

DEVI SPARKS

A person's legs, wearing high-heeled shoes, are the central focus of the image. A small, grey and white cat is sitting on the floor, looking up at the person's feet. The background shows a window with a view of a house and a car.

ANIMAL MAGNETISM

Phaze

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Animal Magnetism
by Devi Sparks

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An erotic romance novella by

Devi Sparks

PHAZE

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This is an explicit erotic novella intended for the enjoyment of adult readers. Please keep out of the hands of children.

Chapter One

"Oh for heaven's sake." Hailey Tovar blinked against the bright daylight filtering through the lace curtains of her bedroom as a black-and-gray tail slid along her jaw line. The fur-covered alarm clock had his motor set to 'loud' this morning, preventing further attempts at a few more minutes' sleep. "Okay, okay, I'll get up," she groaned and rolled to face the owner of the tail, pulling the covers up to her chin at the same time.

Picasso wasn't convinced. Two luminous eyes gazed at her dubiously, whiskers twitching.

"Fine, you don't believe me?" She flung back the sheets, sending the cat dashing for the door, and dragged herself out of bed. She might as well get up, since she obviously wasn't going to have any luck in the sleep department.

Reluctantly she stood and crossed the room to her dresser to get post-shower underwear, squinting at herself in the mirror over the chest of drawers. Bluish circles colored the skin under her green eyes and she looked haggard, but it was nothing a little concealer and a lot of caffeine couldn't fix. She hoped.

If only she'd been able to get *Ryan* out of her mind. Thinking about him was not terribly out of the ordinary—she'd had a whole year to think about and remember him. But *this* morning, and a good portion of the previous night, he had dominated her brain waves almost exclusively. Much to the detriment of her beauty sleep.

Probably because today was the one-year anniversary—if she could call it that—of the day *it* happened.

Hailey stretched in a yawn and trudged wearily into the bathroom, a smile of remembered passion tugging at her lips. She twisted the knob in the shower, and without waiting for the water to run warm, immediately pulled her nightshirt over her head and stepped in.

"Yeeikes!" Hailey gasped as the cold water hit her bed-toasty skin. Now wide-awake, she stepped out of the stream of water and adjusted the knob. When the water had warmed suitably, she reached for the shampoo and began to lather her hair ... and remember that bright spring day one year ago today...

* * * *

Hailey finished cleaning up her lunch mess and made her way into the living room studio to work on her latest sculpture, a mixture of thrown pottery and sculpted figures. She had it sketched out on drawing paper and now tacked the image to her easel, but she would have to see how the piece turned out in reality.

She had spent the morning replacing the thermostat on her big kiln in the back yard—a task that had gone rather smoothly considering the electronic complexity of the contraption. The warm sunshine and fresh spring breeze had invigorated her, giving her a peculiar sense of anticipation, and she looked forward to injecting that sense into the piece she'd hastily sketched.

Animal Magnetism
by Devi Sparks

After retrieving a lump of clay from a bag in the cabinet, she sat down at her potter's wheel and tossed the clay into the center. Then she added water to the reservoir from a jug she kept on the floor at her feet, and turned the wheel on.

In the corner of her vision, she saw Picasso take up his station on the couch, regally arranging himself on a pillow and tucking his misshapen paw beneath his chest.

"I have a good feeling about today," she told the cat. "Nothing like the great outdoors for getting the creative juices flowing, don't you agree, Picasso?"

One feline eyebrow rose noncommittally.

She sighed almost wistfully as her hands began their work. The cool slippery clay felt wonderful, and she smiled as inspiration seemed to flow from it as it molded and smoothed under her skillful touch. This was what she loved to do most—create with her hands—and the clay had never failed her. Even when pieces hadn't turned out exactly as she'd envisioned them, they were still skillful masterpieces in their own right, and presumably brought some measure of joy to those who purchased them. The fact that others appreciated her work enough to pay money for it never ceased to amaze her, and she was thankful that she could pay her bills with the fruits of her creativity.

Slowly the clay began to take on recognizable shape—a tall tube, smooth and shiny. Suddenly a loud knock at the door interrupted her concentration.

She exhaled noisily and turned the wheel off, holding the clay steady until it stopped spinning. Her guest was probably her neighbor, Dorothy, who never used the doorbell,

returning her hedge clippers. She'd liked Hailey's topiaries so much that she had decided to experiment with her own overgrown bushes. Hailey had tried to warn her about attempting complex animal shapes before mastering the basic circles and ovals, but Dorothy was confident and started snipping away. Now instead of overgrown bushes, Dorothy had a wonderful menagerie of animals as yet unknown to modern science.

Hailey wiped her hands on her clay-caked apron as she padded barefoot to the front door, Picasso close on her heels.

When she swung the door open, it was not Dorothy who stood on her top step, but a tall man with nearly-black hair and arresting cobalt blue eyes. Immediately her heart began to thunder in her chest, goose bumps cropped up on her arms, and Hailey felt an odd sense of recognition, as though something deep inside her recognized something deep inside him.

"Can I uh—Can I help you?" she asked, shaking off the unsettling sensation.

"Hi, I'm Ryan Matthews. I'm a friend of..." his voice trailed off as he looked at her, a strange expression on his face. His gaze caught hers and after a long moment he asked, "Have we met before?"

Hailey tilted her head at him and smiled. Was that a come-on or did he actually feel the same weird sense or recognition? Either way, she was sure she'd remember having met him before. "No, I don't believe we have."

"Hmm." He furrowed his brow and gave his head a shake, then shrugged. "I'm a friend of Donnie Howard, your

newspaper carrier. I'm helping to fill in for him this week while he's on his honeymoon."

"Oh, Donnie got married? That's wonderful!" Donnie was the sweetest man she knew, though she only actually saw him two or three times a year when he came to collect subscription fees. He was a jovial guy in his mid sixties who did the paper route to keep himself busy.

"Nah. He and my mom were married fifteen years ago. Never had a honeymoon, so I sent them to Cancun for their anniversary."

"How very thoughtful of you." Hailey was impressed.

He blushed and looked down. "You're Hailey, right?"

She nodded, surprised. Perhaps they *had* met before. Otherwise how would he know her name? Then she followed his gaze and saw her name and address printed on the top sheet of paper on the clipboard in his hand. Duh. "I guess it's collection time again, huh?" She glanced down to see Picasso rubbing himself lovingly around Ryan's legs.

What in the world?

Ryan peered around his clipboard, too, and chuckled softly. The sound sent a warm giddy feeling bubbling through her. "Friendly cat," he said and returned his smiling gaze to her face.

Hailey shook her head, somewhat dazed by the oddity of the situation. "He's not usually. He normally runs and hides under the bed when anyone so much as sets foot on the porch."

Now Ryan tilted his head at her. "Are you *sure* we've never met?"

"I don't think so, but you do seem familiar..." she conceded.

"I run an Internet and computer consulting firm, maybe I've been in your office."

"Nope. This is my office. I'm an artist and work from home." Which reminded her—clay had hardened on her hands. "Tell you what. Why don't you come in and have a seat while I wash my hands and get my checkbook." She motioned to a barstool by the kitchen counter.

He nodded absently and stepped inside, gently nudging the cat aside. "Maybe we went to school together. I went to Tech."

"I went to State." She flipped on the faucet in the kitchen while he settled onto a stool.

"Okay, how about high school? Where'd you graduate?"

"Belgium. Grew up military."

Suddenly Picasso jumped into Ryan's lap.

"I'm sorry, you can just push him down. I don't know what's gotten into him." Her hands were wet, or she would have done it herself. What in the dickens had possessed her normally shy cat?

"It's okay. I like animals." He turned his attention to the cat and stroked the feline's ear. "Hey buddy. I'll bet you have a cool name like Rembrandt or Donatello. Am I right?"

Hailey grinned as she dried her hands with a dishtowel. "Picasso."

Ryan touched the abstract-looking black spots on Picasso's otherwise white face. "You look like a Picasso."

When Ryan did not resume stroking the cat's ear, Picasso batted him with his paw to get his attention.

The ploy worked. "What happened to his paw?" Ryan asked as he obediently resumed petting the cat's head.

"I'm not actually sure. He might have been born with it that way, or he might have been injured as a tiny kitten. He was in an abandoned litter my friend Anne found in her shed."

"A cat with a mysterious past, then? What made you choose him?"

"I didn't. I had told Anne I didn't want a kitten, because I'm not generally a cat person. But I accepted her innocuous dinner invitation evening, and this guy sat at my feet and tapped my leg with that paw, mewling until I picked him up."

"And then you couldn't put him down again, huh?"

Hailey shook her head. "That was two years ago."

"I once had a bull mastiff I got the same way." At the mention of a dog, Picasso jumped from Ryan's lap.

"Once?"

"He lives with my brother now."

Hailey noticed a flicker of frustration cross his face, but didn't pry further. It was none of her business.

He tilted his head at her again, as though searching for some answer. "The gym," he said suddenly, blue eyes scanning her trim frame.

"Pardon?"

"Do you belong to a gym? Maybe we've met there."

She shook her head and pointed to the sculling machine and rack of hand weights in one corner.

"Do you go out to clubs? Have you been to the Kamikaze?"

"Not since college." Good Lord, had it really been six years since she'd been out dancing? "My work takes up most of my time so I don't get out much." Okay, it was a small fib. The truth was that she was a veritable recluse who spent most of her time with her cat. Having always been on the shy side, she didn't have many friends, and those she did have were even less outgoing than she was.

Ryan let out a breath of frustration. "I guess we really haven't ever met before. I just can't shake this feeling that—" He rubbed a palm over the back of his neck. "How odd."

She smiled at the genuine distress in his voice as she started to write out a check for her newspaper fees. "I know what you mean."

"Do you feel it too?"

Hailey glanced up in mid-check, unsure how to respond, and found his intent gaze fastened on her. Her heart flip-flopped in her chest and warm desire pooled low in her abdomen. She had the inexplicable urge to tear off her clothes, hop into his lap, and beg him to take her right here and now. She cleared her throat looked quickly away, somewhat horrified by the blatantly wanton direction of her thoughts.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you—"

Heat crept into her cheeks. "You didn't scare me, exactly." She finished writing out the check and handed it to him. "Do you have this conversation with all the young single ladies on Donnie's route?"

For a split second she sensed his offense, but then bewilderment settled over his features. "No, I've never had

this conversation with anyone in my life." He sighed deeply and stood up. "Most unsettling."

They walked to the front door in silence, Hailey wondering how to reassure him without seeming too forward. But he opened the door and turned to her before she could think of anything suitable.

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Hailey Tovar," he held out his hand and gave her a warm smile.

Hailey reflexively took his hand and shivered as his long fingers engulfed her own. "It was nice to meet you, too, Ryan Matthews." She looked into his blue eyes and goose bumps once again cropped up on her arms. She could almost feel the heat of delicious possibility crackle around them as he held her gaze for long moments. Then he reluctantly released her hand, turned and headed down her steps.

She grinned as she got a great view of his cute rear. "Say hi to Donnie for me," she called to his retreating back. He turned his head and smiled with a nod.

Hailey closed her door and leaned against it. What an odd encounter.

What an intriguingly sexy man.

She shook her head and padded back to her wheel where the tube of clay now seemed somehow phallic. When traitorous thoughts again invaded her head, she decided to start over and crumpled the clay into a ball. Critics had described her artwork as fresh and innovative, but certainly they hadn't meant *that* fresh and innovative.

Picasso resumed to his spot on the couch and watched her with his usual bland interest, his uncharacteristic loviness apparently forgotten.

She shook her head again and switched the wheel on once more, centering the clay with her hands as it gained speed.

Thirty minutes later, Hailey still sat at her wheel, staring blindly at the spinning lump of clay that had now begun to dry, thinking about Ryan Matthews, unable to concentrate on her work. She rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands.

With relief, she heard the mail truck pull away from the curb in front of her house and stood up, switching the wheel off with her foot as she did so. Perhaps checking her mail—an everyday, mundane task—might help her focus again. She untied her apron and folded it across the counter as she walked to the sink to wash the dried clay from her hands again, then slipped on her sandals and headed out the door.

But as she pulled her front door closed behind her, she spotted Ryan across the street, knocking on Mrs. Alverson's door. Her heart thundered anew.

He turned away from the door and started to walk down the steps, but paused when he saw her.

She tried to feign nonchalance and strode to her mailbox, feeling his eyes on her with every step. Her senses vibrated, her pulse thrummed. Undeniable need coiled within her. She wanted him, despite every rational part of her brain screaming that this was not even slightly logical.

At the curb, she smiled at him before retrieving her mail. Then, after a long moment, she brushed her windswept hair out of her face and tried not to sashay up her walk, or as she

Animal Magnetism
by Devi Sparks

ascended her three steps. On the porch, she turned and looked at him again, for she knew he still watched her, could feel his gaze. Though neither moved, an unspoken, yet very clear communication passed between them and he started across the street. She opened her front door and stepped inside, leaving it open. Moments later he stood in the doorway.

Chapter Two

The mail slipped from Hailey's hand as Ryan paused on the threshold for a few electrifying seconds, then surged forward and swept her into his arms.

"I've never done this before," he said, his voice revealing his uncertainty.

"Oh God, me either. This is crazy," she breathed. But crazy didn't begin to describe it. Insane, irrational, loopy, especially since she had only ever been with one other man—six years ago. Yet at this moment, it *felt* like the most rational thing to do in the world. To deny the moment would seem even more insane than giving in to it. Perhaps she would examine the ridiculousness of that notion later, but right now her body flamed with need and his body against hers and in hers was all that seemed to matter.

She heard the clatter of a clipboard hitting the floor, heard her front door sough shut, before he backed her against the wall, pressed his arousal into her belly. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he whispered urgently into her neck. It was a 'speak now or forever hold your peace' sort of question.

"No," she whispered back honestly, almost inaudibly. But she turned her head and kissed his neck, telling him without words that she intended to do it anyway. Of their own accord, her hands slid around his waist and pulled him more firmly against her. "Please Ryan," she whispered against the column of his throat.

He growled low and pressed her harder against the wall. "Tell me what you want from me, Hailey. As crazy as this is, I need to hear you say it." His voice was hard, demanding, as his gaze met hers. "I need you to be sure."

His tone made her stomach flutter with excitement, adding tinder to the inferno that already raged in her abdomen. I want to—" she tried, but couldn't say it. "I'm sure," she said instead. His body was pressing painfully against hers now, his thigh wedged between her legs, pinning her pelvis to the wall. She wanted to rock against him, to move, to do anything to create friction where she needed it, but he held her immobile.

"You're sure." His blue eyes glittered.

"Yes, ohgod, please. I'm sure." At her feet, she felt a soft vibration as Picasso purred while winding himself around their legs, but her focus was on Ryan, on the burning need between her legs.

Ryan wavered another split second before his lips came crashing onto hers with primal abandon. Her arms rose to encircle his neck as he lifted her from the floor.

His pulse pounded beneath her fingertips—or maybe it was her pulse, she didn't know. It didn't matter.

Without hesitation, she opened her mouth to his onslaught of passionate demanding kisses, rocking her hips against him, getting closer and closer to release by the second.

Before she could think any more, his mouth left hers and blazed a fiery trail to her ear, then her neck and shoulders.

Within moments he was lifting her shirt over her head and removing her bra.

She continued to rock against him, savoring the feel of his hands on her breast, of his hot breath on her bare skin.

Her own hands worked first his belt buckle, then the top two buttons of his jeans. All the while she continued to rock.

"Hailey wait."

She was so close ... so close ... that his words didn't immediately register.

"Hailey ... fuck." He lifted her higher and stepped away from the wall, carrying her with him. "I need to be inside you *now*."

He had probably seen the edge of her bed when he'd sat at her counter earlier, for he carried her directly to her bedroom and set her down in a warm ray of sunshine that fell across her bed. As he stood again, he grasped the waistband of both her shorts and her panties and dragged them down her legs, then tossed the garments aside.

Which left her lying naked in a stream of light.

She closed her legs instinctively, but he shook his head. "Open your legs. I want to see you."

She obeyed, however hesitantly, earning an approving smile.

He quickly finished unbuttoning the fly of his jeans and pushed them to the floor before stepping out of them.

When he straightened, she found that her mouth was suddenly dry. He was beautiful, as she had known he would be. Well-toned and muscular, but not overly bulky.

But what held her attention at the moment was the rather large shaft of flesh that stood nearly upright, reaching almost to his navel.

Panic, desire, and appreciation swirled in her brain. He was much larger than the only other man she'd been with. Would he fit? Would it hurt? The idea sent tiny electric pulses shooting through her pussy and she moaned softly.

He must have noticed her trepidation. "I'll try not to hurt you," he murmured as he crawled onto the bed and stretched out alongside her, skin to skin, his cock nestled against her hip.

"It's okay."

He raised an eyebrow.

She didn't comment further because she was even more surprised than he was. Pain? Arousing?

When had that happened?

While she ruminated, his hand skimmed lightly over the skin of her torso, down over her abdomen, to the sparse curls between her legs. Her body jerked slightly as his fingers parted her folds and found her aching clit.

Ohhhhhh.... Blessed friction....

She tilted her hips wantonly into his hand, panting with the nearness of her orgasm.

"Mmm..." he moaned as her rocking hips rubbed against his cock. He bent his head and took a nipple into his mouth and suckled gently at first, then tugged and nibbled a little harder.

Her back arched off the bed, but he pressed her back down firmly and latched on to her other nipple, nibbling and suckling while his fingers slid in and out of her sheath.

"Ohgaaaaaahhhhd!" she cried as suddenly her interior muscles seeming to stretch to the ceiling and she was soaring and tumbling through a violent orgasm.

"Fuck," he ground out and dragged her beneath him before her body had quieted. Hooking his arms under her knees and bracing her legs wide, he pressed the head of his cock into her still-pulsing sheath.

Then he paused and sucked in a ragged breath. "Ohgod, Hailey, you're so *tight*," he groaned into her neck.

"I know," she gasped out as he withdrew slightly, then pressed further. It hurt, but only just enough to excite. "More ... faster..." she urged, tilting her hips.

His teeth bit into her neck, holding her still as he withdrew and pressed in again, still further this time, then again, and again. His hot breath feathered over her skin as his teeth eased and his hungry mouth explored her ear, her throat.

She felt herself stretch impossibly around him, painfully yet wonderfully, and couldn't contain her moans of passionate agony. Never before had she experienced such fullness, or such aching need to be filled.

Another orgasm reared up, waiting, waiting...

Her fingernails dug into the skin of his back.

"Ohhhrrrrgh," he growled, his hips slamming fiercely into hers now. With each thrust, she could feel the head of his cock smash against her cervix. Her wicked impassioned mind wondered idly what it would feel like to have that cock slamming into her ass.

The thought sent her over the edge even as it shocked her. "Ohmygawwwd!" The orgasm wrapped itself around her, wringing mercilessly through her body.

Ryan roared his own release, jetting himself into her before gradually slowing his pace. Finally he sank to the bed and pulled her on top of him.

After she had caught her breath, she looked up to see Picasso sitting on the dresser, watching. For once he looked genuinely interested, and she had to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

Hailey shook her head. "All of it. My unusually lovey cat. You. Me. This. I'm not sure what to make of all of it."

"I'm not sure either, but let's make more of it."

She grinned as he tweaked her nipple.

Three more times he took her that afternoon, draining her body of every ounce of sexual energy she possessed. When they were both exhausted, he stayed in her bed, holding her until after the sun had set.

It was exhilarating, satisfying, and enlightening, to say the least.

But it was too much. She knew he wouldn't stay, knew it as surely as she knew her own name, and she wasn't sure she wanted him to. The afternoon had been wonderful, but it fell just on the 'scary' side of 'weird.'

She didn't do things like this, and she suspected he didn't either. Yet they had.

And it was more than her brain could handle in one day.

Animal Magnetism
by Devi Sparks

So in that last hour while they lay quietly, she memorized his face, catalogued every detail of their time together in her heart.

And then, just as she had known he would, he quietly dressed, kissed her one last time, and left.

* * * *

Chapter Three

The orgasm crashed over Hailey and she rubbed her fingers harder over her clit, unmindful of the cooling water, until the spasms subsided.

Not nearly as satisfying as that day had been, but better than nothing, she supposed.

Finally she turned off the water in the shower with shaking hands and concentrated on the last rivulets of water coursing down her skin, remembering how Ryan's hands had done much the same thing.

She hadn't seen him since then, but how many times in the past year had she sensed his presence, say in a department store, but looked around to find no one familiar? How many times had she heard his voice in a crowd, but sorted out the faces too slowly to find him before he was gone?

Too many doggone times to count.

Hailey stepped from the shower and dried herself, then picked up her standard white bra and panties to put on—but changed her mind. For some reason, she felt today warranted something a bit bolder.

"Hmmm..." she hummed aloud as she returned to her bedroom naked and opened the top drawer of her dresser. "Aha." She selected the leopard print bra and underwear she had purchased on a whim last week. "These are pretty bold, aren't they?"

Picasso eyed her, then began to lick the fur of his back, conveying quite clearly that he couldn't care less.

After drying her hair, she dressed in a trim black pantsuit with black boots, then went to make herself some breakfast, again lost in thought.

As she stood at the kitchen counter a while later, she felt a gentle tap on her shin and looked down to see Picasso sitting at her feet, using his bum paw to get her attention.

He met her gaze expectantly, paw poised in midair.

She blinked and looked from the cat to the can of cat food on the counter in front of her—and remembered what she'd been doing. "I'm sorry, guy. I guess I'm a bit preoccupied this morning."

Obediently, she fished the can opener out of the drawer, opened the cat food, and put it in a bowl on the floor. Then she fished her own cold toast out of the toaster and poured herself a cup of coffee.

In the month that followed Ryan's visit, she had found herself terrified and yet hopeful that she might have conceived his child, for they had given no thought to contraception. But she hadn't become pregnant. Even now, a twinge of disappointment pricked her heart.

In the year since, she'd noticed that her artwork had taken on a more sensuous feel, with intimate lines and curves, entwined and passionate. Her critics had noticed as well, much to her delight. Her recent pieces had brought higher prices than ever in the exclusive art boutiques downtown and in the Stockyards.

Because of Ryan.

What had caused them to come together in such a brief flash of intense passion? For a year the reason had eluded her.

"Not any more," Hailey said aloud. She set her mug in the sink and looked at Picasso. "This morning I intend to find out."

She grabbed her purse and locked the front door behind her. The phrase "animal magnetism" had been floating in her brain all night, as it had for the better part of the past year, and she set out on a mission to the library to find a book on the subject. Today she would know, once and for all, what had caused two otherwise sensible adults to temporarily abandon all sense of convention and morality to indulge in probably the most intense round of lovemaking known to mankind.

With singular purpose, Hailey strode into Central Library twenty minutes later and headed straight for the card catalog. Yes ma'am, she would sit here researching all day if necessary, but she *would* have an answer before she went to bed tonight.

She opened the 'A' drawer and began flipping through cards. *Now, let's see. Animal Husbandry, Animal Kingdom ... Here we go. Animal Magnetism.* Hailey copied down several call numbers and consulted the map to determine where in the thousands of shelves the 154's were located.

As she moved down the rows of shelves, her skin began to prickle. 136.63 to 143.30, 143.31 to 151.76, 151.77 to 160.85.

Hailey slowed and rounded the corner, then stopped. Her breath fled; her heart thundered.

He sat on the floor not quite ten feet away, propped against the next row of shelves, looking directly at her as though he had looked up from his book in anticipation of her arrival.

Lord he was more gorgeous than she remembered.
"Ryan."

He smiled, a mixture of expectation and relief—with a hint of lustful hunger. "Hailey."

She moved closer and sat down next to his feet, facing him, taking notice of the goose bumps fading on his arms. His familiar clean manly scent filled her nostrils, triggering a flood of searing memories.

With great effort, she reigned in her ragged breath, forced herself to inhale and exhale slowly.

"Happy anniversary," he said with a grin, closing the book in his hands. "You're looking for this?"

She looked at the title—*Mesmer's Theory of Animal Magnetism*—and nodded. How surreal was this? And yet the entire situation seemed perfectly logical in some cosmic sense. "I was awake most of the night last night, trying to figure out how it happened."

"Me too."

"Have you figured it out?" She gestured toward the book.

"Not really. Mesmer supposedly used it for hypnotism, and I doubt either of us was hypnotized."

Hailey pulled another book off the shelf beside him and flipped it open, scanning the table of contents. "Sea turtles

and homing pigeons. Let's see." She turned to the indicated page and scanned the contents. "It's not Mesmer's theory, but it suggests that animals such as sea turtles and homing pigeons instinctually use the earth's magnetic field to navigate home."

"Perhaps somehow our homing radar got set to each other."

"Interesting hypothesis." She couldn't help but grin.

"You look great."

Her breath caught in her throat. "So do you."

"It's good to see you again."

"And you."

He smiled at her again, his blue eyes bright.

She hadn't realized how much she'd missed him until this moment. And it didn't even seem strange that she could miss someone with whom she had spent fewer than six hours cumulative.

But now that he was here, sitting next to her, his hand resting on her knee, she felt wonderfully content.

And increasingly aroused. Like *déjà vu*, she had the not-quite-inexplicable urge to tear off her clothes and hop into his lap. Heat crept into her cheeks, but she nonetheless thought about how it felt to have him so deeply inside her.

His eyebrow twitched, and she knew he was thinking similar thoughts. They sat for long moments, silently soaking up the other's presence.

Finally Ryan drummed his fingers on her knee. "Would you like to grab some early lunch?"

Hailey remembered the toast and coffee she hadn't finished and her stomach growled. "Sure."

"I know of a nice place within walking distance." He stood up and held out a hand to help her up. "You like Polynesian?"

She allowed him to help her to her feet, and she was suddenly aware of the breadth of his shoulders in the narrow space between the bookshelves. Her heart fluttered. "I love Polynesian. Are you thinking of Kapiolani's?"

He looked at her, surprised. "Yes, have you been there?"

"Only once, actually, but my neighbor two doors down, Leilani Halau, owns it. She brings me take-out at least once a week."

"No kidding? My employees groan every time I offer to take them to lunch. I can't believe they don't like Polynesian."

Hailey almost told him to call her the next time he wanted to go to Kapiolani's and his employees declined, but the words halted in her throat. Would he think her too forward? She laughed at the irony. He'd been in her bed, for goodness sake. How forward could she get?

Instead she said, "My family lived in Guam for a few years before we moved to Belgium. I guess it got into my blood. Coconut, pineapple, mmmm."

"You lived in Guam, too? That's amazing." He held the door open for her and they stepped out onto Commerce Street. As they walked, Hailey told him about the island and its culture, about the endless afternoons she'd spent on the beach with her mother, searching for hermit crabs and starfish.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Ryan greeted the waitress with a warm smile, then held Hailey's chair for her as she sat down.

"Do you still get to travel?" he asked as he took his own seat.

Hailey glanced at her menu, then set it down. Ryan didn't even look at his. "No, but I miss it. I only ever get as far as San Antonio or New Orleans these days. And that's only when my friend Anne can bear to get away from her husband and children for a few days."

"The same friend who gave you Picasso?"

"Yes." Hailey grinned, impressed that he remembered both the cat's name, and the story of how she got him.

"I love New Orleans," Ryan continued. "I go to a computer conference there every summer."

Their waitress brought two glasses of ice water and placed one in front of each of them. "Y'all ready to order?" she asked, pen poised over her order pad. Ryan nodded to Hailey.

"I'll have coconut chicken and shrimp with pineapple, please."

"Uh-huh.... Got it. And you?" She smiled at Ryan.

"And I'll have the grilled mahi-mahi."

The waitress scrawled the order and picked up their menus. "Coming right up. My name is Michelle if y'all need anything."

"Thanks, Michelle." Ryan turned his attention back to Hailey. "I've always wanted to travel. I was born and raised in Texas, and I've been to Mexico and Canada, but I've always

wanted to get off the continent. Haven't had much opportunity to do that."

"I'm sure they need computer consultation in Europe."

"Yeah, but my team would be jealous, and I couldn't afford to take everybody.. It would have to be a personal trip."

"Even better."

"Someday."

"Now that I'm grown, I wouldn't mind going back to the places I lived. I think I'd have a different appreciation of them now."

"Why not go? Your work is fairly portable, isn't it?"

"Aside from the wheel and kiln, you mean?"

"I suppose you're right." He offered her a charming smile.

"But I could always paint while I was there."

"There you go. Every great artist spends time in Paris, right?"

"Oh, the Louvre! I would love to go there again. Last time I was there, I was a freshman in high school."

"That's on my list of places to visit before I die, along with Machu Picchu and the Pyramids of Giza."

"Ooh, a backpacking trip in the Andes! I've always wanted to do that. And wouldn't it be cool to go inside the pyramids?"

Michelle arrived with their food, and conversation dwindled while they savored the exotic flavors of Leilani's recipes. Hailey caught Ryan watching her more than once, some indefinable expression on his face, but he didn't comment.

She wondered what he was thinking. Was he remembering their last meeting? Was he still trying to figure out where they

might have met before? Did she have parsley stuck in her teeth?

When Ryan was finished, he set down his fork and silently watched her pick at the last bit of chicken on her plate.

Finally he spoke. "It is so great to see you again, Hailey. I've wanted to call you, but..." His voice trailed off.

"I know. Me too." She put down her own fork and absently fiddled with the bottle of Polynesian sauce Michelle had brought. "But it was just a little too weird, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. Yeah it was..." Ryan looked at his empty plate. "I did check on you once, a few months later. I—We didn't use any—I wanted to make sure—to see if you were okay."

Hailey caught the emotion, the hopeful regret, in his eyes when he met her gaze. Like her, she saw he had hoped they'd made a baby that day.

"I was a little bit disappointed, too," she admitted softly.

He smiled at her, then cleared his throat and went on. "You were coming out of your house with a blond man, all dressed up and looking ... beautiful ... I just sat in my car and watched you drive away with him."

Hailey remembered that night. Clearly. The only date she'd been on all year.

She had been unable to get Ryan out of her head, so when a fellow artist at the gallery had asked her to dinner, she'd accepted. She remembered looking up and down the street as Alan ushered her to his car, almost expecting to see Ryan walking up the sidewalk, but there had been no people and few cars. The date had turned out to be a disaster, and she said so now.

"A disaster? Why?"

"He was a nice guy, but it just wasn't what I expected. He said we'd go to dinner and the theater. I was excited because I love the theater. But he took me to McDonald's then to the movies to see *White Chicks* at the dollar theater. And then he started groping at me half way through the movie."

Ryan laughed, but anger flashed in his eyes. "What did you do?"

"I politely placed his hands back in his own lap and said 'No Thank You.' He pouted from then on."

"He sounds like a jerk."

"I'm not sure what his problem was, but he really seemed to be a nice guy. I tried to make it up to him by suggesting we go get some ice cream, my treat, but he mumbled something about lactose intolerance and took me home."

"Do you know why he thought his behavior might be appropriate?"

"Not a clue. I'd only ever met him twice, and we talked about art. I don't date much, and have only been with—" she broke off, sure this was more information than Ryan wanted, or than she wanted to give.

"Been with..." he prompted. "What were you going to say?"

Hailey looked at her hands. "I've only ever been with two men in my life, so it's not like I have a reputation."

She looked up and into Ryan's cobalt blue gaze. Unable to look away, she met his meaningfully assessing eyes, acknowledging the truth of her words. Apparently it was something he'd needed to hear.

"You said you talked about art. Perhaps it was your art, your sculptures themselves," he said.

"Pardon?"

"Your sculptures. They're very bold and sensual. Could they have given that guy the impression that you're a bit more ... risqué?"

"You've seen my work?"

He nodded. "You have a dozen pieces in the Stockyards Gallery."

"Yes—well, I did. Now I think there are only two or three. The others have sold."

Disappointment twinged in Hailey's chest. Last summer she had done a sculpture, in her trademark abstract style, of two bodies entwined on what, to the experienced eye, could be a four-poster bed. Into the bodies, she had etched leopard spots. *Animal Magnetism*.

She had placed it in the gallery with her other recent work because she'd been so proud of it, but she'd put an unbelievably high price tag on it, so that it wouldn't sell. But it *had* sold two months later.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Yes, I'm an artist. I sell my work to support myself. But sometimes you create a piece that you just don't want to let go."

Ryan didn't say anything, but in his silence she heard his answer loud and clear. Somehow she knew.

"You bought it."

He nodded slightly. "I had to. It wouldn't let me walk out of that gallery without it."

Hailey smiled, suddenly relieved. "Then I'm glad it found a good home."

"Me, too."

"You didn't buy all the others, did you?"

He grinned and shook his head. "But I might have if I'd had any money left after the one."

"Sorry about the price. I had hoped to hold on to it."

"You can have it back, if you want it."

"No! I'm glad it was you who bought it. I can't think of a better place for it."

"Good, 'cause I was kidding." He grinned again.

She laughed as color crept into her cheeks. Pride? Embarrassment? Joy to be in this man's presence?

Ryan pulled out his wallet and inserted two bills into the leather check folio Michelle had placed on the table for that purpose, then pushed out his chair. "You want to go for a walk?"

"Sure." Hailey stood and took his outstretched hand, allowing him to lead her out of the restaurant. His warm fingers curled around hers and hope bloomed furiously intense in her heart. Warmth flooded her being, and she was utterly happy for the first time in many years.

They strolled down Main Street, then back up Commerce, talking about their lives, their families, their neighbors, and anything else that came up. Hailey couldn't remember smiling so much in one day in her entire life. Or feeling so at ease.

She was surprised when her stomach growled again, seemingly only a few minutes later, and she looked at her

watch. "Goodness, it's nearly dinnertime already. Perhaps we could get some dinner together, too."

Ryan's eyes grew wide and he looked at his watch. "Damn. I'm going to be late." He stopped and turned to face her. "I'm sorry, Hailey, I've got to go. My fiancée is waiting. I'm supposed to take her to dinner."

Hailey's heart plummeted straight to her toes and a wave of nausea swept over her. "Your fiancée?"

"We've dated on and off for eight years—we were separated last year at this time—and she finally pressured me into getting officially engaged."

Feeling the stunning blow of the grand prize slipping through her fingers, Hailey blinked away unexpected tears. She swallowed hard. "Congratulations. She's a very lucky woman."

He reached out and took her hand in his. "It just doesn't seem right to say goodbye again. Can I call you?"

"No. It wouldn't be right." She shook her head, then squeezed his hand and offered him as much of a warm smile as she could muster while fighting back tears. "You have a wonderful life. I wish you happiness and many beautiful children."

He looked at her for a long moment, regret and sadness evident in his eyes. With a tender sweep of his thumb, he raised her hand and softly kissed each knuckle. "Goodbye, Hailey Tovar."

"Goodbye, Ryan Matthews." It was barely more than a whisper.

Chapter Four

"So I said, 'I don't know what the devil you're talking about,' then I turned my back on her and stomped out the door. You should have seen the look on her face!"

Across the table, Lisa chattered on about her most recent tiff with her stepmother. Ryan nodded politely but tuned her out for the most part. For one thing, he had heard this story before—well, maybe not this *particular* story, but Lisa and her stepmother didn't usually get along, so similar stories were abundant.

For another thing, his mind just could not let go of Hailey Tovar. Quiet, pretty, he found her stunningly sensuous, though he doubted she was aware of her appeal, or that her dichotomous blend of timid and wanton sexuality was so intoxicating. When he was with her, he felt ... alive, and ... *whole*. Like he'd never felt with anyone before.

Not even Lisa.

As his fiancée chattered on about shopping, Ryan found himself at a fork in the road of his life. One road led to a comfortably predictable life with Lisa, lukewarm affection all around but no kids. She was adamant about not having any 'little brats' wrecking her figure or her furniture.

The other road led to the unknown, centered around the woman who had filled his thoughts and dreams every day since their one afternoon of explosive passion. The woman whose voice he had heard, whose presence he had felt a million times in a million places.

He thought about Lisa. Headstrong, beautiful, but often rude and selfish. She was spoiled and rich, had never known a hard day's work in her life, and almost always got whatever she wanted. Eight years ago, she had decided she wanted Ryan.

During the first year of their relationship, he had been flattered that someone like her was interested in someone like him. After all, he was from a middle class family. His father was a plumber, his mother a housewife.

He had met Lisa at a club when he was attending Tech and she was attending St. Agatha's College for Women. She had bowled him over with her cheerleader-type skirts and her expensive car.

He was a computer geek who drove a Nova. He hadn't stood a chance.

He supposed that until today, he might have still felt that she was too good for him and that he didn't deserve her. Largely because Lisa liked to remind him that he had blue-collar genes.

He had invested the better part of eight years with this woman already, had done his reasonable best to please her including giving away the dog he'd raised from a puppy because the lovable bull mastiff 'slobbered too much.'

But did he really love her?

Moreover, did she even love him?

He was ashamed to admit it, but the answer to both questions was an uncomfortable 'no'.

Lisa frequently told him how cute and smart he was, but she had never said 'I love you.' He'd suspected for a few

months now that she only insisted on getting engaged because her father had dropped some major hints about wanting to give his daughter the wedding of her dreams.

Come to think of it, Ryan couldn't remember ever telling her he loved her, either. How pathetic was that? Eight years and not a single utterance of those three little words.

Never had she made his insides turn to jelly as Hailey did. Even when Ryan and Lisa had first started dating, he'd been more impressed with Lisa's car and money than with Lisa as a person.

On the other hand, when he thought of Hailey ... *Hailey* ... his heart beat faster, his breath caught in his throat, and a smile automatically spread across his face.

"What are you grinning about? I'm telling you about the rude sales clerk at Donovan's. *I* didn't think it was very funny."

Ryan looked at his fiancée, suddenly aware of the clanging and bustling of the busy restaurant around him. He saw her scowl, heard the derision in her voice, and he almost wanted to laugh. It was one of those moments that you read about, usually associated with imminent mortal danger, when your life comes into acute focus. You suddenly realize where you've been and where you're going. And Ryan knew without a shred of doubt where he wanted his life to go. And with whom.

"Lisa, do you remember last April when we were 'cooling off' for a few weeks?"

Her scowl remained in place. "Yeah?"

Ryan told her about his newspaper round for his stepfather and how he had ended up in Hailey's bed. His skin prickled and a slight shiver crept down his spine as he carefully edited out the details, but thought about them nonetheless.

"And you only just *now* decided to tell me this?" Her voice rang shrill and sharp. The diners nearest them paused in their own conversations to look at her.

"I'm only telling you now because I ran into her this morning and spent the day with her. And I had a great time."

"You did *what*? Is this going to be a yearly thing? You going to do it again next year, too?" Her voice rose an octave. "Is *she* the reason you don't want us to live together yet? So you can have your little side fling whenever you want?"

He held up a hand. "Calm down, Lise. We talked, that's all. But, I'll be honest..." He looked down at his hands, which folded and refolded the napkin in his lap. "I've thought about her every day for the past year. There's something there that I've not ever felt before. That might not mean anything, but fate has given me another chance." Now he looked up to meet Lisa's gaze, unflinching. "I have to find out for sure. If I don't, I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

A few diners glared at him.

Lisa's nostrils flared. "Oh. My. Gawd. Are *you* dumping ... *me*?"

He felt bad for doing this to her, but it wouldn't be fair to either of them to carry on as usual. "I'm sorry, Lisa. You are a wonderful woman. I don't regret our time together at all. But you and I want different things. I want to have a family, you

don't, I want a house in the suburbs, you want a downtown apartment, I want to coach little league, you want—"

"I can't believe you have the nerve to do this after everything I've done for you. I have invested eight long years of my life in you!" Lisa shrieked. "You were a total geek until I got my hands on you. You would be nothing without me."

Ryan listened quietly as she continued to deride him for who he was now, and who he had been. The diners who had initially given him dirty looks now turned their scornful glances on Lisa, eyes wide.

Finally her tirade wound down, and she concluded with, "You can just forget about ever working for my father now."

"I don't want to work for your father. You *know* that."

Her bottom lip trembled, but Ryan recognized embarrassment rather than sorrow.

She glared at him. "You will always be average. You're too soft, too sentimental. You'll never be the man I wanted you to be." She loudly shoved her chair back and stood, then glanced at her left hand and snorted. "And I didn't even laugh when you gave me this paltry diamond. It's not even two carats!" She jerked the ring off her finger and flung it at him. He caught it easily.

Lisa gathered up her purse and uttered what was to her the ultimate insult: "I hope she gets stretch marks." Then she spun on her heel and stomped out of the restaurant.

"Me too," Ryan whispered, imagining Hailey pregnant with his child. He closed his eyes as his heart swelled in his chest and he savored the image.

Animal Magnetism
by Devi Sparks

After Lisa had left, a small round of applause peppered through the restaurant and he signaled for the check.

Chapter Five

Hailey sat in her living room, listening to the rain pattering on the windows, staring blindly at one of the sketches she had done of Ryan, lost in thoughts about what might have been. Again, logic seemed to disappear. How could she feel such devastating loss when she never had him to begin with? How could she feel so sure that he somehow completed her when she had spent fewer than twelve hours with him? But logical arguments did nothing to assuage the mourning of her soul.

She closed her eyes and pictured him, his face. In her mind's eye, she saw him all dressed up in a tuxedo, swinging his bride around in a joyful hug. She saw him catching a small child who ran into his wide embrace.

No, her soul argued. *Eight years on and off, and the other woman had to pressure him into getting officially engaged?* It didn't take a genius to deduce that the other woman didn't suit Ryan.

A single tear rolled down her cheek. A tear for Ryan. A tear for the other woman. A tear for herself.

Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps Ryan was meant as a lesson. Someday she would find her real true mate and laugh at her naïveté.

Her skin prickled and she looked at the front door on reflex. Moments later there was a loud knocking. She knew it was him, but stayed where she was. As much as she wanted him, she didn't want to be the secret mistress. It wasn't right.

He knocked again. Still she stayed on the couch.

Picasso gave her a long-suffering look from his spot on the other end of the couch, his tail twitching annoyance.

Ryan knocked a third time and she nearly gave in. Maybe just this once.

No. It wasn't right.

He didn't knock again. She heard a car drive away.

She sat and stared unseeing at the door for another fifteen minutes, convincing herself that she had done the right thing. When she found her true soul mate, she wanted it to be on honest terms. No secrecy. No shame.

But what would one night have hurt?

Everyone. It would have hurt everyone—her, him, and the fiancée. Hailey was a woman of integrity and had done what was best.

Emotionally exhausted, she decided to head to bed early, and went to check that the front door was locked. Her skin prickled again and she opened the door without thinking. And gasped softly.

Ryan sat on her top step in the rain, shoulders slumped, soaked to the skin. He turned his head, a look of relief and desperate hunger in his eyes. She watched as he stood and faced her. Rain dripped from his hair, the end of his nose.

"This thing between us—Hailey, I want to—" he took a step toward her.

She held up her hand. "No, Ryan. We can't. I want it, too, but—" Hailey's throat closed, "but we can't. It wouldn't be right."

He took another step. "I told her."

"Pardon?" Her heart paused.

"I told her everything. About you, about last year, about how I feel. Told her that if I didn't find out what this soul-gripping feeling is, didn't take the chance, I'd regret it for the rest of my life."

Hailey couldn't speak.

Ryan closed the last of the gap between them, stepping over the threshold, and wrapped his big hands around her shoulders. "Hailey, I have to know why the thought of you bearing my children, of growing old with you, feels so utterly *right*. Why the thought of another man groping at you in a movie theater just boils my blood. I have to know why I seem to know you instinctively, as though my soul knows yours. This is so far outside the realm of typical experience, I've gotta know if—if—" he faltered for words.

"If we were somehow meant to be," Hailey whispered.

They looked at each other for a few moments, silently acknowledging whatever forces had brought them together.

Ryan leaned down and kissed her tenderly. Water dripped onto her shirt. She shivered, due only partly to the coldness of the raindrop. As he deepened the kiss, she grasped the lapels of his drenched suit jacket and pulled him inside. He kicked the door closed behind him.

She pushed his jacket from his shoulders and without breaking the kiss, he took it off and tossed it over the back of the nearest chair. Something fell out of it, bounced on the seat and fell to the floor.

They both looked over and Hailey saw a large diamond ring. Already Picasso had gone over to investigate, and gave it a curious sniff.

"She threw it at me," Ryan said with a rueful smile.

Hailey looked up at him, her gaze serious. "Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked, echoing his words to her a year ago. "It's probably not too late to get her back." She unconsciously held her breath, hoping.

He gave her a tender smile, then nodded. "I've never been as sure of anything in my life as I am at this moment."

Hailey let out a breath and smiled. "Thank goodness," she whispered with no small amount of relief. Then she threw her arms around his neck with abandon and pressed her hot mouth to his neck.

Ryan's heart swelled in his chest as his arms closed around her. A ridiculously obnoxious grin spread across his face, he knew, but he couldn't help it. He felt oddly torn—part of him wanted to throw his head back and laugh 'til he cried because he felt so indescribably wonderful, but a bigger part of him wanted to take Hailey to her bed and rediscover the joys of being inside her.

The latter part won out.

"I want you, Hailey," he whispered against her ear, "in every way possible."

Her body shivered, and as he drew back to look into her eyes, he saw that her cheeks flamed red.

But she met his gaze and nodded her agreement and understanding. Unmistakable heat blazed in her eyes. She wanted everything he could dish out.

He grinned, and bent his head to resume the kiss.

Within minutes they were fumbling with each others' clothes, leaving a trail of soggy shirts, pants, and underwear as they made their way laughing, nibbling, and kissing, into the bedroom. Ryan wasted no time before reacquainting himself with the nuances of her body, with the way she looked at the peak of a climax.

She was truly beautiful.

Hours later, after they sated their passions—at least to the extent of their energy, Ryan smiled at the woman who had apparently captured not only his heart, but his soul as well.

"You're wonderful," he said and pulled Hailey against him. "And I think I might be crazy in love with you."

He felt Hailey smile against his neck as her arms tightened around his waist.

From his post on the dresser, Picasso purred contentedly.

Epilogue

Hailey Matthews stepped onto the small balcony and looked out over streets she'd not tread in nearly twenty years.

Closing her eyes, she allowed the faintly familiar aromas of the city to take her memory back to the carefree time of her youth, before she ever knew the inexplicable power of fate.

And God bless the power of fate. Even now, another year later, she found it hard to believe.

When would she ever have thought that her paper 'boy' would someday be your father-in law? The thought made her smile. And when would she have thought she would someday be back in Paris, about to go to the Louvre.

She giggled in anticipation. As they browsed the collection of world masterpieces, she planned to whisper her news into his ear as though commenting on a piece of art.

He was going to be a daddy.

Behind her the glass door opened and closed, then her husband's arms closed around her. "You about ready?"

"You bet," she said with a grin, and squeezed his hand. "Let's go see some art."

~The End~

Animal Magnetism
by Devi Sparks

Devi Sparks has a dirty mind and loves to share it with her readers. A 'good girl' for most of her life and always a late bloomer, Devi didn't arrive at her rebellious teenage years until her late twenties.

Never one to waste a per-fectly good rebellion, she is still savoring every unruly whim and notion (though not necessarily acting on them—wisdom and experience and all that 'grown up' stuff *sigh*) and hasn't looked back.

She's an EPPIE Finalist author (under another name in another genre), and is published in both fiction and non-fiction.

Devi currently lives in Texas and enjoys writing, painting, traveling, and well ... other things ;-)

Readers may visit her online at www.DeviSparks.com.

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