

Audrey Godwin

THE
**EROTIC
GHOST**

BookStrand

THE EROTIC GHOST

Audrey Godwin

EROTIC ROMANCE

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IMPRINT: Erotic Romance Special Edition

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THE EROTIC GHOST

Copyright © 2008 by Audrey Godwin

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-055-7

First E-book Publication: January 2009

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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Printed in the U.S.A.

PUBLISHER

www.BookStrand.com

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to all the voracious readers out there that, like myself, are addicted to the magnificence of the one-dimensional man such as a picture on a calendar, a handsome form on a film strip, a muscled body on a website—*or the paper hero in a novel.*

THE EROTIC GHOST

AUDREY GODWIN

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Prologue

His hot breath smelled of warm whiskey.

His masculine scent mingled with her own flowery bouquet of lilac talcum as she slowly lifted her legs and straddled him. His lazy gaze traveled up her body until both gazes met in a swirl of heat.

God, he had the darkest midnight eyes she'd ever seen. She could tell he appreciated the black lace bra, panties, and garter belt she wore. A fabric as sheer as a spider web wrapped itself around her legs, adding to the mystery of a dark room and flickering candles. Had it been only two months since he had stopped her for speeding?

She thought back to the day she saw him walk up to her car. Dark uniform, motorcycle, the wind blowing his long, sexy hair, jeez, he must have been ten feet tall. And how he filled out a uniform! When he looked down at her with those sinful, midnight eyes, she almost moaned out loud—and he hadn't even touched her! She blushed every time she thought about their first date. They had an early dinner, a buggy ride through Central Park, and he gave her a single red rose. It was an evening only a romantic could have planned, and Zack just wasn't the type. His face was chiseled and strong, and his arms when they held her....

"Did you enjoy the Pink Lady?" Zack's voice had the breathy sound of someone who was getting his cock deliciously handled.

“Sure did,” she whispered as she pressed the head of his cock against the slit in her lacy panties. “You really spent a bundle there, Zack. Why wouldn’t you let me help?”

“Hell, Dana, I can afford it. I’m a New York City cop, remember? Sure, my paycheck sucks, but being part of a secret society, you’d be surprised how many favors we get just for the hell of it. It’s a ‘You scratch my back, I scratch yours’ kind of thing. Works real good.”

“Sounds shady to me.”

“Well, we could have gone to Weird Willie’s for a hotdog. Would *that* have made you happy?”

“Mmmm,” was her answer as she slowly inched him inside her making the swollen lips between her legs drip and pulse with anticipation.

“I like your hand better, plus you don’t get a lipstick ring around my dick.”

“I thought you liked my lipstick rings,” she teased while looking down at him seductively.

“To hell with lipstick rings, I’m hungry for some red-headed cunt.”

He rolled her over and gave her a long, juicy kiss while passionately burying himself inside her.

The invasion was like an electric charge. His rock-hard cock made her jerk as it rubbed against her over-sensitive clit. The sensation sent her climbing into heaven—climbing so fast, she couldn’t resist clinging to him while rolling her hips loosely.

As he nudged in deeper and deeper, her cunt dripped over him profusely, keeping him wet and slick as he pounded in and out of her. Her legs widened involuntarily and her back arched, offering him her breasts. She quivered as his warm lips nibbled her neck first, afterward making a moist trail as they moved down to her nipples. The licking and sucking of his wicked tongue made several lusty moans come sliding out of her throat and into the dimly lit bedroom.

God, she was ravenous! Her fingernails dug into his back as the wild rhythm of their sex built fire after fire between her legs. While she was caught up in this red-hot haze, all at once a sound rang in her ears. It came just at the zenith, the apex, the silver height of her orgasm, making it seem far away until she floated down to earth again and heard the jarring sound next to her bed.

Brrrrrrriiiiiinnnnnnngggg!

Her eyes flew open. She immediately felt Zack's moist lips whispering next to her ear. "Let it ring, babe, just let it ring."

She wanted to, God how she wanted to, but there was something about a ringing phone she couldn't ignore. It beckoned her with every ring. Waiting as long as she could, she finally pushed Zack away and reached for it.

"Damn!" he growled as he rolled away.

"Hello!" she almost shouted into the receiver.

"Dana, thank God you're there. Sorry if I woke you. You can blame it on the three-hour time difference between us."

"Mr. Sherman!" She suddenly felt naked, and quickly reached for a sheet and wrapped it around her. "What's wrong?"

"I'm in one hell of a pickle, that's what's wrong. I just got out of an all day meeting with Masters and Ford."

"Those bastards from the cosmetics firm? Why did they keep you so long?" She glanced at the clock on her bedside table. "My God, it must be—what—after ten there?"

"Ten twenty-two to be exact. I just got back to my hotel room. I gave them everything I had, and they still turned me down. I've managed to put them off until tomorrow. They say if they don't see something they like by noon, they're going with another advertising agency. I'm sorry, Dana. You're going to have to take the first flight out to San Francisco."

"Fly all the way to San Francisco? Why can't I give the information to you over the phone? I have my brief—"

"I'm afraid not, Dana. These guys won't be satisfied with a few statistics. You'll have to do your whole presentation from beginning to end. You know, pictures, diagrams. Hell, give them a graph full of pretty colors and they'll be as happy as a couple of kids in kindergarten. Ideas, they're not buying. A big fat guarantee is what they want. Goddamned bloodsuckers, if it wasn't such a big account, I'd tell them where to stick it."

"You mean do the presentation myself? Sir, I can't...."

"Don't bother with a taxi. I'm staying at the Carlton Ritz. Call me when you get here and I'll pick you up at the airport."

"But what about the office? Who'll run it?"

"Roland can handle things."

"Mr. Sherman...."

“Dana, don’t screw this up. You know cosmetics, and this is a multi-million dollar account.”

“I can’t do this. I’ve never—I mean, I’ve only assisted before.”

“Dana, this is exactly what you’ve been training for. Hell, I’ll be there with you to give you all the support you need. Remember when you showed up in my office right out of college? I kept my eye on you and I wasn’t disappointed. The day I gave you that corner office was the best decision I ever made.”

“Well, I...”

“We make a good team, Dana. Men’s stuff I can handle, but this is cosmetics. Who the hell knows more about that than a woman? After all, Master’s and Ford Cosmetics is the biggest in the business. Their Midnight Pleasure line is their newest baby, and they want to launch it big into the public eye. Ad campaigns, TV commercials, the whole nine yards. If you can put this one in our pockets, it could mean a big fat bonus for you, possibly a promotion. How does a partnership sound? All you have to do is drop this juicy account in our laps.”

She gulped. “Yes, sir.” After slamming the phone down, she ran around the room packing while still dressed in her seductive outfit of slit panties and spider web hose.

Zack sat up. “What the hell are you doing?”

“That was my boss. I’ve got to get to San Francisco pronto!”

“Oh, God, not again.” Finally getting up, he snatched at his clothes with angry movements, and began to dress.

“I’m really sorry, Zack, but this could mean my job.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Only a few days as far as I know.”

“Dana—hell, this job of yours is driving me crazy. We never have any time together anymore.”

“Now is not the time, Zack,” she called out just before she stepped into a steaming shower.

“It’s my own damned fault,” he muttered, “I never should have got myself mixed up with a brainy female. From now on, it’s empty heads and big boobs.”

Chapter 1

I'm late! I'm late! For a very important date!

The words from her favorite fairytale screamed through her head as she peered into her rearview mirror to apply her lipstick. Her car skidded and rocked while she smacked her lips together and fluffed her naturally red hair. Looking at it, she remembered Zack's words.

To hell with lipstick rings. I'm hungry for some red-headed cunt.

Damp like it was, the color looked muted and dark, but when the sun shone on it, she had been told it looked as if it were on fire. She patted it with approval, and smiled at the reflection in the mirror. Sure, she knew it wasn't any fun having a rendezvous suddenly interrupted, but Zack would have to understand she had certain responsibilities. It seemed funny, though. For years, women were the ones left alone and lonely. Thank God times had changed, and women could give the men in their lives a great big taste of their own medicine.

She looked around at the darkness as she turned off the main highway. She hoped like crazy she wouldn't be sorry for taking this shortcut to the airport. It was getting close to two now, and no time for anyone to be out on some dark, vacant road. To make her boss happy, she'd scrambled around like a crazy person, and after throwing a few essentials into her bag, she hurried out to her car with no makeup on, and her hair wet from a shower. She leaned forward and peered into the mirror once more and fluffed it again. When her gaze shifted back to the road ahead, her eyes widened in fright.

The sky was lit up with what looked like a sizzling bolt of lightning heading her way. For several wild, erratic heartbeats, her feet pumped on the brakes while she watched the column of light come closer and closer.

"Oh, my God!" she shouted when she saw the jagged bolt brutally stab the blacktop in front of her car, swallowing her up in its blinding light.

While enclosed in the brilliance, her car fell forward into a deep hole. She bounced around like a rubber ball, her seatbelt the only thing keeping her from being thrown from the car. The last thing she remembered before darkness overcame her was the hiss and sizzle of a dying fire.

* * * *

A mysterious hush hung heavy in the night until a soft, withering wind soughed hauntingly through the treetops. The sound was high and lonely—out of tune. Moments later, the skies opened and piercing eyes the color of a glittering blue jewel filled the skies. The intelligence lying beyond those eyes knew Dana was teetering on the edge of infinity, that she was about to enter into total darkness, to float into its soft death, its peace, its eternity.

Rise up and live, Dana, came a whispering echo mingling with the wind. *Live to fulfill your destiny.*

Dana struggled to resist the voice. She wanted the darkness, she wanted the rest it would give her—the peace.

Dana, you will not die! You will live and do as I command!

No! No! her mind screamed. She was desperate to follow the darkness.

Dana, you are forbidden to die. Your fate is yet unfulfilled. I command you to rise up and live!

She couldn't escape it. The sound was jarring, like a ringing phone, so she naturally floated toward it. The further she traveled from the darkness, the more pain she became aware of until it stretched across her left shoulder and into her head. The pain was raw, unmerciful. It settled there, hitting again and again like a fisted hand. Her lashes began a soft flutter, and she slowly moved to lift her head.

It seemed every move she made brought a new ache to life, so she was careful not to make any sudden movements until she managed to work herself free of the mangled car. Finally making it to her feet, she looked around and then down. What she saw filled her mind with angry memories of the dark road, the sizzling lightning bolt, and the hole her car lay in.

"Dammit!" she shouted into the night while she angrily kicked her sporty, low-slung, lipstick red Spyder convertible on its badly twisted fender. "Why me? Why the hell me?"

Suddenly, a wave of dizziness hit her, causing her to stagger. Her hands flew out to reach for something and found the smooth metal of her car. She wilted against it, her head continuing to swirl.

As she stood trying to orient herself, something incredible flashed before her eyes. It was cobblestone streets—old-fashioned street lamps—fog—and a voice—a *familiar* voice.

Come!

What? She looked around to see who spoke. When she saw no one, she shook her head to clear it before she turned and looked again at the crater the big flash of lightning had made in the road. She was faced with spinning wheels, a smoking engine, and darkness. She moved to grab her bag from her car, and winced at the aches and pains of a badly bruised body.

No doubt about it, this has been a day from hell.

Pulling her cell phone from a dark corner of her bag, she began dialing Zack's number. Her fingers did a swift *click, click, click*, only to realize she wasn't getting a signal. She shook, pounded, and glared at the phone until she realized the batteries had picked this precise moment to run out of juice. And if that weren't enough, the excruciating pain in her shoulder had spread and turned into one gigantic headache.

While rubbing her temples, she happened to glance down on the floor of her front seat and saw where her romance novel had landed and was reminded of The Book Nook where she bought it. Her favorite pastime, besides reading, was looking for little out of the way bookstores that had titles you couldn't find anywhere else. The Book Nook was a hole in the wall that had everything from Shakespeare, to vintage comic books that probably cost an arm and a leg.

Paying no attention to them, she went straight to the Historical Romance Section and began to rummage around in those of famous authors. While engrossed in the storyline of a delicious sounding romantic suspense, she didn't see the tiny magical sparkle that floated through the narrow aisles, and arrowed in among the books. With a dazzling glow, and tiny bursts of light, a book was subtly formed. Engrossed in her search, she continued to rummage through the other books for several minutes before she caught a glimpse of an intriguing title.

The Devil's Cup.

She quickly pulled it out from among the others and was captivated by the extraordinary looks of the handsome hero. Curious, she turned it over and read the blurb on the back.

She loved romantic suspense, and the blurb intrigued her, but it was written by a Nelly Reinhardt, a writer she'd never heard of. That didn't really bother her since she'd discovered great unknown writers before, so she took a peek at the ending, and found that it wasn't a happy one. This disappointed her, so she put it back on the shelf, and walked away. As she made her way through the narrow aisles, she found herself first in horror, non fiction, Home Remedies, and later, Cookbooks, which is what she came in for.

The strange thing was, every time she went to a different part of the bookstore, there she saw *The Devil's Cup* eerily staring back at her.

My God, she thought. It's like this book is following me around.

Dismissing the chills she felt, she couldn't resist picking it up, and turned to the first chapter. She had intended to read only the first few lines, but before she knew what was happening, the owner walked up to her.

"Want to buy it?"

"Huh?"

"I said, would you like to buy it?"

"I'm not sure."

He looked down at the book. "It looks like you've read about three chapters. Anymore, and I'll have to ask you to pay for it."

When she looked, she was surprised to find that she'd read five chapters. She glanced up at him, embarrassed. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I mean, the book is so good, I...I guess I lost track of time." She smiled thinly. "Of course I'll buy it." She scrambled in her purse for her wallet.

He reached out and took the book. "I'll just take it up front and ring it up. Anything else?"

"N-No. Not today. I like your store, though, I'm sure I'll be coming back."

Now, as she pictured the handsome hero in her mind, she sighed. What a dreamboat he was. Dark, mysterious and foreign. She read it every chance she got, hating each and every time she was pulled away from her suspenseful fantasy. Just a few days ago she'd managed to get a few days off, and was just settling down with her book, a Coke, and a big bag of

potato chips when her boss called to inform her he was just about to leave for California on a multi-million dollar deal, and as his second in command, she'd have to take care of the office.

She hated it, but she actually counted herself very lucky. She had climbed up the ranks quickly since she'd gone to work for the Sherman Advertising Agency. It was a high-ranking job that brought with it a lot of responsibility, and although she had never been afraid of hard work, at that moment, she would have probably traded it for just one more hour with her novel.

If it wasn't such a gripping part, she thought. Maybe just a few more lines.

Convinced, her eager eyes scanned the written page. Those few lines led to another few lines, and another, until she was forced to cast it aside. She hadn't had a chance to open it since, but Zack filled in nicely.

Now she eyed the book critically and glanced around as if she were trying to resist the temptation. She finally lost the battle with what she thought was a sensible argument. Was it fair to leave the heroine hanging? Of course not! So like an alcoholic reaching for another drink, an addict reaching for another hit, a starving man reaching for food, she quickly wedged the twisted door open, reached in, and grabbed the novel.

It'll only take a minute.

She turned on the dashboard light. Excited, she flipped to the page she had dog-eared, and saw the last lines she had read:

As she walked, the road was dark and lonely, clouds of varying shades of gray gathered in the sky...

The heroine was in a spot! As her gaze voraciously moved along the printed page, something inside her snapped, and she looked up. "Jeez, what the hell am I doing? *I'm* the one on a dark and lonely road!"

It was a struggle, but she forced herself to close the book, pressing it firmly between her palms. As she was about to put it away, she noticed the cover. The heroine looked a lot like her.

Strange that I didn't notice it before.

An icy chill crept down her spine.

Finally dismissing the coincidence, she told herself she had more important things to do, like finding a way back to civilization! There was no doubt she would miss her plane and be fired, but—well, that’s the way things had gone today. She looked down at the book that seemed to be glued to her hand and it brought to mind a recent date she’d had. He had taken her to a very exclusive French restaurant. About mid-way through the meal, he excused himself to go to the men’s room. Even the exquisite food on her plate couldn’t keep her from dragging out her romance novel for a few more scorching lines. She’d read a full fifteen minutes before she realized he had come back and was sitting across the table glaring at her. She smiled sheepishly while sneaking the novel back into her bag.

When she guiltily forked one of the most expensive vegetables she had ever eaten, and bit down, she gagged. It was stone cold! Needless to say, she never saw him again.

All right, so it was true. She was a voracious reader, and always had a book with her wherever she went, even on a date. Until Zack, she’d been out with so many losers, she’d lost count and was ashamed to say her books had come to her rescue more than once. Even Zack preached to her about them, although he was a little more understanding than others she’d been out with.

The only reason he was so tolerant was they had tried some of the positions she read about. God, what imaginations some of those authors had! The positions they put their poor characters in—well, she knew they had to be impossible to manage—either that or she wasn’t as sexually enlightened as she thought. She stroked the cover. The powerful sex erupting between these two beautiful people was worth any twist of her imagination.

She refused to feel guilty. What was the big deal if she buried her head in a book for a few hours every day? Who cared? She could have worse habits. After justifying herself in her own mind, she stuffed the book deep into her bag with a clear conscience, and saw her dead, useless cell phone taking up valuable space.

God, how she wished she had taken the time to recharge the batteries before making this long trip. Anyone else would have taken care of it immediately. *Your fucking signal gets low, you recharge.* Oh no, not her. That would be way too organized, and no one could ever accuse her of anything so sensible.

Lifting her head, she looked into the darkness surrounding her. Anxious to find her way out of this hell, she pushed herself away from her car and began stumbling down the dark road to the nearest phone. *Oh, God*, she thought when she looked down at her new wedgies that must be at least five inches high. Another stupid move. Well hell, who knew she'd be clomping down a deserted road in heels high enough to send her into orbit?

"What else can happen?" she mumbled as she looked up into the sky where dark clouds threatened. "Oh, no," she moaned, slipping a hand up over her eyes to hide the awful sight. "I had to ask." Suddenly, through the part in her fingers, she saw something in the distance and quickly lowered her hand.

Squinting, she could just make out a looming old structure that reminded her of a page out of her novel. It was too tempting to pass up, so she began a mad scramble through her bag, quickly dragging it out one more time. More than a little curious, she glanced down at the cover, noticing the mansion behind the handsome hero and heroine, and quickly back at the dark old mansion ahead of her. The resemblance was uncanny, as if the novel had come to life before her eyes.

"Damn, I need rest," she mumbled, while dropping the novel back into her large bag. "Apparently, two o'clock in the morning is not the best time to find yourself on a dark road without wheels. Your imagination can play all kinds of tricks on you."

However, that was precisely her situation, so she had no choice but to make her way toward the dark, gothic-type structure that was heavily laden with gables, towers, and steeples, not to mention climbing ivy and imbedded weather stains.

She walked slowly, the scraping of her ridiculous wedgies echoing through the trees, making her glance around to see if someone followed her. The wind soughed mysteriously through fluttering leaves causing the shadows that stretched across the road to move with a peculiar kind of life. Each grotesque limb reminded her of a snake writhing dangerously on the ground. She found herself gingerly stepping over them, and cursed herself for being so stupid.

Just as she stepped up to the wide entrance to the mansion, another sudden wave of dizziness swept over her and she quickly reached for the spikes of the gate to steady herself.

And she saw it again!

Cobblestones, and old fashioned carriages tumbling along loudly. There was a heavy, mysterious fog hanging in the air. It was the thick, soupy kind, the kind that would make Jack the Ripper long for a prostitute!

Come!

It was the voice again, along with a wind lifting and pushing at her, mussing her hair with an icy cold hand. She lowered her head and shook it, finding herself back on the old road looking at a name written in extremely ornate letters.

Staresini.

She frowned when a dizzying sense of *déjà vu* hit her. Slowly, her gaze traveled beyond the gate and she noticed the front of the formidable dwelling was made up of large stones of every size and shape, their crevices shadowed with age.

“What the hell is an old English mansion doing way out here?” she mumbled. It looked incredibly unreal, illusory, a shimmering image that seemed to be floating.

She glanced around, seeing nothing for miles, except dark trees bending in the wind, and wildly fluttering shrubs. Realizing this foreboding, old mansion was her only chance to get help, she stepped hesitantly past the entrance and onto a wide walkway. It was flanked by trees with crackling leaves quivering in the stiff breeze. She was sure she could hear a faint whisper, as if the trembling trees were talking to each other.

Enter at your own risk, they seemed to be saying.

As if to encourage this eerie message, suddenly, a corner of the distant sky lit up in heavenly brilliance, drawing her eyes upward to the atmosphere of low churning clouds and grumbling thunder. She had just stepped up on the stone porch when a blast of wind brought with it the pungent odor of rain, and a loud clap of thunder. In only seconds, a deluge began, and she stood trapped beneath the overhang, looking out at a curtain of rain. It was so heavy, it almost blinded her to the lawn beyond. From behind her, she heard an eerie squeak and immediately whirled around.

A man stood there, almost as insubstantial as the late night gloom surrounding him. She saw the steely glitter of his eyes coming from within a deep shadow draping his head and shoulders like a shroud. When he spoke,

his words were slow, his chilling rasp out of place anywhere—*except in her nightmares.*

Chapter 2

“May I help you?” the man said, a scowl creasing his face as his gaze raked over her from head to toe.

“I-I’m looking—” Her words weakened as the dark figure suddenly separated from the low-hanging shadow. With a trembling hand pressing her mouth, she quickly muffled a gasp. What little light there was exposed merciless lines of age carved into his face. His thin mouth lay in a dry, snake-like twist, his cold, glittering eyes surrounded by a web of wrinkles, giving him a constant scowl. He was dressed all in black, the gray pallor of his face, similar to some bloodless creature she’d seen all too often in horror movies.

She recoiled from the sight of this gray, death-like individual, her trembling voice reduced to little more than a whisper. “—for a phone. The bat—” Her words were stopped by what looked like human teeth marks on his ear being partially hidden by a fringe of long, greasy gray hair. “The batteries are dead,” she continued hesitantly, showing him her cell phone. “I wonder if—” Her gaze shifted and she looked past him, the heavy silence and dim lighting inside reminding her of a funeral parlor. “—if I could use the telephone. I had an accident. My car is in a...well, sort of a...it’s difficult to explain. A lightning...” While trying to find the words, her gaze happened to drift up to his face, which was full of frowning uncertainty, as if he were trying to understand a foreign language. She finally gave up, and sighed heavily. “Maybe I should talk to—well, whoever owns this place.”

“I am afraid the Master is not receiving at the present time. He is in mourning. Since you do seem to be in something of a fix, perhaps I can be of some assistance.” He stepped back. “Would you like to come in?”

The moment she made a hesitant step across the threshold, something happened. She couldn’t tell exactly what it was. A change of some kind

seemed to have taken place in the atmosphere. It seemed close, confining, sort of a prim, stiff, genteel kind of feeling.

She looked around at the combination of red walls, dark shining wood, and red carpet covering each step of the wide, formal staircase. It was as if she'd stepped into a different century. Oil lamps were used instead of electric lights, and some strange odor hung in the air, reminding her of her grandmother's old house.

The elusive fear that had only nudged her at the door now burst into full bloom, and she turned quickly to leave. To her surprise, the old man she presumed to be a butler was just closing the door. She had gotten only a glimpse of the outside, but gone were the rain, the trees, and the vacant road, and in their place was a street that resembled a foggy night in old England.

The house was surrounded by a tall spiked fence, there were old lamp posts that cast circles of golden light along the curbs, and she could see a noisy, wobbling carriage as it slowly made its way along a wet cobblestone street.

My God, what's going on?

She lunged for the door and tried to open it. When it wouldn't budge, she turned to the butler. "The door, it seems to be stuck. I think I..."

The man looked at her with worried eyes. "Are you all right?"

She nodded slightly, but she knew she wasn't all right at all. She'd been hearing voices and couldn't think. Her mind was muddled, confused. Turning away from the door slowly, she looked up at the strange décor that told her she had somehow landed in a different century.

The room had a kind of hellish elegance—so many leaping flames from so many fireplaces. There were cold spots—hot spots—God-awful heat. Hadn't these people heard of central heat and air? Electric lights? All at once, the scene before her began to undulate, and her eyes closed. With a suppressed moan, she pressed her hand against her head, trying to fight the dizziness—a dizziness that sent the garish room to spinning. The red color ran together while the fire in the fireplace stretched making the room resemble a flame-ridden cave. Reaching out for something to hold on to, she shook her head, her mind full of black snakes that coiled and stretched until they obliterated reality. Finally, everything went black, and her weak body crumpled to the floor.

* * * *

“Oh, my word,” the butler said, looking down at her as if he didn’t quite know what to do. Finally, with desperation nipping at his heels, he shouted toward the back of the mansion for help. A somber looking creature in a gray dress straggled in, her face turning to shock when she saw the woman on the floor.

“Wha’ ‘appn’d, guv’nor?”

“The poor woman was in an accident from what she said, and passed out. I should think that would be apparent. Here, now, help me get her to the couch.” They struggled, getting her into the study, and onto the couch. “Put a wet cloth on her head. I will summon the Master.”

* * * *

From within the dim regions of a kingdom called The Isle of Tranquility, a man stood before a crowned figure seated upon a throne. The Mighty Zeus was clothed in gold and purple raiment, and the crown on his head was rich in precious metals and jewels. The Isle of Tranquility is only one kingdom within Olympus—a floating city that sits high in the sky. Zeus, is the supreme ruler of this, and all the other kingdoms that exist on Olympus. Although he has armies, he carries a thunderbolt which he hurls at those that displease him.

“You have done well, my son. Without you there, I am afraid the battle would not have been won.”

“I am glad I could be of service, Sire.”

A frown appeared on the bearded man’s face. “Franz, I was terribly sorry to hear of your dear mother’s death. Out of respect for you, I will try not to call on you again until your mourning period is over.”

“Thank you, Sire.”

Just then, The Pink Child walked in. “Sire, I have a message for The Magician.”

“You have my permission to give it to him.”

“Thank you, Sire,” she said with a slight bow, and turned to hand the scroll to Franz.

The Mighty Zeus nodded to The Pink Child. "You have done well. You may take your leave now, and go to The Land of Play."

"Yes, Sire!" she said with a big smile.

Franz was about to unroll the scroll when The Mighty Zeus said, "Don't open it yet, Franz." With a gentle rustling of his tunic, he rose from his throne. "I would have you walk with me. We need to talk."

"Is something troubling you, Sire? Have I...?"

"No, my son, you have done nothing. And yes, something is troubling me." He was deep in thought as he led Franz through a wide arch leading to a beautifully manicured garden.

From there, they strolled down many paths in companionable silence until they came to The Cathedral of the Rose. This was a sacred place where blood-red roses grew among the majestic ruins, and were thought to actually contain the blood of Christ. The shredded walls were covered with these roses, forming a kind of arbor in which The Sealed Books were kept.

Franz's eyes scanned the Cathedral as if he'd never seen it before. "Why did you bring me here?"

"In truth, I am not sure. And yet..." He looked over at Franz. "Franz, you are very special to me. Not only because of your extraordinary powers, but because I have grown very fond of you. I am aware of how you came to be one of us, however, I was hoping in spite of it, you might eventually come to feel at home here." He gave Franz a long and reflective look, and lowered his head sadly. "But I know it is not what you want, and I cannot continue to ask you to be loyal to a destiny you had forced upon you."

"Mighty One, I..."

"No need to say anything, Franz. I realize how torn you are between these two worlds. Ties, no matter how old, are hard to break, I imagine." He looked out at the sea of blood-red roses, and after a few moments of silence, he continued speaking. "Because of a certain state of affairs that I am not at liberty to divulge, I find I shall be able to reward you." He looked down, and indicated toward the scroll. "You have been summoned to your household."

"Being all-knowing, I am aware of what awaits you there. I could take you into the Cathedral and show you what is written in The Book of Fates, assuring the outcome, but I don't think I will. Although I am tempted, I cannot play favoritism, Franz. What awaits you in your human domicile will be very traumatic for you."

“It’s very important for you to prove to me you deserve the reward I have chosen for you.” Putting his hand on Franz’s shoulder and squeezing, he said with a stab of emotion, “My son, it would hurt me deeply to see the glowing words of triumph, which I know are written there, changed to those of defeat.”

“Mighty One, I know it is not your intent, but you are planting fear in my heart.”

“No, do not be fearful, my son. However, you must know this. I will be at The Windows of the World watching, and when the moment comes that tells me what I need to know, you will get your reward, or with a wave of my scepter, be doomed to rule The Tarot Card for all eternity.”

“But that would mean....”

“Yes. That all ties to the physical world will be broken, with no hope of returning.”

“Sire, why has this happened?”

“The Fates have decreed it. In doing so, they are locking the door between our worlds for all time. When that happens, you will find yourself on one side, or the other. I can only hope it will be the side that will bring you the most happiness.”

With deep concern on his face, and slow, uncertain movements, Franz unrolled the scroll. In only a few thrashing heartbeats, he looked up at the Mighty Zeus. “You are right, Sire. I have been summoned to my household.”

“You may go, but remember what I told you, and act accordingly.”

Without speaking, Franz stepped back, bowed low, and turned.

The Mighty One watched as the impressive figure of The Magician walked down the lane, getting lost in The Mists of Time. When Franz came to The Point of Departure, he descended a long staircase and slowly disappeared into an atmosphere of clouds and mist.

Chapter 3

The devoted butler stood waiting, his eyes trained upon a painting that hung over the fireplace. When he saw a glittering mist exude from it, he straightened himself and stood at attention until the faint glow formed and took on substance.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you," the butler whispered, "however, I am afraid something very odd has happened."

"It's all right, Thorn. I know it must be important since you're not a man easily..."

While Franz was speaking, Thorn moved from his Master's line of vision, and watched his reaction.

Franz gasped when he saw what seemed to him a living fantasy—a woman right out of his dreams lying as still as death on his couch. Her pale skin gave her an ethereal glow, and her long glossy, curling lashes caught the light and glittered like tiny diamonds as they swept down across her high cheekbones. She was very curvy, with long fluid lines begging to be touched. She had a wealth of long hair that gleamed with rich, red highlights spread out seductively over the pillows instead of being confined to a bun.

He frowned slightly at her scandalous clothing, and realized she wasn't wearing a corset. Instead, she wore pants, like a man, and an indecent slip of a blouse that didn't even have enough material to cover her midriff. And her shoes, they were like stilts. How did she walk in them?

"Who is she?" Franz whispered, almost in awe of the lovely creature.

"There was hardly time, sir. She simply came in, and collapsed."

"Get a room ready," he commanded.

"Yes, sir." The butler turned to the maid. "A room, Matilda. Immediately."

"Sir," the woman responded hesitantly, "I know it ain't my place and all, but, well, do'ya think it's wise to move her?"

Thorn turned to the impertinent maid. "She only fell to the floor from a standing position. It isn't as if she fell from any great height."

The maid glowered at him. "She was in an accident. Something could be broken. Poor thing probably needs a doctor."

"She's right," Franz said. "She may be seriously hurt."

Sticking her nose high in the air, the maid looked at the older man triumphantly.

"A room," Thorn reminded her. "We cannot keep her on this bloody couch forever. Get a room ready!"

With a quick tilt of her head, and a muttering under her breath, the maid left.

"Dreadful night to be out," the butler offered when he saw his Master lower himself to the edge of the couch. "Sir, if you no longer need me...."

"Yes, of course. You may take your leave. I will check for any broken bones in your absence."

With a slight nod of his head, Thorn turned and followed Matilda to make sure she would warm the bed for the injured woman.

* * * *

Franz hesitated at first, his hand hovering in the air above her. She had a slim, wild beauty that was almost mesmerizing and his palms tingled at the thought of touching her. Lowering his hand slowly, he stroked her lightly at first, the feel of her firm young body causing something to happen inside him, a quickening of his senses below the belt.

Try as he might, he couldn't keep his wayward cock from stiffening—a fire from gathering between his legs. His hands were surprisingly steady as they continued to move, his straying gaze coming to rest on her full, lush breasts. He wasn't used to seeing a woman's breasts outside her stays, and to see them natural this way caused a jolt deep inside him. The thin material of her blouse even allowed him to see the bold outline of her nipples pressed against it. It was such a brazen picture, he could almost feel those stiffened globes being indecently drawn into his mouth by his hungry tongue.

The thought caused a hot ache to fill his throat.

He found himself caressing her like a lover, his fingers slow, his wandering gaze feasting on the hollow of her neck filled with soft shadows.

While his heart hammered in his chest, suddenly she whimpered and began to writhe beneath his touch. Surprised, his hands lifted for a moment, and then continued on their trembling journey. A sharp, almost biting delight filled him when his thumb brushed her breast, and lingered.

Again, she moaned as if his touch excited her.

Suddenly her hand drifted up and pressed his, pushing it over her breasts while her body writhed. His senses reeled drunkenly, setting his body aflame. He squeezed, and tweaked her nipples, his mouth tingling with the desire to taste them. When her hips began to move, his gaze traveled downward, and his breath caught at the sight of the juncture of her thighs. The heat raged inside him—leaping flames that burst from the furnace of his own body. The tide rose and swelled inside him, buffeting his mind, drugging his senses. Never before had he been so aware of a woman beneath his fingertips.

He could feel himself becoming utterly captivated by her. Each place his hands touched caused her to writhe and moan while giving out exclamations of delight. He had never known a woman so alive he could simply touch her and she would respond like a scarlet woman.

My God, he had found a wild creature on his doorstep, a wanton in this world of prim maidens, a woman with a beauty beyond anything he had ever seen, or could even imagine. Her reactions to his touch had shown him that she was passionate, and liked to be fondled. The idea of having such a willing woman made the fire of desire leap wildly within his groin. His hungry gaze lowered to the soft, white flesh stretching scandalously between her breasts and her pants. The sight of it made him so hot, he became increasingly restless. He could only imagine what it would be like to have her—to be caught up in a dizzying, passionate embrace, his cock buried so deep within her pussy each plunge would send him deeper and deeper into carnal madness.

With a quick darting of his gaze he looked around the room to make sure he wasn't being observed. The room was empty, so his hand moved brazenly toward the exposed area and touched her lightly. He sighed and closed his eyes at the smooth, velvety feel of her skin. She answered him with a moan that drove him on into the forbidden area of her body.

While holding his breath, his hand moved, his fingers slipping beneath the edge of her pants until he found her navel and the soft mound of her

abdomen. He knew what lay just beyond, but couldn't get to it without undoing her pants.

He looked up at her. What if she woke and found him fondling her? Would she open her legs to him, or push him away? The answer to these questions were in her writhing body when he touched her. The idea sent a sinful rush of heat creeping along his neck. Willing to take the chance, he slowly leaned over her, his hungry tongue reaching out, tasting, savoring her soft, silky skin.

A deep, exotic fragrance rose into his nostrils, the heady scent causing his mouth to open and suckle as it moved boldly upward toward her breasts. When at last his hot, scorching tongue had just barely touched a nipple, he could feel it getting hard beneath the brush of his tongue.

And then suddenly he heard a sound.

Feeling a jolt of guilt, he lifted himself quickly, wiping at the beads of sweat on his forehead, and pulling at his collar where the heat continued to gather around his neck.

God, what had made him do it?

He wasn't a man ruled by his passions. Never had he allowed himself to become so captivated as he was with this woman. With these impure thoughts going through his mind, his quick gaze angled toward his butler who had just entered the room.

He had never seen anyone who was less welcome in his sight.

He wanted him somewhere else, not watching his wandering hands caress her thighs, her arms, her shoulders. He wanted to be alone to touch her breasts, feel their firmness, and see the shiver of delight he was certain would pass through her. It was torture to withdraw his tingling hands from the young, supple body.

"Apparently, there are no bones broken," he finally said as he rose slowly from her side and approached the older man who discreetly waited in the background. "What happened?"

"I think she was trying to tell me that she had some sort of difficulty with her—" The butler hesitated. He remembered her saying *car*, which he figured was some kind of young person's deviation of *carriage*, so he improvised. "—her carriage. An accident of some sort, I believe. To be honest, sir, she was quite disoriented. Her words were rather strange. I could not quite make sense of what she was saying." The butler touched his chin

with his fingers as if in thought. "It seems she mentioned *lightning*, or some such thing."

"Lightning?" Franz repeated, a chill creeping up his spine. He remembered the battle in which he had assisted Olympus in their fight against The Dark Region. Had a bolt gone awry?

"Yes, sir. Not to worry. I'm sure she'll be fine."

"Were there any servants with her? A chaperone, perhaps?"

"She was quite alone, sir."

"Strange." Franz eyed her curiously. "Did she present a calling card?"

"No, sir," the butler said quickly. "A rather unique young woman, to say the least. She wanted to use—" Again the butler hesitated. "—the *telly*, or some such thing. I didn't have a chance to find out what she meant."

"Well, judging from her appearance and her language, she must be from somewhere else. America, perhaps. The parts that are settled seem to be filled with barbarians. I have heard all kinds of stories. I am sure you have, as well."

"Yes, sir."

"In any event, she will have to stay until she is stronger. I will expect you to see she is comfortable, and report to me of her condition as you see fit." Something caught his eye and he leaned forward to pick up the dead cell phone lying on the floor.

After examining the strange looking object, he handed it to the hovering butler, and then lowered his voice to a guarded tone. "I am sure I do not have to remind you that I cannot be disturbed. Think up some plausible excuse for my absence, and make sure her carriage is repaired."

"I have already informed her the house is in mourning, sir. I'm sure that under the circumstances, she will not expect too much activity."

"I am afraid this puts something of a strain on you," Franz said. "I must apologize for that."

"Apologize, sir?"

"Yes. It is possible some mishap of my magick may have brought her here. I cannot imagine what could have happened. It will be difficult for you having someone in the house who is not...."

"Please, sir," the butler said, with a relaxed smile. "Put your fears to rest. Her stay will be brief. Nothing to it, really. I will manage quite capably."

“Good man.”

They turned to look at her when they heard a soft moan. “She is waking,” the butler whispered.

“Try to explain my absence as best you can. Naturally, I do not wish to be rude, but, well, I must attend to my duties. A guest at this time is most inconvenient.”

“Just leave it to me, sir. I will handle everything.”

Visibly relieved, Franz laid his hand favorably on the older man’s shoulder, and spoke sincerely. “You’re a good man, Thorn, I simply don’t know what I would do without you.”

A thin smile graced the butler’s face. “We do our best, sir.”

Without the sound of scuffling footsteps, or swishing movements, Franz disappeared into the darkness, seen only seconds later on the landing. Standing perfectly still, he detected her scent on his hands. He brought his hands upward and sniffed. The scent was glorious. It smelled of musk and wild flowers. It wasn’t a scent he was familiar with, but one he enjoyed tremendously. It reminded him he’d been without a woman far too long. Perhaps it was the reason he’d had such a strong reaction to this one.

Was she really as beautiful as he’d imagined, or was he simply so hungry, anyone would look good to him? Had her moans ripped deeply into his belly causing him to begin to harden, or had he only imagined it? Was she an answer to a prayer, or had a demon invaded his kingdom? Who was she, and where had she come from? A long way, perhaps, since she was a creature with long, flowing hair, and a body blatantly revealed instead of being hidden under hoops and skirts.

His hands still tingled from the sensuous touch of her curves—lush curves that were outlined scandalously beneath a thin material that would make a man long for a candlelit room, a bed—and her. He knew he shouldn’t, but his large hand lowered to the balustrade, and he turned slowly toward the study.

He could still see her lying there. Yes, she was beautiful, it was not his imagination. Her hair was as red as he’d remembered. Her skin still glowed like porcelain in the dim light, her body round and firm. His fingers still tingled from each caress. He still wanted to lean over her and feel her warm, sensuous breasts press against his chest. He wanted—

Suddenly she moved and he quickly stepped back into a shadow.

Chapter 4

In the velvety blackness of her void, she felt a presence outside herself. A presence sensual and warm, giving off a very male fragrance. Her body instantly reacted to it, her back arching, and her nipples almost painfully taut. She tingled as his clean spicy odor stole over her like a caress.

His touch had soothed her, his quiet whispering accent comforted her. She listened for the drum of the voice that made passion slowly inch through her veins. When the moment of awareness came to her, she lunged forward, the wet cloth falling from her head.

“Where am I?”

“You are in the home of Franz Staresini,” the stiff butler offered, coming forward from his position by the door. “From what I understand, you were in an accident.” When she made no response, he continued, “Your carriage? Lightning?”

“My what?” she murmured, grabbing her head and frowning. Had he said ‘carriage,’ or....

“By the way, you presented no calling card.”

“Calling card? What the hell is a calling card?”

The butler’s brows raised when he heard the curse word fall easily from her mouth. “Well,” he began, his words uncertain as he tried to explain, “it is customary to present a calling card upon arrival to someone’s home, a manner of identifying who you are, of course.”

She frowned. What the hell was he talking about? Carriages? Calling Cards? “My name is Dana. Dana Perrin.”

“You also arrived with no chaperone, or servants. Are you a married lady? Is there a *Mr.* Perrin somewhere?”

Chaperone, servants. This was getting weirder by the minute. “No, I’m not married.”

His brows raised in speculation. "Very good." With a clap of his hands, a thin woman in a black dress appeared at the door. "Bring tea," he said, and when he noticed she was still holding her head, he added, "and a headache powder, I would imagine."

"Please," Dana managed around the pain. "That's really not necessary."

"I'm afraid it is. The Master would never forgive me if I allowed someone to come into his home without extending the proper courtesies."

"The *Master*?" She replied curiously, wondering what the title meant. When she reached upward to smooth her wild red hair, she gave a groan at the pounding pain in her head.

Watching her slow movements and pale face, a frown creased Thorn's forehead. "Miss, after you have taken your tea, I think you need to rest."

"I'm sure I'll be fi..." Just at that moment something caught her eye and she quickly turned her head toward a splash of vivid colors. There on the wall above the fireplace was an extraordinary painting of The Magician Tarot Card. The Magician himself was a husky, tall, and extremely handsome man standing against a black sky full of lightning bolts.

Lightning!

Mesmerized by the painting, she leaned forward and stared intently at his face. Who was he and why did he seem so familiar? She'd seen him somewhere, knew him from somewhere. The sensations she had experienced just before she woke came back to her. The fragrance of a virile male with a deep, velvety accent and a spicy, woody fragrance wafting around him.

She looked at the butler. "Someone was in here earlier. I vaguely recall a man wearing spicy cologne. Who was he?"

"Only the Master, miss. He was here making sure you were all right."

She looked back up at the painting. "Is that him?"

Thorn followed her gaze. "Yes, as a matter of fact."

She knew him, but how could she? He wasn't anyone she'd ever met. Still, he seemed familiar. At a party perhaps, or in her dreams? With her gaze still on him, she rose slowly from the couch. Each step took her closer to the huge canvas of vivid oils, her gaze raking over his painted form. His hair lay in long, dark waves to his shoulders, his eyebrows deeply arched, and his lips curved sensuously, revealing their lushness in soft hills and

valleys. He had long sideburns, and wore one golden earring in his left ear that glinted in the light cleverly created by the artist.

His apparel was strange. A costume? It consisted of a black cape with a red lining, and it blew in the wind. Beneath it, he wore a black skin-tight body stocking with a bolt of glittering red lightning on the chest area. His boots were short, ankle-top, and out of them rose muscled legs that just about took her breath away.

With his hands on his hips, he looked like some kind of super hero about to save the world. On his handsome face just below the edge of his right eye was a small, star-shaped birthmark. It accentuated his flashing blue eyes, almond-shaped and dangerously hypnotic.

Beneath the painting was a gold strip with the words *The Magician* inscribed on it. The words brought with them a strange foreboding she couldn't seem to shake. Suddenly, she sensed the old man approach her from behind.

As they both gazed upward toward the painting, the old man spoke in soft tones, a certain awe in his voice. "He calls himself a magician, but he is so much more. A *mystic*, if you will. There is nothing he cannot do. His extraordinary fame has spread to other worlds, other spheres."

"Worlds and spheres?" Dana repeated, cutting her gaze back to Thorn. "Forget the tea. I think I'll have a little of what you've been drinking."

Her strange reply jarred Thorn out of his reverie, and his shifting gaze cut toward her guiltily. "Did I say...?" He chuckled nervously. "Oh, miss, you must not pay any attention to the ramblings of an old man with a vivid imagination."

"Pretty powerful, huh?" Dana turned back to the painting. "Mystic," she said thoughtfully. "There is something vaguely familiar...."

"You have heard of him?"

"Not in the way you mean, but yes, I think I have." As she stared, her next words were soft, sounding almost awe-struck. "There's a certain mystery in his eyes. They're almost fathomless. Do you see it? He must be very powerful."

"Yes, but unfortunately there is a price to pay."

"A price?" she asked, turning to the old man. "What do you mean?"

“His gift has made him scandalously rich, as you can see by all that surrounds him. However, he is a tortured soul, I’m afraid. He only comes out at night and frequently walks the cliffs until he exorcises his demons.

She looked into the butler’s dark, mysterious eyes. “Only at night? You mean like a vampire?”

“Vampires are for the addle-brained, miss. What he is, goes much deeper than that. Let me warn you not to expect much socializing while you are here. His duties are varied and very demanding, and will take most of his time. At other times, he will be keeping to himself since, as I said earlier, he is in mourning.”

“What exactly is his work?”

“Work?” Thorn scoffed. “How mundane. How *very* mundane.” Proud to the core, he couldn’t resist bragging just a little as he elegantly straightened his cuffs. “Let us just say, he attends the gods. They use him in battle to perform miracles.”

“You’re kidding!”

“*Kidding?*” the butler said while raising his eyebrows. “I do not believe I know that word.”

She chuckled. “You expect me to believe—”

“Miss Perrin,” the huffy butler said, “the Master could easily call lightning down from the heavens.”

Lightning!

She looked back up at the painting, and even though he did look impressive as he stood surrounded by a sky full of lightning, she didn’t believe a word the bragging butler said. This man was only a magician in a costume who did tricks to amaze his audience, nothing more.

The fact that the butler was a proud peacock of a man who refused to allow anyone to think his master was anything except the very best at what he did, was only loyalty at work. After all, a magician wasn’t a miracle worker, and if she let him go on bragging, he would probably have the man walking on water. At that moment, his low, ominous voice reached her ears as he continued with his ridiculous dialogue.

“Power such as his frightens people, I’m afraid,” the man whispered. “As a result, he does not have many friends.”

“But why? Is he dangerous?”

“Only to himself.” His voice became deep and ominous. “No mortal man was ever meant to have such power.”

Hearing the unease in Thorn’s voice, Dana peered at him closely. The look in his eyes as he focused on the painting sent a chill slowly crawling up her spine. She could almost be convinced the old man was telling the truth. His eyes were oddly morbid, as if they could remember each and every unthinkable marvel they had witnessed.

Finally shaking himself free from his thoughts, the old man’s face became etched with concern. “You are still weak, miss. Perhaps you would like to lie down.”

“No, no, I’m fine. Tell me, who just died?”

“Died? Oh, yes. His dear mother just passed.” The man’s eyes held sadness. “Terrible tragedy.”

“Tragedy? What happened?”

Looking around to see if anyone were listening, he leaned close to her. “Drank poison.”

“Oh, my God!” When?”

Very recently. In fact, her grave that sits on the small rise in the family graveyard is still fresh. Only a few days before she was found si—”

“Sitting at the dining room table,” Dana finished for him, and continued, “She was darkly beautiful, her delicate arm outstretched. The hand that held the glass was lying limp, the glass tilted over, the wine glowing as it spread across the table. Her blood-red nails matched the deep red of her lips. The rich burgundy liquid made a long, winding trail until it reached the edge, at which time it dripped, like blood, to the floor.”

She could see the words in her mind, written down somewhere. Dana shook her head, but the image of the darkly beautiful woman with her arm outstretched wouldn’t leave her mind. She could see the woman’s pulse slowly pumping, almost feel it, the thick red blood swirling and flowing, until suddenly, right before her eyes *it stopped!*

Dana gave a start, and gasped, a death-like chill crawling up her spine. The wine, it must have been.... Oh, God, the woman had drunk poisoned wine! Where had this vision of death come from? She didn’t know the woman, had never met her, yet she knew every nuance of the scene. She saw a long table, the woman’s dark red nails as she held the glass, the glow of the burgundy wine as it spilled across the dark wood grain. She could even

hear the heavy strike of the glass against the table! Suddenly, she felt close to the woman, as if she'd known her. All at once something changed. Oh, God! Was it her imagination, or did she smell the pungent odor of wet grave dirt?

"That describes the scene perfectly." The butler scowled at her. "How did you know? How *could* you—?"

"She must have been an actress," Dana whispered, ignoring his unfinished question.

"Why do you say that?"

"The drama. Only an actress, or someone in show business would think up such a dramatic scene."

"As a matter of fact, she was in a couple of plays—only small parts, of course. Her professional name was simply Sarafina. Very elegant, don't you think? Like her son, she had great talent. The whole family, in fact, is talented beyond anything that can be imagined."

The old man's gaze lifted upward into the rafters, his voice taking an ominous tone. "She walks these halls, you know. At night between midnight and three, you can see her floating along the staircase, or hear her playing the grand piano in the music room." His eyes became distant. "The music is...well, it resonates as if it were coming all the way from..." He stopped suddenly, realizing he had forgotten himself again.

"Please go on." Dana looked at him intently, wondering if he would say heaven or hell!

"Please forgive me." His lids lowered, giving her a strange angled look. "You cannot go out again tonight. I will check on your room while you have your tea."

"Oh, no, I couldn't put you out."

"Nonsense. It's no trouble at all." He departed with a secret smile that chilled Dana right down to her toes. He had walked only a few feet when he stopped, turned, and with all the grace and culture his position required, said, "You may call me...Thorn."

Why did the name send an eerie echo around the room?

Later, with the edge of a teacup poised at her mouth, she felt surrounded by a heavy presence that seemed to permeate the study. It was him. He was all over the place. The smells were his—tobacco, port, spicy men's cologne,

even the odor of books bound in expensive leather. It was truly a man's room.

His room, she thought as she glanced up at the hypnotic painting. Suddenly, as if formed by the masculine scents that tickled her nose, he appeared on the landing. Her gaze shifted slightly and she saw him standing there, his hands fisted and resting on his hips. Their eyes met, his mesmerizing gaze sending out sparks of blue fire through the dim, murky shadows.

He was dressed in a red pirate shirt, the front gaping open almost down to his waist. His black trousers were skin tight, and he wore knee-high boots. The beauty of his form took her breath away, and she felt herself held captive by the burning intensity of his gaze.

All too soon, he was gone, and she simply stared, bewildered.

Had he really been there only seconds before, or were her eyes playing tricks on her? Had she really seen him, only to have him mist away into thin air? All at once, as if to pull her out of her dream state, Thorn, in his somber black attire, appeared in her line of vision, obstructing her view of the darkened landing.

With a slight bow, he said, "The Master has kindly extended an invitation for you to stay as long as needed since your carriage ..."

His voice thinned as her mind began to whirl with her own thoughts. *Where did the elusive magician go?* She stretched her neck to see around Thorn, but the landing was dark and vacant. *Had he actually...? No. No, it hadn't happened. People, not even magicians, mist away just like that.*

"Are you comfortable?"

"Huh?" Her attention was drawn back to Thorn.

"I say, are you comfortable?"

She looked down at the tea service. "Oh, yes. The tea is delicious." She looked back up at him with a questioning frown. "Were you saying something about my car?"

"I simply stated that your *carriage* would be repaired first thing in the morning. In the meantime I have prepared a room..."

"A room?" she said, excitedly. "Thorn, I can't say, I have a plane to catch." She extended her arm and tapped on her watch. "Look, I have exactly one hour to get to the airport. Don't you have an all night garage around here somewhere? I need my car!" When she saw Thorn's mouth

gaping open as if she'd just spouted the theory of relativity, she had to face the awful truth. She was never going to catch that plane. She was caught in a world of red carpets, flickering flames and dark staircases. The pace was slow, even sluggish, and she had no alternative but to slow down as well, or go absolutely mad. Just when she thought it couldn't get any worse, her pounding headache came back, and Thorn's proper English accent she thought so beautiful before, only irritated her now.

"I'm sorry if you're displeased," Thorn replied, "but I assure you that your carriage will be repaired at first opportunity."

There it was again—carriage! La-ti-da. Nothing as mundane as car, or automobile, but carriage. Oh, well. It had been her experience that the English had their own language, and 'carriage' instead of 'car' was just one example. While these thoughts danced in her head, she finally gave up the fight, and said, "Yes, thank you, Thorn."

Thorn was aware of her displeasure, and said, "Is there something bothering you?"

"Oh, nothing, really. It's just—" she hesitated, not wanting to fight that battle again, and said simply, "I-I thought I saw your master." She pointed past him toward the landing. "There."

He turned briefly to look in the direction of her pointing finger, and then looked back. "No, miss," he said simply, "you did not see anything."

Chapter 5

Almost three.

“Dammit!” she said as she lowered her face in her hands. She had no doubt she would be fired, but she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t even call Mr. Sherman to explain her situation, and she had no car to get anywhere. She had to give up talking to Thorn. The stress at trying to make him understand had brought on her headache again. What was it about ‘airport’ and ‘plane’ that brought on that lost look he gave her? She might as well be talking to a wall—or knocking her head against it. At least that’s how he made her feel. Finally, she lifted her face, combed her hair back with her fingers, and jumped up to begin pacing.

As bad as that was, it wasn’t the only thing that concerned her,

Somehow she’d become trapped in some kind of bizarre nightmare.

Everything around her—the wallpaper, the furniture, the old mansion—it all seemed to be part of another century. As she inhaled the smell of sweet oil and paraffin, she walked to a window and gazed out on the ocean. Where did it come from? That dark, country road she walked down was in New York, and the nearest ocean was Coney Island—and yet here she was looking out on the darkest, most restless ocean she’d ever seen.

No way was it Coney Island.

The days that followed saw her falling into a routine. The alarm clock woke her for breakfast at seven, and her day was spent learning as much as she could about her benefactor. He never came down for meals and she never saw him, except as part of some fleeting shadow. At night, as Thorn had said, the piano played.

Many times, she’d left her bed to go to the music room as she did that night, but as soon as she opened the door, the music stopped abruptly, and there was nothing. Only eerie, ghostly silence. The piano stood vacant, the

French doors open and a raw night wind lifting the sheer white curtains in the gusting breeze.

She knew someone had fled into the night only a moment before, but who? Since she didn't believe in ghosts, she stood at the gaping door looking out at the restless sea, expecting to see someone, possibly the elusive magician exorcising his demons. Had he been the one at the piano, or had it been Sarafina? Who was out there now, avoiding her as usual? Walking, maybe running along the precipice to get away from her? Catching a chill, she turned quickly and ran back to her room.

He'd grown to be such an enigma to her, she could think of nothing but solving this little mystery. She knew he was in mourning, but this was ridiculous. It had come to the point that Thorn conveyed his messages to her, extended courtesies, stood in his stead when the mysterious magician couldn't be present, which was all the time. It seemed as if Thorn stood as a door between them, a door she couldn't open or close. Why was he so mysterious?

By now, her curiosity was at its peak, and mere thoughts turned to dreams, fantasies. How it would be to have him hold her, to feel his kiss upon her lips, his hot breath on her neck.

Maybe she'd never know. Maybe she'd leave this house never knowing anything about this man who was here, and yet he wasn't. He was like a mist that couldn't be caught, a puff of wind that couldn't be contained, a drop of rain that dried up when the sun came out.

Now, with another night full of misty appearances, she became frustrated. With a sob, she fell facedown on her bed, her fears and uncertainty growing until at last she felt herself being gently lifted into The Land of Erotic Dreams.

She stood surrounded by a blue heaven with white mist swirling about her. White crenellated columns soared upward into an open heaven, garden walls that bowed and curved, surrounded unbelievable beauty that lay beyond ornate arches. There were staircases climbing high into the misty atmosphere, floating rooms, mirrors that reflected eternity, and endless corridors that went on forever.

At that moment, she saw The Magician, who slowly appeared from out of the mist. He walked like a prowling cat as he stalked toward her, his

movements slow and dramatic. She was filled with a myriad of voices and feelings and she knew they came from him.

She sensed pictures of both of them writhing on a bed of satin, deep probing kisses, and the erotic sensation of oil on her skin. She thrilled at the touch of his hands, his lips, and his tongue as it caressed her. She realized quickly that sensation ruled his world and there was no need for words. A transfer of thoughts was possible.

While she continued to languish in erotic images of tangled sheets, flailing limbs, writhing bodies and hot, scorching, forbidden thoughts, his silent voice came through again telling her this was his domicile in another world.

She was immediately reminded of something Thorn had said to her, and the words rang inside her head.

...his extraordinary fame has spread to other worlds, other spheres...

However, the words were forgotten as quickly as they came, when she felt a gentle grasp of his hand on hers, pulling her toward him until she was in his arms, her eyes and her senses quickly immersed in his. A deep, sultry heat reflected in his eyes, and without saying a word, he leaned her backward, his lips only inches from hers, their hot breath mingling.

She thrilled at the feel of his muscled body, and drank in his nearness. She could feel the kiss of the mist as he swept her up in his arms and gently carried her to a bed with white, sparkling satin sheets, and lay her down.

Dana felt herself becoming so very aroused, fear turning to fire in her stomach. As each piece of their clothing vanished, he lay down beside her, his mouth and his hands playing her body like an instrument. The thrill of his touch made her sizzle with a host of scorching electric vibrations she'd never felt before. As his face loomed nearer, why did she feel the world would end if she never felt his lips upon hers? Closer they came until they touched slightly, pressing, moving, teasing, until she opened to him, his heat melting away every inhibition she had.

When his hands at last found her breasts, she let out a soft growling moan, and arched upward, feeling the hardness of his muscled chest.

She felt such an intense need for him to know her, to love her, to claim her with his mouth, his hands, and body. She couldn't remember when she'd felt this wild, this needy. She wanted him to sink into her, to thrust so deeply, bringing with him a glorious delight of pleasure she'd never known.

Suddenly, his breath became heavy and passionate. He buried his mouth in the soft curve of her neck, his fingers digging into the soft cloud of her hair, his mouth and tongue ravishing her until she felt ready to explode.

Wanting more, he moved downward until he began to suckle her breasts. She arched her back like the animal she had become when his mouth covered her nipple, his tongue stroking, caressing and drawing on each one in turn.

His cock was hard—almost brutal against her. Suddenly, she heard a silent command. While he continued to suckle her like a starving man, he told her to lift her legs. Willingly, she opened for him, and she felt him settle himself between her thighs. A blast of heat and raging desire consumed her when his rampant cock touched the folds of her cunt, gently nudging her, causing an explosion of heat to engulf her.

She had to touch it, handle it.

Because he knew what she was thinking, he lifted himself so her hand could get between them. She could hear him urging her on, and she grasped him firmly. Suddenly, she had an urge to take him into her mouth. Again, understanding her desires, he turned on his back, and she lay over him, her mouth already opening to the large cock that stood stiff and beautiful before her.

Drawn to it like a magnet, she gave him a gentle lick at first, followed by a daring suckle. Growing bolder, she opened her mouth, and with a tongue that licked and drew, she covered him hungrily.

She could almost taste the life inside it as she felt it tremble in her mouth. He moaned, digging his fingers into her hair while his hips began to thrust. When she knew he was within seconds of a climax, he jerked her upward. She moaned lustily when she felt his hot breath on her ear, and his heavy body over hers.

With her thighs once more cradling him, her lids flew open when he suddenly thrust himself inside her filling her so fully that she cried out. She became dizzy with desire when he began to plunge over and over and over again. She had the urge to lift her legs higher, allowing him to plunge deeper, riding her with wild, untamed abandon that thrilled her until she was drowning in a joyous burst of ecstasy.

She clung to him, thrashed beneath him, and moaned his name over, and over, and over again.

Franz... Franz... Franz...

Until her eyes opened to darkness, and she found the hot, exciting swirl of an orgasm didn't come from a dark, handsome magician, it came from the hand she found between her legs.

Oh, God! What was happening to her? She knew she'd been there. She could describe the setting in stark detail, hear his hot, accented words even though they were spoken to her mind.

It was real!

He was real!

She knew it!

There was no one she could go to, no way she could prove it.

The enigma grew.

Day after day, she lived with eyes that glowed in the dark, shifting shadows, distant, obscure forms with shuffling feet. And at night, from the window of her room, she continued to see his dark form walking along the edge of the precipice, a fleeting figure as light as air.

The night finally came when she dared to follow him.

When she knew he was coming in the back door of the mansion, she quickly found a spot and waited. The shadows of the old house surrounded her like living beings as she watched breathlessly from a shadowy perch at the top of the stairs. The air was close, the shadows swaying as the candles undulated in a soft breeze. The hush was so great around her, she could hear the nervous heaving of her own breath as she stood silent.

A rustling of feet and a creaking of boards told her he was climbing the long staircase. Her heart pounded, her pulses thrummed as he stealthily came to the last step, and crept along the darkened hallway passing within inches of her. Did he know she was there? Could he feel her presence as she could feel his?

Staying close to the walls, she followed him, feeling a chill when the yellow glow from the undulating lights caused his moving silhouette to climb the towering walls, creating a shadow of monstrous proportions.

As he moved further ahead, she slipped from one place to another, trying to keep her eyes on him. What made the shadows shift, the space between them seem to stretch before her eyes? Watching every move he made, she ran, a darting of bare feet peeking from beneath her robe. She saw only flashes of him before he disappeared behind a door, or around a corner. But

when he misted into a million tiny sparkling lights, she wondered—is he a man or a ghost?

While following sounds or movements she thought were his, she found herself in a remote area of the mansion, confused by all the winding corridors. Musty carpet smells tickled her nose, long neglected portraits seemed to emit the pungent odor of grease and paint causing her to imagine the colors melting and dripping.

She cringed as the eyes of dead ancestors seemed to follow her from one corner of the old mansion to the other. Old oil lamps nestled in dark corners or down a long expanse of wall, the flames flickering and sputtering as they danced mysteriously to some distant music.

The smell of hot oil, beeswax, and dust permeated the darkness, lending the house an Old World look and feel. She couldn't shake the impression she was caught in some kind of time warp with an elusive magician who chose to surround himself in an atmosphere of mystery.

Now, as she stood in the middle of a corridor that branched off in so many directions it made her dizzy, she looked around and saw a room that seemed to beckon to her. She opened the door to find it full of tricks, ghastly masks, even a headless woman lying in a casket. The horrible sight had her gasping in terror. While backing away in fear, she stumbled, bumping into several pieces of furniture to get out. In her haste, she nudged a tall bookcase, only to have the head tumble out of a hatbox. When she saw it hurtling toward her, horror gripped her, and a bloodcurdling scream came bursting from her throat. While making a desperate lunge to get away, she noticed the glassy eyes, the sewn in hair, and stopped.

When she could breathe again, she found it was fake.

It was all fake, everything. Fake blood, a fake body.

Was the house also fake—*was he*?

Was she out on some country road dreaming right now?

Later, while shadows crowded around her, she found she was in his rehearsal room. No flickering oil lamps, nothing, not even a candle lent its light. In the radiance of a slice of moonlight, she saw a button on the wall and pushed it, thinking it was a light switch. Hearing what sounded like a rusty door opening, she looked around just in time to see a skeleton swooping out of the darkness, soaring toward her. She turned to run, but the

hard-edged, bony contraption hit her, knocking her down, and fell with a clatter upon the hard-tiled floor.

Her breath caught in her lungs. Fear seized her unmercifully, but the sprawling bones made no move toward her. Instead, the thing stared at her, through black holes that must have once been someone's eyes. Slowly, she began to inch forward, finding it was nothing more than another trick, an elaborately constructed box with some kind of spring geared to make it jump out at the unsuspecting visitor. It hung from a wire that for whatever reason, had been strung across the long room. She could imagine seeing it coasting above the heads of a screaming audience.

Suddenly, she understood.

He was leading her.

She had begun pursuing him, but quickly the prey had become the hunter. His thoughts told her in which direction to go. It was true, sensation did rule his world. He had only to think, to nudge, and she followed his every command. She looked around at the house.

At first, it was terrifying—this house of horrors, this parade of macabre faces that haunted her dreams, but she had learned that they were nothing. Only tricks, tricks that couldn't hurt her, and for whatever reason, he was her guide.

Suddenly, it was too much, and her tears burst forth like a flood. She had to get out of this room. She abruptly turned and ran as fast as she could. Her fleeing steps took her through the shadows, around the staircase, and into the study. At last, she was safe. No tricks here, no floating skeletons, no eyes peering at her from portraits of dead people. She was safe, unless he came to her. If he did, she knew she wouldn't be able to resist him.

She could sense a presence around her even now.

A touch, a hissing of breath, the thrumming of an excited heart, the lightly perfumed scent, the exotic spicy, woodsy fragrance stealthily coming with his presence. It was insubstantial, airy, but she exulted in it. Somehow, she knew he was close, and his touch sent thrills of excitement spiraling through her. She could sense him behind her, and whirled around, seeing nothing but his ghostly image reflected in the painting over the fireplace.

She wilted with disappointment.

She found herself longing for him, for his physical presence. She had grown tired of hot breath upon her ears, airy touches, whispers that echoed

around her. Now, she wanted to reach out and feel flesh and blood, but the nearest she could get to him was in her dreams. She looked up at the painting, at the roguish smile, the compelling eyes, the strange magnetism that was so potent.

From the very first moment she'd seen it, she'd had a strange reaction to it and now she wondered what it was that held her spellbound.

As she gazed upon it, in her fertile imagination, she saw him take her lips, followed by her very soul. At night, she could hear him whisper to her in subdued tones, feel a ghostly breeze and—was it a touch? She wasn't sure. How many times had she stood in her bedroom and felt a tiny caress along her arm? She knew it was Franz touching her so intimately in the night. *But how?*

To get away from his magnetic eyes, she suddenly turned and ran up the stairs to her room. The moment she opened the door, she was greeted by his presence, his flame-hot breath so bold her body reacted instantly. She leaned back on the door, her eyes closing, the thrill beginning at her center and burning outward until her whole body was consumed.

"Oh, God, Franz," she mumbled while writhing in his invisible arms, "who are you? What are you? Why won't you let me see you, feel your body? Please, Franz, I must touch you, I must!"

No answer came—only a misty kiss, a touch on her breast, a hand between her legs. The sensation of his fingers pushing up inside her caused an immediate orgasm to erupt within her, melting her until she turned boneless. Somehow she found herself on her bed, soft, husky, words—from somewhere—whispering in her ear. Something happened. For the first time ever, she felt a wicked desire spiral upward, and spread through her. Suddenly, her inhibitions fell away, and she became a wicked harlot—a wanton that would do anything to feel of his cock inside her. With frenzied movements, she tugged and pulled at her clothes, furiously discarding them as fast as she could.

She writhed at his touch—a touch that both tormented and thrilled her. It brought her higher and higher, reaching just short of the peak of desire. She could feel the pressure of his hands on her breasts, a fullness between her legs. All of a sudden, it came, the plunges that caused a passion to explode inside her. The intense fire that made her hips move wantonly as she gave herself to him grew until a firestorm began in her brain and melted

down her body. Suddenly, in her mind's eye she saw him! Dark, he was, his naked body above her, his eyes filled with lustful pleasure, and she was the object of that pleasure. She closed her eyes as he moved, his cock plunging in and out, rubbing against her clit, her g-spot, bringing her to such peaks of pleasure she couldn't speak. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, his breath became labored, and the look on his face as he fucked her over and over again was filled with such desire. Without thinking, she grabbed him, and instead of air, she felt his muscled hardness. It evoked such pleasure in her that she screamed with delight. They rode together, the bed squeaking, the air filled with the pungent odor of sex.

He teased her lips, her ears, flames of fire burning them, causing her to moan and shift from side to side while her hands splayed out grasping him, even digging her nails deep into his phantom-like body. Deep in the throes of passion, her breath became labored. She moaned out his name, each of them using the other's body for their pleasure, caressing, licking, sucking, until at last they shattered together.

Her lids, heavy and slumberous, opened at last and looked deep into the shifting shadows, hoping to see him again, but his misty form had departed.

The erotic fantasy that made her pulse with such a lush, deep opulence was wonderful. At last she had been able to touch him, to stroke the body she had seen in the painting. At last she'd been able to see the handsome man with the devilish smile who drew her somehow, spoke to her, touched her—*night after erotic night*.

Chapter 6

She slept for hours, at last waking and stretching with a smile on her face. She realized that she felt so completely satisfied, and remembered the midnight visit from Franz. Slowly, she rose and walked to the door of her bedroom and opened it. She wanted so much to see him. Her gaze slid along the corridor wondering where his room was. As many times as she'd followed him, she never saw him enter a room. Instead, she found only trick doors, revolving walls, everything a deception.

Was his existence a ruse, as well?

Was she the victim of a gigantic hoax?

All at once, a staggering thought hit her. She had no proof that he lived. She'd never actually saw him in the flesh, only as a wavering form that misted away after he had fucked her thoroughly.

Oh, God, was it true?

Was he *dead*?

Was she being fucked by an erotic ghost?

No, it wasn't true, surely!

A grave. Thorn had told her about a grave. He'd said it was Sarafina's grave, but he was lying! A chill crawled up her spine. It was *his* grave that lay out on the rise—the grave of her ghostly lover. Wanting answers, she went looking for Thorn. She found him polishing the silver and cornered him.

"Thorn," she said urgently.

"Good morning, miss. You slept late today. Are you ready for your breakfast?"

"Thorn, you have to tell me the truth."

"The truth? About what, miss."

"He's dead, isn't he?"

Thorn stopped what he was doing and looked at her strangely. “The Master?”

“Yes, the Master!”

“Why would you ask such a question?” He returned his attention to his task.

“I’ve been here for days, but all I’ve ever seen of him are shadows that float, whispers in my ears, light, airy touches. He never even comes down to meals. Tell me the truth. It’s his grave that sits on the rise, isn’t it?”

Thorn’s lip quivered in a suppressed smile. “Miss Perrin, I assure you, the Master is very much alive. He’s simply in mourning. His mother passed, after all. What would you expect him to do? He has asked that he be left alone in his grief. He is doing no more than I would expect of him.”

“But there are clothes in my closet, dresses with yards of skirt and hoops. Things found in roman—” All at once, her words hit her. *Oh, my God.* That’s why all this seems so familiar. They were words written on a page! She had read them with her own eyes, stepped into the heroine’s shoes!

The Devil’s Cup—she was the heroine in *The Devil’s Cup*!

Playing out each scene, saying the words, feeling the fears, crying the tears, and Franz was the hero! She reeled with the reality of what had happened. She hadn’t stepped back in time, at least not in the usual sense. She’d stepped into an historical romance novel!

She turned quickly, leaving Thorn staring after her. Flying up to her room, she threw things around until she at last found her bag stashed high up on a closet shelf. She dug into it until she found her novel. Grabbing it, she looked at the heroine on the front who could easily be her. Turning it quickly, she looked on the back at the blurb that described the book.

In a house full of shadows and long buried secrets, a young woman finds passion in the arms of an elusive magician who loves her to—death!

Death!

The word screamed out at her. Opening the book, she leafed to the last chapter and began reading. It was true! The heroine threw herself off the cliff in the back of the mansion! The same cliff she’d seen from the music room door, the same cliff the elusive magician walked nightly. She dropped the book as if it had suddenly caught fire. She had to be dreaming. She

wasn't living in a romance novel. That wasn't *her* on the cover. It wasn't possible!

She wasn't going to jump off a cliff and die!

Turning quickly, she ran back down to Thorn. "Thorn, I've got to talk to him. Where is he?"

"The Master is indisposed." He turned his head and gave her a pointed look over his half-glasses. "I believe I told you that."

"Well, *undispose* him! I have to talk to him. It's urgent!"

"*Undispose* him?" Thorn continued to peer at her from over his half glasses. "Really, Miss Perrin, where did you learn such language?"

"Quit stalling, Thorn! You know what I mean!"

A frown appeared on his face. "I will never get used to your American words. Stalling, indeed. Like you stall a horse?"

"Stalling! It means putting off, wasting time! *My* time!"

"Perhaps you should tell me the problem." Thorn lifted a bowl and examined it by trying to see himself in a portion of the polished silver. "Perhaps I can be of some help."

"You wouldn't understand, Thorn. It's something I must discuss with Franz! Please!"

Thorn turned and looked at her. "Franz?" he repeated. "My dear, it is very impolite to call the Master by his familiar name." He shot her a haughty look. "Even *I* do not call him Franz."

"I apologize for God's sake! Now, tell me where he is!"

"That I cannot do," he said stubbornly. "If you want to see him, you will have to wait until he is over his mourning period."

"When, Thorn? When will that be? Tomorrow? Next week? When?"

"A decent mourning period is one year." He cut his gaze toward her. "Even you must know that."

"But Sarafina...my God, it's only been..." Her words faded, and she looked back at Thorn. "Are you saying I'm expected to stay in this, this mausoleum for the rest of the year?"

"I am not saying anything, miss. It is not my decision."

She rolled her eyes and rubbed her hand along her forehead. "You're about as helpful as a bucket with a hole in it," she complained, and suddenly turned to him. "Thorn, does *The Devil's Cup* mean anything to you? Is all this part of a romance novel? Am I dreaming?"

Thorn looked at her with a sympathetic smile. “Miss, I do believe that bump on your head has done more damage than I thought. Keep talking like that, and I am afraid it will be some time before you are able to leave.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me, and I’m not crazy. I’m...I’m just confused!”

“Yes, well, whatever the case, your present arrangements must be taken up with the Master. I have nothing whatsoever to do with decisions made here. I simply do the Master’s bidding. As for the mourning period, I wouldn’t worry about that. But the clothes in your room, the ones you think belong in a—what did you call it—some kind of novel? They are the very finest in fashion today, sent over by a modiste in the village.”

There was that language again, language she hadn’t understood before, but now was blatantly clear. She had taken up residence between the pages of a book! She looked at Thorn, the drum of his words once again reaching her ears.

“He simply thought since your stay was longer than intended, you would be more comfortable with a change of clothing, so he provided them. Quite thoughtful, I must say. I am sorry you don’t appreciate his kindness.”

“My God, Thorn, don’t you understand? I don’t belong here. I have—or I *had* a life out there somewhere. And now, somehow, I’ve fallen into this trap, this elegant trap with cardboard characters where nothing is real.” Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. “My car,” she said quickly, “where is my car?”

“I am sorry, miss, but no carriage was found. You were apparently hallucinating.”

“What?” Dana cried. “How the hell do you think I got here? On a flying saucer?”

Again Thorn peered at her over his half glasses, a frown etching his face. “A what?”

“Never mind,” she mumbled. And then the truth hit her. It was a modern low-slung lipstick-red convertible that had no place in a historical romance novel. Still, where had it gone? Sent into oblivion, or still out on that dark, deserted road where she had left it? She felt lost, nowhere to turn.

Thorn moved his devious gaze from the silver he was polishing, and watched her with a sly look in his eyes, an insincere ring to his voice. “If you want to leave, madam, what is to keep you from opening the door and

hailing a hackney? I could give you a few coins for the fare myself.” Challenge glittered in his eyes.

“I’m not about to go out in that world of frilly bonnets and pleated fans. I want to go home, Thorn. Back to good old 2008. Back to electric lights, refrigerators, plumbing, air conditioning, and my car, my beautiful little lipstick red.... God, where could it be?”

“Then go. What is stopping you?”

“He is!” she yelled, pointing toward the painting in the study. “He’s the key to this whole thing, yet I’m forbidden to speak to him, and he won’t make an appearance. Not only that, I can’t come and go as I please. I’m a prisoner here. The door isn’t locked, yet I can’t seem to....”

Then a thought came to her. “Thorn, do you remember the night I came here? When I couldn’t open the door?”

“Yes, I remember. It was stuck.”

“That’s what I thought, but that wasn’t it.”

“What are you saying?”

“Don’t you see? I’m a prisoner. I’ve tried opening that door any number of times, but apparently I can only go where the story leads me until it’s told in its entirety.”

“Everything you are saying is insane. If you cannot go through that door, there is a completely logical reason.” His voice softened to a hiss. “But only he knows what it is.”

“What are you saying?” she urged.

“I can’t believe you don’t understand,” Thorn said, a gleam in his eyes.

“Understand what? What the hell are you talking about?”

“You are here because he wants you here, and you will be here until he decides you can go.” The dim, flickering light made Thorn’s eyes take on a slight dementia. “I knew it from the first, even before he did.” His lids lowered, his steely gaze raking over her body. “The way he touched you. He was not looking for broken bones. The man was aroused!”

“What? You mean...?”

Thorn continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “His hands wandered intimately. A touch turned to a caress, a stroke to an embrace.” His piercing gaze lifted, and he looked at her. “He wanted you, and if I had not been there....”

“You mean he would have raped me?” Dana said.

“No, nothing like that, but it’s why you’re still here. Don’t you see?”

“No, I *do not see*,” she mocked him. “How do you know any of this? Can you read minds? Are you as powerful as he is?”

He dropped the silver in his hand, causing it to clatter to the table, and rose, facing her. “Sarcasm does not become you, Miss Perrin. And yes, in my own way, I am powerful. I know everything that goes on in this house.”

His tall, thin body hunched wickedly as he slowly advanced on her, a long, bony finger tapping his temple. “I know what he is thinking, what he is going to say. I am ahead of him. He has never done anything that I have not anticipated. That is why I am so useful, so needed here. He depends on me, leaves everything in my hands,” Thorn’s face turned dark, “even you!”

“No! Not me! Do you hear? Not me? He can’t come into my life and turn it upside down. He can’t!”

“He can do anything he wants, Miss Perrin. He is the Master, after all.”

“Bull!”

“Wha...?” Thorn began, and then said, “Miss Perrin, I can make no sense of what you say! Perhaps in America....”

“America, my fat Aunt Harriet!” she yelled as Thorn gasped.

“Disrespect for your elders on top of everything else!” Thorn barked, indignantly.

“Hey, Einstein, keep up with me here, okay? I’m telling you he can’t command things to happen just like that. He might be a powerful magician....”

“Magician?” Thorn exploded. “Madam, he is no mere magician, he is a mystic, and in my mind, *immortal!*”

“He’s nothing but a man with a hatful of tricks, and I’m leaving!” She whirled around and strode quickly toward the door but stopped when she heard Thorn’s voice behind her.

“Are you indeed? You will leave only when he wants you to go, and no sooner. Romance novel, bah! It is his iron will that keeps those doors shut to you.”

She turned, seeing his thin form hovering at the foot of the staircase. “You poor misguided fool. He’s got you believing he’s some kind of god. Well, he’s not! He’s a one-dimensional character with some kind of...of grandiose complex. His mother, I remember her from the book. Beautiful and kind, but trapped! Apparently, she had to die to get away from him!”

She looked up toward the rafters. "When he found himself alone in this...this mausoleum, apparently he wanted company, which is where I came in. How did he do it? How did he get me here?"

Lightning!

"It doesn't matter how," Thorn said, his eyes sharp and dark as he looked down at her, "the fact is, you are here and you will not be leaving until he gives the command!"

She whirled around, eyeing the door. "Well, maybe in some twisted way, he brought me here, but that bastard can't keep me here, not if I want to leave!"

"Your crude language is insulting to the Master, and I will not have it!"

She stopped in her tracks and whirled around. "Oh, really? Well, I haven't read the whole novel, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that this is all your doing. The butler did it, right? Very predictable! Ms. Reinhart should think about taking a writing lesson!"

"My doing?" Thorn said while following her. "And just how do you think *I* could do such a thing? He is the mystic, madam, not I."

"A mystic, is he?" She placed her hands on her hips. "Or is he God? Why do you call him *Master*? Do you worship him? Is he Divine to you?"

"Why, I have never been so insulted!"

"Do you end your prayers *in Franz's name*?"

"Miss," Thorn breathed, an incredulous frown etching his ancient face, "I do believe you have gone over the edge."

"No, I'm not crazy. I just don't trust anyone in this house!"

"Does that include the ghost of Sarafina?" His reply was soft, but heard as loudly as the roll of a drum.

"Why do you ask me that?" She hissed. "She has nothing to do with this."

"She may have more to do with this than you imagine. She was powerful in her own way, you know."

A chill raced up her spine. "You're cruel to bring the dead into this." She glared at him, and whispered, "You're trying to scare me, to..."

"If anyone is trying to scare you, it is not I."

"What do you mean?"

“Think. He is a mystic. It is his job to elicit a gasp, strike fear in the stoutest of hearts. To hear a gasp from a pair of lips as lovely as yours is like a beautiful symphony to his ears.”

She looked away from Thorn thinking about the fake head that had fallen out of the hatbox, and the skeleton she had seen coasting along in the dark. So that was the reason. She’d sensed him close that night, leading her, nudging her, but she had never guessed the reason. Was it true? Did he enjoy her gasps? Her screams?

She looked around at the low-hanging shadows, the strangely carved wood, and the panels of red, and whispered, “I don’t know him, and yet I do. He’s gone, and yet he’s here. He’s in the very air we breathe, in the walls. He inhabits every shadow. They heave with his life.”

“I knew it the first night you were here,” Thorn whispered. “I could tell by the way he handled you. The look in his eyes. Since then he’s orchestrated this whole affair. Listening for the intake of your breath, your whimper of fear, your gasp.”

“Gosh, it sounds...I don’t know...sick, somehow.”

“Not to him. When he elicits a reaction from you, it is like a touch, or a caress. It is his only contact with you.”

She frowned up at him. “How do you know all this?”

“I have been with him many years, miss. I know him well.”

“Why would he go to such lengths?”

“Why? Because he wants you. Maybe to you, he is only the hero in some ridiculous romance novel, but to him, it is his life.”

She peered at him closely, remembering the surly butler in the novel. “And you, Thorn, what about you?”

“Believe what you will, madam, but do not drag me into this book to which you refer. If I occupy a space at all, it is only to do his will and reside in his shadow.”

“We’re both prisoners,” she said with a hint of despair in her voice. “Do you realize that, Thorn? We’re both here until the book is finished. When did you come? One dark night from out of the rain?”

Thorn’s eyes widened, the truth written in his face. All at once, his thin lips began to move. “No, not in the rain. But it was a terrible night, a night full of lightning.”

Lightning!

Dana put her hand up to her mouth. "Oh, my God, it's true! I'm right. Say it, Thorn!"

"You are *not* right, Miss. You see, I can come and go as I please. I can leave any time I want. You would do well to dispense with this book madness you keep talking about, and realize that you are here until he says you may leave. You are held as firmly as if you were tied with ropes."

His words spelled doom, and she recoiled when she heard them. With a desperate voice, she shouted, "I can leave! I can!"

At that moment, she felt her back hit the wall, and turned, grabbing the doorknob. With a hard pull, she tried again and again to open it, but it wouldn't give. She whirled around. "It's locked!"

"With what? A key? The key hangs on a peg with spider webs covering it. Might I remind you this is a respectable townhouse on Hyde Lane? The only thieves who would dare come near here are those out of their minds. The guttersnipes surround the whorehouses and gaming hells, picking the pockets of those who stagger into the darkened streets with their pockets full of money. The most we have to fear is a ghost who walks the halls at midnight, or me, the guilty butler. Remember? I am already here. You cannot lock the door against me, and you cannot lock a ghost out. She walks through walls, haunts the graveyard."

Fear rushed through Dana, and she put her hands up to her ears, refusing to listen to another word. Thorn's words droned on and on, his face coming closer and closer. She suddenly pushed away from the door and ran past him toward the staircase.

He grabbed her arm, bringing her to a halt.

She was forced to look up into his shadowy, wrinkled face and hear his hated words being hissed at her.

"Hear this, Miss Perrin. If what you say is true and we are both trapped here until the last page is turned in that ridiculous novel, or if we are simply at the mercy of a mad man, the end is still the same. You are his now."

She stared at him for a moment, watching the dance of light and shadow upon his grotesque face, her voice trembling. "It's too fantastic, Thorn. I can't believe it. And you're wrong about Sarafina. It's him. He's the one playing the symphony. You said yourself he wanted to scare me."

"You would do well to believe me, Miss. It *is* the ghost of Sarafina that plays that dark rhapsody. Every night from midnight to three, and she will

allow you to see her only when she is ready.” His glittering eyes bored into hers.

“You’re all crazy,” she sobbed, and turned to run, the vast hall she entered becoming a dark cave of colorful ghosts, their lips stretched upward in haunting macabre smiles. She ran from them—from Thorn—from *the truth*.

Dana stayed in her room the rest of the day, her face pressed against the cold glass of her window. When at last the sun was setting, she went down to dinner. As usual, the table was set for three, but she was the only one there. She looked up at Thorn when he came in to look over the settings. “I want to see him. Is he coming down?”

“I believe you are aware the Master is indisposed.”

“I’m sick of hearing that word. I can’t wait, Thorn. I want out of here. If he brought me here, then he can release me.”

“Release you from a novel you are trapped in? Tell him that and he will likely send you to Bellport.”

“Bellport? What the hell is Bellport?”

He looked down at her with a glitter in his eyes. “I’ve never heard such language. It’s....” The words abruptly stopped when he realized his reprimand did no good. “Bellport is an insane asylum. You would not like it there. It is overrun by rats, so I have heard.”

“Thorn, I have to do something. I can’t just sit here and accept all this.”

“I would suggest you pick up your fork, miss. Your dinner is getting cold.” He turned away, leaving her for his position by the door.

She ate again in silence, the food being served, then taken away by servants who seemed to be mute. When she spoke to them, they simply looked at her, and then to Thorn, and said nothing. She whirled on Thorn as he stood motionless by the door. “What’s wrong with them? Is everyone in this house deaf and dumb?”

Thorn looked at her as if she were an idiot. “This is a black house, miss. When a death occurs, a respectable mourning period is observed, and no one speaks, or is spoken to.”

“My God, you people live in the Dark Ages.” She threw her napkin down and confronted Thorn. “There haven’t been black houses for hundreds of years. Put a friggin’ wreath on the door and get on with your lives.”

“How very impertinent. In view of the circumstances, I would think....”

“I don’t care about *circumstances*. If he won’t come to me, then I’ll go to him. Where is his room?”

“I am not at liberty to say.”

She gave him a deadly look. “If I have to search this house from attic to cellar, I’ll find him!”

His face turned from a dignified coldness to one of alarm, but still he held his composure.

With an abrupt toss of her head, she turned and started for the door. “I’ll be in my room.”

Thorn stepped aside, and with a slight bow, he muttered a respectful, “Mistress.”

Chapter 7

That night. That dark, foreboding, scary night, she searched the mansion beneath swaying shadows and flickering candles. She went in and out of cold, dark rooms, along endless corridors, both narrow and wide, and finally lost her way.

Suddenly, she saw Franz.

He was nothing more than a flickering shadow, but she knew it was he. He had entered a room. She could even hear him moving around inside. Finally, she had him trapped!

Determined not to lose him again, she ran toward the door, grabbed the doorknob with a firm grip, and turned it. Not letting anything such as his privacy stop her, she blatantly pushed the door open thinking she would find a candlelit room full of shadows. Instead, she found herself rocking on the edge of a drop straight down into the restless ocean.

The waves kicked and splashed, the wind roared, and the fog concealed the black rocks upon which she would have fallen had she not held on. Battling the wind, she finally fought her way back into the safety of the mansion, slamming the door closed. She leaned against the wall, fear a bitter taste in her mouth as she tried to stop trembling. She breathed deep, her breath catching in her throat.

As she began to calm, she finally pushed herself away from the wall and walked back to the shadow she had stood in. Slowly, she turned, and looked again at the door. She had thought possibly she had picked the wrong one, but knew immediately that she hadn't. Slowly, she stepped forward and carefully opened the door again, but the ocean was gone. She saw only a dark room, cold, musty and with a thin layer of dust settled everywhere.

Her thoughts were whirling.

Was she losing her mind?

Not knowing what else to do, she at last gave up and found her own suite of rooms. She was defeated. So, why was she wasting her time? He wasn't here. He was in a grave. She knew it. He had to be.

All at once, she thought of the perfect plan.

The book!

The book would tell her all about the hero. Who and where he was, and why he was so elusive. However, when she went to find it, strangely it had vanished along with her bag and everything in it.

Brushes, combs, makeup, her dead cell phone, they were all gone! Had someone taken it? *No*, she thought, a sense of dread filling her. *It's missing because it isn't in the story.*

Gradually, she would become more and more ensnared in the story. Soon even her clothes would disappear from off her back, her memories washed away. She wondered where the book was, drifting in some black void, or maybe its pages blew in the stiff wind as it lay on the floor of her car.

If she had doubted before, now she was sure. She was being held captive in a dark dream from which there was no escape—a dream that had somehow been infused with an old song that couldn't have been popular now. She couldn't remember the name, but could hear the fluid notes rising and falling in her head, along with words that were a musical depiction of the act of sex. Haunting, yet arousing, and it would continue to haunt her until the last scene.

Until her death!

The only thing left was to confront Sarafina. Was Thorn right? Did the ghost actually haunt the music room and float along the grand staircase between the hours of midnight and three? And if she did, could she speak to her? Make her understand? It was madness, but she was desperate. Maybe she would see her tonight. She would wait, listen for the music. And when it began to play—

The music never came.

No swells, no arpeggios, no gifted fingers building to a dramatic crescendo. Nothing. Night after night, she waited for Sarafina's appearance, but was disappointed. She decided she must find Sarafina on her own. The thought of looking for a ghost in the midst of these dimly lit hallways terrified her, but she knew she had to. Somehow, she had to get help, if only

from a ghost. And so, in only her thin cotton nightgown, she roamed the mansion, her pale, iridescent presence looking as much like a ghost as Sarafina.

Nightly, she floated down the staircase, visited the damp, cold music room, but only a dark, empty, vacuous space greeted her. No floating presence anywhere in the mansion.

Sarafina was gone.

Just when she needed her, the ghost had vanished.

On a night when all was silent, her lids flew open at an awesome sound. Chiming clocks from all over the mansion summoned her. The sounds were mixed. They called to her with everything from light tinkling chimes to deep bongs, urging her to awaken. And when their chimes ended, the music soared forth, reverberating around the cavernous mansion. Lunging up from the bed, she ran down the hall to the grand staircase, her bare feet kicking beneath her light, feathery gown, the silver rays of the moonlight shining through the windows, casting glittering designs on the floor.

Suddenly, she saw her.

The dark and beautiful Sarafina was spotlighted by the moon, a glistening iridescence in the night. She wore a white shroud that danced lightly around her while she sat at the piano, her dark head lowered over the keys, her body swaying to the music.

A breeze floated in through the French doors that stood open, the white gossamer curtains billowing in the wind. The haunting music filled the room, the swells intense, the arpeggios pure magic. How could it be? Did it mean something? Was it a prophecy of things to come?

And then, at the highest crescendo in the music, she looked up, her face the very image of her son—dark and mysterious, and beautiful beyond words. Her pale, gossamer being was eerie, the silver rays of the ghost moon bathed her body, giving her an ethereal glow that caused a chill to dance erratically up Dana's spine. She wanted to run, to escape this madness, but she couldn't move. She was frozen in fear. The familiar old tune was all around her, the striking of the keys drumming heavily as Sarafina continued to play. The sound was unearthly and ghostlike as its echo ricocheted powerfully off the cavernous walls and ceiling. Dana was struck speechless as she watched the specter move and sway.

Something was wrong.

Not that she'd ever seen a ghost before, but she'd heard enough about them to know they floated, their presence too otherworldly to be heavy and severe as this one seemed to be. She stood silent for a moment, and then began to slowly walk toward the apparition until she stood before her. She knew a ghost could not be touched, but this one seemed all too real, so she boldly reached out and grabbed at her hair.

She gasped as it fell, along with her shroud, and a mask.

All at once, a single striking of discordant keys filled the room and the ghost lunged upward. She found herself looking into a pair of dark glittering eyes stabbing out of a face full of deep-cut wrinkles.

Thorn!

"My God, you're sick!" Dana hissed, and turned to run.

"No! Please!" came a voice from a dark corner.

She whirled on her heels to see the magnificence of the hero step out of a shadow. He stood before her now, dark and mysterious, and so achingly handsome, she couldn't move. She said nothing, just kept expecting him to mist into the shadows. When he didn't, she saw the torment reflected in his beautiful, glowing eyes, and was struck with wonder. How could this man—this *paper hero*—feel so deeply?

If past experience were any indication, she had expected a creature that floated instead of walked, a cardboard cutout, perhaps a flat movie screen idol she could only look at. But not this, not a *real* flesh and blood man who took her breath away.

Suddenly, he spoke.

His voice was smooth and deep, his strange accent dripping with sophistication.

"I must apologize for this ridiculous fiasco. I know you do not understand any of this, and when I learned of all the mental anguish you were going through because of me, I...well, I had to try and help.

"I am afraid I have been remiss. Thorn has kept me informed of how you were doing, conveyed messages regarding your desire to leave, and instead of using my magick to get you back to where you came from, I found I could not let you go. I have hidden in shadows, crept around the mansion watching you. It is unforgivable, I know, but I have been so lonely. It is no one's fault. The truth is, when my mother died, I became so lonely and distraught, I had to have someone.

“On a night much like this one, I—my magick must have went awry somehow and brought you here. I thought I might tell you the truth, but I did not know how to approach you, and...”

“And you thought to have Thorn masquerade as Sarafina would solve the problem?”

“What can I say? I thought you would turn and run when you saw the fake ghost.” He shrugged. “I was wrong. You are just as brave, as you are beautiful.”

Beautiful...he said beautiful!

“And what did you hope to accomplish?”

“To find you, comfort you. To hold your trembling body next to mine, to offer you a dry shoulder on which to cry. Many things. In the meantime, I intended to make a friend of you, to get to know you, and eventually tell you the truth.”

“Sorry I ruined it.”

“Master,” Thorn interrupted.

“It is all right, Thorn. Go and take those ridiculous frills off, please.” He turned back to Dana. “Do not blame him. Thorn is a very loyal servant without whom I would be lost. He follows orders to the letter, even if they include dressing up like a ghost to keep a certain beautiful, young woman pacified until his Master finds the courage to unveil himself.”

Beautiful.. he said it again!

Looking down at her, his eyes grew soft in the lingering darkness. “The truth is, I have been courting you in my own twisted way.”

“Courting me? What do you mean?”

“Have you not felt touches in the night, a wisp of wind, a subtle whisper in your ear?”

“I knew it,” she whispered. “It *was* you, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s impossible. How?”

“I am very powerful as Thorn has told you. I studied for years at the knees of an old master of the arts, and learned to separate my spirit from my body. I can roam the mansion at will.” He lifted his eyes toward the rafters of the vast room. “I am the ghost here and yet I live.”

Dana gasped. “I can’t believe it. How is something like that possible?”

“It is nothing. Anyone can do it if taught.”

“Really?” She gave him a suspicious look. “How do you do the one where I can’t go past the threshold of the door?”

“I am afraid I do not know what you mean.”

Her mouth fell open, and she was suddenly wrapped in fear. It wasn’t him after all. What she had suspected all along, now she knew to be true. She *was* trapped between the pages of her novel, here until the finish of the book.

She was going to die!

“Are you all right?”

Wiping at the tears that had slowly slid down her face, she said, “Yes. I...I guess it’s just all too much for me.”

“I am so sorry I made you cry. If you could only understand why I did what I did. That first night when I saw you on the couch, your lovely body, your hair, the beauty of your face, I could not forget you. I fought it, but it did no good.” He hesitated. “And Thorn, being the devoted servant he is, simply did as I instructed him.” He looked at her, his glittering eyes catching some distant light. “And I was left to skulk in the shadows, watching you, wanting you.”

“Why? I begged Thorn to let me talk to you!”

“Yes, I know, but at first I didn’t know what to expect of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“A man in my position has to be very careful. Because of my extraordinary powers, there are those who would use that power for evil. It is they, that I must shield myself from.” His eyes softened as they looked at her. “For instance, if I were to find myself in love with a creature as beautiful as you, I might be persuaded to use my powers for evil.”

“Surely, you don’t think that I...”

He smiled. “Perhaps not, but the spicy tales of temptation grace our history books, even the Bible. I am not above it. No man is. I knew eventually I would approach you, but I had to be careful. That is why I kept my distance.”

“I didn’t think you were real,” Dana whispered in awe.

“Oh, yes, I am very real. I have feelings, emotions. I hunger, I get cold, hot. I also experience loneliness, Dana. May I call you Dana?” he asked, smiling softly.

“Yes, of course.”

“You came into my life at a very difficult time, a time when I was left alone, so alone that I imagined I could hear the walls speak, the shadows move. I needed someone, and when you arrived, you were like an answer to my prayers. Your charms are very potent. So potent, in fact, I could not stay away from you. In time, after watching you for so long, I boldly began to touch you. It was rapture, Dana, like an erotic dream.”

She thrilled at the sound of her name being spoken in his low, warm, sexy accent. “Yes, it was like that,” she whispered, her gaze meeting his while the shimmering light of the moon cast a glittering glow around them.

He gave her an angled look, his voice husky and warm. “When I touched you, did you enjoy it?”

“I’m sure you know how I reacted to your touch.”

“Do not fight it, Dana, stay with me,” he urged, taking her hands, his eyes sultry and lazy.

A warm, liquid rush blossomed inside her at the feel of his hands, his intoxicating nearness. He was certainly no cardboard character, and he clearly wasn’t dead. His soft breath touched her cheek, his warm hands squeezed hers, and his overt maleness made her quiver inside. She could be so happy here with him, if only.... She turned her eyes and looked at the French doors, and knew that only death lay beyond. She was a prisoner in a world that wasn’t her own, and nothing he could do, could free her.

Or could he?

Why not try?

By his own admission, he was a powerful man, so powerful that others sought to use that power for their own selfish purposes.

All at once, she turned to him. “How much did Thorn tell you? Did he mention a romance novel?”

“A romance novel?” He frowned slightly. “I am afraid I do not understand.”

“You see, I...” Her words stopped abruptly when the memory of Thorn’s words echoed through her mind.

I can’t wait, Thorn! I want out of here. If he brought me here, then he can release me!

Release you from a novel you are trapped in? Tell him that and he will likely send you to Bellport...an insane asylum overrun by rats.

Had Thorn been right? He had said he knew his master well. Perhaps he did know best, she decided, her shifting gaze glancing toward the precipice, the last scene—*the scene of her death!*

“You were saying?”

“Nothing,” she muttered.

“Well then, may I escort you to your room?”

As they were leaving the music room, she turned just in time to see the billowing curtains, the shroud on the floor being lifted by a rogue wind, and sensed an eerie presence. What she didn’t see was the creation of a figure, a blending of light and shadow as wispy as the air and as dark and beautiful as Franz was handsome. An airy creature that blended into the walls, the shadowy, iridescent fingers that seemed to come from nowhere to caress the ivory keys of the piano.

At her door, Franz leaned close and whispered, “Will you invite me in?”

Shivers of delight shimmered through her when she felt his hot breath on her ear. She wanted to say yes. He was undeniably the most handsome man she’d ever seen, but she didn’t know him at all. She looked up into a pair of electric blue eyes that glowed out of a face as dark and mysterious as midnight.

“Can I trust you?”

“Not at all.”

His answer made her body ache for his touch, his *solid* touch not visited upon her as air and mist, or in a dream where she woke up in a dark room alone, but real, so very real! She was fully aware of the hardness of his thighs brushing against hers. She eased her hand behind her, opening the door. He pushed her in quickly, and she gasped as his lips found hers, causing a charge of electricity to spear rapidly through her body. His kisses were slowly draining all of her doubts and fears.

“Please don’t tell me to stop.” He breathed passionately.

“I was going to, but somehow I crave your hands. Is this a trick of your magick?”

“Possibly,” he whispered, and gave her body a hot, raking gaze. “I will devour you. Consume you with a passion that will burn through the night.”

“You’d better,” she answered softly, lifting her hands to the glowing image of fire and passion. His movements were very dramatic, and like all

the heroes of all the movies she'd ever seen, he swept her up, and closed the door with his foot just before he placed her gently on the bed.

With flames of passion dancing in his eyes, he lowered himself over her, his lips seeking hers. As she melted in his arms, the darkness around them became a lover's embrace—an intimate darkness where their clothes were yanked and pulled, buttons flying, and seams tearing. Once they were free of them, she felt his cock brushing against her, and reached down and took it in her hand. She handled it gently, as if it were a precious toy created only to bring her pleasure.

As his lips and tongue suckled her skin, their breath mingled while hot tides of passion raged through them. His tongue, resembling licking flames of fire, moved along the soft curve of her neck, sending gusts of desire exploding through her. While he held her, his enticing words of love fell temptingly on her ear sending exciting thrills arching through her.

"Dana, my God, you're an erotic river, swaying, moving to a secret beat known only to you. I've never known a woman to be so free, so..." Suddenly Franz's words faded when he watched her slither down his body and begin to lick and eat his cock. He gasped, knowing only a woman for hire would do such a thing. It concerned him for all of a second, and then when a gust of swelling desire burst through him, his concern turned to bliss.

He yielded to the burning sweetness of her touch as she cupped his balls in her hands, and played and licked. Suddenly she pulled herself up and straddled him, taking his rigid cock and slowly pressing it inside her. Franz gasped at its velvety warmth, so tight as he pushed inside, each plunge was like an illicit flame carrying him higher and higher. He throbbed and twitched while her dripping juices coated his cock. His hips pushed upward, meeting hers, his cock digging deeper and deeper into her cunt while her hips moved loose and raw. He had thought he was going to make love to her, but instead she was the aggressor, wantonly ushering him into a world of carnality he had never known.

She leaned over and began to lick his muscled chest. He, in turn cupped her breasts, his mouth opening wide to take her nipples inside. Slowly his hand moved downward, caressing each curve until he at last reached between her legs, and found her clit nestling temptingly between her folds.

While his cock continued to plunge, his fingers rubbed it with urgency, causing a moan of passion to slip through her lips.

A series of tiny electric shocks stabbed through her. Hot, scorching spears that made her buck wildly. His caressing fingers kept the flames alive while spirals of lustful heat arched through her.

She could feel their mutual need fusing in the soft moonlight that seemed to empower their love. But any man wouldn't do, only the man in the painting, the one she fell in love with. And now he was here, along with the song that swirled throughout the mansion.

The sound of the ghostly piano floated up the stairs and wrapped around her, whirling inside her while he led her down a sensuous path to ecstasy—an ecstasy she'd never known, and would never know, except in his arms. All at once, waves of desire shook her when he turned her over and opened her up even wider and plunged deep inside. His hard cock electrified her, causing her body to jerk spasmodically.

"Franz!" she moaned out in erotic pleasure. "Oh, God, Franz!" His body was hard, and his fingers burned into her tingling skin as he lifted her buttocks to meet his loose, raw plunges. Over and over, he delved deep inside her, plunging into her cunt with his rod from hell...

She could feel her breasts crush against the hardness of his chest as they came together as one. Man to woman, passion to passion, rolling, their passion thundering in her ears like a fiery storm. He bucked and plunged, his moist lips scorching her as he suckled her breasts, his teeth gently biting until waves of ecstasy throbbed through her lifting her to heights she'd never known. Her hips became loose, uninhibited, as she began to reach for the elusive orgasm. She clung to him, met his uncontrolled plunges as she literally climbed him to find her release. He tortured her with emotions that whirled and skidded, his tongue making a path along her shoulder, across her kiss-bruised lips, up to her eyes, and then darting lustily into her ear, causing her to writhe wildly in his arms.

"Oh, God, Franz!" she cried out.

"Come, my love!" he rasped out in gasping passion. "Come again and again for me!" Feeling her cling to him, his movements became savage and raw. He plunged again and again, wringing orgasm after orgasm out of her until his body jerked like a mad whip crack and his flaming seed flowed through her like honey.

Suddenly, she moaned, her last orgasm shattering through her like a million glowing stars. She was so exhausted, she melted against him, her world filled with a glow and a warmth that sent her into the sweet oblivion of sleep.

* * * *

The ghostly presence in the music room looked up past the rafters, and into the bedroom they occupied, and smiled. She remembered the night she had directed, or *misdirected*—that one bolt of lightning to break through eons of time—

1800, 1900, 2000

—until she had found the perfect mate for her son.

Maybe now Sarafina could rest in peace.

Chapter 8

The next day while darkness still hovered, she awoke, the handsome magician still asleep beside her. She turned, watching him as he slept. She could hardly believe he was here with her. Being careful not to wake him, her hands stroked his muscled chest, his strong, chiseled jaw, and his soft, lush, pillowy lips. She wanted to steal a kiss, but didn't dare. If she woke him, he would leave her, and she wanted to enjoy this moment as long as possible. Her dreams that night had been those of a blue night, a silver moon, and him.

She'd felt his kiss, his weight on her, his thrusting hips, and his rock-hard cock driving into her. She knew now because of his concern for her he had stepped out of his dark world of mourning, and into hers, bringing her passion she never knew existed. The best part was, she knew this was only the beginning. He would come again wrapped in hard, tantalizing flesh, or perhaps he might drift in on a breeze, a sigh, or a whisper.

It might be anywhere—in her bedroom, at night in her bed, bathing, walking, resting. And she would welcome him any way she could have him. She would feel his arms surround her, caressing her, touching her in all the places that craved the feel of his hands, his mouth. Her eyes would close, a moan would escape her lips, and perhaps she would even cry out while his fingers moved inside her. As of this moment, she was his slave, his victim. She lived for his touch.

* * * *

As the long days and nights came and went, there was never a question of leaving again. She lived for him, longing for the burning sweetness of his lips on hers, the long, surrendering moans that passed from her lips as he caressed her. He sought her out many times, finding her in the tub, gazing

up at his portrait, reading, sleeping, and each time when he left her, she wept. How could she exist until he returned?

And would he return?

Or was this all just an erotic dream?

Sometimes, his form was nothing more than iridescent beauty, other times, he was solid beneath her touch. Either way, she could feel his touch burning her, his breath scorching her neck. A dizzying sensation sent her up, up, up until she was swept up in rapture, the feel of his lips on the nape of her neck, a slight pressure of hands on her breasts. Like small diamonds, her nipples hardened, his nearness making her gasp.

Now, in this moment of time, she sensed him at her back and arched suddenly when a hot breath tickled her cheek. She melted when his tongue of fire licked her face, leading slowly to her lips where she felt a gentle pressure. It grew, moving down, down, and down again until he turned her, putting her back against the wall. Her hands moved outward, pinned by his, and she was helpless to resist him. She was his to do with as he chose. She felt as if she were standing in a cocoon of fire, her desire for him reaching so high she thought she might die. His hands scoured her body, her breasts, teasing, tantalizing until she wanted to cry out in some kind of erotic torment.

Suddenly he grabbed her hips, and her cunt was invaded with a hot blaze that burned between her legs. His tongue, long and stiff moved inside her, playing with her clit and consuming her sex juices as they dripped onto his tongue. She went wild until a faint orgasm rendered her helpless. Her eyes closed, and her body went limp and she melted toward the floor. His hands caressed her gently, his body finally claiming hers. She pictured his handsome form in her mind, and succumbed to his touch, swaying with him as he moved above her. It was the most exciting thing she'd ever known.

She lived for his touch, the plunge of his cock, the delicious push and pull, the teasing of his lips on her breasts, and the passionate draw of his mouth. He was wild. He ravaged her, his breathing labored, his hard body heavy on hers. She clung to him, her knees reaching upward, her hips pushing as she reveled in the feel of his cock inside her. She pushed, urging him to go deeper where that elusive orgasm taunted her. She could feel his buttocks and reached down and squeezed him, pushing him deeper and deeper until the two were almost one. Their hips pushed, they rolled, sat up

and then when his orgasm flared, so did hers. The release was so deep and so satisfying that a scream burst from her lips as she moaned out his name.

“Franz! Oh, God, Franz!”

Finally, with a long, passionate kiss, he withdrew.

* * * *

This lasted for weeks, the magician coming stealthily, his movements soft and subtle, but leaving her ravaged and spent in the tub, bed, or on the floor. His love was hot, and he took her in many ways. His hands touched her everywhere, causing desire to spiral up inside her to a point where she thought she would surely shatter. When she didn't think she could stand another minute without him inside her, he rode her hard, with her emitting passionate whimpers while she climbed upward into a raging orgasm that left her limp on the disheveled bed. Afterward, her body always ached with the pleasure of being loved completely.

* * * *

One day, a thought hit her hard, like a slap in the face, sending a shiver over her body. A ghastly picture of trickling water spilling over a pair of cold purple lips lodged in her mind.

Water in the grave.

The thought came to her over and over again, never letting her rest.

“Thorn!” she called out urgently.

“Yes, miss,” he said, striding into the room.

“We have to do something. There's water in the grave.”

“Water in the grave, miss?”

“Yes. Don't ask me how I know, but somehow I do.”

“Who's grave, miss?”

“I-I don't know. Sarafina's, I suppose. All I know is there's water in the grave. We have to have it removed, dried out, whatever, I don't know.”

Later that day, she stood at the window watching a crowd of men working over a grave with antiquated equipment she knew would someday be replaced by sophisticated digging machines. Knowing she'd never been out to see the grave, suddenly she was curious. The house was very quiet, so

taking the opportunity, she walked quietly toward the door and surprisingly it opened, allowing her to slip past it and go out to the family graveyard. While walking beneath the weeping willows, she found a path that wound around through the tombstones, and followed it. She stopped at each one of the Staresini family graves, imagining what they might be like until she came to one more....

Willetta Staresini Known to her adoring public as Sarafina

Her eyes widened. She looked up immediately and saw the men hard at work on another grave.

“No, you’ve exhumed the wrong....”

Suddenly, a thought hit her. There were two graves in this portion of the graveyard where the most recent of the family had been buried.

“If this is Sarafina, who is...?”

Running toward the men with the large machines, she shoved her way through and fell to her knees before a coffin that sat on a small rise.

“Oh, no!” she sobbed, knowing what she would find inside. “Open it,” she commanded through tears. When no one moved, she turned and yelled at them, “Open it for God’s sake!” One man with a crowbar in his hand stepped forward and forced the lid open. When the body within was exposed, Dana clamped her hands against her mouth to try and muffle her cries. A red shirt, black pants, boots, dark, wavy hair down to his shoulders. It was Franz Staresini, the man she loved, the man who had come to her in the night, the day, touching her, loving her.

The man she loved was a ghost!

She woke up screaming.

The next thing she knew Franz was bursting through the door, a look of terror written on his face. He grabbed her and held her to him, while murmuring words of comfort while Thorn looked on from the doorway.

With a face gleaming with tears, her hands began moving over him, squeezing him as if she couldn’t believe he was real. First, she caressed his wonderful face, his broad shoulders, her hands urgently moving downward, feeling his firm flesh, his rippling muscles, and tracing the blue veins in his arms where she knew warm blood rushed through.

“You’re alive. Tell me you’re alive!”

“Dana, what is wrong with you? Of course I’m alive.”

“But you were dead, in a grave with water seeping in.”

"You were dreaming, my love. It was nothing more than a nightmare."

Again she grabbed him, holding on as if she were afraid he would get away. "Maybe it was a dream," she whispered, "but it's true, isn't it? No, I don't mean about your being a ghost, but there is *something*." All at once her gaze lowered, and raked over him. "It's past midnight, why aren't you in a robe, why isn't your hair messed up?"

"Insomnia, I am afraid."

"No, that's not it," she whispered as her eyes continued to search. She could see nothing out of place, not a line or a crease. He never needed a shave. No flyaway strand of hair ever shadowed his forehead. He was eerily perfect. "My God, you never look any different. You never change clothes, your voice always resonates just enough to sound as if it's coming..." Her hand clasped her mouth. "Oh, God, you *are* a ghost!"

A look of irritation passed over his perfect face as he rose from the bed and began pacing. Finally looking over at Thorn, he said, "I am going to have to tell her."

"It would appear so, sir."

"Please, leave us alone," he whispered.

"Yes, sir," Thorn muttered, and turned to leave.

"Tell me what?" Dana questioned.

He turned to her, a look of resolve on his face. "Dana, it is true, I am different."

"Different?" she whispered, almost afraid to ask. "How are you... *different*?"

After an intense struggle, he gently sat on the bed beside her and took her hands in his and kissed them softly. "I do not know what to say, except I am sorry. I should have told you a long time ago, but, well, the truth is, I am living under a curse. Such a curse forbids me to come out in the daytime. If I come out at all, it is only as a shifting wind, a light fragrance, a whisper, a touch. I am forced to live my life beneath the stars, in shadows. And when the sun comes up, I enter back into my domicile in the clouds.

"But that's impossible. It...it simply can't be."

"Dana, I know my differences are strange to you, but in all other ways, I am like any other man. We made love, my seed was planted deep within your body."

A deep feeling of regret passed through her. "I'll never bear you a child. We can never go among people and live normal lives."

"I am a man fully capable of loving you as you need to be loved. My differences, they cannot matter that much to you."

"Maybe they shouldn't, but they do." Dana jumped up from the bed. "I want a normal life, and I want it with you. Is that too much to ask? I need to know the truth, Franz, all of it."

"I have told you—"

"No, you haven't. You haven't told me the most important part. The part that tells me how and why. Apparently at one time, you were a man like any other, and something happened. What was it, Franz? What terrible tragedy took place that turned you into what you are today?"

He thought for a moment. "I-I would not even know how to begin. Perhaps you should ask questions."

She nodded, and began speaking as she paced. "You speak with an accent. Where do you come from?"

"Somewhere very far away, I am afraid. You would not know of it if I told you."

"Franz...."

"Very well. Have you ever heard of The Gates of Troyes?"

"No."

"It is a city in Northwest Europe, France to be exact, and existed in the thirteenth century. More than likely much concerning it has changed today, but the history is still there."

"Oh, my God," she muttered, her hand over her mouth. "This isn't true. It can't be true."

"I am afraid it is," he said, his voice a somber whisper. "My family performed in the Champagne Fairs. Twice a year, the whole town was turned into a fair. In August, it was simply called the *Hot Fair*, and in December it was the *Cold Fair*. The fair sold many things. Bolts of scarlet cloth, kaleidoscopes, spices, skins, metals, handcrafted items. My father was Thibaut the Trickster, and my mother was Marjan." He watched her eyes grow round as she listened. "Should I go on?"

She could do nothing but nod.

"Her name was Marjan," he repeated. "She caressed, cuddled, and played with snakes. My father was known as the father of orphans. My

brother Hugo and I were the orphans. There were dancers, jugglers, acrobats, performing bears. Monkeys performed on street corners, and jongleurs sang on the church steps. The taverns were noisily thronged, and provided you with any kind of whore you would want.”

Dana gasped.

“Dana, I do not have to continue with this.”

“No, go ahead. It’s all right.”

“Yes, well, the...uh...*ladies* served bread, broth, and beer, and two kinds of meat. It was also an occasion for brawls and bloodshed.”

“Franz, perhaps you should uh, discontinue with this part. I’m more interested in what happened.”

“The curse? You want to know....”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“When I was a young man, I had the misfortune to fall in love with a witch. When she tired of me, she put a spell on me.”

“Wait, let me get this straight. You were a young man in thirteenth century France?”

He nodded, his anxious gaze darting away from her.

“My God, you’ve lived forever! You’ll never die!”

He said nothing. No denial, but no acknowledgement. After several heartbeats, a look of resolve etched his face, and his gaze traveled back to hers. “That is not all.”

“There’s more?”

“You have seen the painting in the study.”

“Yes, a very unusual picture of the tarot card. I admit it’s a cute idea, but why would you have your picture painted to resemble The Magician in the Tarot Card?”

“Because...*I am the magician in that card.*”

Chapter 9

She looked at him, horrified. “What?”

“It is true, Dana, every word. I was cursed to exist as The Magician of the Tarot Card until I find...” He hesitated. “Let us just say the *key that* will unlock the door that keeps me prisoner. Until then, that card, that painting, is my lair. It is a doorway to a kingdom you could not even fathom. It is true I am a man of this world, but being The Tarot Magician gives me access to many other worlds beyond this one. While in these other worlds there are no restrictions on me, but in this one, I am bound by all the normal limitations, except where my magick can help me. I will never be able to leave it behind until I find that one ultimate gift, that *something* that will free me. Until then, I must accept my doom as it—”

“Accept it?” Dana cried out. “How can you just *accept* something like this?”

“Dana, I have no choice! It is all part of the curse. The only good thing about this is the power I possess. Being the ultimate magician, so to speak, I have powers beyond belief, powers....”

“All except one,” Dana said softly, her voice listless and sad.

“Yes,” he agreed unhappily. “The power to break through these chains that bind me, invisible though they may be. Other than that, my feats are extraordinary.”

“Why didn’t she just kill you?”

“Very simple. You see death is too peaceful, too serene. When you are cursed, it is not death you experience, it is *life!*”

“Where did you meet her?”

“At one of the Champagne Fairs. She had a Soothsayer’s tent. Being a magician, I frequented fairs always looking for a job, an audience.” He slowly rose from the bed, walked to a window, and looked out.

"I'll never forget the day I saw her. She was very beautiful. The fairs were truly mesmerizing. They had everything a man could possibly want—fire eaters, flesh artists, freak shows, fallen angels, haunted castles, and a den of iniquity."

He turned and looked at her. "It was there I took her for the first time. I went back time and again, my only excuse being that I was young, and my body on fire. I have learned that only one thing can break the spell, something more powerful than any magick. I have looked everywhere, and have not found it."

He turned back to the window, and looked out, his eyes looking as far into the distance as possible. "But I will," he whispered with resolve, "even if it sits on the highest mountain, or floats at the bottom of the ocean." His gaze moved upward. "Perhaps it winks at me from the moon. Perhaps it is not even tangible, perhaps it appears as dust, smoke, a mist."

"Can you make me like you?"

He whirled around, and looked at her as if she'd proposed a liaison with the Devil. "Dana, you would not want to be like me! My God, it is misery to live this way. Do you not understand? To live forever is—"

"Can you make me like you?" she demanded.

"Of course, but I would not even consider it! To be like me would be pronouncing doom upon yourself!"

"Don't you see? We'll be together forever! It's the only way!"

"No! You do not understand what you are asking! I could not!"

Suddenly, the roar of the ocean filled her ears, and she looked up at the window, and heard the wind blow against it. "Do you love me?" she whispered.

"You know I do."

"You won't let me die, Franz." She turned and ran from the bedroom, down the stairs, and out the back door of the mansion.

"Dana!" Franz cried out. "Where are you going?"

Without an answer, she ran as fast as she could, her nightgown fluttering around her bare feet. When she came to the windy ridge, she stopped and edged up to it carefully. Below was the restless ocean, the waves crashing against black rocks that rose up along the edge of the beach like the jagged teeth of a monster.

They yawned open, inviting her to jump. The height made her dizzy, and she began to weave around. With excitement coursing through her veins, she turned until her back was to the sea, her eyes searching the mist for Franz who was frantically running toward her.

"I'm going to jump," she called out to him. "If you love me, you will do as I asked, and we will live together forever. I will be immortal like you."

"Dana, you are wrong. This is not the answer. If I am forced to use my magick..."

At that moment, a giant wave splashed against the rocks, drowning out his words, sending them into the tumultuous atmosphere to mingle with the whipping wind and raging ocean.

"Master, is there anything I can do?"

Franz looked back and saw Thorn standing in a strong wind, his robe and nightcap whipping around his thin, hunched body.

"Stay back, Thorn!" he cried out, the sea spray from the turbulent waves, wetting his face. "Dana, come away from the edge!"

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind pushed against her, causing her to lose her balance, and she slipped on the loose rocks and tumbled down the side of the cliff.

Her scream pierced the night air.

She scrambled madly for a foothold, the jagged rocks cutting her hands as she struggled to hang onto the edge.

She looked down at the sharp rocks while the wind lashed at her body, her hands becoming raw, blood-soaked and slippery.

Fear such as she'd never known assaulted her, screamed inside her head, flashed images of her battered body as it lay upon the jagged edges of the rocks below.

If Franz didn't save her, she would die!

Her hands were slipping down the cold rock. She knew she was in danger of falling, plunging onto the sharp, jutting rocks below that formed the nightmarish mouth of a sea monster.

Franz leaned as far over the precipice as he could, but he couldn't reach her.

"Use your magick, darling." Dana urged. "Make me like you."

"I—God, I cannot, Dana. You simply do not know what you are asking."

"You'll let me die?" she sobbed, the wind whistling around her.

"No, Dana, I am giving you what you want. I am releasing you. I couldn't bring myself to do it before, but rather than let you die, or doom you to a life of misery, I will let you go." Tears flowed from Franz's eyes. "Goodbye, my darling," he whispered.

"Oh, my God, Franz! Don't do this!" she yelled.

"I have to, Dana. It is the only way!"

When she slipped a little further, a bolt of fear pierced his heart. He quickly lifted himself up, and stretched his hands toward the sky.

Come forth mighty warriors!

In only a few erratic heartbeats, the clouds in the sky parted, and a host of gods appeared on the horizon. Chariots, horses, and armored warriors stood in the pathless sky watching him, ready and waiting to do his bidding.

Opposite was Death, a dark, hooded figure on a black horse. Not far from him was the Devil and his army waiting for the chance to take her soul. They stood restless, their dark horses snorting fire, and pawing at the clouds.

He looked back toward the chariots of gold and white that stood waiting, ready to transport the gods across the skies. Invincible warriors, snorting horses and restless chariots seemed anxious to go to battle.

He hesitated, knowing if he called on them, he would lose her for all time. On the other hand, two kinds of death awaited her if she stayed—a prisoner in his world, or a place in Hell for all eternity. All at once, her pleading voice burned his ears.

"Franz, do it, for me, my darling. Change me, make me like you. Now! My hands, they're slipping, Franz. I don't know how much longer I can hold on."

"No! I will not damn your soul or ask you to spend eternity in a lesser hell!" he growled, knowing he sounded harsh. "You will be free, Dana. Free to love again. It will be all right. You will not remember me, but I will always...." His words ended on a sob.

All at once, he threw his hands high, as if he could control the elements. A roar came down from the heavens and lightning leaped from his fingertips. He glowed with energy, his movements powerful. In a blink of an eye, his costume changed from the one he always wore to a draping black and red cape with a body stocking of the same color. The wind lifted his cape, and his deep voice shouted into the wind—

Mighty Boreas, friend of all humans, Destroy the enemy with your mighty power! I see them even now. The ones that gather to bring unto her a downfall! Build up a powerful wall against death! Surround her with it, oh mighty one, lest she die! Turn might into magick, power into spell, oh, mighty Boreas! Allow her to float on the wings of safety to her ultimate destination in time!

"You know in doing so, she will be taken from you," Boreas cried out.

"Yes!" Franz answered back in resounding tones of power.

"Yet you would do this even though it will mean losing her for all time?"

"Yes, mighty Boreas, I must. I love her too much to hold her here."

"Do you choose to have her remember you and suffer?"

"No! She must have no memory of me! Please, mighty Boreas! Do not let her suffer!" he cried, the pain of losing her reaching deep into his heart, causing tears to roll down his face. "Let her live to love again."

"So be it!" Boreas called, and then blew, his cheeks growing fat with the mighty wind from his lungs. The ocean heaved, the trees bowed over, the clouds rolled over the sky.

Franz, feeling the mighty wind in his face, lowered his head against the elements as if in prayer while his hands were still outstretched. When he felt the supreme power surge through him, he began to glow, his head jerked upward and his voice rang out against the evil.

By the power of the Supreme Creator within me, I command. It is so!

The moment the last three words were uttered, the skies darkened with anger, and the earth went into battle. Thunder, wind, and lightning roared across the skies in the form of chariots. The gods wailed out their war cries and strong winds whipped at his cape. Suddenly, the picture of death and destruction was rent in half, being rolled back like a curtain.

What appeared in the midst was a golden throne that descended from the heavens, and sitting upon it was The Mighty Zeus of Olympus, the City of the Gods. His face shone with the light of a thousand suns. His majestic hair and beard flowed around his face and over his chest like the waters of a mighty river.

In one hand, he held a scepter, and in the other a sealed Book of Fate. With eyes that glowed like two lakes of fire, he surveyed the scene below.

With determined movements, he lifted his scepter and pointed it at Franz, passing judgment upon him.

After taking all into consideration, what was The Mighty Zeus' decision? Had Franz lived up to his expectations, or had he failed miserably?

Because of him...*an innocent woman had been thoughtlessly plucked out of her own time...*

Because of him...*she suffered great mental stress...*

Because of him...*she had been made a prisoner of his lusts...*

Because of him...*she now hung precariously from the face of a cliff...*

Because of him...*a war waged in the heavens...*

Because of him...*someone outside the Realm of the Tarot had learned his secrets...*

Because of him...*his sins were endless!*

He had only one thing to his credit—he *had fallen in love!*

* * * *

While lightning bolts cut through the endless skies, and the celestial war continued to wage, Dana's hands began to slip—slowly at first, and then more and more, until she finally tumbled into the empty air. The cold wind whirled, pushing at her back, and against her outstretched arms and legs as she plummeted downward. A spine-chilling scream burst from her lungs, ear-splitting at first, and then as she tumbled down through the years, it slowly faded away.

Until—it *sounded no more.*

Suddenly there was a strange fluttering sound—like the pages of a book being quietly *closed.*

Epilogue

The road was narrow and dark.

A deep hush filled the night, except for a swarm of cicadas that sang a haunting tune in the nearby brush. A woman lay silent and still inside a sporty, low-slung, lipstick-red Spyder convertible. In only moments, her lashes gently fluttered, and then opened. Lifting her head, she looked around curiously. Screaming aches and pains caused her to move slowly as she tried to climb out of the car.

How long have I been out?

As she looked down into the smoking crater where her car still lay, the whole thing came back to her slowly. She looked around. It was still dark, so she couldn't have been out too long. With her head swimming, she was forced to lean against the cool metal of her car for a moment to get herself oriented. As if on cue, in the distance, she saw a pair of headlights coming toward her.

"What luck!" she cried out.

She quickly pushed herself away from the car, ran to the center of the street and wildly waved her arms.

The oncoming car slowed down and a pair of electric blue eyes stared out of a swarthy face. "Need some help?"

"Yes!" she cried out. "Thank God you came by. My car is over there in that hole, and my cell phone isn't working."

He slowly pulled over to the side and got out of his car. Looking at the deep hole in the blacktop, he said, "How did a hole that size get there?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

He looked around. "Not a very good place to have an accident. Looks like nothing around for miles."

"You're right." She looked closely at him. "You have a strange accent I can't place."

“Don’t try. I’m English for the most part, but my family comes from Northwest Europe.” He paced around, looking at her car. “Well, I guess the first thing we need is a tow truck, and then a mechanic.”

“You can forget the mechanic. It’s totaled.”

“You’re probably right,” he said with a warm smile. “I would be happy to take you somewhere.”

“Thanks.” She quickly grabbed her purse and they both slowly walked toward his car. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come along. I had a plane to catch, but I’m so late now, I’ll probably be fired.”

“Actually, we’re both right on time,” came his strange reply. Seeing her surprise at his answer, he stopped walking and quickly extended his hand. “My name is Franz Staresini.”

“Staresini,” she repeated thoughtfully. “Sounds familiar, like I’ve heard it somewhere before.” After thinking about it for a moment, she smiled. “Guess not.” Finally taking his hand, she jumped back as a small shock of electricity sizzled between them.

Lightning!

The electric shock awoke something inside her, triggering a feeling of *déjà vu*. She looked up at him curiously. “Are you famous? I mean...well, the name...something about lightning. Do you know anything about that?”

He chuckled. “A little, I suppose, why?”

“Hey, I know! You remind me of the hero in a romance novel I’m reading. It’s called *The Devil’s Cup*. He’s a magician, see, who likes to play with lightning. And the heroine...God, she’s beautiful!”

“You mean he’s a *mystic*, and she’s a redhead.”

Dana smiled with surprise. “Yeah. How did you know?”

“I don’t know. Call it a wild guess.” When she wasn’t looking, his gaze moved from her face to her hair.

“Come on, now. You may be a man, but I’ll bet you’re a romance freak just like me.”

He gave a slight shrug. “Isn’t everyone?”

She laughed, and gave him a sidelong glance. “Just for kicks, answer a question for me.”

“I guess I can do that.”

“If...”

“Is this a test?”

“Yes,” she said simply, and continued, “If you took me to a very exclusive restaurant and suddenly had to go to the men’s room, when you came back and saw me reading a romance novel, would you get upset?” She gave him an inquiring look while waiting for his answer.

“I might,” he said, with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “Unless you agreed to share the sexy parts with me.”

Dana’s eyes widened at his answer. “I think I’m going to like you.” She smiled. “My name is Dana, Dana Perrin.

“Hello, Dana,” he said, his deep, dark eyes slumberous. “By the way, do you know anything about Tarot cards?”

“Hey, don’t kid me. You *have* read the book. It’s all about this magician that—”

“That was cursed into The Magician Tarot Card.” His cunning gaze slid toward her. “Am I right?”

“Exactly. He was very elusive, maybe a bit mysterious.”

“He was a wimp,” he said, cutting his teasing eyes toward her.

“What? She bellowed, suddenly halting her steps. She turned to face him, her eyes narrowing in anger. “How can you say that? He was wonderful, and the most handsome man I’ve ever seen.”

“You *saw* him?”

“Well...” She hesitated. “Only in my mind maybe, but the author described him to perfection.”

Franz chuckled. “Okay, if you say so. Hey,” he took her arm, “it’s getting late. We’d better hurry.”

She held back, her face etched in childish anger.

“Hey, I’m sorry about teasing you, but I couldn’t resist.” His hand reached out and turned her face toward him, “You were asking for it, you know. It’s one thing to hear a beautiful woman go on and on about a man made of flesh and blood, but a paper hero? That was just too much.”

“Beautiful?” she said, a small smile playing along her lips.

“Very.” He winked.

“Well,” she began, allowing her childish anger to melt away. “I guess you’re right. I’m sorry.” She was quiet for a moment, and then with a dreamy look in her eyes, she said, “Jeez, I wonder what it would be like to have the hero in a romance novel come to life? You know, see him in the flesh, feel him, his lips.” Turning to look at him, she said excitedly, “These

authors, they make them so perfect, don't you think?" Hearing nothing but silence, she said, "Hey, what's wrong? You have to admit they do seem real, the heroes I—"

"Dana," he said firmly as he stopped and swung her into the circle of his arms. Their gazes met, creating a sizzle of electricity between them. "No more novels," he said, his voice husky with desire. "No more living your life on a printed page. From this moment on, every minute of your life will be the most romantic novel ever written. And I will be its author, editor, publisher...*and its hero.*"

His words took her breath away and she could do nothing but close her eyes and revel in the erotic flames he had ignited within her. Before she knew what was happening, he kissed her, causing her senses to reel, and every nerve in her body to short-circuit. Even the feel of his body was familiar, and she wanted more, more of his lips, *all* of his body. She was surprised at her own eager response to this stranger, and yet he wasn't a stranger. Who was he? How had he found her on a road rarely traveled? And why now, at this precise time of night? These questions and more might never be answered, but she didn't care. He had found her, and she had found him. That was all that mattered.

"No more novels," she whispered in agreement while gazing deeply into his eyes. "I have what I..."

Click.

Franz suddenly froze and looked around.

"What's wrong?" Dana asked.

"I thought I heard something," Franz muttered.

"It's probably nothing. The splintering of a twig, maybe."

"Perhaps." He gazed into the swirling black clouds of a dark sky. A sky that held all the far off distant worlds he had once traveled. Were they calling him back? Would he have to leave just as he'd found the only woman he could ever love? He recalled the day it all began. The day he stood talking to The Mighty Zeus in front of The Cathedral of the Rose.

...they are locking the door between our worlds for all time. When that happens, you will find yourself on one side, or the other. I can only hope it will be the side that will bring you the most happiness.

Suddenly, he knew. The realization burst upon him like the dawning of a brand new life. He was free, free at last to say goodbye to all the loneliness

he had once known, all the torment and all the anguish, because the strange sound he had heard wasn't the splintering of a twig. or even a deadly summons into battle. *It was the lock of a door.*

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Audrey Godwin is quickly rising into the ranks of hottest erotica writer around today. She slowly evolved from the mundane boy meets girl plotline, to the sexy bad boys who leave a trail of erotic fire wherever they go. Her passion is the big, swarthy type that fits into the gothic scene which she has brought into the twenty-first century. These alpha males might be vampires, werewolves spirit beings, or they may be completely normal. But one thing they all are is, sexy as hell.

It all started when she began reading. She read good books, bad books, so-so books, and those that had no business being published. So, deciding she could do at least as well, she put down her latest novel, and decided to write. Even though she tried to focus on her heroines, she somehow couldn't keep from wrapping her whole story around the gorgeous guys. Finally, she gave in to it and prowled the streets of her imagination in search of her next super idea and gorgeous hunk. Somewhere along the way she was discovered on the internet by a publisher that fully embraced her style of writing, and introduced her to erotic e-publishing. What came from it was a series of books that slowly became published, giving her the feeling of at last achieving her goal.

Audrey has had her days in the sun, when she was the life of the party, a laugh a minute kind of gal, and outrageously cool, but sadly, that's all over now. Today she's one of those boring x-civil service workers that has a penchant for bookstores and sappy love songs. She prefers quiet dinners with friends over maddening crowds. Her favorite pastime is writing a truly exciting suspense or horror novel with strong, stand-alone characters, and an exciting, anything-can-happen plotline. After several years, her love of writing hasn't left her, so look for more of her dark romance novels that will give you a chill one minute and a hot flash the next.

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