentions.

Gently he moved a tendril of her blonde hair from her cheek. She turned her head away. "Stephanie, look at me." She turned toward him with a petulant frown as he locked her in his gaze, sending a magical message into her brain. All at once she smiled, the crease of irritation smoothing from between her brows, her expression softening.

"I'm so sleepy," she announced, stretching lavishly as he pulled the covers up over her. "I could sleep the entire day." She closed her eyes with a dreamy sigh of contentment. She would sleep the entire day and when she awoke, she would not remember Paul Windsor. She would not remember he had been on her shift on the flight. She would not remember seeing him that morning at the café. She would not remember failing to seduce him with her limited charms. She would simply wake, feeling rested and refreshed, ready to enjoy the Paris nightlife without a care in the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

"*Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey, Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey.*" Anne sat on a bench at the park, focused intently on a pigeon pecking near her feet. She had been trying to immobilize the bird for several minutes, to no avail. She was about to give up, promising herself only one more try when the pigeon for some reason looked up at her. She caught its eye just as she spoke the strange, magical words. The bird stiffened, frozen in place by her spell.

"Oh my God!" Anne said aloud. A woman nearby turned to look at her. Anne smiled and ducked her head, waving her hand as if to say, *excuse me, please ignore me.* The woman looked away. She hadn't noticed the perfect replica of a pigeon at Anne's feet. The other pigeons seemed unconcerned as well, brushing against the frozen little fowl as they swiped the crumbs nearby.

"I guess the trick is to look the subject in the eye," Anne said to herself. "At least I've had one success today." For Anne had tried her hand at the truth powder, carefully measuring and heating the ingredients, following the directions to the letter. The

mixture had boiled down to a thick paste that she'd left to dry for a few hours. When she returned to examine it, it had dried to a powder but it was a bright purple rather than the pale lavender Paul had said was essential.

*Paul...* Since he had left two days before, Anne had done little but think of him. She'd tried to busy herself, cleaning her apartment from top to bottom, practicing her immobility spell, mixing the ingredients for the truth powder, going to the market to look for some of the more common ingredients, like ginger root and oil of orange.

Paul had remained in her thoughts, in her heart, lingering just below the surface. He had left a T-shirt in her bedroom of soft dark gray cotton he had worn the day before he'd left for France. When she'd found it, inadvertently kicked under the bed, she couldn't contain the cry of pleasure as she brought it to her face, inhaling his lingering scent as she rubbed the soft fabric along her cheek. *Paul. Why did I send you away? I want you now. I do. I miss you.*

On the third day, Anne went into her study. She began to examine the canvases Paul had claimed to admire. Was it time to paint again? It had been several years since she'd lifted a brush to the canvas, drawing that first defining line of color along the pristine white canvas.

The idea of painting again! It was almost like doing something forbidden—a luxury in which she had no right to indulge. Painting was a frivolity, a pastime for wealthy idle girls with no real talent. Paul had tried to get her to talk more about her reluctance to paint, but she herself hadn't been entirely clear. He'd suggested gently she no longer needed to carry her father's misguided, outdated messages in her brain. If she chose to paint, it was her business and hers alone. She was a grown woman who certainly had the time now to "indulge in this idle pastime" if that was how she insisted on thinking of it. With Greg's insurance money and her own substantial savings, Anne didn't need to work again as long as she managed her money wisely going forward. She had literally all the time in the world to paint, if that was what she wanted to do.

She realized a part of her was afraid—what if whatever talent she'd once possessed had disappeared? Paul knew so much about art—he would see her pathetic efforts and it would diminish her in his eyes. "Stop it," she said aloud. "An artist doesn't paint for someone else. If you want to paint, paint for heaven's sake!"

She wasn't even sure where her easel was, though she realized it was probably at the back of the closet in the study. She recalled she still had several blank canvases and a large box of tubes of paint. Half of them were partially used, most of them probably dried up and worthless. She would buy more paints tomorrow, she decided, feeling positively bold.

Anne picked up the red lacquer box from the desk. Paul had given it to her the night before he'd gone. Inside was a beautiful set of handmade Russian sable brushes, each one nestled in its own groove, the smooth wooden handles fairly begging to be held, the brushes longing to be dipped in color. Anne lifted one of them from the case, drawing the soft sable tip along her cheek. She would do it! Now twelve years older than when she'd first begun the exercise, though not necessarily any wiser, she would



again attempt a self-portrait. This time she would hold nothing back—painting what she saw, seeking the essence of herself by blending colors on the canvas, creating the lines and planes that would bring the image to life however imperfect, however vulnerable, however mortal.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day passed in a dream as Anne, newly armed with fresh tubes of paint, a clean palette, plenty of rags and paint cleaner, began her work. She wore an old T-shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, a large mirror set up alongside the easel. Happily, none of her skill seemed to have deserted her and knowing she was alone with no one to step in and oversee her work, she painted freely after first sketching her features with charcoal.

She forgot to eat, sipping from a bottle of water from time to time, too engaged to even stop and go to the bathroom until the pressure on her bladder became too insistent to ignore. As the sun began to set, Anne had a very good start, the face and hair blocked in with some detail around the eyes and mouth. She'd only painted the outline of her neck and shoulders. The last several hours had been spent on the eyes and at last she was satisfied they captured something of her essence.

Exhausted, she began to clean her brushes, the smell of the turpentine causing her to open the window. The early evening air felt cool and inviting compared to the relatively airless room. She would finish cleaning, shower and take a stroll as the sun set over Washington Square. She would buy a hot dog and a soda and pretend Paul was next to her, laughing as she made a mess of the chili, reaching out to wipe her chin with his napkin...

Anne pulled on Capri pants and a tank top, slipping her feet into sandals. She put her wallet, cell phone and a lipstick into a small shoulder bag. Locking her door, she dropped her keys in as well. She emerged from her townhouse, her mind occupied with daydreams of the man she'd let travel halfway round the world without her. She didn't see the figure again lurking, waiting, biding his time, finally ready to make his move.

## **Chapter Twelve**

Robert Langley gripped the syringe, feeling for the plastic cover to assure himself it was secure. The serum inside would surely be enough to knock her out once he'd got her in the car. The little bitch was going to get what was coming to her at last and she wouldn't be able to prove a thing, not if he played his cards right.

Robert prided himself on many things—his vast wealth, his killer instinct in business, his good looks, his ability to seduce women, but most especially his patience when he wanted something. The wealth he'd been born to—but he'd taken his father's millions and increased them tenfold with sheer determination and only a minimum of trickery and foul play, none of which could be traced back to him, most of which was actually legal, if somewhat underhanded. His looks had always been an asset—he was tall and strong with thick blond hair and nice even features. Women were always attracted to him and men respected him.

Occasionally he ran into types like Anne Kaliner and that stuck-up European creep she'd glommed onto before her husband's corpse was even cold. Women like Anne thought they were better than men. They thought they could compete in the workplace and in sports, but in reality they were simply tolerated, and that only because the law demanded it. If Robert had had his way, women like Anne would do what women were supposed to do. Either stay at home and take care of the children or do something seemly for a woman, like be a teacher or a nurse. Women were nurturers—men were achievers. To pretend otherwise was to buy into all this feminist bullshit.

Robert often wished he had been born a century earlier. His family used to tease him he was a throwback to another era but it was true. He'd never liked to see girls in pants, women doing men's jobs or women being assertive or demanding. There was just something unnatural about it. The women he chose to date learned quickly to be submissive to him in all things or get the hell out. With his looks, money and power, Robert Langley didn't usually have a problem. He could have his pick of beautiful women.

Why then had he even bothered with Anne? Truth to tell, there was something so sexy about her he couldn't pretend he wasn't attracted. It wasn't her unusual beauty that had captivated Robert—he had dated two fashion models. It certainly wasn't her brains, though he grudgingly had to admit the deal she'd brokered for him had earned him quite a bit of cash but he knew her husband was probably behind it, tutoring her at home so she could look good at the office.

No, it was something else. Something passionate, something vulnerable, behind those huge gray-green eyes, something he wanted to possess, to claim, to crush. If only

he'd heard about Greg's death sooner, it could have been him instead of that English bastard with the mysterious and lovely Anne Kaliner on his arm.

When she'd behaved so coolly toward him, both at Granger Finch and at Donner's party, he'd wanted to hurt her. To smash that pretty face, to rip off her clothing and defile her. He'd had more than he realized to drink at the party obviously, since he'd come to on a couch in the hallway with a pounding headache and a vague memory of having cornered her at the bathrooms, eager to wipe that smug expression off her face.

He'd given her another chance. He'd bought her the most expensive roses he could find. He'd come with his tail between his legs, humbly asking her forgiveness for his behavior the night before. And how did she greet him? Was she gracious? Did she accept the flowers, accept his apology, accept his invitation to get to know him better? No! The bitch said she was "seeing someone". As if he didn't know who that someone was! As if that someone could possibly hold a candle to Robert Edward Langley III, one of the most sought after bachelors on the Manhattan list of *Who's Who*!

He'd given her a chance but she'd blown it royally. Now he wouldn't take that cunt out if she paid him for the privilege! No, Anne had lost the opportunity of being the lucky girl on his arm at the U.S. Open, at Wimbledon, at Hollywood new release parties, at the most elite clubs in the city and around the world. You didn't reject Robert Langley and not live to regret it.

Which brought him to his greatest virtue—his patience. Robert would always take revenge, but he would do it in his own time, carefully working out the details so it wouldn't come back to bite him. He had always liked the saying, "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

Discretion was key. One had one's reputation to uphold after all. People wouldn't take kindly to their car turning up in the Hudson River or their taxes being audited because of an anonymous tip. He'd done both those things and worse, but what he'd planned for Anne was his grandest scheme of all.

He'd watched her in the weeks since the party, tracking her moves, observing when she came and went. At first that limey asshole had been with her constantly. Robert had followed them to the guy's ritzy penthouse on Central Park West and back again to her Village townhouse. They were so goo-goo-eyed over one another, they hadn't noticed a thing. He knew his plan would be difficult to execute with lover boy always underfoot but Robert would find a way. All he needed was a few minutes when she was alone to start things rolling.

Then to his delight the boyfriend had disappeared! Either they'd split up—hopefully!—or he had to go out of town on business or something. Whatever the reason, he'd stopped coming round the last three days and she'd been staying at her place, coming out once or twice a day to shop or hang out at the park in Washington Square. She was clearly a loner—he never saw anyone else come to visit her, never saw her meet anyone on her forays.

The gods it seemed were shining on him. They wanted him to exact his revenge, to punish the uppity bitch for rejecting him, for humiliating him, for insulting him. She was alone, the Brit was history and the time was ripe. Robert had always had excellent timing and he was certain this would be no exception.

Reaching up he touched his toupee, a very expensive rug that looked like the real thing. It was dark brown and matched the mustache he'd grown since Anne had seen him last and dyed to just the right color, along with his eyebrows. His dark brown contacts completed the disguise as he knew it was the details that could unravel a scheme however well planned it might seem. He couldn't disguise his height alas. He could disguise his voice to a point and hopefully she would be so disoriented by the drugs she wouldn't recognize it. Even if she did, she couldn't prove a thing.

Robert moved back against the wall as the front door to her townhouse opened. There she was. This was it. He took the syringe from his pocket, flicked away the plastic cap and moved toward her, his step light, his muscles alive with anticipation. Let the games begin.

"Excuse me, miss. You dropped this." Anne turned to the sound of man's voice. Near her stood a tall man with dark hair holding a woman's ring. It looked like a wedding ring. Reflexively Anne felt her own ring finger with her thumb. It was bare, but then she'd stopped wearing her wedding ring since she'd let Greg's spirit finally rest in peace.

Of course the ring he held wasn't hers. Her rings were in a safe deposit box at her bank. "No," she said. "Sorry, it's not mine." The man had moved closer to her, too close for comfort. She tried to step away but he gripped her forearm suddenly.

"Hey! Let go of me!" Anne tried to jerk away. He released her arm but at the same time lifted his other hand, jabbing her bare arm with something. She felt the prick and a stinging sensation. The man had stuck a needle into her arm! "What the hell! What did you do! Oh! My arm!"

Terror swirled through Anne's mind as images of smallpox and bubonic plague came hurtling into her imagination. The man pulled her close, putting his arm tightly around her as he said soothingly, "There, there, it's all right. It's all fine. You're going to be fine, just fine." A man walking by with his dog looked over at them, his expression one of concern.

"Everything okay?" he asked hesitantly.

"Sure, sure. My wife is just feeling a bit dizzy. We're parked right over here. Thanks, though. Since 9/11 it's nice to see how New Yorkers care again." He kissed the top of Anne's head. The man with the dog smiled and nodded, walking off as Anne tried to shout after him.

Instead of screaming, she only managed to mumble, her head suddenly heavy, her vision blurring. She stumbled against the stranger as he propelled her toward his car, his strong arm wrapped tightly around her. Opening the back door, he half shoved, half

lifted her into the car, slamming the door closed. Quickly he slipped into the driver's seat. The last sound Anne was conscious of before passing out was the clunk of the doors locking as the man sped away.

The room was dark when Anne opened her eyes. She was stiff, the arm she was lying on asleep. She was on her side on a mattress, her hands somehow tied behind her back. As she pulled against the binds, she realized they must be rope.

Anne remembered the stranger, remembered the shot. Someone had drugged and kidnapped her! It couldn't be true and yet here she was, tied up in some dark room about to be murdered.

"God, help me!" she moaned, and then louder, "Hello? Please. Where am I? What's happening?"

"Welcome to hell, little girl." As the deep voice spoke, Anne felt a peculiar recognition. The voice seemed somewhat familiar though she couldn't quite place it. The light flicked on and Anne squinted in the brightness. Before her sat the tall dark-headed man who had given her a shot of something. She could barely breathe, terror snatching the air from her lungs.

"Please. What are you doing? What was in that shot you gave me? Why have you done this? Let me go, please! Let me go," she pleaded.

Ignoring her pleas the man said, "You've been very, very naughty and you have to be punished. I've brought you here to give you what you deserve. Don't worry, I won't kill you—if you behave that is." The man smiled cruelly, his face eerily familiar to Anne though she didn't know why. His words chilled her to the bone. She knew from reading crime stories that the kidnapper wouldn't let his victim see his face if he planned to let them go. This man was going to kill her, she was sure of it! But first he was going to torture her. Anne began to breathe very rapidly, unable to catch her breath, unable to stop the hiccups of terror.

"Please, please, please," she begged. "Let me go. I won't tell. You need money? I can get you plenty. I promise. Just let me go! Please!"

"Shh, hush now. Stop that. I'm not going to kill you. I certainly don't need your money. Just calm down! The injection was Phenobarbital, just a little something to make you agreeable to the drive. I gave you enough to keep you out while I changed you into something, er, more comfortable." He stared down at Anne's naked body as she closed her eyes, feeling her blush cover her skin. "I've got more where that came from if it becomes necessary to sedate you again."

The man stood and moved toward her. Anne shrank back against the wall, bumping her head in the process. He sat down next to her, taking hold of her shoulders. She jerked and writhed, trying to get away from him. "Calm down, I tell you. Calm down or things will go worse for you."

She stilled as he gripped her hard, unable to control her whimpering. He stared at her, his brown eyes boring into hers. His expression softened as he asked, "Are you thirsty, little girl? Shall I give you some water?"

Anne nodded. She was horribly thirsty. The man stood and came back with a bottle of water. He unscrewed the cap and held the bottle at her mouth, tilting it so some of the water spilled onto Anne's bare breasts. She shivered and pulled away from him, acutely embarrassed at her nudity but unable to hide herself.

"Come on now, cooperate or you won't get any water. Here, let me help you sit up." The man lifted Anne into a sitting position and with her hands knotted firmly behind her, she was powerless to stop him. As she sat upright, dizziness assailed her and she leaned heavily against the headboard of the single bed. This time when he tipped the bottle, she made an effort to drink from it, trying to get as much as she could. He let her drink for a few moments before withdrawing the bottle.

"Good girl," he patted her head. Anne jerked her head and his face darkened. "Don't do that. You are not to pull away, understand?" Anne knew that voice. But from where? The man sat back down on the chair near the bed. His voice softened with lust as he said, "Jesus, you are fucking hot. I'm going to enjoy your punishment, oh my yes!" He rubbed his hands together and licked his lips in an exaggerated gesture. Anne felt numb with fear.

*Paul! Paul, help me, help me, help me.* What was she hoping for? He was across the world. A muffled ringing sounded. Both of them turned toward its source. Anne's purse was on the kitchen table. Her cell phone! If only she could get to it! After six rings it stopped, going to voice mail.

Seemingly unperturbed, the man turned back toward Anne. "You know, I've been so rude. I haven't introduced myself. You can call me Greg." He smiled cruelly as Anne's eyes widened. "I will call you Anne or cunt or whatever I want."

"You—you know my name. My husband's name..."

"You want me to marry you so soon? And this, our first date!" The man who called himself Greg laughed again. "Yes, I know your name." He held up her slim wallet he must have retrieved from her purse. As she absorbed this, he went on. "A few ground rules for you while you're enjoying my hospitality." He waved his hand around the small room. It was an efficiency apartment, drab with only the bed, a few rickety chairs and a kitchen table as furniture. The place looked abandoned.

"Number one, you do what I say to the letter. Number two, you get to drink or eat or piss or whatever your bodily need of the moment is only after you suffer a punishment. If you handle the punishment well, I'll reward you with my cock. When I am not using you, you will be tied down. If you try anything funny, I'll chain you to the bed and I'll gag you. I'll sedate you and starve you. You're completely at my mercy, got it, chickie baby?"

Anne couldn't answer as she'd fainted dead away.

Robert rubbed his penis, reaching into his jeans to grab hold and pull it upward. He felt almost dizzy from the fierce erotic thrill he'd gotten from tying Anne down and threatening her. The sheer power he felt was like a cocaine high. He could conquer the world! It didn't hurt that Anne was butt naked, completely exposed for his viewing pleasure. Bitch. She was where she deserved to be.

She'd had a chance to sail on his yacht, to sleep on his 1000-count cotton sheets, to attend the best parties, go to the most upscale clubs, fly to Paris for dinner on a private jet, all with him, Robert Edward Langley III, one of New York's most eligible bachelors. Instead here she was in a dump, tied down on a filthy mattress, at the mercy of a madman...

He stared at her luscious body. When she'd fainted, he'd repositioned her spread-eagle and he liked what he saw. He had a good view of her nasty twat from this angle. Her tits looked soft and inviting, ready to be squeezed and bitten. He could do whatever he wanted. The regular world didn't exist in this secret haven he'd secured for them. Reality was suspended and no rules applied except the ones he chose to impose.

Things were going very well. For a moment he fantasized about keeping her here forever. Who would be the wiser? He'd turn her into a zombie sex slave, like in the stories he enjoyed reading online sometimes. The girl was kidnapped and brainwashed, a willing slut-whore, chained to the bed when he wasn't there, on her knees when he was... Robert shook his head, shaking away the idea. Already this was risky, far riskier than any other revenge plot he'd exacted over the years. If he were caught, he could do serious time. No, he wouldn't take stupid chances. He'd just keep her overnight. Teach her her lesson. Then he'd inject her once more, tie her loose enough to let her get herself free but tight enough to make her work for it. By the time she got away, he'd be long gone.

He'd rented the place for a month, using cash and a false ID. It was all so absurdly easy. Who would ever connect Robert Langley, businessman, millionaire, mover among the powerful, with some creep who lived in a dump in Harlem? Even if Anne figured out who he was, which wouldn't happen—women were so easily fooled—it would be his word against hers.

No one could pin this on him. But Anne would never forget it. When she went flouncing out in her skimpy dress, would she wonder at each man she saw, would she be afraid he might be lurking around the corner, ready to abduct her again? He'd take the saucy gleam out of her eye. Already she was terrified and he hadn't even begun to have his real fun.

Robert rubbed his cock harder, thinking what a shame it would be to waste his jism, especially when there was a cunt right there for the taking. He'd planned to make her suffer first but she just looked too damn good tied down and spread for him. He moved toward her, pulling his pants and underwear to his knees. Aware Anne would probably go to the police and aware of DNA testing, Robert pulled a condom from his pocket and unrolled it onto his erection. God knew where the slut had been anyway—better safe

than sorry. He rubbed his sheathed cock a moment, staring at the spread-eagled naked girl as power surged through him like a drug. He fell over her with a grunt just as she opened her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul lifted the small crystal orb from its leather travel case, unwrapping the soft velvet that protected it. He was worried as Anne hadn't answered her phone, nor returned his several voice messages. Up until she'd suddenly fallen silent, they'd talked at least twice each day for the three days he'd been gone. He had considered cutting his trip short, longing to fly back to her. Yet he respected her need for time alone. Now he was beginning to be seriously worried. She was all alone in the big city. Since mortal means of contacting her weren't successful at the moment, he decided to track her by magical ones.

Dropping a pair of panties she'd left at his apartment into the small pot of viewing potion, Paul stirred it thoughtfully for a moment, remembering how she'd tossed them with a coquettish laugh before falling upon him with delicious abandon. He sighed and sat down with the orb, the potion's aroma now swirling in the air of his hotel room.

The crystal went from black to gray to pink and finally cleared. He was focused on the present, conjuring his true love. As the image formed itself in the glass Paul stared a moment, not comprehending. Anne naked and bound on a filthy old mattress! He watched in disbelief as a man, his pants at his ankles, bent over the prostrate girl. The blood in his veins turned to ice as he stared in horror at the ball, barely aware as it slipped through his fingers and crashed to the floor, rolling under the bed, black and dormant once again.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had happened so quickly Anne had barely had time to register her horror as his long thin member poked hard against her. She felt the tear of her flesh as his condom-sheathed cock pressed past the dry but forcibly spread entrance of her sex. Her screams were muffled by his big hand over her mouth. He rutted and thrust against her, grunting like a pig, his hot breath in her face. Within seconds he'd come inside her, lying over her heavily for a minute or two afterward. Like a cornered animal, Anne had tried to lie still, her eyes shut, silently calling for Paul, though she knew he was a thousand miles away. Her heart was smashing against her ribs beneath the dead weight of the monster sprawled on top of her.

Anne's cell phone rang again, a plaintive cry issuing from her purse across the room. The man who called himself Greg—she refused to call him that, refused to call him anything—heaved himself off her. In his haste the condom was partially pulled away from his flagging cock. Anne closed her eyes, ill at the thought of his sperm wriggling inside of her. She could hear him zipping his pants. Again her cell phone rang.



"Fuck," the man snarled. Moving to the table, he grabbed Anne's purse, pulled it open and removed the phone. Drawing back his arm, he hurled it toward the wall. On impact the ringing stopped abruptly. Anne felt as if her last connection to the world had just been yanked away. She felt dizzy and sick, as if she might vomit. A tiny part of her kept waiting for the clock alarm to go off, the nightmare to end. Alas, she knew this nightmare was real.

The man returned to stand in front of her. She turned her head away, squeezing her eyes shut. "Open your eyes," he said. "Look at me while I'm talking." She obeyed, not knowing what else to do. "I gave you your reward before your punishment. Now you'll have to pay extra."

"Why?" Anne cried, her voice trembling. "Why are you doing this? Please, I'm begging you. Please let me go. Let me go!" Anne strained at her bonds, desperate to close her legs, to free her wrists. The rope had burned her wrists as she'd struggled beneath his offending weight. Her sex felt raw and she longed to close her legs. Bitter bile rose in her throat but she willed it down. Lying as she was, she could choke on her vomit. She could die here on this filthy bare mattress with only this monster as her witness.

"I'll tell you why. You're being punished because you're an uppity cunt. You think you're better than the men around you. You think you're too good for men most women would sell their souls to be with. You're being punished because you're a dirty slut."

Anne stared at the man. He was obviously completely insane. How could he possibly think he would get away with this, whoever he was? Surely he knew she would go to police, there would be an investigation. She realized with sudden sickening clarity—there wouldn't be an investigation if there was no one to report what had happened. He must be planning to kill her. *Oh God, oh God, oh God, I'm going to die. I'm going to die.*

Anne took a deep breath as she tried to control herself. *Don't panic. Approach this logically. Think!* She could do something. She might be tied down now with no one aware she was missing, but she wasn't hurt and she had her wits. If only she had a magic spell to help her. A magic spell! *Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey...* The words swirled into her brain. Yes! If she could somehow get free, long enough to say the spell.

The man was bending over her, untying her legs, which were secured at the ankle by rope that had been tied off underneath the bed frame. "I'm going to untie you because you're going to get your first punishment. I'm going to put you over my knee and spank your ass. If you try to get away, I'll tie you down so tight you won't be able to wiggle." He leaned over her to untie her wrists from the headboard posts. "No funny business," he warned as he stood back. "Stand up and come get what you deserve."

Anne considered bolting. She felt weak from the effects of the drug and from hunger. It had been hours since she'd eaten and she was still very thirsty. His

defilement had left her nauseated. Yet she had to escape! How absurd to die here with this odious man when she had her whole life before her.

Her natural courage began to reassert itself as she thought of Paul. Paul would want her to fight! He wouldn't expect her to give in without resistance! This man had the upper hand in terms of strength but she'd seen no gun. And *she* had something he didn't have – magic!

Could she get by him fast enough to get to the door? Where were her clothes? Wrapping her arms around herself, she stood slowly, glancing around the room. She saw her clothing, tossed in a pile in a corner by the door. She felt dizzy standing and sat back down on the old lumpy mattress.

"I said get up," the man demanded, now sitting on the chair once again. Anne stood.

"Please, this is crazy. I'm begging you. Please."

"Good, I like when you beg. Now get over here and get your ass on my lap. Move it or I'll make you crawl." His tone was hard and Anne obeyed, biding her time, her heart beating so hard she thought it might burst through her chest.

Reluctantly she lay over his lap, feeling absurd, terrified and utterly humiliated. In a way this was worse than the rape because she was complying, voluntarily doing his perverse bidding. She didn't dare refuse him. He was nearly a foot taller than she and much stronger. Nonetheless she felt ashamed as he pressed her head down between his legs and put a strong hand on her lower back to hold her in place.

His hand came down hard on her ass and Anne yelped, instinctively covering her ass with her hands. "Move your hands! Now!" he roared, smacking her hands along with her ass until she moved them away. He hit her hard, methodically covering both cheeks until she began to whimper and cry, her head caught between his legs, her beautiful hair dragging on the floor.

When he tired at last, he gave her a push and Anne fell to the floor. She curled into a ball, crying softly. "Hey," she heard the man say. "Hey, get up. You're okay. Get up." She felt his boot prodding her side. Anne struggled to her knees. Slowly she stood, hugging her body, her hair hanging over her face.

The man actually sounded contrite as he said, "I got a little carried away. Your ass is just made for spanking, Anne."

Anne stood miserably, her poor bottom on fire, but she hadn't missed the contrition in his voice. For the first time she felt hope kindle like a tiny flame in the wind. "May I sit down, please? I'm so tired and hungry." As she stood, hugging her body, she began to tremble, shaking so violently the man actually approached her and pushed her to the bed.

"Sit there and don't move," he ordered. "I'll get you more water and some crackers I have." He pointed toward her as he walked backward toward the kitchen, his eye upon her. "Don't move. Got it?"

Anne rocked on the bed, commanding herself to get a grip. If she could get the guy talking, perhaps he would be distracted enough for her to try the spell. "*Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey, Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey.*" Anne whispered the words, praying she had the intonation and spacing right. He came back and sat on the chair across from her after handing her the bottle and a handful of crackers. It occurred to her as she drank the water it might be drugged. It had no taste however, and she was just too thirsty to resist. She ate the crackers. They were stale and dry but much better than nothing at all.

He was watching her. She had to get him to talk, to distract him somehow while she was still untied. "Please," she began. "Please let me go. I can get you money. I promise I won't tell. Just let me go."

"When I'm good and ready, cunt. Not a moment before. Girls like you think they run the world. Now you see you're just another cunt, just another piece of ass put in her place."

As he continued his delusional misogynistic ramblings, Anne began to whisper the words, barely moving her lips, focused so intently she no longer heard his words but only the sound of his oddly familiar voice...

*"Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey, Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey. Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey, Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey."* As their eyes locked, Anne said aloud, "*Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey, Anah rrrrathra. Anah hebuk. Woiyek, woiyek, wigafey.*"

He stiffened suddenly as if he'd been frozen, his mouth still open in discourse, his hand raised in a gesture to emphasize a point. Anne stared at him a moment, stunned. It had worked! First a lovebird then a pigeon, now a human! She had done it! She stared at him a moment longer and noticed his hair looked odd. Slightly askew. As if it were a wig. A wig! A disguise!

Anne stood. She knew she had to run, to get out before he unfroze. She had maybe five minutes at the most. But she had to know what was under that toupee. Tiptoeing toward him, she reached out to touch the hair, half afraid he would leap to life and grab her. He remained immobile however as she pushed at it and then grabbed it, pulling it free of his head.

His thick blond hair was pinned down beneath it. With a sickening flash of recognition Anne finally put it all together. His height, his voice, now his blond hair. The sick bastard was getting revenge because she'd rejected him, refused his roses! She couldn't believe he'd go to such absurd lengths to get back at her. It was junior high school gone horribly, dangerously awry.

Anne felt rage pumping through her blood like a poison. Her hands clenched at her sides and she raised her fist, ready to smash his smug face. But the thought of contact with his flesh, even in violence against him horrified her. The time for revenge would come later. Right now she had to get out! To connect with Paul! To get to the police.

*Hurry, hurry, hurry...* She raced to her clothing, worriedly watching the statue of a man as she pulled on her things. Her anger had given her strength she might not otherwise have been able to summon. Robert Langley would pay for his crimes. She would make sure of it.

She had no idea what time it was. It was still night outside the dirty window of the apartment. She hurried to the table, grabbing her purse. The cell phone lay where it had fallen. Anne grabbed it and stuffed it into the bag. She scanned the dim room for the man's wallet but found nothing. It was probably in his pocket and she certainly didn't plan on touching him again.

Turning the deadbolt with trembling fingers, Anne pulled the door open and sprinted out toward freedom, adrenaline giving her the strength to fly down the stairs and out into the night.

"Taxi!" she cried, waving wildly as a yellow cab drew to the curb. "Take me to the nearest police station!"

## Chapter Thirteen

"There's an extra hundred in it for you if we make good time," Paul told the cabbie as he leaped into the backseat of the taxi and slammed the door. Properly motivated, the driver screeched out of his place at the head of the taxi line at Kennedy Airport. Paul gave Anne's address in the Village and turned his attention to the traffic lights.

He tried to keep calm. He'd managed to make it this far without completely losing his mind. He'd tried to banish the horrible image of the tall man, his pants down, bending over Anne, tied down naked on a bed...

The image had rendered Paul nearly insane with dread, desperate to return to his lover, to save her, to free her, to murder the man who had kidnapped her. Hastily he checked out of the hotel—the second art auction he damned!—and raced to the airport in a hotel limo. He'd barely made it onto a flight just leaving for New York. If only Concorde were still flying! A whispered spell to the official at the gate allowed him to board without the mortal inconvenience of purchasing a ticket or presenting a boarding pass. Still, warlock or no, he was forced to endure the ensuing seven-hour flight, unable to change the laws of physics on so grand a scale as to hasten the jet's arrival.

*Please, please, oh please let her be okay. Let me get there in time...* The moment the plane touched the runway he flipped open his phone and held down the speed dial button. He had almost cried with relief as Anne answered, "Hello? Paul? Paul, oh Paul."

"Anne, sweetheart! What happened? Are you safe? Are you home?"

"Yes, I'm okay. I've been trying to call you for hours. Paul, come home. I need you." Despite his fear for her, the words warmed his heart. She needed him!

"I saw your image, Anne. In the crystal orb." He realized as he said this he'd forgotten the little crystal globe back at the Paris hotel. Not that it mattered. What was a magic trinket compared to the safety of his girl? "I saw..." he hesitated, trying not to betray the anguish in his voice. Surely she was upset enough without his adding to it. "I saw you tied to a bed, Anne. A man, someone, was leaning over you. I tried to reach you but only got voicemail. I've been so terrified for hours. Thank God, you're safe. What happened?"

"Langley. That fucking bastard Langley!" As his taxi sped toward her, she told him the horrible details—Langley's disguise, his use of drugs to incapacitate her, the several hours he'd kept her tied and naked. Anne began to cry as she tried to tell Paul the sordid details of the rape and spanking.

Paul interrupted. "We can talk about it later, darling. Please don't put yourself through that right now. Tell me this—how did you get away? Do the police have him?"

"I used the immobility spell!" Anne said, her voice a little stronger. "I did it! My own magic, Paul! I'd been practicing with pigeons. When he froze, he jerked his head. That's when I realized he was wearing a wig. He wore dark contacts too and a mustache. He must have planned the whole thing well in advance. He must have been watching me, stalking me..." Her voice broke in a sob.

"Take a deep breath, sweetheart. I'll be there in just a few more minutes. You didn't say, did the police get him?"

"No, I told them the location of the place he'd taken me to and then they took me for a doctor's exam. I'm going to press rape and kidnap charges against the bastard. If they find him. He got away! He wasn't in the room, not that that's a surprise. He wasn't at his apartment either or his job. But the detective assigned to me told me they'll track him down soon enough. He said they have more than enough evidence to arrest him. Apparently there were even traces of his semen..." she faltered but forced herself to continue, "and it's been sent to the lab for DNA testing. And the doctor got the proof she'll need to prove I was raped..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. Paul heard the anguish, felt her pain, felt his heart break for the suffering she'd endured at Langley's hands.

Gently he said, "I'm here, Anne. We're pulling up now. In a moment I'll be there." He paid the cabbie, tossing a hundred dollar bill toward him as he sprinted from the car. Anne buzzed him in and he raced up the stairs. In a moment she was in his arms, clinging to him, sobbing against his chest as he smoothed her long, curling hair, kissing the top of her head as he held her.

He maneuvered her to the old couch in her living room. As she sat next to him, he held her gently as she rested her head against his chest. She was still crying but softly, just letting out the tension now. He stroked her hair, his heart filled with tenderness. Though he'd promised himself not to use magic on Anne, he'd meant he wouldn't use it to manipulate her. But if he could help her, soothe her, take away some of the pain that bastard had inflicted on her, where was the harm?

Softly he began to sing, his voice rich and deep, soothing her with words she didn't understand but responded to nonetheless. He could feel the tension uncoil in her muscles as he wove a gentle witch lullaby round her spirit. The lullaby was an easing spell—it wouldn't make her forget but it would remove the worst of the sting, helping her to heal more quickly. Paul could have wiped the entire incident from her mind, freeing her from the horrible memories that would no doubt linger for years to come. But he knew she mustn't forget because Langley was going to pay and they would need Anne to make sure he did. The man was an arrogant fool who had somehow thought himself so clever he could fool Anne and evade the law. He hadn't reckoned on Anne's magic! And no matter what justice might be meted out in the mortal courts, Paul Windsor vowed he would personally see to it Langley atoned for his crime.

Later that night Anne awoke to find herself in her bed, Paul beside her, silvered with moonlight shining against the strong lines of his face. He must have carried her to

bed. She must have slept for hours, right through dinnertime. Rising up on one elbow, she studied the sleeping man. How could she have doubted her love for him? Her desire to have him in her life?

If she had gone with him to Paris, she wouldn't have endured the horrible ordeal with Langley. She shivered but found the coil of terror at the pit of her stomach had come unwound. It must be because Paul had come home and now she felt safe. Yes, he made her feel safe and wanted. He made her feel cherished and loved. He made her feel vital and alive. Anne realized as she gazed at the dark handsome man she had never truly been in love before.

What a startling realization, when she'd just spent the last year mourning a man she had meant to spend her life with! She had loved Greg, but it was as if her life had been lived in shadow, the feelings vague, the desires hidden. She hadn't known there was a different way of loving, a more passionate plane of existence, until Paul had come into her life.

And what would happen now? He did seem to love her but in warlock terms she would age quickly while he stayed forever young. As her body sagged and wrinkled, his eyes would turn elsewhere, to the next lovely young conquest and she would be bereft and alone...

And yet! Even as she thought these maudlin, morbid thoughts, Anne reached out and touched his stubbled cheek, admiring his firm jaw, the soft, wide lips gently parted in sleep. If now was all she had, wasn't now enough? Wasn't now all any of us ever had?

"Look down at your feet," a friend had once said to her. "That's where you should be. Here—in the moment, living each minute as if it were your last." Then she had always been in a hurry, always looking to the next business deal, the next venture, the next big thing. She'd been in such a hurry to get wherever it was she was running to, she'd missed out on so much of the journey itself.

She leaned over, gently kissing his cheek, lightly grazing his lips with hers. He smelled heavenly and she breathed deeply as she nuzzled at the nape of his neck. Paul stirred and turned toward her, opening his eyes, the pupils dilated so they looked completely black in the light of the moon through the window.

Though only the night before another man had abducted her, abused her, raped her, still she found her body responding to this man next to her. Langley was like a distant nightmare, half forgotten as she gazed at her true love. His arms came around her as he kissed her, pulling her close. Paul was naked beneath the sheets. Anne realized she was still in her clothing from earlier in the day—he'd only laid her down on the bed, no doubt not wanting to disturb her by taking off her things.

She pulled away from him a moment and sat up, pulling her shirt from her body and reaching back to unclasp her bra. Unzipping her pants, she shimmied out of them, along with her panties and snuggled naked back into Paul's arms, eager to feel his warm, strongly muscled body against hers. He had been watching her as she performed

her hasty striptease and now as he held her she felt his tension, as if he were holding a china doll instead of a woman.

She pressed harder against him, her nipples rubbing across his smooth chest, her thigh against his manhood. Paul pulled back a little. "What is it?" she whispered. Was he rejecting her? Was she damaged goods now? Surely he wasn't so provincial, even if he was over two hundred years old!

"What's what?" he responded.

"Why are you pulling away from me? Don't you want me anymore?"

"Anne!" Paul pulled her close. "More than anything in the world. It's just, well, with what you've been through. I didn't want to press, to make you uncomfortable. When a woman's been defiled as you were, it can be very traumatic to be intimate again..." He trailed off, again pulling away.

"Paul! Don't give Robert Langley that kind of power over us! I certainly don't plan to. I was terrified, and yes, it was horrible. But, I don't know, I don't know how to explain this, but since you came back I'm not afraid anymore. I mean, I still hate him and I plan to press charges, but I seem to have lost that edge of panic, that feeling of helplessness. Since you sang me to sleep—" She stopped abruptly and this time it was she who pulled away. "Hey, Mr. Windsor," she demanded. "Mr. Warlock. Did you cast another spell on me? To make me forget?"

Paul sat up, grinning sheepishly. "Not to forget but to take away the sting. Or as you so aptly put it, to take away the power he had over you. I couldn't bear to see you so afraid, my love. But I didn't want you to forget. We mustn't forget when atrocities are perpetrated—on a whole people or on an individual. When we forget, we learn nothing. Forgive me for working magic on you when I promised I wouldn't. But it was out of love, because I do love you. With all my heart."

"And I love you!" She reached out, stroking his forearm. "And thank you for taking away the 'sting'. Because I wouldn't want anything to come between us. Not again. As I lay here watching you sleep, I came to a certainty in my own heart. No matter what happens between us later, between the mortal and the warlock, I love you now, at this moment, and I will love you as best I can for as long as you'll let me."

"That's all anyone could ever ask," he answered gravely, "and I shall do the same."

This time when she pressed her breasts against his chest, Paul did not pull away. When she kissed his mouth, he responded, his tongue curling past her parted lips as his cock rose hard against her. He rolled onto his back, holding her so she was astride his naked body, her hot sex poised over his ramrod-stiff member. Her hair was a wild tumult of curls obscuring her face as she lowered herself over him, taking his full length with a deep sigh of pleasure, her body shuddering as it acclimated to the welcome invasion of his shaft.

Slowly she began to move, sliding forward so her spread sex rubbed against him. The dual pleasure of his cock inside her and the friction against her clit soon had her



moaning and panting. Paul pulled her down for a kiss, his large hands gripping her ass as she rocked over him, riding him faster and faster in her passion.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh!" All too soon Anne felt the hot, inexorable rise of fierce pleasure as an orgasm ripped its way through her, almost against her will. Paul held her fast, his hands on her hips as she rocked and gasped against him. As the first tremors of pleasure slowly subsided, Paul continued to move her body with his strong hands, forcing her to stay astride his shaft, still rock hard inside of her. At first she wanted to roll off him and savor the still new experience of orgasm through intercourse, but he wouldn't let her go. Soon the intensity returned, pleasure roiling through her as Anne again felt the rising heat of impending orgasm. "Take me," she whispered, her voice rasping with need. She slung herself over, dragging him with her, his cock still buried to the hilt in her wet, slick tunnel.

He lay atop her, understanding what she wanted, what she craved. How good, how right it felt to have his strong, perfect body draped over hers, his heavy cock teasing her into a near stupor of pleasure as he kissed her neck, her collarbone, her breast, his dark hair grazing her chest as it fell forward.

His rapid breathing and soft moans matched her own. In a duet of passion, their bodies writhed and shuddered as each cried the other's name. Anne held on to Paul as if he would disappear if she let him go, her need for him so fierce it frightened her. Then she remembered—this moment was all they had, and it was all they needed. Sighing, she relaxed against him, falling almost at once into a dreamless sleep, cradled in the arms of her lover.

\* \* \* \* \*

"No, sorry, ma'am," the police officer on the line was apologetic. "We still haven't located him. We've had his residence and office under surveillance around the clock. We don't have anything concrete against him at this point. I mean," the officer had the grace to sound sheepish as he continued, "it's still just your statement that it was Langley. We don't have any proof the person who did this to you was Robert Langley. Until we can bring him in for questioning, we can't file charges or impound his bank accounts or anything like that. We'll keep you posted regarding our progress."

Dispiritedly Anne hung up the phone. Paul rubbed his chin, thinking. "Have you got anything of his? A piece of clothing, a book, anything he's handled?"

Anne made a face. "Why would I have anything of *his*?"

"No, I suppose not. I don't have the skill to conjure his image without something belonging to him. But I know someone who has. Would you like to meet a witch?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Anne smiled shyly as Paul introduced her to the beautiful witch. Amelia was dressed in a flowing robe of silver silk that precisely matched her closely cropped hair.

Her large dark eyes smiled along with her mouth as she took Anne's hand in both of hers. "I've heard so much about you, Anne. The mortal who melted the ice around this warlock's heart! I honestly never thought I'd see the day."

Anne blushed at her words and glanced up at Paul, who put a hand to his forehead and rolled his eyes. "Come on, Amelia, give me a break here. I have a reputation to uphold!" They all laughed but quickly sobered as each recalled the reason for the visit.

Amelia escorted her guests into the orb room, its walls dappled with a prism of colors reflected and refracted off the many beautiful crystal balls set on daises throughout the room. Anne gasped with admiration as her eyes moved from globe to globe. While Paul's display had been impressive, Amelia's crystal orb collection was one of the most extensive and valuable in the magical world.

Paul grinned at her. "Couldn't resist putting on a show for the mortal, eh?" Amelia gave him devilish grin as she tossed her head. Normally each orb was carefully shrouded with its own satin cover, perfectly fitted to protect the priceless crystal beneath it. "I thought I'd show you them all, so we could decide on the best choice for detecting the subject."

She turned to Anne. "With your permission, I'd like to probe your mind a bit, to get a sense of the man, an image. If it's not too painful, close your eyes and imagine him, not as he was in disguise but the way he really looks. Try to recall his features as precisely as you can." Anne stood very still, her eyes closed, the image of Robert Langley with his icy blue eyes, the arrogant curve of his mouth, his thick blond hair brushed back from his forehead. She felt sick for a moment, bile rising in her throat as the image of Langley in disguise invaded her mind, his dark wig and mustache, the brown eyes raking insolently over her naked body...

She felt Paul's hands on her shoulders. "Hey, Anne. It's okay. Come sit down." Anne's eyes opened and she turned toward Paul, who put his arms around her for a moment before guiding her to a long low couch.

"Use me instead," Paul said to Amelia. "I know what the bastard looks like." Amelia nodded, focusing her dark eyes on Paul's handsome face as she probed his memories.

After a moment she said, "I think I've got enough. He's hiding naturally so we'll want to select a seeker orb, one with superior detective properties. Let me see..." Amelia gazed appraisingly around the room, her eyes narrowed as she considered. She walked over to a blood red crystal ball about twelve inches in diameter resting on a pedestal of black wrought iron. Her hands moved gracefully over it as she closed her eyes. "Yes, this is the one. Paul, will you prepare the viewing potion?"

Paul nodded, moving toward the small cauldron in the corner. Amelia had already added most the ingredients and it was left to Paul to add the last few oils and herbs that would give the potion its potency. He lit the small burner beneath the iron pot and prepared the brew. Anne sat on the couch, her eyes moving from witch to warlock, awe and amazement overtaking her.

Her more rational self still tried to doubt what she had seen and experienced. There was no such thing as magic! Yet, even she herself had cast a spell, rendering Langley immobile long enough for her to escape. Though not long enough for the police to find him. Yet here were these two wonderful, magical beings willing, even eager, to assist her.

As the lovely witch stood over the crimson crystal orb with her eyes closed, her lithe form draped in shimmering silver, her long slender fingers dancing over the glass, Anne marveled that she was over four hundred years old! She couldn't help the little dagger of jealousy and insecurity that sliced along her emotions. Paul had said she was an old friend, their relationship going back over a century. In all that time, surely they had been more than just friends?

Anne was distracted from her jealous musings as Paul announced, "I think it's ready." The potion filled the room with a sweet, slightly acrid scent that gave Anne a vague headache. Paul smiled toward her. "This is it. Let's find out where the rat is hiding." Together they joined Amelia, still standing at the orb.

"Each of you place a hand on the ball and imagine the subject. Just keep his image in your mind as best you can while I probe for him. Though we haven't anything of his, having both of you should help. Stay focused and don't be distracted by what the orb reveals. Keep his image in your mind and I'll interpret what we see." Anne nodded, assuming the words were meant for her as Paul certainly knew what to do.

Amelia closed her eyes, her lips moving as she murmured an incantation, her hands moving lightly over the orb. The dark red shimmered, glowing as it began to lighten to a coral pink swirling with silver and finally to a clear glass. "Focus," Amelia commanded. Pushing down the disgust and rage looming just below the surface, Anne forced the image of Robert Langley to the forefront of her thoughts. Paul stood across from her, his eyes closed, his head bowed as if in prayer.

"Ah," Amelia said in a low voice. "We're getting something." Anne watched with fascination as the image of a man appeared. He was sitting on a beach, a drink in his hand, a brown-skinned woman with dark hair next to him in a bikini. Amelia whispered and murmured as she bent close to the image. As if he had been called, the man turned directly toward them and Anne gave an involuntary cry.

"It's him!" she said urgently. "It's him." She wanted to turn away, to run from the room, but she knew she mustn't.

"Stay focused, you can look at him now, rather than the image in your mind. Let me probe the area, try to determine the location," Amelia said. She moved her fingers along the glass and the scene widened, rather like a camera pulling back from a zoom shot. A small hotel built of white brick with a thatched roof was set back several hundred yards. *El Cielo Hotel* the small sign read. "I do believe we've got him," Amelia announced.

\* \* \* \* \*

An anonymous tip to the police enabled them to track down Robert Langley, picked up in Riviera Maya, Mexico. He was flown back to New York the next morning for questioning. When Anne called that afternoon, she was put through to the detective on her case Mitchell Spencer. Paul watched her as her eyebrows bunched in anger, her mouth falling open in disbelief. "You let him go! What are you talking about! How could you do that?" She listened a moment, the color draining from her face. Finally she said, "Yes, all right. Yes, I'll come now." She paused, listening. "An attorney? For me? This is crazy." Again she listened. "Yes, okay. I'll be there."

She hung up, sinking to the couch next to Paul. "What happened? Why did they let the bastard go?" Paul demanded.

She turned toward him, her expression bleak. "He's got proof, so they say. Proof he was in Mexico while he was *allegedly* holding me prisoner in that dump! He's got airline tickets to prove it and witnesses corroborating his story. He wants to press charges against *me* for slander and defamation of character!"

"Obviously he paid a pretty penny to manufacture the evidence he needs," Paul said dryly. He thought for a moment. "How does he explain away the DNA evidence?" Paul refrained from saying "the sperm found inside of you upon examination" but he could tell from Anne's face she understood. She flushed and bit her lip. "I don't know. They want to talk to me. They have a few questions for me, they said. The guy sounded like *I* was the guilty one! I can't believe this. He said I might wish to have an attorney present. This is like a nightmare!"

"You don't need an attorney," Paul said as he pulled her into his arms. "Langley won't get away with this, sweetheart. You forget, he may have all the dishonest alibis money can buy but you've got magic on your side."

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul glanced around the windowless room, its concrete walls painted a drab pale green, the old metal table at which they sat scuffed and scratched, the paper cups of tepid coffee someone had provided sitting untouched before them. Anne sat next to him, her hands clasped in her lap, her expression anxious.

As Detective Spencer came into the room, Paul stood and held out his hand. "I'm Paul Windsor, I'll be representing Ms. Kaliner." Nodding, the detective shook his hand and they all sat down.

Spencer said, "Do you have any objection to this conversation being recorded?" As they said no, he pressed the button on the small tape recorder on the table. He asked basic information about Anne's name, date of birth, address and other details as a matter of record and then asked her to recount what had occurred the night in question.

"Excuse me," Paul interjected. "Don't you already have a very detailed account from Ms. Kaliner based on several extensive interviews?"

"Yes, but in light of Mr. Langley's evidence —"

"His evidence?"

"Er, his testimony. It appears there's more to this relationship than we'd first suspected."

"What relationship?"

"Between Ms. Kaliner and Mr. Langley."

"There's no relationship between us! How dare you even suggest—" Anne blurted, but was cut off by the detective.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but it appears you've been less than forthright with us. Mr. Langley has asserted you've had an ongoing affair, dating as far back as two years ago, when you worked closely together on a business deal for Granger Finch. He has records indicating—"

Anne spluttered in disbelief as she interrupted, "Affair! This is insane!"

"Do you deny you knew Robert Langley two years ago? That you worked intimately with him on a merger deal?"

"I can't believe—"

"Answer the question."

"It's all right, Anne. Answer his questions. Let's see where they're going with this." *Remember, we have magic and truth on our side. Let's let Langley paint himself into a corner.* Paul slipped the words into Anne's mind and she looked at him, pain in her eyes, but slowly she nodded.

"I did work with him then, yes. On a purely professional level."

"So you deny knowing him outside of work. You deny the trip you took together to Bermuda shortly thereafter?"

"Trip to Bermuda?"

"Mr. Langley supplied us with records. Airline ticket receipts with your name on them, corroboration with your place of employment that you took those days off."

"I may have taken time off, but it certainly wasn't to fly to Bermuda with that creep! I was married then! I barely knew the man!"

Spencer nodded, making some notes on his pad. Anne added, "He's obviously lying! Look, you were there when I came to the station! You took my story. Did you think I was lying then? Obviously the man's paid a lot of money to someone to make up records. Hadn't you better spend your time trying to verify his so-called proof? What about the drug he injected me with! Your doctors took blood, surely it was detected."

The detective looked embarrassed. "Well, ma'am. He says you have a history of drug addiction. Barbiturates, like the one found in your system. We're going to need to search your home, ma'am."

"You'll need a warrant," Paul interjected. The detective nodded.

Anne was shaking her head, disbelief on her face. "What about the rape! Your own doctor confirmed his semen was..." She trailed off, her voice a hoarse whisper, her expression one of horror.

Paul put his hand over hers, sending a silent spell of peace toward her. This was worse than he'd expected, but nothing they couldn't deal with. He felt her calm beneath his spell. Turning toward Spencer he said, "What about that? The DNA evidence."

"According to Langley, your client was, er, intimate with him on a regular basis. They'd had sex just before he left for Mexico, which according to airline and hotel records, was the day *before* this alleged incident took place. Traces of semen can remain for several days."

"And the trauma to the vagina—evidence of forced entry?" Paul wished Anne wasn't sitting there listening to this clinical discussion of her body but then what she had endured at the man's hands was much worse. He would see her through this.

"Well," the detective looked embarrassed but plunged on, "Mr. Langley told us Ms. Kaliner likes it, er, rough. They would play games, he said. Bondage games. She liked to be tied down and, er, forced." He glanced at Anne who was bright red, though from anger or shame he couldn't have said. "But this time they had an argument afterward. He said she was angry because he couldn't take her with him to Mexico. He's been wanting to break it off with her because of the drugs and her clinginess. He said this whole thing was fabricated by Ms. Kaliner. You know...a woman scorned..."

"This is beyond absurd." Paul put his elbows on the table, aligning his fingertips as he forced himself to be calm, resisting the impulse to put a curse on the man in front of them. He reminded himself the detective was just trying to do his job. "What is it specifically you wish to ask of my client today?"

"Well," Spencer said, turning toward Anne. "We have your earlier signed statement. In light of the new evidence, we were wondering if you'd like to retract it and give a new statement. Mr. Langley has said he won't press any charges if you drop yours. No hard feelings. Lover's quarrel."

Paul said quietly in his elegant British accent, "We have nothing to retract, Detective. Ms. Kaliner stands by her statement one hundred percent. The man is a bald-faced liar, as well as a rapist and kidnapper. We expect you to press criminal charges to the fullest extent of the law. I strongly suggest you check his so-called records with the airlines and the hotel. Find out who he paid and how much to lie for him and create false documents. Search his home for brown hair dye, a contact lenses case, any receipts from a wig shop, other false identification he might carry. Get into his computer and look for purchases with online pharmacies. While you're at it, interview Harold Donner. He was present when Robert Langley spoke with Ms. Kaliner at a party last month. He was witness to the fact Ms. Kaliner could not recall Mr. Langley's name, though they were supposedly 'intimate' as you said, for some time prior."

"Harold Donner, the billionaire?"

"One and the same. Whoever else Langley bought off, you can bet Harold Donner wasn't one of them." Paul stood, his hand on Anne's shoulder indicating she too should rise. "Now, if you're done with this charade, we'll bid you good day."

## Chapter Fourteen

Paul caught his breath as he saw the half-finished portrait Anne had been working on. The eyes were perfect, Anne's eyes stared back at him from the canvas, their brilliant clear gray green catching at his heart. The picture wasn't finished, some of it only blocked in, but there was enough there to convince Paul beyond a doubt of Anne's considerable talent.

He stared again at the canvas, mesmerized. There was pain in those eyes and compassion. Somehow she'd caught her own essence, something very difficult to do, even for the most accomplished artist. Paul wanted to wake her from her nap, to shake her by the shoulder and demand why she hadn't shown him her new work at once. But no, let her sleep. The ordeal at the police station had been a horrible shock, though in retrospect Paul supposed they shouldn't have been surprised. He doubted this was Langley's first foray into criminal behavior—the whole thing seemed too well planned, too well thought out to be merely the vengeful behavior of a man scorned.

No, Robert Langley had probably terrorized other women before Anne and would do so again unless they found a way to stop him. Paul had little faith in the police force's ability or willingness to uncover the evidence necessary to convict Langley at this point. He'd probed the detective's mind as they were meeting with him. Spencer had been warned to go easy. Apparently Robert Langley had someone very high up in the force on his payroll, someone eager to quash anything that might give Langley a bad name.

Paul didn't intend to allow the long, possibly corrupt arm of the law to stick its hand into Anne's personal life, raking up painful memories of her husband in the process, invading her privacy, spreading doubt and innuendo among her peers. He would put a stop to this nonsense once and for all. They would need a full confession, delivered in person by Langley himself. Paul intended to make that happen.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That's right. You need to add a pinch more cinquefoil. Be very careful with the oil, too much and it'll dilute the serum." Paul was helping Anne as she carefully mixed and stirred the ingredients for the truth powder. She was pleased by his suggestion she might like to be the one to brew the potion he intended to use on Langley.

"I've tried this twice before," she admitted. "Both times the powder was too dark."

"That's the yarrow blossom. Crush it some more and we'll try again." Together they mixed and stirred, their heads touching as they worked together, concentrating over the cauldron.



"That should do it," Paul finally announced. "Turn off the fire and let it dry. Meanwhile, make your call to the son of the bitch. Remember to act defeated, the poor stupid female he arrogantly assumes he can manipulate to get out of this thing. Stick to the script as best you can. Then we'll call Spencer and put an end to this nonsense."

Anne nodded, a clutch of fear in her gut. Mostly she was excited. She felt empowered knowing Paul was in her corner. She dialed Langley's number, unlisted but easily obtained by Paul from the phone operator with a magical suggestion.

"Hello?" Anne tried not to shudder at the sound of his voice.

"Hello, Robert. This is Anne. Anne Kaliner."

"Ah." The man seemed at a loss for words.

Instead of screaming at him, raging that he'd not only terrorized and abused her but then created a horrible string of lies that made her a suspect of false accusations, she swallowed and said, "I think we should talk, don't you?"

"What about? Your insane accusations against me?"

"Listen, you and I both know the truth. But I'm not a stupid woman. I know when I've been beat. You're just too clever for me." She tried to sound as if she were on the verge of tears. "If you'll agree to meet with me at Spencer's office, we'll both admit to a lover's quarrel," Anne had to force the words past the lump of disgust in her throat, "and drop the charges against one another."

Langley was silent a moment. Slowly he said, "And I'm not a stupid man. What's your angle? What do you want? Money?"

"Well," Anne forced herself to sound pathetic. "Since Greg's been gone and I haven't been working... Well, things have been kind of hard. This apartment is incredibly expensive, there's no rent control. I was thinking if maybe you could help me —"

He cut her off with a loud burst of laughter. "This is rich! Too rich!" Apparently he was buying it hook, line and sinker. "I always suspected you could be bought, just like any common whore. All women are the same. Get a whiff of cold hard cash and all is forgiven, all forgotten." He laughed again but then said in a cold voice, "So, you agree to drop your ridiculous unfounded charges and I agree to forget the matter for a small fee of...what, ten thousand?"

Paul, listening on the other line, mouthed to her, "Fifty."

"Fifty thousand."

"Fifty thousand, eh? That's awfully steep. You can't prove a thing. It's your word against mine and as you've obviously come to realize, my word carries a good deal more weight in this town than yours does."

"Even if you're," she forced the words out, "exonerated, you'll still have the scandal of a lawsuit, if not a criminal trial. I'll find other women, women you've done this to. I doubt I'm the first. I doubt I'll be the last —"

"That's enough. Shut up." Obviously she'd hit a nerve. She waited, looking at Paul, who nodded, smiling as if to say, *We've got him*. "Okay. Fifty thousand *after* we meet with the police and you retract your statement and sign a new one confessing you were just a jilted lover. You might be fined for obstructing justice or a frivolous suit or something. I'll cover that too. Deal?"

"Yes. I'll wait for Spencer's call."

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul and Anne walked into the room where Langley and another man, presumably his attorney, sat at the table. The room was considerably nicer than the interrogation room where the detective had grilled Anne over her alleged accusations. The table was of polished wood, the floors carpeted.

Anne and Paul sat across from the two men. Paul noted they were both dressed in extremely expensive suits worn over snow-white shirts and hand-sewn silk ties. Langley's blond hair was slicked back, his mouth pursed in a small smile, his eyes cold and flat. The man beside him looked small in comparison to Langley's lanky frame. He was darker with receding hair and eyes set too close on either side of a long hooked nose. He had several stacks of papers and folders in front of him and looked very official.

Anne was dressed in a dark blue dress that hugged her curves while still being conservatively cut. Her lovely hair had been pinned up in a French twist, making her large eyes look in ever bigger in her small, sweet face, now pinched with anxious anticipation. Paul hated that she'd been put through all this but knew the events about to unfold would give at least some satisfaction.

Detective Spencer and another man whom he introduced as District Attorney Shafer entered the room a moment later. Once they were all seated, the DA turned to Anne. "I understand from Mr. Bennett here and his client Mr. Langley you have something to say."

*I would very much like a cup of coffee, if it isn't too much trouble.* The words Paul sent to Langley issued out of his mouth a fraction of a second later. He himself seemed slightly surprised to have uttered them. The DA nodded at Spencer, who rose and left the room. At the door he said, "Could I get anyone else anything?"

"A bottle of cold water for the lady," Paul said, and Anne smiled gratefully at him. As they waited, Langley's attorney and the DA made small talk of a kind that made it clear they knew one another on a personal basis. Peeking into the DA's mind, Paul learned he was beholden in some way to Langley and hated him for it, but had been ordered by those above him to get this thing settled as quickly as possible. When Spencer returned a few moments later, Paul squeezed Anne's leg.

*Now it begins,* he whispered into her thoughts. Waving his hand over them all, he said the magical words necessary to immobilize the mortals for the few seconds he needed. This particular spell was weaker than the immobilizing spell he had taught to

Anne, good when only a few seconds were needed to cover a sleight of hand but when one didn't want to draw any unwanted attention. It would have been very difficult to exclude Anne from the spell, as any mortal within a few feet was bound to be caught in its web.

Quickly he removed the little twist of paper that held the truth powder he and Anne had successfully brewed the day before. Unscrewing the paper, he let the pale lavender powder cascade into Langley's cup, using the plastic stirrer to help it dissolve quickly. He only had about ten seconds left. Hurriedly he dropped the paper into the pocket of his jacket and sat back, waiting for the mortals to spring back to life, unaware they'd been tampered with by a warlock.

As if nothing had happened, the DA turned to Anne. "As I was saying, we understand you are prepared to make a new statement."

*I must drink this delicious coffee to the last drop.* Obediently Langley lifted the cup and drank from it, gulping the tepid brew until it was empty. He set it down with a satisfied sigh. Anne twisted the top on her water bottle. Paul saw her hands were shaking. Gratefully she allowed him to unscrew the cap for her.

He turned to the DA. "Just a moment. If you would be so kind, we have a few questions for Mr. Langley. Since we agreed to come here, some new facts have come to light."

"Indeed," said Mr. Shafer, his expression annoyed.

"Yes," Paul said, turning to Detective Spencer. "I suggest you begin recording now, sir." As Spencer depressed the on button, Paul turned to Langley. His face was slightly less animated than before he'd imbibed the truth powder, the lines smoothed from his brow, the cunning snuffed from his eyes.

"Have you been having a love affair with this woman Anne Kaliner for the past two years?" Paul ignored the startled looks from the other men sitting around the table.

"No," Langley answered calmly, even affably.

"No? So you lied about that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"So I could implicate her, keep her mouth shut." For a second a struggle seemed to pass over Langley's face like a spasm. Then his expression smoothed again.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"What the hell is this?" Langley's attorney leapt to his feet. Turning to Langley he demanded, "Robert, what do you think you're doing? Are you drunk?"

"No," Langley said, now turning to face his attorney with a calm expression. "I'm not drunk."

"Well then I think we need to take a break so I can consult with my client!"

"I think we'll hear a little more of what he has to say first," the DA said dryly. "Explain yourself, sir. Just exactly what is your relationship with Ms. Kaliner?"

As the attorney sank into his chair, Langley continued unperturbed. "Well. I worked with her a few years ago on a business deal. She was the uptight token cunt they employed to pretend they were equal opportunity employers, even though we all know better. Women belong in the kitchen or on their knees with a cock in their mouths —"

"I demand this stop at once!" Langley's attorney was again on his feet, slamming the table with his fist. "My client is temporarily deranged."

"That he may be. But we're going to hear him out now," Mr. Shafer said in a hard voice, a peculiar gleam in his eye. "Go on, Mr. Langley. So you lied when you stated Ms. Kaliner was your lover. Why was that?"

"To disprove her accusations against me. I figured if I could smear her enough, she'd lose her nerve and shut up. It worked too. She's the one who said if I pay her fifty thousand, she'd drop the whole thing. She's been humiliated enough, she says." Again Langley's face twisted. He flushed slightly and opened his mouth as if trying to speak but snapped it shut again.

One could have heard a pin drop as the three men stared at Langley in utter disbelief. "So you did it then?" Detective Spencer said softly. "You abducted and raped this woman, just as she claimed?"

"Yes. But the cunt deserved it. She rejected me. She humiliated me. She thought she was better than me." He waved his hand dismissively toward her. "Anyway, I didn't really hurt her. She got the spanking she deserved and a bit of cock. I just scared her, is all. Reminded the little bitch who's in charge in this world. Men rule and money talks." Smiling oddly toward Anne, who looked away, he added, "That's the way of the world, little lady."

"Jesus," Shafer said. "It's like he swallowed a truth serum or something." Langley's attorney looked slightly green.

Paul said, "Gentlemen, I know you have great many questions for Mr. Langley. Such as how he managed to obtain false records and ticket stubs for Ms. Kaliner and himself, as well as where he purchased the barbiturates used to drug her, the wig and contacts for his disguise, the details as to how he obtained the room where he held her and all the other premeditated actions he took in his plan to stalk, kidnap, rape and terrorize Ms. Kaliner. You might ask him what other women he's abused in the past. And if you've time, perhaps a review of his business dealings would be in order."

He stood up from the table. "With your permission, Ms. Kaliner has been through more than enough and doesn't care to relive the hideous details through this man's testimony. Anne?" He turned toward Anne who stood as well. Gently he took her arm.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Detective Spencer said. Anne nodded without speaking. As they left the room, the questioning began again. The men had about fifty minutes left to drag the truth from the sorry bastard. When the powder wore off, Langley would again be free to lie and twist the truth to suit himself. But by then it would be too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, guys like him think they can buy their way out of anything, but even he couldn't get out of this one. Not when he was the one to implicate himself so thoroughly." They were sitting at Paul's breakfast table two days later, Paul drinking his second cup of tea after a breakfast of blueberry pancakes and bacon, Anne with her coffee reading the Arts and Leisure section of the *New York Times*. Paul smoothed the Metro News Section flat against the table. The headline read *Prominent Investor Confesses to Crime of Kidnapping and Rape*. The article went on to describe in some detail the crimes perpetrated by Langley, not only against Anne but it turned out, three other women whom he had abducted and abused in a similar way, though he had gotten away with those crimes until now. *Langley faces eight to twenty-five years for each count. He is currently being held, awaiting sentencing. This will be the last we see for some time to come of the millionaire man-about-town once described in Manhattan's List of Who's Who as one of our most eligible bachelors.*

Paul folded the paper over and stood. "I'd say it's time for a well-deserved vacation. How about the Caribbean, my love? I know the perfect little island where I'll have you all to myself."

Anne grinned up at him. "As long as we can get there by boat, count me in."

\* \* \* \* \*

It looked more like a small but very well-appointed living room than the cabin of a jet. The private chartered jet was one of the most luxurious money could buy or in this case rent. Anne and Paul occupied two of the four luxury recliner soft leather seats, the other two being empty. The pilot and copilot were out of sight in the cockpit, its door closed to afford privacy to the travelers. The cabin was outfitted with a well-stocked bar, a pantry and refrigerator filled with snacks, water, cold soda, beer and trays of gourmet meals prepared by a five-star chef, ready to heat when the two passengers became hungry.

Paul had taken Anne's admission of her fear of flying seriously, but he knew once he got her aloft, she'd see how safe and easy it was, especially with a magical anti-anxiety spell. He generally avoided the crush and annoyance of commercial airports and had used this particular charter company a number of times, always well pleased with their service and expertise. Money was not a consideration for the warlock, who was actually richer than Robert Langley and Harold Donner put together, though he didn't advertise this fact. Most witches and warlocks had acquired vast wealth over their long lives and Paul had found he had the knack of investing it wisely, with accounts and portfolios spread throughout the world.

He smiled at Anne, who was staring out the round window of the jet as thrilled as a child at the tableau of miniature cities and farms spreading out below them. The spell he'd cast over her before they boarded had erased her fears. She seemed perfectly comfortable traveling at a cruising speed of almost five hundred miles per hour.

Paul popped the cork of a bottle of cold Champagne. Anne held up her crystal flute as he filled it and then his own. "To us," he said as they clinked glasses.

After a while Anne sat back, pressing the lever to recline. She was wearing a blouse with small buttons along its front. The first several buttons were open and if Paul craned his head a bit, he could see down her blouse to the tops of her luscious breasts. Anne followed his gaze and laughed. "Sneaking a peek, are we?" she teased.

"I don't need to sneak, do I now?" he rejoined, grinning back. Reaching over he unbuttoned the next three buttons, exposing her dark pink satin bra.

"Paul," she said, twisting toward the closed cockpit door. "Someone could see!"

"Don't worry. They're too busy flying the plane to come out and visit with the passengers. We have the whole cabin to ourselves for the next three hours. I know a lovely way to pass the time."

"I was thinking of a nap..."

"Plenty of time to rest on the island. You can sleep all you like in the woven hammocks strung under the cabana right on the beach, a cool wind blowing to offset the hot sun, the sound of the waves lulling you sleep. But for now, I have something else in mind." Lifting the armrest between their two seats, he reclined his as well, making a full-size bed for the two of them. Leaning up, he opened the rest of her blouse.

"Take it off," he said quietly, "and the skirt as well." It wasn't a request but a command, albeit a gentle one. Flushing slightly, Anne obeyed. Paul could see her nipples poking against the soft satin. He could smell desire emanating from her like a perfume.

Paul unbuttoned his own shirt and tossed it aside. Lifting his hips, he slid out of his trousers. He saw Anne's eyes gliding over his strong, hard body and could see the lustful approval in her eyes. Paul grinned and teased, "Like what you see?"

"Very much," Anne responded, her eyes shining, her lips parting. The crew apparently forgotten, she flung herself over Paul, wrapping one leg over his belly and laying her head on his chest. He needed to feel her soft breasts, the sweet hardening nipples, against his skin. Reaching around her, he unclasped the bra and pulled it from her body. She lifted her face to his, her eyes closed, her mouth begging for his.

Paul complied, crushing her to him as they kissed, his cock rigid, poking from his silk briefs. He felt her fingers stroking his member through the silk and he moaned against her mouth. As they kissed, Paul pulled his underwear down and kicked it away. Sliding his hands to Anne's hips, he dragged the slip of fabric that covered her sex down her legs.

Anne pulled away, whispering urgently, "They'll see us! We're naked!"

"They won't, sweetheart, I promise. We're private clients. They wouldn't come back here without signaling us via the intercom. It would be like walking into our hotel room uninvited. They won't do it. This beauty," he stroked his hand along her bare breast and down her belly, pressing his palm flat against her mons, "is only for my eyes."

Anne sighed sweetly, her eyes fluttering shut, her legs parting in invitation. Paul slipped his hand between her thighs. He smiled to himself as he felt how wet she was, her delicate labia swelling with desire. He slipped a finger into the wetness and drew it up along her lips, making her shudder.

He loved watching her face as he teased her pussy, swirling in ever tightening circles toward the hard little nubbin of her clit. The desire, the passion, the yearning and finally, when he relented and touched her there, touched her as she needed to be touched, the fierce satisfaction in her expression. She became lost in his amorous attentions, completely unselfconscious in her rising lust.

As his fingers played at her sex, his mouth sought those perfect breasts. He bit and teased her hard nipples, delighted with their texture and taste. As he suckled and stroked her, Anne began to whimper, gyrating against his hand. Deciding to prolong her pleasure, to drive her wild with anticipation, Paul abruptly withdrew his hand.

Anne's eyes opened. "Don't stop," she begged. "Please, don't stop."

"All right," he said slowly, his mouth curving into a cruel smile, his cock raging with desire. "But you mustn't come. Not until I tell you. If you come a moment sooner, you'll be in trouble. Promise?"

"I don't know if I can promise such a thing!"

"I'll help you, darling. I'll control your orgasm." He slipped his hand back to her hot, sweet pussy, rubbing and swirling until her eyelids closed and her body arched again toward his touch. After only a few moments she was again thrusting and moving against his hand, breathing rapidly.

Again he pulled his hand away, watching her teeter on the edge of climax, pulled back in the nick of time. "Naughty girl," he said playfully. "You have no self-control, did you know that?"

Anne's cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright. "Paul, stop teasing me. I need it! Please! Let me come!" Once more he relented, rubbing her slick, smooth folds as he inhaled the delicious aroma of her arousal, ripe in the small cabin.

"Oh, oh, oh," she cried softly. He could feel her body tense with impending release. Climbing over her, he plunged his cock into her. "Now!" he said in a hoarse voice. "Come now." Her vaginal muscles gripped him in a sheath of rapture. As he moved inside of her, his own pleasure rising to meet hers, Anne began to keen, a high-pitched cry of utter abandon.

As orgasm gripped her, her muscles milked Paul's cock, making him explode inside her as he held her tightly in his arms. Still she continued her high, sweet cry, her body racked with uncontrollable spasms. Finally she stilled, though he could still feel the steady thumping of her heart against his chest.

The intercom clicked on, the captain's voice low and muffled as he politely inquired, "Uh, excuse me, Mr. Windsor. Everything all right back there?"

Paul reached up to depress the button to respond. "Just fine, Captain. Sorry if we disturbed you."

"Not at all, sir. Just checking."

Anne buried her head in Paul's side. "Oh God!" she whispered. "They heard us!"

Paul smoothed her long curls and smiled. "So what? We're in love. We're allowed. I'm sure it's nothing they haven't heard a hundred times before." Anne didn't reply. "Then again, maybe not a hundred," Paul grinned. He continued to stroke her head with one hand, his other arm cradling her against him. When his hand dropped as he fell into a deep sleep Anne didn't notice as she was asleep as well, her lips curved in a smile.



## Chapter Fifteen

They lay naked side by side on thick, large beach towels. Anne had been uncomfortable at first with the idea of being nude out in the open until Paul had convinced her the island was uninhabited. He owned the fifty-four acre stretch of paradise, most of it lush palm-lined beach. He rented it out through a management company most of the year but always kept several weeks free for himself.

When he informed the caretakers he was coming, they made sure to stock the freezer and refrigerator with scrumptiously prepared meals and the freshest local fruits and vegetables. He kept a well-stocked wine cupboard—there being no cellars on the beach—as well as several cases of Champagne on hand. He knew he would find fresh white sheets on the bed in his favorite room in the large airy bungalow he had had built to his own design some fifty years before. Three of its walls were almost all glass, floor-to-ceiling windows that invited in the spectacular view of the pink-white beach and the crystal blue water meeting the deep blue sky.

Anne had been enchanted with the small island, unable to believe how clear the water was and how warm, compared to the Atlantic shores she was used to visiting as a child. Brilliantly colored fish swam round her knees as she waded past the small waves lapping the shore. Paul said they would go snorkeling if she wished.

They had come from an invigorating swim together and now rested lazily on their towels, sipping fresh iced limeade spiked with coconut rum as the warm sun dried their bare bodies. Anne looked over at her lover, so handsome, his strong body glistening with the suntan oil she'd applied for him.

"I wonder what it'd be like," Anne said slowly, her finger dragging a line in the white wet sand, "to make love with a warlock while experiencing the full spectrum of his magic." She smiled lazily, her eyes trained on the pattern she was making in the sand.

"You would, would you? Our lovemaking isn't magical enough for you?" Paul said in a teasing voice as he turned toward Anne. She flushed, unable to control her nipples, which rose to points under his gaze.

"I didn't mean that," she hastened to answer but he laughed, leaning back again.

"I know, sweetheart. I'm teasing you." He stroked his chin as if in thought. "So, you'd like to experience the magic a warlock can offer. You realize you would be in my thrall? Completely in my power, under my spell."

Slowly Anne nodded, feeling a fire in her loins at the prospect. Since she'd been with Paul, her body had come alive for the first time. Her capacity for sensual pleasure seemed boundless. Paul had teasingly called her his greedy girl, but he'd made it clear he was delighted with her lust. She had come to crave the intensity of experience he

offered, eager to try anything he suggested as long as his body, his mouth, his cock were involved.

She barely recognized herself, so different from the practical busy woman she had once been, her head firmly on her shoulders, her shoulder always to the grind. That Anne had had no time for romance and had speculated it was a trumped up game, wishful thinking on the part of weak people. She had liked sex, to a point—it scratched an itch. Greg had been the same—they were two peas in a pod, both satisfied with what she would now consider a starvation diet of sensual pleasure.

“I want it,” she whispered. “Show me. Take me.”

Later that afternoon, fortified with freshly caught grilled tuna and a cucumber salad, washed down with cold Champagne, Anne and Paul shared a leisurely shower before retiring to his huge white four-poster bed. The white curtains billowed at the open windows as the sea breeze gently cooled the room.

“Are you ready, Anne? I’m going to enchant you now, to take you with magic, give you an experience few mortals are permitted. Are you sure you want this?”

His eyes burned into hers. Her assent died on her lips as she stared back, feeling as if she could see his very soul hidden behind his onyx gaze. She nodded. They were both sitting on the edge of the bed. Gently Paul pushed her shoulders, pressing her to lie down. He lifted her legs so she was fully on the bed, her head on the pillows, her sun-kissed body golden against the snow-white sheets.

In a soft, low voice he began to chant, nonsense words to her ear but not to her body. As he spoke he uncapped a small gold bottle, releasing a lemony scent spiced with something she didn’t recognize. Tipping the top of the bottle against his fingers, Paul smeared the oil lightly behind Anne’s ears, drawing his finger down over her throat and between her breasts. He dabbed more oil on his fingers and drew the line down her belly.

Wherever the oil touched, Anne’s skin began to tingle and heat. It wasn’t painful at all but invigorating. Anne tried to touch the line of warmth he’d drawn but found she couldn’t move! She tried again, a touch of panic settling over her. “Paul, I can’t move!” She wanted to say these words, but even her mouth would not cooperate.

Paul smiled gently, though his eyes glittered darkly. “It’s all right. Don’t worry. You will be able to move when I wish it. Your body belongs completely to me at this moment. Until I release you from the spell, you can only respond to me—you cannot initiate anything at all. You have lost the power of speech, the power of movement. If it pleases me you will be blind and deaf as well, all your senses surrendered to my magical whim.”

He bent down to kiss her and Anne found she could kiss him back. As his lips grazed hers, his fingers slid to her thighs, drawing a line of sweet fire over them with the magic oil. When he pulled away, she was unable to pull him back down to her, her arms pinned magically to the bed. On one level Anne wasn’t sure she liked this game. It was disconcerting, even frightening, to be so completely at someone else’s mercy, even

someone she trusted so completely. But on a deeper, more primal and ultimately more honest level, she was on fire with lust, her forced submission a powerful aphrodisiac.

Paul gazed intently at her. "While you are under my spell, I will enter your mind. I will enter your heart. You will hold nothing from me. Do you understand, my love?" Anne found she could nod. She was uneasy as she realized he would penetrate not only her body but her deepest secrets. Until now she believed he had kept his promise to "keep out of her head".

*Be easy, his words slipped into her mind. I know your secrets already, dearest girl. I couldn't love you more and I'll never love you less. Trust me, trust me with your total self. I will keep you safe."*

Anne smiled, finally truly letting go. She watched as he daubed a bit of the hot oil over the folds of her pussy. The tingle ignited her desire, filling her with a powerful lust. She knew she was wet and ready, though he'd barely touched her. Had she been free to move, she would have jumped up and wrestled her lover to the bed, straddling him and plunging herself onto his lovely shaft.

But she couldn't move. As Paul gently pressed her thighs apart, she could not stop him, her muscles inert, her will vanquished. He lifted her hips and slid a plump pillow beneath her ass. Kneeling between her thighs, Paul breathed deeply, inhaling her womanly musk. Normally she would have closed her legs at that point, vaguely embarrassed. Being magically restrained, she had no choice but to endure his attentions.

She forgot her embarrassment as his tongue snaked out to lash at her spread pussy, licking along the folds, seeking the sweet hot spot at its center. Her voice seemed to have returned as her moans were audible to her own ears. Though his tongue had always sent shudders of instant pleasure coursing through her loins, this magical kiss was more intense, as if pleasure had transmuted into something more powerful, more potent, than mere sensation. Almost at once she was gasping, her heart pounding, unable to catch her breath as his tongue sent searing waves of ecstasy rippling through her body.

The waves caught her, lifting her out of herself as she careened toward a mind-numbing orgasm. It literally lifted her from the bed as she arched in screaming release, every nerve ending on fire with sensual abandon. When she finally flopped back down, her body was soaked with sweat, her hair a tangle of curls over her face, every muscle spent as if she'd swam across the ocean just beyond those windows.

Dimly she heard Paul's voice and struggled to focus on the words. "That was just the beginning, my love."

Anne lay inert, incapable of responding, though if she could have, she would have begged for a respite while she recovered herself. Instead she felt his strong hands lifting her, flipping her over and positioning her on her hands and knees. She tried to fall forward but found she was held in place, a force field of magic keeping her in position. He employed the gold bottle, drawing the oil over her swollen sex. At once she was on

fire again, unable to control the wanton waggle of her ass, her silent invitation to receive Paul's perfect cock.

Crouching behind her he obliged, pressing into her impossibly wet pussy, making her grunt with satisfaction as she pushed back against him, eager to take him fully. Grabbing her hips, Paul began to move inside of her, a circular motion that made her jump as he touched a particular spot, each time sending a jolt of searing sensation exalting through her body.

As he moved, Paul whispered more strange words, weaving a spell so potent the very air around them seemed to shimmer with its power. Their bodies seemed literally melded together—muscle, tissue, membrane, blood, flesh—fusing in a passionate embrace. As the magic rippled through them, Anne found she could actually experience what Paul was feeling—not just a sense of his pleasure but his actual perceptions. The spell he'd weaved connected them so thoroughly she could feel the velvet clench of her vaginal walls against his cock as if it were her own. She could feel the delicious pressure in his balls as the blood pounded through his loins.

The magic literally let her become him while still maintaining her own sense of self. She was swept up into the moment, unable to comprehend what was happening with her conscious mind. Somehow the warlock and the mortal had become one person, a connected soul, bound by magic, each experiencing the other's ecstasy, passion the flame that held them spellbound.

Anne became lost in the sensation. She was no longer a woman with her own thoughts and desires. She had become an extension of her lover and he the extension of her. As they rode waves of orgasmic release, Anne's body trembled and shuddered. She no longer knew if the feelings she was experiencing were hers or his. It no longer mattered. They had become one.

As Paul took his mortal lover past pleasure into a realm of pure concentrated ecstasy, her mind ceased to function, her consciousness nearly obliterated. It was a potentially dangerous place to be. With a lesser-skilled warlock, she could lose herself completely, unable to regain her sensibility even after being released from the magic spell. But Paul was skilled as well as loving. Anne was safe in his arms, free to abandon herself to the magical lust he pulled from her.

Slowly he eased his magical hold, aware his lover was nearly spent. As the spell dissipated, Anne slowly came to herself, as if waking from a powerful dream. Paul was still inside her, but she no longer felt his every move as if it belonged to her. She was Anne again, recalled to herself, but still in the grip of passion. Paul held her lightly by the hips, leaning forward to kiss her neck. She felt his fingers on her pussy, sending a jolt of delicious fire through her. Paul's movements quickened, his panting, shallow breaths matching his more intense thrusts. His fingers danced over her labia, teasing her clit even as he tensed and jerked suddenly hard against her, causing her to fall forward, the magic force field released as Paul lost himself in his own impending climax.

As they fell to the bed, his fingers remained buried at her sex, a swirl of pleasure drawing one last orgasm from his exhausted lover. Her cries mingled with his moans as together they rocked and shuddered toward sexual oblivion. They lay where they fell, their bodies slick with sweat, their arms and legs entangled amidst the twist of sheets.

Anne found she could move freely now, the spell released. Pulling herself up, she looked down on Paul, who lay still, his eyes closed, his black hair falling over his face. She wanted to understand what had happened, to process the amazing magical experience. Gently she smoothed Paul's hair from his eyes and bent to kiss each eyelid. She had to know if he had had the same experience of literally feeling what she felt, along with his own pleasure. She hadn't been prepared for the magic, thinking the spell would only heighten her experience, rather than alter it to such a degree.

She opened her mouth to try to express what she didn't have words for. But before she could speak, fatigue fell over her like a blanket. Her head barely hit the pillow before a deep, sweet sleep claimed her.

"Hey there. I was afraid you weren't ever going to wake up!" Anne squinted through one eye at the sound of Paul's voice. The room was awash in pink and golden sunlight, the sun just peeking over the horizon.

"What time is it?" she asked sleepily. She stretched languorously, feeling her muscles loosen and lengthen.

"It's about five o'clock."

"Too early for dinner." Anne opened her eyes all the way and sat up, pulling her hair back in a ponytail with her hands before letting it spring back over her shoulders in a cascade of brown ringlets.

"It's dawn, you silly girl. You slept right through dinner, right through the night! That magic really wore you out!" He laughed, his expression tender as he sat next to her. He was dressed in denim cut-off shorts and nothing else. He looked good enough to eat. Even after the wild day before, her pussy warmed as she drank in his masculine beauty, her nipples perking pinkly toward him.

"You've only got one thing on your mind," he laughed.

"Hey, no peeking in my head! You promised."

"I don't have to use telepathy," Paul laughed, gently tweaking her erect nipple. She threw a pillow at him but couldn't deny it.

"I've made you breakfast, sweetheart. French toast and ham along with some nice strong coffee. We've got cream and a bowl of fresh strawberries." At the mention of all that delicious food, Anne realized she was famished.

She followed Paul into the kitchen where he poured her a steaming mug of coffee, adding the cream for her from a clay pitcher. She looked around the kitchen but the table was bare.

"Outside," Paul said. "Ready and waiting for you, if the seagulls haven't gotten it." She followed him to the deck behind the house. Under the shade of a cluster of palm trees they ate their meal. Anne surprised herself, eating three pieces of French toast, four slices of ham and nearly the whole bowl of berries.

The sharp angles of her once too-thin face had softened. Her hipbones no longer jutted from her frame but were more femininely rounded, though she remained slender and probably always would. Love was good for her appetite. She realized she was deeply and truly happy today, whatever tomorrow might bring.

She saw Paul was gazing at her with those dark hypnotic eyes. The naked love on his face was so raw, so exposed, she almost had to look away. No one had ever loved her as he did. No one had cherished her for her spirit or esteemed her for her essence as he did. She knew while Paul admired her beauty, he of all people understood how fleeting physical charms could be.

By the same token, for the first time in her life Anne felt a love for another person so complete she didn't require his love in return. She had absorbed at last the lesson of mortality. Each day and the experience it held was a gift. And Paul was the brightest, most wonderful gift of all.

\* \* \* \* \*

They'd spent two glorious weeks on their own secret bit of paradise. A boat came daily to replenish their stocks. While they swam or walked along the shore, several housekeepers moved quickly through the house, changing the sheets, sweeping the sand away, mopping and dusting all the surfaces.

Though they hadn't any special timetable, both of them realized it was time to return to New York. Anne wanted to continue work on her portraits and Paul had business to attend to.

He knew they would cherish this time, storing it in their hearts, another gem on a string of memories that would shine like jewels someday in the future. For despite it all, despite their love, Anne was after all a mortal. He could extend her life by perhaps fifty or sixty extra years with his magic and with her permission he planned to do so. He could give her a youthful guise for as long as she wanted or allow himself to age along with her.

Yet in the end, she would certainly die well before his magical constitution gave out. Ironically it was Anne, his young lover, who gave him comfort, aware he sometimes brooded over the future, a future that could not include her.

"We have today. We have now," she said gravely as she'd watched him gaze pensively out over the ocean as they lay cocooned together in a brightly colored woven hammock on the veranda. "In the end, Paul, that's all there is. Cherish the moment, seize it, take it inside of you. In that way, you'll never lose me. I'll always be in your heart, as you'll always be in mine."

He smiled, his heart swelling with love as he took her in his arms. He hadn't meant to make love to her but her supple body called to him. Her long, slender neck was offered for his kiss. Her round, luscious breasts were bare beneath her dress. He tore the flimsy fabric from her body in a moment of passion, his cock rising hard against his shorts.

Anne's hands were at the shorts, pulling open the metal button at the top, sliding the zipper down. Paul helped her, pushing the denim down his legs, tossing it over the side of the hammock as they swayed to and fro. He pulled her warm body to his, kissing her breasts, sucking her nipples, his balls tightening with pleasure as she stroked his cock.

Too eager even to remove her panties, Anne guided Paul's cock past the yellow silk of her underwear, beneath which her pussy was wet and ready for him. She guided him to her entrance and he pressed, unable to go slow, suddenly desperate to be inside of her.

Anne moaned, a deep guttural moan of animal lust as he penetrated her. He felt her strong legs wrap around his back, pulling him even farther into her velvet tunnel. Together they undulated as the hammock rocked and swayed to their movements.

"I love you, oh I love you so!" Anne whispered against his neck as he held her fast, pleasure rising through him like a tide.

He kissed her face, her eyelids, her nose, her cheeks, the top of her head, tears springing to his eyes even as his body thrust and danced inside of her. There was no warlock magic at work here. Just two lovers, their bodies expressing the love in their hearts. Paul felt complete for the first time in his long life. Love had made him whole at last. Together, with only the magic true love can weave, they had cast a lover's spell.

## About the Author

Claire Thompson has written numerous novels and short stories, all exploring aspects of Dominance & submission. Ms. Thompson's gentler novels seek not only to tell a story, but to come to grips with, and ultimately exalt in the true beauty and spirituality of a loving exchange of power. Her darker works press the envelope of what is erotic and what can be a sometimes dangerous slide into the world of sadomasochism. She writes about the timeless themes of sexuality and romance, with twists and curves to examine the 'darker' side of the human psyche. Ultimately Claire's work deals with the human condition, and our constant search for love and intensity of experience.

Claire welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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