

Loose Id

Wicked

TREVA HARTE

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Loose Id.®

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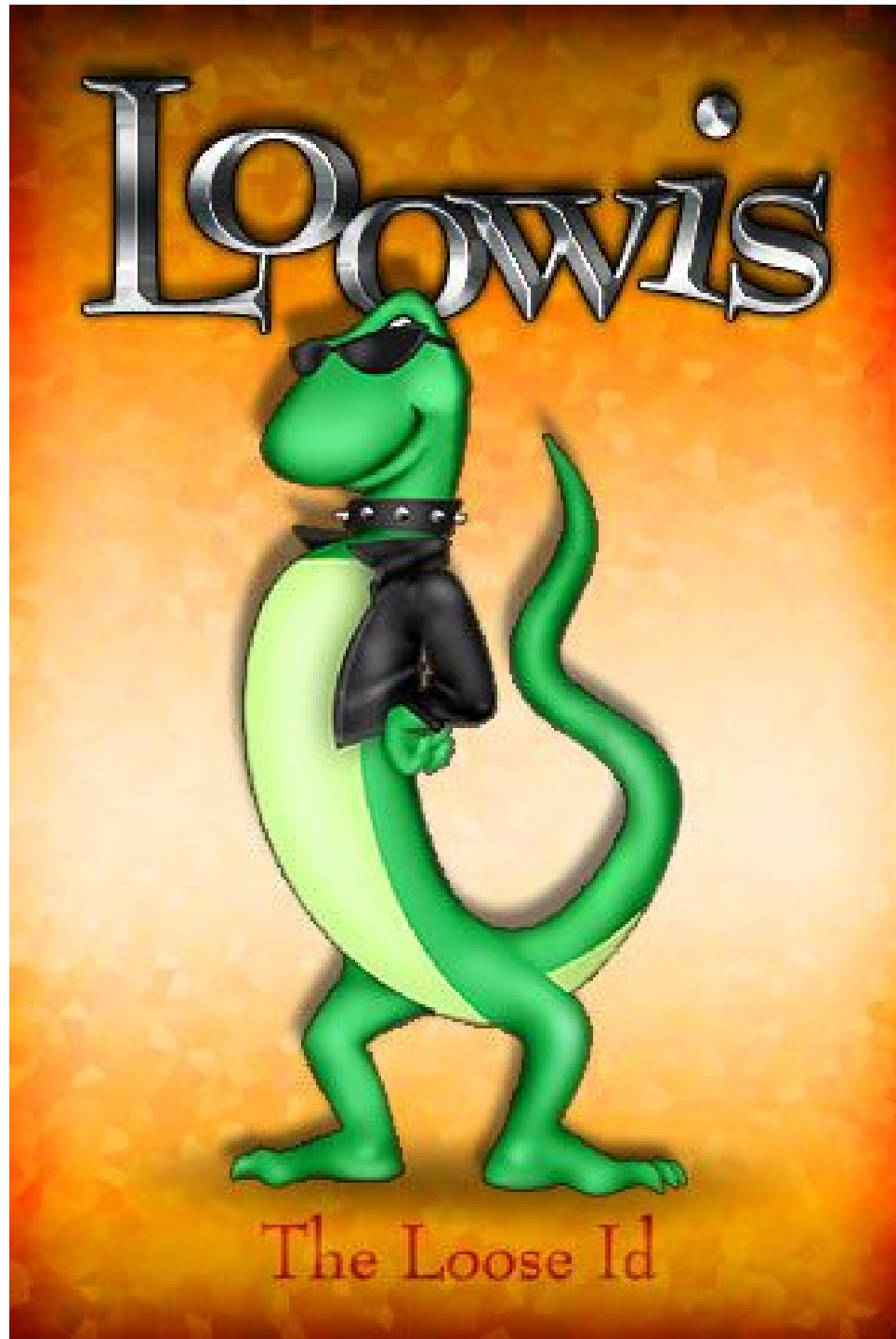
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Prologue

"I'm going away." Doyle looked at her, blond hair blowing into his face. His hair looked even more tousled and unkempt than usual.

"Away? Where?" Livana was startled.

"To school." His jaw set.

Livana knew, without him saying a word, he'd begged not to go away to school. And she knew, without him saying anything, just why. Doyle was too different, too bookish, too ... crippled. She didn't mind his hesitating walk, but others his own age would laugh and torment him. She'd heard what was said about him in town.

"But why? Why can't you stay here?"

He looked away. "With mother dead, everything's changed." His voice was soft.

"But you'll be back for the holidays, Doyle."

"No." He shook his head and sighed. "Father is shutting up the house and going away. Back west, I think. I'm not to go along."

Her eyes softened. "Doyle, don't be bitter."

"Don't worry. That's not important. Just don't expect me for the holidays. I don't know where I'll be. Not there. Not here. I wish I was the right age to do what I want."

An ache spread from her throat to her heart. Livana didn't like to think of her world without him in it. No one else was her friend. No one else wanted to be. They thought she was as odd as he was. "Very well. When you're old enough you can come back. I'll be here." She kept her voice steady.

"Will you, Livvy? That's a long time. Things happen." Doyle's eyes were watchful and tired. And old.

"You don't believe me?"

"I'm afraid to believe anyone anymore. And you're younger than I. You can't promise anything. You don't even know what to promise."

"What do you want me to promise?" Doyle wanted something, something that was just beyond her awareness. Something ... important.

"I shouldn't. And you can't." His eyes, very blue and direct, stared into hers.

"But what?" Livvy pressed, scared but needing to know.

He took out a penknife without saying anything, then pricked his finger. She smiled. They'd done this before, long ago, when Doyle first came to town and they'd met. She'd been afraid to do this back then.

Now she held out her finger unhesitatingly and his knife made the tiniest of cuts in it. They pressed their fingers together. He looked down at her hand and, suddenly, he bent and sucked the cut finger. She felt his warm tongue stroke against her skin and shivered. He straightened, still holding her hand.

"You're inside me, Liv. I'm inside you," he whispered. "I'll come back. I swear. And then I'll see what you can promise me."

He dropped her hand and left without looking back.

Numb, she watched him limp away, her heart slowly breaking inside. When he was no longer in sight, she ran away. She wouldn't cry in public. She reached her grandmother's house and the old woman was there, waiting in the kitchen for Livana as she always did.

Grandmother knew. She always knew. They held onto each other while Livana cried her heart out.

“He won’t be back, Grandmother.” She sniffled. “I’m afraid I won’t ever see him again.”

“Ah, my dear. I’m sorry for your grief.” The creased face was gentle but Livvy knew what Grandmother wasn’t saying.

“You aren’t grieved that Doyle is gone?” Livana felt betrayed. “I thought you liked him!”

“He’s an old soul, my dear. And an interesting young man. But Livvy, the intensity in him was ... troubling. You two were so close. *Too* close.” The older woman looked sad suddenly. “I’ve kept you too isolated. Things would be different if you’d met more people.”

“How can I if no one but Doyle will talk to me?” Liv asked seriously.

Grandmother sighed. “That’s true enough. Well, be that as it may, you’re just a child, Livvy. If Doyle stayed longer I could foresee trouble. Trouble you’re too young to manage.”

“Doyle wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Perhaps not. But you might hurt yourself.”

Chapter One

September 3, 1901

Livana walked down the familiar path. It had been a long time, a very long time, but she knew the way. The insects hummed in the grass as the sun warmed her head. Summer would soon make way for fall in New England, but not yet. Not quite yet.

She stopped at the gate. Cerberus obediently sat next to her. The gate still hung at a strange angle to the ground. Whatever wonders were being performed in the house to transform it -- and the gossip was that the changes were many and costly -- the outside hadn't been changed for years.

Liv had watched as the grounds of the grand house gradually became overgrown with weeds in the spring and had seen the winter snows tear at the shutters and paint. Season after season had come and gone with no one to care what happened to the house except her. She couldn't do anything about the neglect.

Gradually she'd stopped going to the house. Grandmother had sent her to a school in Boston for a year or two but Liv had been miserable and Grandmother couldn't afford to have her stay anyway. By the time Livana came back, she knew enough to avoid the

Grenville home. There was no reason to look and see more decay every year. The decay reminded her too much of the way she felt inside.

The windows now looked washed and repaired at least. Liv took a breath and forced herself onward. The dog obediently got up and followed her.

When she'd heard the news she'd come, of course. She hadn't thought about it twice. She'd dismissed the wildest of the rumors and focused on the hope he'd return. Now she was rethinking her hasty arrival.

What if Doyle wanted nothing to do with her? He'd promised to come back, promised he'd return specifically for her, but when he finally had returned to his ancestral home he hadn't bothered to come calling.

Livana sighed, then continued walking. She'd waited so long and she had to know.

The house was being opened up and restored. That could mean nothing. Maybe it was going to be sold. If the current owner wasn't going to live there it should be. And even if he did return, he might be planning to leave again shortly.

As Doyle had once said, it had been a long time. And things do happen. Doyle might've decided to never come back. Or, she thought as grief lanced through her, he could have already taken a woman to wife.

She'd been sure that everything would be made right again once she got here, but she might find out she had been completely wrong. Her last hope of seeing him could be taken away in the next few moments.

Livana stood in the middle of the entrance path knowing she was afraid to go forward. Once again Cerberus sat down but whined in confusion. The front door opened, and an unsmiling man stepped out and crossed his arms. He said nothing, just looked down at her.

Livana paused. He wasn't Doyle, but for just an instant she felt a tug of some kind of feeling. She wasn't sure what it was exactly. Perhaps ... attraction?

They stared at each other a moment. Liv was curiously embarrassed by his gaze, but she stuck her chin out and walked forward again. She thought this man was attractive. Why not? He was good-looking, after all -- dark and tall and young. But he wasn't her reason for being here.

However, she knew that if he wanted to prevent her from entering he could. He looked strong enough to prevent anyone from entering.

"Excuse me." Liv kept her voice calm and firm. "I wondered if the owner of the house was here."

"Why do you need him?" The voice was deep and masculine.

Cerberus readied himself to protect her and she patted his head. "I don't. But we were old friends. I just wanted to say hello."

"Not many people come here to make social calls, ma'am. But I'll give Doyle your name."

"Livana. Livana Hawkins." She felt a fool.

"A charming name." He nodded his head to her, almost like an old-fashioned bow. "And I'm Nicholas, by the way. Nicholas Hall. But I trust you'll call me Nicholas."

As the man stepped back into the house she told herself she definitely was a fool. She hadn't been waiting for so long to be turned aside by a stranger. For years she'd waited on Doyle -- heart-wrenchingly lonely years she'd spent dreaming and hoping that he'd return for her.

Well, no more. She walked in uninvited, gasping in surprise when she reached the hall.

She'd never seen the hall so polished and scrubbed. The chandelier gleamed and the waxed wood floor shone. Strange carved masks hung on the walls and she was tempted to survey one or two more closely. Surely all this meant that Doyle was going to stay.

With that thought, she almost whimpered from relief. Then she wanted to slap herself. Idiot! One moment she was terrified because he might stay and the next she was terrified he

might disappear forever. If she didn't act as if she had some sense when she saw him, Doyle would likely think she'd gone mad.

* * * * *

"Doyle. I'm dying for you, Doyle."

He lay there, naked under her, waiting for whatever she wanted to do. It wouldn't matter what she wanted. Whatever it was, he would want it too. Whatever it was she wanted and more. He'd always want more -- always need more. He needed everything and then some.

Her mouth lowered to taste him and her hair tumbled over them both. She would give him what he wanted. Her scent aroused him beyond belief. Her hand knew exactly where to stroke. How could she not know? She knew his every fantasy.

She was his every fantasy...

"Doyle!"

Reluctant to wake, Doyle nevertheless opened his eyes. Hall's grinning face wasn't really what he'd wanted to see. But had he really expected to see her instead?

Of course. After every dream of her, he'd awakened and been disappointed.

"There's someone here to see you. A quite beautiful someone named Miss Livana Hawkins."

Finally. The first rush of pure delight had him sitting up. All his usual lethargy fell away. She was finally here, finally within grasp...

Oh Lord. *She was here.*

Terror rolled in next. What would happen if they did meet now?

He felt the stubble on his face, imagined what he must look like. He already knew what he felt like. He hadn't recovered yet. He'd longed and feared for this meeting forever. Her rejection would mean destruction. Her acceptance could be his redemption.

Not yet. Not now.

Hall had said she was beautiful and he never exaggerated about women. But Doyle already knew she had to be.

He wasn't her match, though.

He needed to be more presentable. He needed to have all his wits about him. He needed to charm her, seduce her, tantalize her. All the things she'd always done to him.

She needed to fall in love with him as desperately as he'd always loved her. Liv couldn't do that if she saw him this way.

All these years and he wasn't ready. Not yet. Couldn't she have waited a few days? He needed a little more strength, a little more time.

Doyle laughed, suddenly, harshly.

All these years and he needed to send her away. But just for a while.

Just until he could erase everything he'd done for the past ten years.

"No. I won't see her now."

He shut his eyes again, utterly disgusted with himself.

* * * * *

The door to the library opened and Nicholas Hall stepped out. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. He can't see you today. Perhaps tomorrow." The man's face softened into a sudden, brilliant smile. Despite what he'd told her, she almost smiled back. "Maybe you could talk to me instead to while away the time? I never refuse to talk to beautiful young women."

Charmingly as the man delivered the news, the rejection was painful enough to knock the breath out of her. Liv could feel tears almost come to her eyes. Doyle didn't wish to see her.

She couldn't believe it. How could he not want to see her? Perhaps he was married...no, no, she'd *know*. She always knew. Doyle was most definitely not married. But why then?

Anger rushed in, strong and hot. She pushed back the stray hair that had tumbled over her face during her walk. Her carefully upswept coiffure was going to tumble down soon from the heat. Liv was sure her hat was already tilted at a less than fashionable angle. Very well. She wasn't a fashionable young woman of leisure who had come to make a social call on a long-lost acquaintance. She just wished she could pretend that seeing Doyle wasn't terribly important to her.

But it was the most important thing in the world.

Her nostrils flared. "I'm afraid the master of the house doesn't understand. I *will* see him right now."

Nicholas looked surprised for a moment and she took advantage of that momentary astonishment to step around him and through the library door. He still might have caught her, but Cerberus growled once, low in his throat, and Nicholas hesitated once again. As it was, he moved behind her only a half-second too late.

"Doyle!" she called out.

"You must leave, Livana. Sorry, Grenville --" The would-be guard growled.

But Liv had already walked to the chair by the bay window and stood in front of the man who sat there. She felt her breath catch in the back of her throat when his dark blond head slowly came up and those old soulful eyes she remembered so well drank in the sight of her.

Wordlessly, they grasped hands.

Doyle hadn't expected her to disobey him. Of course, he was also a fool. Once Liv made up her mind, she always did what she had decided to do.

He forgot to say anything for a moment while he studied her. It had been so long and he'd imagined many times over the years what she must have become. His blessing and curse was that she'd turned into something even beyond what he had imagined.

God, she was beautiful. Liv was grown up now, though she remained small-boned and tiny. She had the same deep brown eyes that looked through you. He hoped she couldn't see all the secrets he wanted to hide from her.

He wanted to hold her tenderly.

He wanted her to leave and not see him this way.

Doyle smothered a sudden laugh. He was already getting hard as a rock from just touching her hands and looking at those beautiful breasts. What he really wanted was to have her underneath him so she could welcome him back with her body. So much had changed since they'd last seen each other -- and yet nothing had changed. He'd been afraid of his feelings for her when she had been a child. She'd been too young for him, though even then he'd been sexually tempted almost beyond his endurance.

Thank God he hadn't known what he'd missed when he was younger. If he'd ever even kissed Liv it would have killed him to leave her. That might have been one reason his father had sent him so far away. That and because Liv was below his station in life -- such would have mattered to his father but meant nothing to him.

Liv had been innocently unaware of how he'd burned for her. The adults around him, his father most especially, probably hadn't been.

She wasn't a child now and he was even more afraid.

Afraid for them both.

And he had good reasons.

"Livvy..." His voice wavered before growing stronger. "I didn't want to see you like this, but you never were one to take orders, were you?"

“Then you know you never should have given them.” She smiled down at him, remembering to keep herself steady. It was hard when she’d missed him so much, when she’d spent years praying he’d not forget her and come back home.

As she studied his face, she saw something there she hadn’t expected to see. Her breath caught again, though this time in worry for him. “You don’t look well, Doyle.”

“I’ll be better soon enough. One way or the other.” Doyle spoke calmly, but Liv thought he looked feverish and anxious. He shifted restlessly in the chair, not standing in her presence. She didn’t care about that precisely, but she knew it was something a gentleman ought to do.

“Your foot bothers you?” She remembered childhood times when he had looked as if he wanted to cry from the pain, though he never had. Doyle never cried about anything. He held it all inside.

“Everything aches at the moment.” He caught himself and smiled thinly. “But I didn’t want to see you as an invalid. What man would in front of a beautiful woman like yourself?”

“Should I go, Grenville?” The man spoke from the background.

Liv started. She’d forgotten about him. She’d forgotten about everything but Doyle.

Older, unshaven, ill as he looked, she could feel the old bonds returning, strong as ever. They’d always been there, of course. She’d just forced them from her memory when she thought he would never come back. But they were still friends. They’d always been best friends.

She felt Doyle’s thumbs caressing the palms of the hands she still held out. Slowly he released her and for one strange moment Liv wanted to snatch his hands back and hold onto them forever.

“Yes, go and have someone bring us tea, Nick. We’ll try for some polite conversation and refreshment.” Doyle gestured to the chair opposite. “Have a seat, m’lady?”

"You've been abroad too long, goose." Livana used the old childhood taunt without a second thought as she swept her hat off and settled herself in the chair, the large black dog lying down near her feet. For just a minute everything was the way it used to be when they were children and teasing each other. "We have no m'ladies here in the States."

"And damned few outside the States, too, I assure you," he responded and then caught himself. "Forgive me. Are you still terribly strait-laced, Liv?"

"I'm an old maid, Doyle. I'm expected to be strait-laced."

When his eyes searched her face, she tried not to feel uncomfortable. That was just Doyle's way. His staring wasn't meant to be rude.

"Are you?" he asked again.

"I'm unmarried at twenty-four. Anyone would tell you that makes me an old maid." Liv tried to laugh but he looked too serious.

"Age -- and twenty-four isn't too old for anything, I assure you -- has nothing to do with maidenhood." Doyle shifted restlessly again. "I'm closer to thirty and I'm neither old nor virgin."

"Ah. That's what you meant by your question." Liv knew she should blush at such improper talk. She was warm, but didn't think it was from embarrassment.

Cerberus, sensing a change in mood, growled low in his throat. Liv gestured at him to be silent. Cerberus knew some of what she felt. He always growled at people she was angry with.

And she *was* angry. Doyle had always been possessive of her time and jealous if she did anything without him, but now he spoke as if he owned her. No gentleman would speak of such things in a woman's presence unless he felt he had a right to.

But she knew most of the heat she felt inside was something beyond the dog's ken, something more sensual than mere anger -- Doyle still felt possessive of her and now he was seeing her as a woman. They weren't just childhood friends anymore.

“Yes, that’s what I meant. Are you going to answer me?”

Liv smiled at her questioner. He made her just a little nervous, but she wasn’t going to let him know. “Some might not.”

“Are you one of them?” He scowled.

Well, she’d done her best to change the subject and be polite. If Doyle wanted blunt honesty, she could give him that. “Oh Doyle, don’t be foolish. I live in an isolated town where nothing much has changed since the Puritans settled New England. I’m the bastard grandchild of the town witch and everyone believes I inherited Grandmother’s gift. Who would actually think of taking my virginity?” She looked at him, still partially amused, partially angry, and wholly aware of his presence.

“Except me, you mean?” His soulful eyes flicked over her face.

“Except you, of course.” Liv’s smile continued to grow even while she felt a mix of excitement and fear in the pit of her stomach.

Doyle slid forward and rose. She could tell by his grimace that the movement had caused him pain. Then he bent down, his arms on both sides of her, his hands resting on each arm of her chair. They were almost directly face-to-face. They were close enough for her to feel the warmth of his body.

“And are you also a witch, Livvy?” His voice was caressing.

“Yes.” Liv wondered if she should be afraid to make that admission. Grandmother had warned her to tell no one -- ever. “But you knew I was long ago, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” He still didn’t touch her, except for the breath that skimmed over her face as he spoke.

Liv felt a bit nervous when his eyes grew heavy-lidded. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll be damned for wanting me?” She tried not to let long-ago jeers make her voice sound hurt. “I’ve been told that before. That’s what the men around here believe. So, you see, my maidenhood has been quite, quite safe even if I had wished to give it up.”

“If I’m damned for wanting you, then that happened to me long ago.” The voice was careless. “But I don’t think you had much to do with my damnation, Liv. I refuse to blame anyone but myself.”

“Tea, Grenville?” The third person’s voice jolted them apart. “Ah, but I can see you two are otherwise occupied. I guess I should leave.”

“Do, Hall,” Doyle told him carelessly. “You’ll be in the way.”

“That was particularly rude, Doyle, even for you,” Livana told him as the man promptly left, with a wink for her.

“Yes, it was, though Nicholas will survive it. He’s known me a long time. But now I think we’ll once again attempt a civilized conversation. I wonder if I remember how to conduct one.” Doyle’s voice sounded mocking, but Liv wasn’t sure if he was mocking himself or her.

Or life itself.

Chapter Two

“Eat quickly before you get too melodramatic, Doyle. You always did that when you got hungry.” Liv stretched her hand out to the teapot and then stopped.

Doyle was there ahead of her, pouring. They grinned at each other suddenly, remembering what a disaster she had been during the few times she had been invited for tea when Doyle’s parents had been alive.

“I haven’t broken any china in years.”

“And I’m going to make sure you don’t now. You still take sugar, I hope?” He handed her a cup with a flourish that didn’t spill a drop.

Blast him.

“Of course. I haven’t changed in most of the essentials.” Liv took the cup. His fingers touched hers, maybe a moment longer than they should, before he released the china.

Was it strange to feel so at home with someone she hadn’t seen in over a decade? Ah well, Liv knew she was a bit peculiar anyhow. Why not?

“But I have.”

She could feel him withdrawing from her. As a child she’d hated it when Doyle retreated into a black mood. She hated it even more now. The warm closeness between them

evaporated. So she decided to ask what she desperately wanted to know. He couldn't get any colder.

"Before you make some excuse to leave and you will, Doyle, because you always do when you get this way -- you have to tell me." She leaned forward. "Why?"

"Why?"

"Doyle!"

"Why did I stay away?" He put his teacup down on the table, then sighed, as if he were contemplating whether or not he would answer the question. She held his gaze, insisting that he would.

"Because," he murmured, his gaze falling away. "Because I was a failure. My father was ashamed to have me around. I -- I was ashamed to have myself around you. You deserved better." His smile was humorless. "Still do."

She felt ready to rip her hair out by the roots. "What do you mean? What did I deserve? Not what happened to me, I can assure you." Her teeth ground together. "I suffered over you, Doyle. For so long I waited and I thought -- today he'll be here. Surely today. And you never came. You never contacted me. I'd have gone anywhere, done anything for you. I've stayed here all these years, long past the time when I should have, wondering why you'd forgotten your promise."

Doyle rubbed his forehead, looking tired and shaken.

"I thought you'd forgotten," he said hoarsely. "I'd hoped you had. While I waited for you to grow up, I did things. Things I don't want to tell you. Unforgivable things. But I couldn't stop. Finally, I knew I didn't deserve you. If nothing else, I could stay away from you and give you a chance to live your life."

Liv slammed her teacup down. "That was so noble of you. I know I was too stupid to decide that on my own. What could you possibly have done that I couldn't forgive you for?"

"It doesn't matter now, does it?" He glanced down and suddenly smiled. "You cracked another teacup, Livvy."

"To hell with the cursed cup!"

They both blinked at her words. Liv never cursed. She was always careful with her words, more careful than many, for fear what her words might do.

Doyle's eyes found hers. "I'm sorry --"

"You know, you didn't answer my real question," she interrupted. "You're right, Doyle. What you did doesn't matter anymore. What I really want to know is why you came back after all?"

"I couldn't return here until my father died."

"I don't mean here. You knew you could always come to my home. Any time. Why now?" Liv had never pressed him this way when she was younger. Then again, he'd never hurt her this way either.

"I can't tell you why. For the same reason I can't explain why I stayed away."

Liv was sorry she'd broken the cup before. She wished she could break it now instead. Preferably on one blond, rather shaggy, male head. "Then I suppose I needn't explain why I'm leaving."

Liv stood up. The dog leaped up behind her, stiffening up threateningly again.

"I did ask you not to come right now, Liv," he reminded her in his most autocratic voice.

"Forgive me, Lord High Emperor. Why should my feelings matter if you don't want to see me?"

One of his hands reached out to grab at the sleeve of her dress before she whirled away.

"Livvy."

“Yes?”

“Don’t stay away forever. I do want to see you. Soon.”

He smiled, tentatively.

“I don’t know.” Liv heard her voice softening.

“You know we can’t be parted. That’s one reason -- perhaps the real reason -- why I came back.” After he said that his eyes shut, as if he couldn’t help himself.

He was in pain. Perhaps the problem was he truly hadn’t wanted her to see him like this. She almost touched his hand and then forced herself not to.

Both of them knew she needed to leave.

Then the fingers that gripped her sleeve moved to grasp her hand. He turned her palm over and his mouth moved to where the long-ago knife cut had touched her. She shivered at the caress.

His eyes, heavy-lidded, but still fixed intently on her face, made Liv wait more successfully than his hand, still on her wrist, ever could.

“I remember everything. I’m still binding you to no promise, but I remember. So do you. Perhaps soon I can show you what I want from you.”

* * * * *

“You’re too wicked. We can’t do that here.” The giggle and words had Doyle opening his eyes. He’d fallen asleep in his chair, dreaming jumbled dreams of Liv. “Oh, Lord! I -- I’m sure we can’t. What if someone sees us?”

“What if someone does?”

Doyle awoke to see Nick already under the skirts of one of the new maids, with her bent over on the sofa.

“Making yourself at home, Nick?” Doyle inquired dryly.

Both of them ignored the squeaks of the maid.

“Yes, thanks. I’m just about home now.” Nick smacked the rounded ass of the woman - - Susannah? Elizabeth? -- Doyle wondered if the name even mattered. “Settle down there, girl,” he said to her. “Your master won’t mind as long as he gets a good peek.”

Doyle smothered a laugh.

“You’ll ruin my reputation along with hers, Nick.” Doyle had seen Nick in action before. As Nick fondled expertly, the maid’s protests turned into little mewling sounds of passion.

“A moment here.” Nick threw his head back and began to move in earnest, his cock sinking balls-deep into her over and over again.

The mewls turned into howls and the couch began to rock dangerously.

“Mind the furniture, Nick.” Doyle watched every movement, even while he laughed.

“Mind your tongue for a moment more, Grenville. I’m almost -- ah -- done.” Nick threw his head back and groaned.

Panting, he pulled himself out and began to fasten his pants. Carelessly, he slapped the female’s rump again. “I’m done for now, girl. You can cover yourself up unless you’d like your master to take his turn.”

The girl pulled down her skirts and turned with round eyes.

“I’m sorry, sir. When he began I just forgot ... I’m sorry.” She looked like she might cry as she backed away from the two of them.

“It doesn’t matter to me.” Doyle shrugged.

If for a moment he imagined Liv under him in just the same way -- well, he could take care of how that made him feel in private.

“I’ll see what else I can make you forget later, Bess.” Nick gripped her breast briefly and for a moment she looked blissful. “I think the master wants to talk to me alone now.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.” She scurried out.

"You wanted me to see that, didn't you, you scoundrel?" Doyle settled himself more easily in his chair. His eyes drifted shut and fluttered open. He was too exhausted to be angry.

"I thought it might rouse you. From your slumbers, I mean." Doyle didn't respond. Nick looked down at him, his arms crossed. "So."

"So, indeed."

"I've now met your reason for returning to this backwater. Admit it." Nicholas grinned at him, then walked over and stuffed a leftover cake in his mouth. "She actually looks like she might be worth the trip."

"Liv is special. She always has been."

"So why did she leave?"

"Because I'm tactless. You know how I get when I'm this way." Doyle tried to ignore his lurking unhappiness. He needed to sleep. Perhaps then he could forget the hurt and anger on Liv's face.

"You need to talk to her. She left in a huff. You didn't show up here to make her angry enough not to talk to you again."

"I know. I just...I have no energy to try to be polite right now." Doyle's head was throbbing like someone had laid a hammer to it. "And she's not some silly child who leaves in a huff. She should be angry at me," he muttered.

"All the worse. Then you have to talk to her. You're absolutely determined not to use anything to help you?"

Doyle's jaw tightened. "Shut up, Hall. You know I won't."

"Well, you know people do use this as medicine all the time. Ordinary, respectable people. It's not immoral or illegal. Why not just this once? After all, you need to be able to go and smooth things over with that delightful young woman." He could hear the amusement in Nick's voice. "Or," he taunted softly, "would you rather use me as your proxy?"

Doyle's eyes opened, then narrowed. "Stay away from her." He wasn't sure how much effect the order would have on Nick. Both the worst and best thing about Nicholas Hall was that he was very much his own man.

Nick laughed. "You're sweating to get into her, I can tell. I've never heard you quite so possessive over a woman before, Grenville."

"It's not like that, Nick."

Well, not exactly. Nick couldn't understand because he merely used women, all women, just as he had this afternoon. Doyle knew his feelings for Liv were different. Yes, he was sweating to have Livana. For years, he'd gotten hard at just the thought of her. He was even harder now that she was close. But that wasn't the only way he felt about her. Protective, caring, wanting her good opinion...

"Then deal with her yourself." Nick gestured toward his room. "But I have something that might help you recover your health long enough to charm her back. Just this once."

Doyle considered that, even though he didn't want to. He did need to talk to Livana and quickly. If she broke things off now that he was so close...

Doyle shivered at the thought. He needed Livvy like he'd never wanted or needed anything in his whole wretched life. Maybe Nick was right.

Maybe just this once.

Chapter Three

"I see you survived meeting the young devil." Jared Stone greeted her in front of her house. "We all had hopes he might never come back."

There was no point denying that she'd walked to the Grenville house. Everyone knew everyone else's comings and goings in town.

"Doyle Grenville? Why didn't you want him back?"

Jared's talk was odd. So was the fact he had stopped her. Most people didn't seek her out unless they were in need of help that a charm or some nursing could cure. Today Jared was unusually eager to talk to her.

"He was always different, even when he was young. And we've all heard stories of what he's like grown. Warren, who has been a groom for the young devil forever, has told us all plenty. There's the screaming that goes on behind locked doors and then there's the moods he gets into. The man has rages blacker than pitch. Warren's been in fear for his own life more than once." Jared's eyes looked curious as he divulged the information.

He wanted to see how she would react. Livana refused to show him.

"Well then, Warren must be happy to be back home, safe as ever. Perhaps he'll leave Mr. Grenville's employment if he finds it so difficult." Livana took a step towards the refuge

of home. She tried for her most haughty tone. “Mr. Grenville was always gracious enough to me.”

“Well, of course we all remember you two were thick as thieves long ago.” The man looked sly now. “That’s to be expected, seeing as what he is.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Livana knew she didn’t want to hear the answer even as she spoke.

“Well, he has a cloven hoof, doesn’t he? What else does he drag around behind him but that? None of his special boots can disguise it.” The man winked at her. “But I suppose someone like you can handle Lucifer himself. He was always charmed by you, wasn’t he?”

She could only gawk at him. “Cloven hoof? Don’t be ridiculous. He has a clubfoot. And yes, we were friends when we were children. I don’t know him well now, but if that’s a sample of the stories about him, you have to know everyone is wrong in what they say.” Liv nodded in dismissal and almost ran into the house.

No evil could disturb her there. Grandmother had seen to that long ago and told Livana how to keep everything safe. The angelica root was over the door.

Just to be sure, Livana chanted a special protection to herself. Her Book of Shadows was all she had left to guide her now that Grandmother was gone. But she’d been taught a great deal.

She ought to think about what was happening between her and Doyle. Livana knew she ought to be careful before going any further than friendship with someone like Doyle. She refused to believe Jared’s silly gossip, of course, but it was obvious Doyle was a difficult man.

She almost laughed. Doyle had never been easy to be around. He had just gotten worse with age. Had he ever frightened her with anything he did?

“Livvy?”

She thought she'd imagined the words at first. She'd been sure he wouldn't show up, or at least not so soon. It'd taken hours, sometimes days, for the black moods to go away before.

But Doyle was here and she ran to the door.

He had propped himself up against her door, looking as if he was willing to wait there forever. Not that he had to.

"I'm here to tell you I did want to see you. I do want to see you." He smiled down at her. "Always."

He looked different from an hour ago. The signs of strain were gone from his face and his eyes glittered. He had been handsome even when he looked ill, but now he was beautiful. He looked golden and glowing. For a moment there was something in his look that worried her, but the worry was gone in a wash of pleasure.

His arms were around her tightly. His mouth was on hers.

His tongue had made her shiver when it touched her hand. Now it was doing amazing things, wicked things to her own tongue and it made her want to moan.

"Innocent." She thought she heard him say. And then she was sure she heard, "And sweet."

She nipped his lower lip with her teeth. He drew back and looked down at her. For a moment her breath caught. What had she unleashed? He looked predatory. Maybe Doyle could frighten her after all.

"Perhaps not so sweet." He drawled the words out a little roughly. "But always just right."

"Doyle." Livana touched his cheekbones, let her fingers drift down to his chin. She knew she was hungry to touch more but was unsure what to do.

"Shall I see what you can promise me now, Liv?" His fingers were far more knowledgeable in their caresses than hers. She shivered when he opened the buttons of her shirtwaist.

“Anything, Doyle.”

He paused at that and looked at her. Then he smiled, almost dreamily. “You’re so beautiful, Liv. I can see the heavens in your eyes. I want to see more. I need to see more. I want to fly into heaven with you.”

“Doyle, you scare me a little.” Liv felt him divesting her of her skirt and then her undergarments. “You make me sound so unearthly.”

“Aren’t you named for the moon, Liv? Your grandmother told me that once. Livana means white for purity and the moon.”

“I’m afraid you’ll find me ordinary.”

He didn’t pause in undressing her. Liv realized she stood naked before him and wondered if she should feel modest or embarrassed. She realized she felt neither. She’d wanted him for so long -- so many years of waiting.

He looked at her for a long time and she could feel her nipples begin to tighten. And then she felt more ...

She didn’t know how to describe what she felt -- heat, wetness, excitement, fear and desire. She could tell that Doyle was feeling something similar. The fit of his pants had changed. She wasn’t completely stupid after years of living in the country. Doyle was sexually aroused from looking at her.

Good. She wanted him to be that way around her.

“Never, ever ordinary, my own Liv.” He moved forward and she felt his clothed body against her naked one.

She had never felt an erect man before, but she knew what was pressing against her flesh. Her teeth clenched. What was she supposed to say or do or --

Doyle touched her between her legs and his fingers once again knew what to do to give her ease and torment at the same time. She could feel herself growing wetter. He must know she was too.

“Ahhh.” She breathed the sound out. “Doyle, let me see you. Let me feel you the way you’re feeling me.”

He hesitated. “It isn’t dark yet.”

“No. Not quite.” Dusk was coming soon but the light was still bright.

He bent and gently let his tongue taste and fondle her nipples. They grew erect and tight, and she bit the inside of her lip to keep from crying out.

He looked up, no longer touching her, and she almost clutched his head to make him return.

“I’m a fool. Anyone could come by and see you.” Doyle moved swiftly to close the shutters on the window.

Liv wanted to protest that no one went past the tall hedges of her house and it was impossible to see inside. She wanted to make him return to what he was doing before he left her. But the half-light shifting on his skin as he began to take off his shirt distracted her.

“Now I can’t see you clearly,” Liv objected.

She wanted to look. He paused for a moment and she could see his smile as her eyes adjusted to the dark. She could hear him shucking his clothing, almost as quickly as he had rid her of her attire.

“You can feel me instead soon enough, sweet.” His voice was husky.

“I suppose I ought to swoon or be amazed by that remark.” Liv felt a sudden laugh rising up in her.

Why not laugh? She had waited forever. She had despaired, knowing this would never happen if Doyle didn’t return. Now he was here and she was overjoyed. Her mouth was dry from mingled fear and anticipation and want but she was joyful too.

“Not you. Not with me.” Doyle did laugh aloud. He was happy too. She knew that.

He walked toward her, his hesitant half-step faster than usual.

“Not ever with you.” Liv agreed.

“And since you aren’t swooning, Liv --” He knelt before her and she frowned, puzzled.

She gasped as his tongue swept the most intimate part of her body, and for a moment wondered if she was going to faint after all. She had never dreamed of anything feeling like this.

“Doyle! Oh, mercy!” She shut her eyes and her fingers bit hard into his shoulders.

“No mercy for you in this, sweet. Now spread your legs open just a little bit more and let me taste you better.”

For a moment Liv thought of the evil wolf in the old fairy tales and then every thought was lost in a sea of delight. His hands held her buttocks firmly or else she knew she would have fallen over as he changed from sweet to merciless in his caresses. She shuddered from the sensations -- it was like a rope that uncoiled and then tightened harder and harder inside her.

She clung to his shoulders, not knowing what else to do as she cried and shifted and kept feeling that sudden, almost sharp, tightening in her body. Everything became too much. She thought she might die if he kept on or if he stopped. Liv could feel the gulps of air she took, hear the sounds of Doyle’s tongue as he licked and sucked.

“Doyle, what have you done to me?” She shrieked the words, clawing at his shoulders.

The next rush of excitement and sensation made her shriek again. She shut her eyes and fought for breath. She was going to die from pleasure, she knew it, she had to --

And just as abruptly, the wonderful relaxation made her shiver.

Knowing her legs were truly unable to keep her up any more, she began to crumple to the floor. Doyle’s arms and hands guided her down.

She opened her eyes and saw his face close to hers, his eyes gleaming.

“Merciful goodness, Doyle! What did you do?” Liv whispered.

"I delighted you, Liv. That's what I did. Admit it." He nuzzled his face against her breasts.

"Yes. Oh yes." But this wasn't what Liv had expected of sex after hearing some of the half-whispers in town and after delivering newborn babies to mothers. "But that isn't the right way..."

"It was right for us this time, Liv. But, yes, you're still a maiden. A more experienced maiden, but a virgin nonetheless."

"Why?"

"Because I don't choose to have our first time give you any pain. When -- when you're no longer a virgin, even if there is some hurt at first, you'll know it won't always be that way. I'll make any ache turn into bliss for you. You can be sure of that." He suckled on one nipple and she could feel the bliss starting within her again.

She ran her hands down his back. He was sweating, just as she was. She enjoyed touching his skin and muscles for one long moment. Then her hands paused.

"Doyle? What's this? And this?" She could feel ridges on his back. "Have you been hurt?"

He stilled. "Once or twice, Liv. Once or twice."

"When? Where? What happened?"

"At school. And elsewhere. I don't think I should tell you why, my innocent. Not yet. But let me remind you that I'm not innocent at all. Sometimes, though not always, I quite enjoyed getting my scars."

Liv sucked in her breath, trying to imagine what he meant.

"My dear." Doyle began to kiss her neck. "Don't look at me with such big eyes. You needn't worry. I promise I'll never scar you. I'll never disgust you or hurt you. Just realize in many ways, ways that I may or may not show you, I am quite depraved."

The way his breath tickled her ear, he made the last word sound quite...exciting.

“Show me some ways, Doyle.” He shook his head when she arched her body up to kiss him back. “I wouldn’t mind being wicked. With you.”

“Not tonight, darling. Tonight is purely innocent. Or almost.”

“I suppose that means you won’t deflower me.” Liv suddenly felt quite cross.

His chuckle didn’t help her mood. But his body against hers did. She couldn’t quite see him, but she could feel the muscles, the rough hair on his chest, the wet softness of his sweat. And that erect male flesh of his. Oh, of course. Her pleasure had been completed. Not his. Livana’s hands touched his arousal, hesitantly, and retreated.

“Go ahead, Liv.” His voice was hoarse. “If you want. Only if you want.”

“I -- will I hurt you?” She wanted to touch, desperately.

“Only in the best of ways, my Liv,” he said thickly.

He took her hand and guided it to the tip of his penis. She rubbed her hands over it, startled when she felt a little wetness suddenly drip from it.

“Oh.” She was fascinated, raising her finger to taste what she had brought forth. Salty. Different from anything she’d ever tasted before. She could feel him shudder as he watched what she did.

“Do you like it?”

“I think so.” She answered honestly, reaching forward again to touch and taste again.

“Then I can assure you there will be more of that. Much more.” She could hear the amusement and the restrained heat mingled in his tone and realized just his voice made her ache again.

She stroked the tip and then the whole length of his penis, startled and then encouraged by his groans. Seeing what a male was, what Doyle was, entranced her. She touched the tight sac near the base of his penis and watched him buck under her hands.

“Liv, stop.” His voice was husky.

“Oh, why?” She was ridiculously disappointed.

“Because I’m a fool. I want this to last forever and if you touch me that way, I won’t.”

“Our being together?”

“Our first time together. I want to keep wanting you this way always -- but I’ll die if I can’t have you soon. You create a great dilemma for me, sweet.”

“I don’t really understand.” Then Liv thought about the ache and release he’d brought her, and the new ache that he was creating with just his words and his allowing her to touch his body. “Or perhaps I do. But that’s foolish. Nothing ever ends between us. You satisfied me once, but now I want you even more. Can’t I touch you and do the same?”

“Yes. I know you can. Go on, then. Here I am. Enjoy yourself and let me enjoy you.”

Liv touched more than the rapidly growing part of Doyle. He murmured sometimes, groaned others, but he let her explore as she would. She always returned to that interesting male part of him -- she couldn’t help herself. But his shoulders and chest had such fascinating strength, his stomach muscles clenched when she touched there, and his legs were so strong but trembled when she brushed against Doyle’s thighs.

Liv began to see why Doyle wanted this to last forever despite her own longing to end the tension growing between them. She wanted to feel his body always, to tempt his strength forever.

It was only when she moved her fingers and lips down from his calves toward his feet that he stopped her at last.

“No more, Liv,” he told her. “I can’t bear this any longer.”

He lifted her up and she, without instruction, bent to touch the head of his penis with her mouth.

His responding groan sounded like she had injured him, but she knew better because his hands clenched into her hair, trapping her against him. She’d wanted to do that when

he'd stopped caressing her. That had to mean Doyle wanted more. She wanted to give him more.

Livana took his shaft deeper and deeper into her mouth, his groans only encouraging her to slide her tongue and mouth faster over him. The head of his penis was slick and slippery. She flicked her tongue against the small hole there.

"Liv, no. Please, no. Oh God, I'm going to -- Liv, don't stop. Please, don't stop!"

Then what he'd promised earlier came true. There was more inside of him -- it poured out into her mouth as if a dam had broken free inside him.

"Liv!"

Livana wanted to laugh in triumph or joy. She might not know everything Doyle had learned in those absent years, but she knew enough to make him shudder and beg her to continue and to finally release himself in a torrent of groaning delight. And all the while he'd called out her name.

She'd done that to him.

She curled up against him and put her arms around him as a reward. She thought they both more than deserved it. His arms tightened around her too, though not with the strength they'd had in his final spasms of need. This was a more tender, though still consuming hold.

"You didn't mind doing that for me, Liv?" His voice was a whisper of sound.

Puzzled, Liv shook her head. "Do what? What was I supposed to mind?"

She felt Doyle's almost silent laugh. His kisses brushed over her eyelids and cheeks.

"Liv, you frighten me," he whispered.

She blinked. "Why?"

He was staring at her so intently. Perhaps she did frighten him, just as he could her.

"You can already turn me inside out and you're still new to all this. Heaven help me once you learn more."

Liv had a sudden, ugly thought. Doyle had allowed her to do what she wanted to him until she'd almost touched his feet. Jared's warning echoed in her head. Then she pushed the foolish thought away.

"I'll only learn what you're willing to teach me, Doyle."

"Heaven help us both then."

* * * * *

He was hard again. Doyle felt like he could fuck for hours. Not Livana, though. He'd been terrified as well as aroused beyond belief when he came in her mouth. He'd been fortunate that she enjoyed doing that. She hadn't even known other women wouldn't dream of allowing such things.

She was innocent. So innocent. She was so fragile and beautiful in the moonlight, naked and asleep in her bed. He looked at her and tried to feel nothing but disgust at the images he had in his mind. The things he wanted to do to her had to be wrong. She was too important to use like a whore. Still, he wanted to...

Doyle bit his hand while he gazed up her pretty legs and thighs and then, finally, at her pubic hair. Her legs had spread open slightly, and he could look further. She looked so pretty there. She looked wet and welcoming. Liv might welcome him if he woke her up the way he wanted to right now. She'd murmur to him and she'd be so wet and tight as he rode her --

He pulled himself back, realizing he'd crept even closer to her bed. No. What if she didn't? What if she was shocked waking up to a man on top of her? He'd taken a chance pleasuring her with his mouth and then letting her learn how to pleasure him the same way.

He had to remember Liv was still a virgin. How the hell did you treat an innocent woman you loved when you finally did make love to her? Carefully. Respectfully. That had to be the right way.

He hadn't even earned the right to ask her to marry him yet, but he was damn near drooling over her, allowing himself to stare at parts of her body no lady would dream of allowing a man to see. Doyle knew he had to leave or he'd do worse.

Liv sighed and her legs opened further. He hesitated.

Damning himself, he reached down to pick up her underdrawers. They were white, and curse him for a depraved monster, he put the garment against his face. The cotton smelled like her. Suddenly, wildly, he began to stroke the cloth against his eager cock, all the while staring at his Liv. He wouldn't do any of the things he fantasized doing to her. Never. But he was so hard and he wanted her so badly that he had to do something.

He finally came, forcing himself not to groan and wake her. Then, still feeling guilty, Doyle checked again. Now her underdrawers smelled like the two of them. Like they would once they finally were together.

Damn it! He was getting hard again. Doyle knew he would force himself on Liv if he stayed longer. And not just once. Hours. Hours of fucking.

He'd promised her a night of almost innocent pleasure. Gritting his teeth, Doyle stood up and began to dress himself. He had to leave now.

* * * * *

Being away from her didn't help. He was a damned rutting animal. That was the real problem. Doyle limped toward his bedroom, ready to try to relieve himself again, but paused when he saw Nick's open door.

He recognized the sounds. In Nick's room they were familiar ones. More feminine laughter and soft protests. Then the protests began to change. He knew what would happen next. Doyle fought not to give in to temptation but he'd already been as noble as he could for one night.

He stood at the threshold, staring past the half-open door. The bed was already creaking fiercely. Yes, she was tied and blindfolded. That was one of Nick's favorite games. Doyle's mouth went dry. He rather liked that game himself.

Nick looked up and saw Doyle in the mirror. A split second later Nicholas grinned and made a welcoming gesture.

"Are you going to be ready for more, darling, when I'm done with you?" Nick murmured to Bess -- someone else? -- below him.

"Anything you want." The voice was passionate. "I've never had anything like this before."

Nick gestured to him and then the body below again. Doyle sucked in his breath. Whoever she was, he could fuck her mindlessly. She didn't matter, and what's more she'd want it.

He sighed. But Liv did matter, and she wouldn't want him to do it. He couldn't do that to her. Doyle shook his head and then stepped outside before he could be tempted further.

He heard the high sound of a woman reaching her climax and he flattened himself against the wall, his hand jerking harshly on his cock again. He might not watch any more, and he wouldn't participate, but he couldn't help listening and imagining himself with Liv.

Suddenly, he could almost hear Nick's mocking voice in his ear, whispering, *"You want to marry someone you have to be careful with? One that won't let you do all the things you've been doing this past decade? Either she's going to be disillusioned or you're going to be bored."*

Chapter Four

“Cerberus, I’m not sure what I expected, but it wasn’t this.” Livana stared at the dog, who whined as if in sympathy.

Doyle wasn’t here. She’d woken up and it was as if the whole evening hadn’t happened. There wasn’t even a note. He had told her she was beautiful and always just right and made love to her and then he was gone?

For a moment the air shimmered around her. Liv didn’t enjoy getting truly angry. Bad things happened when she did. She forced herself to remain controlled.

Perhaps Doyle had a very, very good reason.

She heard a knock on the door and relaxed. She was upset for no good reason. He was back with that very good reason -- or no reason at all. The important thing was that he was back.

She opened the door.

A small girl stood there, looking terrified.

“Please, miss. My mother wants you to come to our house. Our baby is sick and Mother says the doctor just makes him sicker.”

“Oh.” Liv stared stupidly down and then took a breath. “Yes, yes, of course. What’s wrong with the baby?”

“He can’t breathe so well. He coughs and coughs.”

Liv turned to her book, already thinking what might be out in her garden to help. Doyle would have to wait. She had a child she needed to help before she called on the disappearing love of her life.

She saw some of the people she knew eyeing her as she ran with little Beth Spencer to the far edge of town. They’d looked before. She didn’t care that they stared now. Liv knew what they were thinking. Doyle had stayed last night. Of course they knew.

Well, they’d gossiped about her before. They would again. No one dared to say anything directly to her. Of course, no one usually talked to her anyhow unless they needed her help.

She heard the choking cries of a baby as she stepped into the Spencer house. Liv mentally tried to calm herself. She was being called on to heal. She had no time for turbulent thoughts. But as she bent over the baby she could feel a sudden, unwanted thought rise in her. She should go see Doyle. Now.

I can’t.

It took a huge effort, but Livana pushed the need to see Doyle away from her. As she touched the baby’s forehead and tried to assess what she needed to help cure the infant, Liv began her healing chant, murmuring it softly so the occupants wouldn’t hear.

Thoughts of anything but the little body with his raspy breathing faded.

* * * * *

“Nick?” Liv said the name hesitantly.

“Livana.” The man inclined his head once. He didn’t look charming now. He looked as if he had much on his mind, as if it was an effort to talk to her.

“I must see Doyle.”

“I can’t help you with that.”

“We aren’t going to have another scene like last time are we?” Livana was tired. It was almost dusk and she’d already had a long day, with only the thought that she’d eased a child’s illness to make her feel better. But she was ready to take on anyone if that was what was necessary to see Doyle.

“I only meant that I’m not sure where he is.” The man looked troubled. “He wasn’t himself this evening. After he ate, he disappeared.”

Perhaps he’d gone to her house.

But Liv couldn’t shake her uneasiness. Ever since she had discovered herself alone this morning, her divining abilities seemed sharper than usual. She knew Doyle hadn’t left his house all day. She knew he was in trouble. What she wasn’t sure of was where he was.

“I’ll find him,” she spoke calmly.

She was tired but sometimes that allowed her ability to feel rather than think to be used more effectively.

Liv shut her eyes. The bond between her and Doyle, always there, seemed stronger than ever. His physical presence helped strengthen it, but still --

Her eyes opened and she looked puzzled, but walked into the house, letting instinct lead her. Nicholas followed after her, almost the way Cerberus might have had she brought him.

“Do you know if there is a way to the roof from the attic? If not, I’m afraid I may have to ask you to go find a ladder.”

“I’ll come with you,” Nicholas offered.

His dark eyes shined into hers, looking concerned and mesmerizing. Liv felt herself swaying toward him, staring back into those eyes. Once again the world shimmered around her, with bright, hot flashes at the edges. Then her heightened senses screamed out danger.

Liv stepped back, hastily. “No. Doyle wouldn’t want anyone else there but me.” For a moment she smiled. “And he won’t want me at first either.”

“Let me help if I can, Livana.” He lowered his eyes, almost humbly, and the world shifted back again to normal. “I’ll go once we find him. But you may need me.”

She nodded her head at last. If Doyle were injured or hurt she’d need Nick’s strength to move him. They said nothing more for a moment as they stood together in the entrance hall.

“Grenville was right, you know. He doesn’t deserve you.” Nick broke the silence suddenly, sounding disturbingly calm.

She didn’t want to think how he had heard Doyle tell her that.

“Perhaps that would be for me to decide.” Liv refused to look at him as she climbed the stairs, but she could feel him close to her.

“But how can you? You don’t know what he’s done or what he’s like. I do.” They came out on the roof as Nick spoke. Liv glanced around but for the moment saw nothing. No one. “I’ve known him in school since he was a boy. The older boys tormented him, you know.”

“I was sure of it,” she murmured.

“I befriended him before he got killed from some of the punishments the others came up with for him. But by then he’d rather developed a taste for pain, don’t you know? At any rate, whenever his foot hurt him he’d ask me to help him. Pain can drive out pain, you see.”

Liv thought of the scars and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from responding.

“But then I found another way to control the pain. I helped drive it away with something better. Laudanum. A little can kill a great deal of pain.”

Liv rarely used that when she healed. More than a little could be dangerous. She much preferred the herbs and other plants she grew in her garden. “I see.”

“No, you don’t yet. Listen. Doyle grew very fond of laudanum. Perhaps a bit too fond. He quickly moved on to other types of opiates. Can’t you tell? Now some men can dabble at that sort of thing now and then, but not Doyle. Doyle can’t stop.”

Nick's voice was still calm. "He tried to stop. He tried again when he first got here. That's why the servants cower when they think of him. He wanted to stop for you, I suppose. But he can't. He gets too enraged, then too despondent. I'll wager he's gone off somewhere trying to stop now. He wouldn't want you to see him the way he can get."

"He knows I wouldn't like any of what you told me." Liv felt the sensation of danger going through her again. "And you must know he won't like that you were the one who told me."

She began to list some remedies in her mind to calm herself. St. John's Wort for purification and willpower. That could help Doyle. Cloves, rue...

"Liv, what if he can't ever stop?" Nick's voice seemed concerned.

"Of course he can."

She didn't want to think about what might happen if she was wrong.

And then she saw Doyle, leaning against a parapet on the roof. Perhaps he hadn't heard their conversation. He didn't look upset at all. He looked happy there. No, he looked more than happy. Doyle looked euphoric.

I finally know what to do. No more self-doubt or self-pity. There's no need for pity or doubt.

Liv hesitated. He was so close to the edge she feared to startle him. By now it was quite dark. He could easily lose his balance or misjudge the roof's ledge in the blackness.

"There are so many brilliant stars out tonight, Liv," he said conversationally, as if he had expected her to come. "Millions and millions out in the huge heavens."

Liv glanced up. There were stars, of course, the full moon dimming their light. But Doyle kept looking up even as she inched cautiously forward.

She's so beautiful. That's not just the opiates. She is. I want to remember her just this way.

Liv paused. It was as if his thoughts were in her head. Thoughts she didn't want. Feelings she didn't want. A confused rush of sadness and love and despair.

"It's an enchanted night, Liv," he said and then he laughed. "Did you enchant it for us, my witch?"

"No. Doyle -- it's an odd night. I feel danger." Briefly Liv wished she had angelica root or African ginger to protect or ward off spells. She hadn't thought to make this house safe. "I need you to come inside with me. For protection."

She wisely chose not to say whose. Liv wasn't even sure whose anymore.

Doyle didn't seem unhappy. But he didn't seem as happy as his words sounded.

"But the night is so delicious. I feel free up here. The wind seems ready to blow me to anywhere." The wind ruffled his hair as he lifted his face up to the sky again. "Have you ever wished to fly, Liv? I always did. I'm so clumsy on earth that using the air would be a wonderful change."

Can I explain it to her? She mustn't regret anything. I don't.

"No. I never have flown," Liv told him. "Grandmother never showed me."

"Then why don't I try it alone?" Doyle's voice changed. "Because, Livvy, Nick is right. I don't think I ever will change. And you shouldn't be bound to someone like that."

"Doyle!" Liv knew something was very wrong.

"If I can't be what you need, Liv, I shouldn't be at all. It's my fault, not yours."

She'll have my money. Perhaps that's all I can give her that's worth anything. And she'll be free. Free and beautiful and finally not bound to me in any way. If I can't do anything else I should for her, I can do this. I must.

"No!" Nick ran forward, quickly, but of course wasn't fast enough.

Doyle glanced at them both and then he was gone over the side, arching out into the air for one split moment. Liv had no time to think. She could only hope she remembered what Grandmother had told her.

Dragon come take my spirit

make it rise

make it fly

make it free

to fly above the seas.

Livana chanted the words desperately even as she ran to the edge of the roof too. And then the two of them were in the air, Liv holding Doyle, Doyle holding her. He laughed.

“Magical witch,” he murmured and kissed her neck. “You should let me loose. You should.”

For a moment she felt him struggle against her.

“Don’t make me lose concentration, Doyle. We’ll both fall.”

She could feel inner tension deflate in him.

“I can’t let that happen,” he said, sounding defeated. And he held her tightly.

Liv tried not to think about what they were doing as they floated, hovered. She threw her energy into her chant, remembering old rhythms her grandmother had given her, creating new ones as they drifted.

The wind rushed through her clothes and hair. The only thing solid was Doyle’s body and even that felt curiously weightless. They were twisting, circling, as if in a whirlpool.

Doyle was very solid indeed, hard and demanding, against her. He used his erection to touch her quite deliberately while he kissed her throat, before nuzzling between her breasts.

The two of them wavered a moment in the air.

She wanted to snap at him that this wasn’t the time until she realized that her nipples were hardening as he caressed them. Her chants began to come out in gasps as he rubbed

himself between her thighs harder and faster. Liv could feel the dampness growing between her legs.

Oh God. This was dangerous and exciting and she was becoming as aroused as he was. How could a man who sought death one moment make her feel burningly alive the next?

Gradually -- she wasn't sure how long it took -- she could feel the curious energy she'd created dissipate and her body grew heavier and heavier yet. Her arms ached from the clutch she had on Doyle.

Finally her head cleared and they were on the ground, near the house.

Liv sat down, feeling exhausted and dizzy. Doyle painfully sat on the ground next to her, his face suddenly concerned.

"Are you all right, Liv?"

"I'm tired, but I'll live." Liv realized she had only thought she was tired when she'd first met Nicholas Hall that evening. Now she ached with weariness. "What about you, Doyle?"

He hesitated.

"You asked me why I came back before, Liv. I came because I thought perhaps with you near me I could manage to be what you need from a man. But it isn't working. I can't stop my cravings." He looked at her with a half-smile. "Any of them. I want you and I want opium. I'm not sure why I tried what I did tonight. Perhaps I'm just tired of failure."

"Doyle, I didn't save you from death to have you go and court it some more." Liv made her voice urgent. "Promise me you'll stay here on earth with me. We'll face whatever else we need to, but I don't know what I'd do without you."

She'd never imagined living in a world completely without Doyle. She couldn't imagine doing so now. Even while she wanted to smack him for doing all the things he'd done, she'd never let him go. Ever.

“I promise, Liv. No matter how hard things are, I’ll stay.” His voice was serious, strained. “I stayed away trying to become worthy of you. Maybe if I stay with you this time, I can manage the task.”

Danger. She could still feel danger from somewhere along with her huge relief. But she was too exhausted to try to fight any more.

“You’re going to stop taking opium, Doyle. This will be the last time. It has to be. We can’t live like this. But now that I know, I can help.”

“Let me help you now, Livvy.” And suddenly she was dangling above ground again, but this time Doyle was carrying her. “Don’t worry, I won’t drop you. It’s only my foot that’s weak. And I’ll gladly put you to bed. I can hardly wait until you wake up and we can continue where we left off in the air.”

That was supposed to help put her to sleep? Liv could feel the warmth in her body despite her weariness. She wanted to suggest that he do more than tuck her in when they reached the bed. She wanted to kiss and fondle him. She wanted to --

She couldn’t help herself. Livana was asleep within moments, her ear pressed against Doyle’s chest, where she could hear his heart racing until she heard nothing more.

Flying took a lot out of a witch.

Chapter Five

“Are you awake yet, Liv?” It was Doyle’s voice, close to her ear. “Please open your eyes.”

No.

She tried to say that but couldn’t. Both her tongue and eyelids seemed weighed down. She vaguely remembered horrible dreams, where flying changed to falling and flames burst out around her.

And now she was awake and naked. Doyle’s hands were on her naked breasts.

“Did you undress me?” Liv heard herself ask groggily, her eyes still closed.

“No, I had the groom do it.” Her eyes snapped open and she saw Doyle grinning at her. “He admired your body exceedingly.”

“Wicked man.” Her mood lightened when she saw his smile.

The fey quality Doyle had before was gone. Instead he looked a little worn. “Are you all right, Liv? You slept for a long time.” He touched her face.

“Keeping both myself and a reckless idiot up in the air wears me out.”

“I must’ve been quite mad. If I killed myself it would be a small loss, but I can’t believe I endangered you, Liv. Forgive me?”

“Sooner than you will, I expect. And I would rather miss you if you were ever foolish enough to try such a thing without me.”

She longed to talk to her lover about his despondency. Doyle wasn't truly mad. He had black moods where he grew angry or morose, but his reason was sound. She'd heard that his father was the same way, especially after his wife died. No one had ever accused Jack Grenville, the man who'd made himself a wealthy railroad magnate, of being insane.

But she could see how deeply troubled Doyle was by what he'd done. Right now she couldn't ask more about why. He hadn't answered when she told him he must stop. Perhaps opiates robbed all judgment from him. She was ignorant of what they might do and, while she knew she could learn more, she didn't want to begin now.

Instead, since his hands were still resting on her body, she thought of something that ought to make him think of different things. Something they'd been thinking about far too much and doing too little about. Perhaps Doyle needed some encouragement.

She sat up, her brown hair tumbling down onto her shoulders and she could see Doyle's interest shift from self-blame to something more exciting. She leaned forward, touching his upper lip with her finger and tracing the length of it.

“Well, we're alive and here, and in bed. One of us is naked. Now, I could make a spell to increase your potency, Doyle, but don't you think you could think of something to do without that?” Livana meant to tease, but her voice came out husky and aroused.

Doyle's eyes narrowed. She could see his face become sensual and intent.

“Possibly.” His voice had changed too, into a sensual drawl. When Doyle drawled, the mix of Irish and British accent his mother had had came through. “Are you trying to lead me about by my cock, dearest Liv? To make me forget what an idiot I was?”

“Yes.”

Liv adored that drawl of his. She always had. Perhaps Doyle knew because he, in turn, traced one of her nipples with his finger and, using the same drawl, said, "Very well then. You've done it. But would you trust my imagination, Liv?"

"Of course." She swallowed. What sort of imagination did Doyle have?

He looked at her for a long moment. "Would you be willing to be blindfolded?"

Liv almost said no and then thought again. Did this come from his disquiet at having his feet seen or something more erotic? She thought about being blind and unsure of what Doyle's touch might bring.

Doyle's teeth just lightly tugged at her nipples and his fingers traced patterns on the insides of her thighs, almost touching--not quite touching...

She shivered. "Yes. I'm willing."

Doyle's hands traced the pulse at her throat that she knew must be jumping. He kissed where his hands had just been.

"I'll always treat you just as you should be, Livana. You're precious. I think this will be exciting for you as well as for me. But I won't blindfold you if you don't wish me to."

"I don't know if I do." Liv was honest. "But you've given me delight already. I'm willing to risk myself."

"You'll risk nothing. I swear." Doyle took out a handkerchief from his bureau. "Are you ready?"

"As best I can be."

He knotted the cloth behind her head.

She was so small. Doyle could feel his hands shaking as she bent her head to allow him to tie the handkerchief. A slender neck, white skin that burned when she spent time outside without her hat. Thin, delicate wrists with blue veins.

He could see all that now, sitting in front of him. His. His Livana. Fragile and tough. Delicate, but able to withstand anything.

His. Finally his.

Blessed Lord, he'd never felt this hard and needy in his life. How could he have? He'd never actually been inside Livvy.

He sent prayers up to a deity he wasn't sure he believed in and knew that Liv didn't follow. But he needed help. Pleasing a woman had never been so important before.

When Doyle finished tying, she sighed.

While his heart constricted with tenderness, his unruly cock jumped with another, wilder feeling. He reached out and touched her white skin. He leaned forward to taste her skin. Just taste.

He couldn't stop shaking. Thank God he'd blindfolded her because if she looked at him he wasn't sure but he might cry. If she didn't watch he could stay tender. He could keep control. And he could make her entirely his at last. He'd been a fool to risk dying before he'd experienced this.

At last. Everything. He'd feel everything.

And he'd make her feel everything too.

It was a different world without sight. A world of sensation that intensified all of her other senses because she had lost the ability to see.

She could hear Doyle's breath rasp against her stomach as he explored her. She could feel his hair tickle and excite her as he brushed it against her feet. She could hear his clothes fall off his body as he undressed. She could taste his skin when she licked what she discovered was his knee resting against her shoulder.

She felt his sex against her lips and she tasted that too.

“Ah, Liv,” Doyle breathed against her ear. “I didn’t imagine you ever being so biddable. Not in any of my fantasies.”

Biddable? She used her teeth, very gently, and felt him shudder. He was impatient and strong, but vulnerable too. That was exciting.

“I do love you. You must know that. I’ve always loved you.”

She heard the effort it took for him to control his voice as Liv used her mouth to suck harder.

Liv realized that her temporary blindness must have allowed Doyle to speak more freely. He’d never said those words to her before. She’d known, of course. How could she not know that about the person who was so close to her? But it was unbearably thrilling to hear them, especially when Doyle said them in a voice that fought to stay even.

He slowly withdrew his flesh from her mouth.

“No, Liv. Tonight I’m the master here. You’re going to be my willing student. I promise to teach you wonders or die trying.”

Her nipples hardened even more with his words. She imagined Doyle watching them tighten, but realized she could tell nothing from the sudden silence in the room.

She was dependent on Doyle to let her know how he felt and what he wanted. She couldn’t see his face or posture and guess from that.

His fingers slid between her legs, and she felt them stretching her open. She heard his breath draw in when he felt how wet she was.

“Please, Doyle?”

When he used his teeth, as gently as she had for him, she gasped and shuddered, just as Doyle had. He didn’t stop teasing, touching, tasting even as her shudders increased. She let out what she was afraid was a wail. She knew she was wet there. She didn’t think she could bear more waiting, more fondling. She needed, wanted, had to have more.

“Pleaaase, Doyle. *Please!*”

“I like that, Liv. Say ‘please’ some more.”

She tried not to beg, but he was devilishly teasing her most sensitive spots, in touching them in just the way that made her wild.

Soon she was praising him, pleading with him, blindly touching him, all in an effort to make him --

“Oh.”

His first gentle push into her was more startling than anything else. The pressure built as he moved forward and suddenly backed away again. He paused and went back to using his tongue against her nub in a way that seemed to give the most pleasure.

She was pleased but not satisfied.

“No, Doyle! You have to go on!” Liv demanded.

“You must ask, Liv. Nicely. Remember who the master is tonight.”

She reached out and brushed against his erection. He was so hard and so big. For a moment she wondered how he would manage to do what she understood was part of sex. Surely he wouldn’t fit.

“Please?”

He pressed forward again and this time she felt the pain more than pleasure, but the promise of pleasure beckoned. Something tore inside her and she felt herself being filled.

She whimpered. There was no pleasure now.

“Gently, Liv, gently. Relax and I promise you all will be well.”

His promise meant nothing. She’d been right. Doyle was too big for her. Surely the tearing would continue if he moved. His hand moved, began stroking cleverly, while his penis thrust into her. She knew she’d die if he stopped.

Liv understood how ignorant she was. Surely other people managed this. Somehow if she just twisted in the right way, if her hips could move --

They were locked together, she and Doyle.

They fit together perfectly.

"Mine, Liv. You're mine." She heard him whisper and they moved in a rhythm that eased her pain and produced waves of more pleasure.

Liv raised her legs and gripped the muscular male body that rocked against her. She felt sweat beading up, trapping itself in her blindfold. She was not only blind but deaf with the feelings he had helped create.

And when Doyle cried out in release, Liv cried out a half second behind him with her own.

Still blinded, she felt Doyle's face against hers.

"D'you think I need some help for my potency yet, Liv?" he asked her, sweetly. "In another moment or two, I believe I can promise you yet more."

Liv laughed ready to tell him how much she did love him, when she heard something. Her breath caught.

It was a step. Not Doyle's dragging step but someone else's. She heard the sound of clapping.

"A fine performance, Grenville. Restrained, gentlemanly. I didn't know you were capable of doing that. But then a nice woman like yours will make a man work to act his best, don't you think?" Nicholas Hall's voice was next to their bed. The mockery in his voice deepened. "Just how long do you think you can manage to stay tame for her, Doyle?"

Even without sight, Livana could feel his eyes burning as he looked at her body. She could almost feel the heat singe her naked skin. For one wicked moment she could feel what shouldn't be sexual excitement -- but was. And when she realized that her embarrassment was complete.

"How did you get here?" Doyle's voice was cold in contrast. She could feel his body covering her naked one, shielding her.

“You left the door open, old friend. And seeing as we’ve shared many things, including women, I thought you were inviting me in.” There was a pause. “But I see I was mistaken. I am sorry, Doyle. And Livana.”

“Get out.”

“Of course, Grenville. My deepest apologies, although I truly have only admiration for you both.”

“Damn you --”

Liv heard violent shoving and crashing while she frantically tried to unknot the cloth binding her eyes. Doyle was crippled! He couldn’t match himself against someone like Hall.

By the time she pulled the handkerchief from her eyes, she saw Doyle locking the door. She thought she heard laughter on the other side, but the door was thick and muffled the sound.

“Damn my carelessness.” Doyle turned back and limped to the bed. “I can be forgetful, but of all things to neglect.”

Liv realized her face was one deep burn of shame. She took a sheet and pulled it over herself. “I was so happy, Doyle,” she whispered. “And now I’m so humiliated.”

“No need for you to be. Tomorrow I’ll tell Nicholas we’re engaged. He’ll understand how it is between us then. We must simply go on differently, he and I, than what he’s used to.”

“And what are you two used to doing?”

Doyle ignored the question. “I know Nick and I have done some things together that were wrong, but I also know he’ll wish us well and be man enough to keep his mouth shut. After all, we’ve been friends for a long time.”

“Will he truly keep his mouth shut?”

“Yes. Or he’ll never open his mouth again.”

"I -- Doyle, are you saying we're to be married?" Liv had thought he would someday propose, but never like this.

Though he hadn't asked her at all.

"Of course, Liv. What else could we do? We've always been meant for each other." Doyle's eyes gleamed at her and he kissed first one hand and then the other. "Forgive me. Shall we do this properly?"

Naked, he bent on one knee and put his hand over his heart.

"Dearest Livana, it cannot have escaped your notice that I have developed feelings for you of the deepest affection --" He gestured to a part of his body where Liv realized something was developing.

She let out a sudden burst of laughter. Only moments before she thought she would never find anything laughable about their situation.

-- and utmost respect. Truly, Liv..." His voice turned serious. "I do admire you and I would be honored if you would consider marriage to me. I hadn't asked before though I've wanted to forever because I don't deserve you. I'll try to change all that and be right for you. I'll become a better man. And I'm grateful that circumstances seem to be forcing my hand."

Liv realized she had never had so many differing emotions within the space of minutes.

Doyle's eyes looked sad suddenly. "You should refuse, Liv. But don't. Please?" He asked as if she truly might.

But she knew what to say.

"Yes, Doyle. Of course I'll marry you." Whatever the reason was that Doyle thought ought to prevent them from happiness could be overcome.

And when Doyle kissed her, that faint trace of derisive laughter from outside the door, the mockery that she still heard in her head, was almost completely stilled.

"You're still troubled by what happened?"

"No." She hesitated. "Yes."

He pulled away the sheet she still clutched. She resisted for a moment, but with a sudden rip, he took it from her.

Doyle was quite hard again. She bit her lip, stunned to realize that she was responding to the sight of him.

"I'll make you forget about everything bad that just happened. You won't be able to remember anyone named Nicholas Hall exists when I'm done with you."

"Doyle?"

"Yes?"

"Were you restrained and gentlemanly before with me?"

"No. Yes. Well, maybe a little bit."

Liv shut her eyes unbidden this time and stretched out on the bed.

"Then don't be. I don't want you restrained. If there's even more to learn, I want that too. Whatever you want, teach me to do."

She kept herself from looking, but now, perhaps because she knew what to expect, what she felt was different. Doyle wasn't rougher, but she could feel herself becoming more eager to bite and scratch at him.

He, in turn, was maddeningly slow -- licking and tasting, pausing between for long, agonizing moments. He laughed once before she fastened her teeth in his deliberately slow-moving hand.

"I want everything, Doyle," Liv whispered.

With those words, he turned her over, put her on her knees and pushed her down. She waited, on her hands and knees, suddenly afraid. Doyle had promised to never hurt her but what did he think might be pleasurable in this position?

"*Doyle.*" She felt his penis entering her from behind, the way animals mated. She was already sensitive and he felt even bigger this way, able to thrust more deeply inside her. This new way was pleasurable, yes, still more pleasure than pain but...

His hand pressed at other sensitive points near where they were joined and she cried out. Still more pleasure, agonizing pleasure. She moaned as he rode her hard, her breasts jiggling with each thrust.

Fingers tugged at her breasts, softly at first, then harder. Liv froze for a moment, something not feeling...right.

This wasn't right. Doyle was behind her, one hand pleasuring her, one hand holding her hip while he pounded into her body, keeping her firmly against him. But there were still hands flicking little streaks of flame through her as they played with her nipples...

A hot, hungry mouth pulled on her nipples. She couldn't help herself. Her first reaction was to moan with excitement.

There was more than one person fondling her.

Doyle's finger tweaked her between her legs and she groaned. Someone else's teeth caught one nipple and she bucked.

She wanted to open her eyes now and found she couldn't. Her eyelids simply would not move. Liv tried reasoning with herself. Doyle had locked the door. Nick -- someone else -- couldn't be there.

Doyle thrust deep inside her. Her upper body was bent almost to the bed. Hands pushed her breasts together and thrust a very hot, hard, erect penis between them.

Liv screamed. Pleasure intensified, doubled, amazing pleasure was shooting through her, burning her with its power.

She ought to tell Doyle, she had to tell him...

Before she could say anything, that other penis thrust itself into her mouth. Doyle still moved in slow, deliberate thrusts, each one harder than the next, withdrawing and waiting until she wasn't sure whether he would return again, though his fingers kept moving constantly against her swollen, slick-wet nub.

The other penis withdrew completely once she realized she couldn't speak and a tongue took its place in her mouth and began to press against hers, in an exact imitation of Doyle's fingers.

Could you go mad from pleasure? Perhaps that was what had happened. She felt no more amazement, or fear, or shame. Just desperate want. Livana couldn't think at all. Two people -- or one person and her own wicked imagination -- moved over her, anxious that no part of her body be deprived of touch and feel.

Liv knew she writhed and screamed and pleaded incoherently. Her legs began to shake and a pillow was put under her to steady her. But nothing else stopped. Tongues, fingers, penises were all being used to their best effect.

She was going to die from climaxing and was pushed on to the next peak. She was burning up. She'd gone beyond madness. Could you die from pleasure?

She heard Doyle's moan behind her as he finally exploded in a long, shaking release and collapsed on top of her.

As his weight rested upon her, she no longer felt anyone else but him touching her.

Her eyes opened easily as he rolled next to her and wearily held onto her. Just him. No one else.

"That damn near killed me," Doyle mumbled against her back.

She looked down at his hands resting between her breasts. What could she tell him? Just what had happened to her?

"And me," she agreed softly. "It was good before, but this --"

"You liked it?" She could hear the relief in his voice. She thought he might be gloating a bit too, though he was careful not to show any traces outwardly.

"Yes." Liv almost added more. She smiled. "Oh, yes. Is there still more?"

His eyes were eager. "Do you want to find out?"

She smiled. She knew then that she couldn't tell him everything.

Chapter Six

“You’ll want a huge wedding, I suppose?” Nick’s face didn’t change when Doyle made the announcement. He congratulated Doyle and gave Liv his best wishes, but Liv sensed anger.

Perhaps she was oversensitive. Everything felt wrong when the three of them were in the same room. Perhaps that was natural right now. Livana feared she would never feel comfortable around Nicholas Hall again.

“Oh no.” Liv protested. “Who would we invite anyhow?”

“Most of New England society, perhaps some British nobility if you have time to wait for them to sail over, some of Doyle’s friends in New York ...” Nick began.

Livana kept her mouth tightly closed.

“Why? Liv and I don’t need that.” Doyle kept his hand resting on the nape of her neck and gently massaged it.

Liv relaxed slightly. Of course, Doyle would understand.

“Are you sure? There will be plenty of talk. Do you want gossip about Livana?” Nick’s eyes looked alert and even a little malicious.

“Oh hell. You could be right.” Doyle rubbed his face. “I don’t want to be in charge of a guest list. Why don’t you put one together, Nick?”

Horrors. That sounded like a terrible idea. But Liv knew she wasn’t capable of doing such a thing. She couldn’t even think of anyone she’d want to invite. Certainly no one from Europe or New York. Or even Boston.

“Always willing to oblige, Grenville.” Nick glanced at Liv and then left the room.

Livana felt as though the breath had been knocked out of her. “Doyle, maybe we shouldn’t get married.” She forced herself to say the words.

He stilled. “What?”

She glanced away, her eyes morose. “I never thought about it clearly before. I wouldn’t know what to wear or how to behave with the people you know. I’m probably completely wrong for you.”

Livana tried to imagine what some blue-blooded stranger would think when they heard she was a witch. And they would hear. In a town as small as this one, everyone heard everything. What would they say to Doyle -- or what wouldn’t they say to his face but think? “I’ve only seen you here but you’ve spent such a short part of your life in this town. You’ve been everywhere in the world, you’ve done so many different things. Do you realize I’ve never been anywhere else except for school? Where would we go after we marry?”

They would be living amongst different people in a different place -- people and places she knew nothing of.

He sounded exasperated, determined. “Do you think I care what you wear or how you behave? Have I ever?”

“But Doyle, your life’s different from mine. I suppose it always was but I saw it as a child might. I didn’t think about how grand your home was or that your mother was a noblewoman back in Britain or --”

"I don't care. I never cared." His jaw set. "You weren't thinking like a child in how you saw us back then. All that never mattered. If you want to stay here, we will. If you want to leave here and go elsewhere, tell me where. I'll go with you. I've wandered over three continents, but I don't have a home, grand or otherwise. Except for you. You're my home."

Livana wondered if she should be frightened of the intensity of his devotion. She knew she wasn't. How could she be when she felt much the same? At least she'd had Grandmother to love and be loved in return. Doyle had never had anyone but her.

"I don't care. I never really thought about where we'd live." Would she want to leave what she'd always known? Grandmother's house was a home, but there was no one there to speak to, nothing to hope for. Only Doyle. He was always the only one she'd talked to, hoped for. "What would you like to do, Doyle?"

"I'd like to show you the world. Things would look different with you. Fresher, more exciting. More full of possibilities." He bent and nipped at her neck suddenly. "I suppose I don't care what we do either."

If they traveled, then Nick would be gone from their lives soon enough. She didn't want to begin their engagement by asking Doyle to rid himself of a friend. Liv just hoped she could bear to have the man in the house until they married.

"I'll try to do the things your wife should." Livana thought about how little she knew about such things and felt a little sick to her stomach.

She could cast a spell. She could help heal sickness. But the idea of giving dinner parties, or going to the opera, or doing whatever else society matrons did was quite beyond her.

"Then will you come to bed with me right now?" Doyle grinned at her but she knew part of him was serious. "That would take my mind away from all the things I don't want to think about. Like guest lists."

He looked anxious and a little ill again, almost the way he had when they'd first reunited. Livana decided he must have depleted all the energy he had during their last sexual bout.

They'd talked in bed. After Doyle had told her how much he loved her, he'd told her how he'd feel next and when he'd feel it. He had warned her that he'd be useless and unable to move now for perhaps the next day or longer. Doyle knew the effects of opium on his body. On the other hand, perhaps Doyle had been wrong this time.

"I suppose we could." Liv wondered if she would still feel what she had last time.

"I was joking. You're sore." He whispered it to her, playing with some of her loose hair as he did. "I know you were sore that last time. And I don't ever want you hurt."

"Well, you know more than me. What could we do that might not hurt?" Liv hugged him.

"You're very tempting. But --" For a moment his eyes looked hot and interested and ready to take her back into his room. Then he looked weary again. "Remove yourself from my presence, beautiful witch."

"Come home with me, Doyle."

Liv realized she suddenly felt lost, and something told her that they would both feel better in her house. All her herbs were there. She could focus her healing energy better. That house was protected. This house was beginning to frighten her.

"I can't." Doyle looked more and more exhausted and Liv gave up the idea with a sigh. "Besides, I'll need you more when I wake up. You need to be near me and help stop me from taking more opiates. I think you could distract me the way no one else could."

What was she to do with herself all day?

That was ridiculous. She'd lived her life well enough before Doyle had returned. She had Cerberus to care for and a garden to tend. She'd tinker with ideas that might help ease Doyle.

Nothing. She'd spent her life doing nothing. Doyle returned and suddenly she realized everything else in her world was bland without him.

"Good-bye then." Liv tried not to feel ridiculously desolate.

Doyle looked at her and kissed her hand. He was very good at it. Perhaps he'd picked up the habit in those countries he'd visited. Her heart jumped each time he turned her hand over and his lips touched her palm.

"It's not forever, Liv. Only a few hours. Come back tonight?"

"I know and I will."

But suddenly she didn't know. She didn't feel sure of him. Livana wasn't even certain why. Her divining sense wasn't telling her so.

She kissed his cheek as he left her, glad he was gone before she did something foolish, like cry.

Liv wandered to the hall table and idly fingered the flower arrangement there. The vase looked delicate and expensive and probably was. Would she be in charge of such things when she married Doyle? Who was in charge of doing so now?

She looked down. Her poplin skirt had gotten dirty. Liv made a face at herself in the mirror. She had tried for a Gibson girl style with her hair but it already looked tangled. She would never be fashionable. Dirty, ignorant of everything deemed important in Doyle's world -- what sort of bride would she be?

"You really expect to marry him, don't you?"

Liv stiffened, one hand clenching a lily.

"Yes, Nick, I really do." She looked into the mirror again and saw the man behind her.

Perhaps it was the mirror's reflection, but he looked odd. Alien. Frightening.

"You don't understand him, Liv."

Liv carefully loosed her hold on the flower. She wasn't sure what to do with her hands, so she held the edge of the hall table instead.

"Liv, he's weak. He won't be able to end his cravings. Not ever. You don't want a weakling." Nick's voice was very close to her now and when she turned, alarmed, toward him, he held her shoulders. He smiled down at her, his smile still charming. "You want a man."

"Doyle is a man," Liv answered quickly.

He didn't kiss her as she thought he would. Instead he traced his finger against her lips, almost the way Doyle might have.

For a moment she thought of this particular man's kiss, of his strength, of his power. That was one of the emotions Nick stirred in her. Attraction. She could even see the two of them in her mind, intertwined the way she had been with Doyle. Or as she had been with Doyle and...and her illusions. Still, the images were so strong that she was stunned. It was almost as if the images were...implanted.

"*Is* Doyle a man?" Nicholas smiled at her as if he could see what she was thinking.

Nick didn't mean the words the way Jared had meant them, but Livana thought of the nasty rumors in town. She'd seen Doyle's foot after that ugly incident with Nick, when she tore off her blindfold. Doyle was a man.

"Completely," Liv answered.

"But you, Liv? I saw what you did on the roof. You aren't a woman. Or not *just* a woman." Nick's fingers moved from her lips to her throat. Liv held herself still. "Doyle doesn't understand you. He's afraid to make you howl like a bitch. He thinks you too delicate, too unworldly. That's not you, Liv. Once you gain experience you're going to want special things from your mate. Very special, unusual things."

And at last, from the confusion that Nick always created in her, she knew at least one thing clearly. There was another emotion Nick evoked for her now. Not just attraction. Revulsion.

Her back straightened. "I don't want you, Nick." Honesty rang in her words.

"Are you certain of that?"

"Yes, Nick. She's very certain."

Doyle's voice had never been so welcome. She felt the air go out of her lungs at the mere sound of it.

"And, by the way, while I appreciate all your efforts to tell Livvy my sordid past and what she needs from me, I believe I could manage to inform her myself of anything that she needs or wants to know."

"But would you?" Nick didn't back down. "Or if I hadn't spoken before would you have still lied to her and tried to pretend you are what she thinks you are?"

Liv could feel danger rising, swirling around all three of them in an almost visible cloud.

"Why should you think I'd lie to her? And why should it matter to you what I tell my fiancée or what I don't?" Doyle was almost next to Nick, fists clenched.

"Don't, Doyle. Stop it. Nick, please leave."

Silence -- prolonged as the men locked eyes.

"Very well." Livana thought Nick looked very dangerous for a moment, but he merely inclined his head. "You want me to leave, Liv, but what do you want, Grenville?"

As the two men stood watching each other, saying nothing, Livana realized that Nicholas had to leave. He was the danger she felt. But what would Doyle say? If Doyle didn't agree with her, everything would be altered for the worse.

"We were friends, Nick. But things have changed. You aren't welcome here now." Doyle's voice was tired but steady. "I don't trust you anymore."

“You’ll change your mind,” Nick murmured.

“Don’t depend on that. And don’t come back.” Doyle began to look more dangerous than Nicholas.

“Then I won’t. Until you beg me to.” Nick’s smile wasn’t charming now.

Fear.

That was the third emotion Livana felt when she looked at Nick.

Chapter Seven

“Well then?” Liv turned to Doyle. “Now what?”

He didn’t answer her the way she expected, with anger over what Nick had said or with reassurances to her.

“You’ll stay with me tonight,” Doyle said instead. “Tomorrow we’ll find a magistrate or minister or someone who will marry us. I can’t imagine why I let Hall convince me otherwise.”

“I need to get my clothing from my house. And poor Cerberus is shut up inside. I never meant to leave him so long.” Livana didn’t mind Doyle’s plans, but she didn’t want him to think she would meekly follow everything he bade her to do.

“I should escort you there. But -- oh damn. When I stop opiates, especially for the first few days, I hurt even more than usual.” Doyle scowled. “I’m a weakling, I suppose. Physically as well.”

“You’re not a weakling. And I believe your biggest problem -- besides that self-doubt of yours -- is about to leave the house and not return.”

“You may be right. But I ought to be able to go with you.”

"I don't need help walking to my own home. Listen, Doyle. You've fought your problems alone until now. Your life is going to be different. I'm here and I'll help you." Liv wasn't sure what they were going to do to change everything, but she knew she was going to try whatever was necessary.

"Perhaps that's what I need." Doyle hesitated, before he reluctantly continued. "Nick was a friend. Or so I thought. He was the one who did everything for me when we were young. He shielded me from bullies. He taught me to fight. He even got me my first woman."

"And I should thank him for that last bit of help?" Livana asked tartly.

Doyle let out a short laugh. "Perhaps not. I tried -- and failed, of course -- to stay faithful to you when I was younger. Even after that failure, for years afterward I picked women with brown hair or who tilted their head or smiled the way you do. Ridiculous, I suppose."

"Ridiculous." Livana lifted her hands to his shoulders. "They weren't me."

They stood there, close, face to face. Doyle didn't return her embrace. He just looked at her. She could feel his anger and desire and sense of betrayal.

"No." He finally spoke. "They were never you. Damn it, they should have been. I've always needed and wanted you. Just you."

He lowered his head and kissed her. Hotly, fiercely, never stopping, he used his mouth and tongue while he backed her up against the wall. His hands tore at the buttons of her skirt, and abandoned the task to pull the garment up.

Livana gasped in surprise and Doyle growled back a frustrated response at her hesitation. He intensified his stroking, probing, sucking. His ravishing.

Liv had never been ravished before, but she knew that was what this had to be. Her back was flat against the wall; her legs clung desperately to Doyle's hips when he lifted her up.

"I can't --" he groaned and pushed his erection inside her. "Liv, I can't wait."

“Don’t. I can’t, either,” she gasped.

He had to feel how wet she was, and that he didn’t have to wait. In case he wasn’t sure, Liv loosed her grip with one hand to reach down and stroke his male sac. Moving her hand up to the exposed part of his shaft, she surrounded him and squeezed.

She moaned and went back to gripping his shoulders when he thrust his shaft inside her as far as he could. He was so hard, so hot, so thick. So exciting.

“I could never use a woman hard enough or deep enough or long enough to get you out of my mind.” Doyle’s voice was husky and rough as he pumped her body hard against the wall. “Never.”

Livana kissed him, hard and rough, and tasted blood. She wasn’t even sure whose it was.

“You never will.” She knew she sounded as harsh as Doyle did.

For one horrible moment Liv could imagine cold, calculating eyes on the two of them, more derisive laughter. She knew Nick was gone but she could see the other man watching, fondling himself as he watched, as if they were doing this only for his entertainment.

As if to shut out her thoughts, Doyle put his forehead against the wall next to her head and moved even harder and faster.

Thoughts of Nicholas evaporated in the tangle of sweat and motion and excitement. She felt Doyle’s muscles bunching as she clutched his back. She heard their breathing rasp together. There was no one in the room but her and Doyle -- but even if there had been, it wouldn’t have mattered. She wanted him. Any way he wanted her. Doyle was proving that to her with his body and hers.

She couldn’t think any more. Livana felt herself peaking and still Doyle poured himself into her, harder, longer, faster. She cried and, with tears coming down her face, Liv peaked again.

She was going to die if he continued and die if he stopped. She didn't have enough air in her lungs anymore, and realized that she didn't need to breathe as long as Doyle continued with his frenzy.

Doyle bit her shoulder, shuddering violently, and climaxed. To her amazement, she climaxed a third time with him still moving wildly inside her, as if to deny he was spent.

It wasn't until his shaft finally began to slide out, completely drained, that Doyle finally, slowly, lowered Livana down to the ground and leaned against the wall, panting.

Livana put her own head to her knees, gulping air.

Doyle wiped his face with his hand and pushed himself from the wall, almost swaying, his eyes looking glazed.

"I may not be all I should be," he said. "But I'm yours. And I plan to be all you'll ever need."

"You're doing a fine job of showing me that." Livana pushed her hair back, exhausted, her own voice slurred.

And he had been. She finally had felt no other presence.

* * * * *

She tried to get up and couldn't. Doyle's hand helped her on her second try. She stood, feeling as shaky as he looked.

"I have to go home." Livana knew that for once Doyle's intensity had been almost too much for her. Almost. Both her body and her mind felt nearly raw.

She also knew, however, that after some rest she wouldn't mind trying this all over again. After years of doing without Doyle, and with just a few sexual bouts, she'd turned into a wanton.

She kissed him sweetly. She wasn't wicked, even if she might be wanton. This was good. This was right, what they had between them now. They had claimed each other. Each time was different; each time drew them closer together.

Without Nick's presence they could live together in peace.

"I'll be back soon, though." Liv smiled at him. "You know that by now. Tonight we'll be together and I'll never leave you again. Not even when you want me to."

* * * * *

Something was different in the town. Liv caught people looking at her as she walked back through the town common. She didn't know why their looks seemed angrier than usual, but she knew they were.

Perhaps they didn't like the village witch consorting with the richest man in town. Perhaps they thought her a whore.

Liv winced at the thought and the term. She'd never been well-liked but she'd earned some respect over the years. After all, she kept to herself and stepped in to help when asked. But her behavior with Doyle seemed to have changed the reputation that had taken her years to achieve.

"Witches have to be careful," Grandmother had told her.

Well, she couldn't be careful with Doyle. He wouldn't let her be. And soon they'd leave this place. What these people thought wouldn't matter to either of them.

She saw a bonfire being built at the end of the common. She tried to remember what celebration that could be for. All Liv could remember was that tonight there was to be an eclipse.

As she shut her gate, she heard a thud against the wooden planks. She looked down in surprise.

A stone.

Someone had thrown a stone at her.

Liv swallowed. Grandmother had told her enough stories about witches and stonings. There was danger here, danger she had walked into.

She wondered how well her carefully woven protective spells would last against an angry crowd. She shut the door and barred it. Cerberus crowded up against her.

Hurriedly she put clothes into a valise. She took her Book of Shadows and hesitated. She had no time to get anything else. Somehow she knew when night fell, she would be in even more danger.

Livana picked up the shotgun that Grandmother kept near the door and whistled to Cerberus. Spells, a weapon, and a large dog suddenly didn't seem like nearly enough protection.

She shut the door, knowing that would be the last time she ever saw the house. "Good-bye, Grandmother," Liv whispered and braced herself.

To her shock, as she stepped outside the gate, the sky turned dark and the wind began to whip up around her. A storm? The eclipse coming earlier than she remembered? The sky had been clear moments ago.

The crowd had already gathered not far from her house. Livana swallowed and began to walk quickly, hoping she didn't look as though she was afraid. Hoping she didn't look as if she were running away.

"Don't let them see fear. Mobs are worse with fear," Grandmother had said.

She heard ugly words as she walked.

"Evil witch."

"Wicked whore."

She heard a stone whiz past her head. If she was hit and fell, they'd be on her. Livana knew that. Cerberus growled but stayed near her.

"Good dog," she whispered. "Brave hound."

A stone skittered near her feet.

Livana turned the corner and stopped short. Someone stood in front of her, blocking her path.

"I told you that you'd need a man," Nicholas Hall said. "I don't see your Doyle offering much protection."

Doyle.

But she knew wishing for him was useless. Doyle was probably asleep, worn out from everything that had happened and from his drugs.

"If you want to help, keep them away and don't badger me." Livana kept moving and he fell into step next to her.

"I don't think I can keep them away. After all, the Spencers' baby just died this morning. Everyone thinks you killed it."

"I helped that baby," Livana gasped. "He was fine, recovering, when I left."

"Odd. When I saw the little thing it was dead." Nicholas looked at her. "And, Livana, why would I want to help you anyhow?"

Livana swallowed. If what she was thinking was true --

Wicked. No, Nicholas was more than that.

"Why are you doing this?" Livana asked. *And who are you?*

"Ah, I see you are coming to know me, my dear." Nicholas' voice stayed as charming as ever. "Why? Because you have thwarted me. Doyle was mine before he came back to you. Entirely mine. And, of course, you've refused to be mine as well. That annoys me."

With a sudden, violent gesture, he grabbed Livana by the arm. She wanted to fight, she saw Cerberus bare his teeth, but suddenly, shockingly, she couldn't resist. All of her will seemed to drain from her body. She saw Cerberus hesitate, too, and then stand, trembling.

Evil. That was the fourth thing she felt when she saw Nick. He was more than dangerous or wicked. He was evil.

“Here!” Nicholas called out. “She’s here!”

The sky grew darker. His face seemed to ... change.

She gasped, seeing him for what he was.

* * * * *

Doyle.

He woke up from a confused dream of her. Hot and tender, sex and love. And danger.

Doyle was used to dreams of Liv. He’d had them most of his life. This dream was different. He could feel her terror right now. His Livvy didn’t terrify easily.

His body complained viciously as he crawled out of bed but he had to move. He’d promised to care for Livvy. Doyle could feel Livvy calling for him and he had to respond quickly. She was in some sort of danger.

He paused. If he just took something now, he could dull his pain and he’d have boundless energy. It wouldn’t be for him. This time it would be to help Livana.

Doyle stared at himself in the mirror.

But he’d also promised Livana not to do that again.

He hesitated.

Once more. Just once. For Livvy?

* * * * *

The sounds of the mob dazed her, sickened her, as they drew near. She knew what the bonfire was for now, but she wasn’t physically strong enough to overcome the rough hands that pushed her toward it. Already it was lit, shining out in the darkness.

Doyle, I love you.

What would Nicholas tell him? How would he explain her death away?

She shut her eyes, wanting to fight but still unable to do anything. She was going to die. Doyle -- her precious Doyle -- he'd finally come back for her and she was going to die.

"Damn you all to hell, what are you doing!"

The voice was loud and strong. She opened her eyes again, feeling the first faint tremor of strength return to her body.

So that's what it was. She hadn't been able to physically resist because *he* -- because Nicholas -- hadn't wanted her to. But now Doyle was here and the demon's spell had been broken.

A whip cracked and someone screamed in pain.

"Doyle," she whispered.

He rode in on his horse, just like in a fairy tale, but this prince was going to rescue the witch and not the princess. The excited horse reared up and several people in the crowd scattered.

Slashing with the whip, using the horse to crowd out others, Doyle reached her side and held out his hand. Livana pulled herself up and clung to his waist.

Cerberus, freed from his enchantment at the same time, snapped and barked at the now frightened townspeople.

"Grenville!" Nicholas called. "Stop!"

Livana began to tremble again. She now knew the power this Nick held. Nicholas could bind her when she had known him only a short time and she knew of ways to resist him. How long had Doyle been under Nick's power?

Liv held herself close to Doyle, silently willing him to fight back, mouthing spells she wasn't even sure would work.

The two men stared at each other, dark eyes meeting blue. She felt Doyle freeze.

"You won't go against me, Grenville." Nick sounded sure. "Not after all we've done together. You need me too much."

Livana tried to gather strength to help Doyle, then realized she shouldn't even if she could. Doyle had to do this alone.

"I love you, Doyle." She whispered the words aloud for the first time, wondering if Doyle could even hear her.

"Of course I would, Hall, if it meant helping Livvy." Doyle looked almost ready to laugh at the notion. "You see, I could never betray her." He raised a revolver and said very calmly, "And you can go back to hell."

"You dare!"

The dark man seemed to suddenly swell in size, and Livana could see his face contort and change from handsome to fiendish.

Doyle fired at the precise moment Nicholas disappeared.

"I don't fear hell, Grenville! That's my home!" she heard Nick call out.

Had he gone into the flames, behind the fire? Livana couldn't be sure. Her teeth sank onto her lip as she watched flames erupt from seemingly everywhere.

For a moment, over the hiss of the blaze, she was sure she heard a shriek. "You were my creature, damn you!"

Doyle's nostrils flared, realizing fully for the first time that Nicholas hadn't been his friend all of these years -- he'd been his captor, his tormentor. He'd been a fool to let Nick work on his weaknesses and make them worse.

But he had no time to dwell on past failures. Liv depended on him right now.

"Perhaps I was. Not any more." Doyle said the words aloud and savored them. He was Livvy's now, never a creature again. She needed a man.

He turned abruptly, wheeled the horse around and cracked the whip at anyone who dared to get in their way. He whisked them away in the direction Livana had tried to run,

pausing and stooping down just once to pick up the valise she had dropped when Nicholas had grabbed her.

The black dog ran silently behind.

"So you're willing to admit you love me at last, Livvy?" Doyle's voice was gentle, gentler than she'd expected after what they'd just gone through.

"Of course." Liv's voice was just as soft. "Did you really need the words? After all, we made a blood bond together when we were young. I'm inside you, you're inside me. Wasn't that what you said? Things do change over time, Doyle, just the way you told me once. But the only change between us is that our bond got stronger."

"Precisely, Miss Hawkins. But I appreciate the words anyhow, my own stubborn love."

A mutual silence fell, during which time Doyle slowed the horse and stopped it. They both turned, looking back.

In the distance a fire burnt up high from the town. Livana could see in her mind's eye the burning of her house and the Grenville house too. And as she saw the walls buckle and fall, she knew that they would never again return to the place where they had first met and fell in love so many years ago. Every trace of them would be obliterated from the town she grew up in. When people spoke of them, they would whisper in fear.

"Let's go find someplace away from here for me to collapse, Liv." Doyle's voice sounded suddenly thick with sleep. "Being a hero without any stimulant to aid me is wearing. Perhaps I'll do better next time."

"What next time?" Liv tried to laugh rather than cry. "I don't make a habit of needing rescue."

"But I rather like being your hero. I may grow to fit the role." Doyle urged the horse on.

"It's not a role, goose," Liv told him. "You always have been my hero and the man I love --both."

As Liv leaned into Doyle's back and rested her head against him, partially for her own comfort and partially to hold him up, she knew that leaving this place forever didn't matter. They would start over, just the two of them. They would make a new home, perhaps here or perhaps in Britain. They would be happy, and they'd never look back.

But then, there was no reason to look back. She had Doyle now.

She smiled. She'd have no need to return.

 THE END 

Treva Harte

Treva Harte read far too many romances for far too long. One day the inevitable happened. She started writing her own brand of romance. She claims raising two pre-teens is a full time job itself, but in addition she works as an attorney in a city with many other attorneys. She and her husband both like writing in whatever time they have left, so they often fight over -- sorry, since they are attorneys they NEGOTIATE -- keyboard time.

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