

A WITCH FOR GOOD LUCK

by
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Prologue

Sydney Mannville was a witch one never wanted to cross. But she was trying to mend her ways, oh yes, and failing miserably. Again.

“Do stop with the excuses,” her twin, Sheryece, said, her aura all sparkling lights and dazzling colors. “You failed. That’s the second time, and you’ve only got one more chance or”

“Whose fault is that?” Syd gritted her teeth. Oh, if she only had more power than Sheryece, she’d singe her sister’s hair from harlot’s red to black. Alas, she didn’t. Such magic on anyone but a mortal was beyond a mere witch. Even if she tried, little good it would do against Sheryece – a godmother so powerful, she’d cursed Syd to a fate worse than death. Syd felt a wave of suffocating black with the memory of Sheryece’s spell:

*“Once each century you must dwell,
In the house of one who needs true love’s spell. If you can bring
these mortals bliss,
Then you, too, shall win all
Including true love’s kiss.”*

She hadn’t any desire for a love, true or otherwise. And Sheryece, as though sensing Syd’s thoughts, had added ominously, “You have three chances to bring true love to a mortal before you are cast into eternal fire.”

“True love, phooey,” Syd spat.

Sheryece floated around the old mansion’s ballroom, shooting color across the crumbling plaster wall like a prism, hoping to cheer the dismal emptiness. Why did Sydney have to be so stubborn? “Can’t you see your attitude is your worst enemy?”

Sydney glowered in the corner, forming the shadow of a giant black cat around her. “My attitude? That’s rich, coming from the twin who got the good name, the good looks. And the prince.” She tossed her auburn mane of curls as her dark eyes flashed with envy.

“The good name! You’ve got to be kidding, Sydney. ‘Sheryece’ was an oddball name three hundred years ago, and I got teased just as much as you. Maybe more.” She added the last thoughtfully, thinking this was the first time Sydney had ever admitted anything bothered her. Maybe Sydney’s failed attempts to do good deeds had rubbed a tiny bit of awareness into her skin.

Should she tell Sydney the curse didn’t exist? She couldn’t curse anyone, even if she wanted to, which she didn’t. Life for Sydney was curse enough, wasn’t it? It broke Sheryece’s heart to see her sister so angry and miserable and unable to see she was doing it to herself. The curse had been a whim of inspiration, or maybe desperation, and her twin had bought into it lock, stock, and broom. She expected Sydney would be furious when she found out the truth, but really, what could she do except shout? A witch’s spell was no match for a godmother’s, and they both knew it.

Syd stared at Sheryece, wondering how a hundred years could go by so quickly. As far as she could see, this “new” century might have modern conveniences, but one could hardly breathe to enjoy them. Rotten air, foul water, overcrowded cities, how could anyone find true love in such a time?

She morosely contemplated what the cursed “oblivion” would feel like. Nothing? Eternal heat

stroke?

She'd tried to help the last young woman, she really had. Who could have foreseen that her spell to bring her true love to town would have led to a duel? If only he'd won, she might still have pulled it off. "So, who is my latest challenge?"

Before Sheryece could answer, a rather distinguished looking man appeared in the doorway. Scratch distinguished, Syd thought, try drop-dead gorgeous. Shoulder-length ebony hair, strong aristocratic nose and bold chin, dark flashing eyes, and batwing eyebrows. She gaped as he bowed before her and said, "Ah, Sheryece, my dear, I have come to repay my debt."

Gorgeous and *blind*, she amended. "I'm Syd."

Sheryece's glimmers formed an angelic vision of her voluptuous form wreathed in white silk shot with gold thread, the same gold thread woven through her long red curls. "Melvin, do join us. You'll be helping my twin, Sydney, with her task."

Syd cloaked her black-clad self in a purple aura meant to hide her admiration and send him packing. She had no use for men. They always lied and *always* preferred her sister. Melvin's eyes, however, merely twinkled in amusement as he bowed again. "My dear Sydney, I am at your disposal."

For a moment Syd was enthralled, then she managed, "The dump is just over the hill, Mel. Dispose yourself there." She glanced at her sister. "Who is the maitre'd anyway?"

Melvin, wearing an affronted expression threw back his cape over his broad shoulders. "You haven't heard of the great warlock, Melvin the Magnificent?"

Syd laughed. "Is this a joke?"

Sheryece frowned. "No joke. Melvin is going to assist you this time. And I will be around to offer advice. If I deem it's necessary."

"If you're so concerned, just undo the curse."

Sheryece's cheeks turned pink. "I explained. I regret making it, but it can't be changed. You must succeed, Sydney."

Melvin waved his hands like a magician about to pull a rabbit out of a top hat. "Don't worry, my dear. With me helping, she can't fail."

Syd lifted an eyebrow. "Oh can't I?" Obviously, dear old Mel knew nothing of a witch's bad luck.

"Now, now, don't be difficult," Sheryece murmured. "With the three of us working together, surely true love will triumph."

Syd narrowed her gaze, suspicious. "You sure I am allowed to have help on this?"

"Of course, Sydney. Now let's not dawdle." Sheryece spun through the air, moving upward like a white tornado, drawing Syd and Melvin with her toward the turret, Sheryece's favorite room. It was almost time to greet their new guest.

Chapter One

Elizabeth Benning took a deep breath of crisp, clean Montana air, exuberance filling her as well. The view from the mountain dazzled her eyes with green. Green hills everywhere, and only a few houses scattered amidst the dips and valleys. No smog, no dirt, no crime. People actually left their doors open around here.

She turned toward the house that had lured her here and climbed onto the rickety old porch. Squinting against the early morning sun, she looked up and up and up. Thrilled at the gingerbread trim, even with the peeling paint and pieces missing, she drank in the historic mansion with her artist's eye. What intrigued her most, however, was the turret tower and the roof above it which rose to a spire with what looked like a crystal orb at the very top.

Three stories high, tons of space, myriad windows, even stained-glass. It was perfect. Or it would be after a major overhaul and the investment of everything she had left from her divorce.

A new state, new business, new life. Her friends in Los Angeles thought she was nuts. They didn't believe her ex, Jerome, was vindictive enough to try and hurt her. They didn't believe he was behind her boss of three years firing her on a trumped up charge – one she knew came from Jerome. Her ex had money, tons of it, and power, and he hated her for leaving him.

Surveying the house, a tremor of fear and excitement rippled through her. She'd always wanted to renovate a place like this and turn it into something grand. "The Good Luck Inn," she announced firmly, imagining it finished with all the quaint touches that made a bed and breakfast inn special, determined not to believe in the silly "haunted" rumors Annie, the librarian in town had warned about. Nothing would dispel such shenanigans faster than repairs and a new coat of paint.

"Goodbye California and welcome Bozeman, Montana," she said as she twisted the brass knob and shoved open the front door. Jerome would have to work hard to find her here, and even if he did, he'd never set foot in Montana before so he wouldn't have the same clout he had in L.A.

Stray beams of light speared the entry like a dozen Hollywood spotlights. She looked up, awed all over again at the spectacular chandelier. Full of prisms, every one coated with dust. What would the entry look like when she'd cleaned them? Her imagination soared happily as she investigated each room, ticking off a mental list of all to be done. "Beginning with new wiring and plumbing," she told the clawed tub in the first floor bathroom. Impatiently she glanced at her watch. The contractor was late. That or he'd been scared off by those "ghost and goblin" rumors.

She gripped the blackened brass banister and started cautiously up the stairs, picking her way past rotted boards. From the landing, she studied the space below. Perfect for the two antique sideboards her grandmother had bequeathed her. Guests could gather up tea and cookies and amble outside to enjoy the gorgeous mountain view. Of course, there'd be snow here in a few months, and she wouldn't be able to take in borders until next summer, but one good summer would keep her going a long time. And she couldn't imagine anything better than living here.

Her first trip to Montana had been merely as an escape after she'd found Jerome in a clench with

his secretary. The woman didn't have Elizabeth's family tree that Jerome was so quick to brag about, but his secretary did have the silicon valley implanted in her chest.

Closing her eyes against the hurt, she jumped at a pounding on the door. "Just a minute!" Testing the banister, she did something she'd always wanted to do, she sat on it and slid down. Arriving at the bottom wobbly but intact she hurried to the door.

"Ooh-la-la, Sydney, Melvin, come see whose knocking," Sheryece purred.

Sydney gasped, "He's gorgeous," and Melvin harrumphed.

"Did my spell really bring him here?" Sydney asked, holding her slender fingers in front of her face as though she couldn't believe the magic she'd wrought.

Sheryece hid a smile of pleasure. "Why else do you think he accepted the job?" She glanced from Melvin to Sydney. Would her twin and Melvin fall for each other? Her only worry was if Sydney found out Melvin was "Prince Mel" she might scorn him all the more for his royal connections, or worse, figure out Sheryece's plan and spoil it. She had to tread very carefully.

Melvin crossed his arms. "Elizabeth won't be very happy when she finds out her ex hired Adam to make sure she loses every penny in restoring the place."

Surprisingly, Sydney beat Sheryece to saying, "She won't find out. And once they fall in love, well, neither one will care what brought them together."

Melvin raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Oh, do come and watch," Sydney demanded.

Adam Gardiner rapped on the wood one more time, uncomfortable standing on the porch, feeling like he was being observed. He glanced around, saw nothing but a sprinkling of distant houses, each on their own acreage, and mountains every direction, all topped off by more blue sky than he'd ever imagined existed. Montana was aptly named Blue Sky Country, but all this space made him edgy. Too easy to be spotted. If he had to bend the law a bit, he didn't want witnesses. *Bend the law a bit, is that what you call lying and plotting vandalism?*

This was one big mistake. He felt it down to his toes.

About to admit the error of his ways and climb back into his truck, the door swung open, and the most bewitching blue eyes arrested his retreat. A deep blue like Venetian glass, with a fringe of violet on the outer edge. The woman blinked as though awakened from deep sleep, and he found himself wondering what she'd been doing. There were cobwebs in her raven hair, dust smudged across one pale cheek, and when their gazes met, she nibbled beguilingly at her luscious lower lip.

"Elizabeth Ho – uh, Benning?" Holy Hell, he'd almost used her married name! He stuck out his hand and rushed on hoping to cover his blunder. "I'm Adam Gardiner of A-1 Construction. You asked me to meet you here."

Elizabeth shook Adam Gardiner's hand with a feeling she couldn't explain. It wasn't his sun-drenched hair or the ruggedly handsome lifeguard-tanned face, nor the openly appraising green eyes. That all registered in a pleasing way, but it was his touch that zinged her with some unknown quantity she could neither put into words or readily accept. Still, her heart was pounding like she'd shot onto the downward drop of a roller-coaster, and her legs abruptly felt rubbery as though she'd run miles and miles and was near collapse. The man's polo shirt and shorts didn't fit with her image of what a construction worker would wear, but the rest of him, shoulders wide enough to toss a bag of cement, a flat stomach and well-muscled legs, all said the man worked hard.

A thick blond eyebrow lifted, and a sexy smile crossed his lips. "Do I pass inspection?"

Her cheeks suddenly felt charbroiled, and she stepped back, catching the edge of the door for support. "I wasn't . . . I didn't mean . . ." Oh dear, how could she tell him her brain had turned him into a work of art, like a Michelangelo sculpture? He'd probably think he could rob her blind or take advantage of her in some more elemental way. *That* did not bear thinking about. So she hadn't slept with a man in months and months, that didn't mean she had to go hopping between the sheets with the first Montana hunk to cross her path. At twenty-eight she knew better, except temptation had never struck like this before. She stepped back, too embarrassed to speak.

Adam wouldn't have dared his comment if Jerome hadn't told him what a bed-hopping bimbo his ex was. Adam had caught a news story about the ugly divorce, both sides claiming the other was adulterous. He'd never heard a bad word about Jerome though and was inclined to believe the man. Elizabeth's red-faced reaction, however, did not match that description, and he was sorry he'd let his tongue flap without checking out the truth for himself. Still, a pathological liar couldn't exactly be trusted, and she was rumored to be that and worse. Hell, she'd been fired from her last job for lying and stealing. Jerome had shown him the statement signed by her boss. He realized she was waiting for him to say something and asked, "You said you wanted an estimate on the plumbing?"

At his business-like tone, she looked relieved. She unconsciously smoothed her hair, realized it and quickly lowered her hand. "Plumbing, wiring, the whole enchilada."

He stepped past her and eyed the entry, then the rickety stairs. "The whole enchilada, huh? Sure you don't want to 'doze this place and start over?"

"Start over?" She gasped as though he'd committed a mortal sin. Perhaps he had, but his sinful thoughts regarding the delectable Elizabeth Benning had nothing to do with the house and everything to do with the way she'd looked at him. He hadn't been studied that closely since the father of his high-school prom date gave him the third degree.

She continued, "This is a historical monument. Irreplaceable. Can't you just see it? The molding replaced, new paint and wallpaper, every bit of brass and copper polished like a new penny?"

She spun around, making him think of Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, the move corny as heck, yet so open and guileless it tugged at his heart.

"It'll be something," he agreed.

Her breathless smile made his throat tighten. Such enthusiasm and passion . . . for a house. He liked building things with his hands, took pride in the houses he'd put up, but he didn't live and breathe his job. Elizabeth Benning was turning into a surprise package. Jerome had described her as a

back-biting, gold-digger who could win an academy award with her acting skills. Adam found it hard to discount her wide-eyed innocence and wondered what she'd done to earn the man's enmity.

"So where do you want to start?" she asked, nibbling at her lower lip again and making him have all kinds of crazy impulses. Impulses that would likely get his face slapped.

"At the top," he said, tearing his gaze from where it didn't belong and glancing up toward the second floor landing.

She led the way, nimbly stepping around rotted boards. Either she was unaware of the streak of black smeared across her backside or unconcerned. He had yet to meet a female who spent less than two hours in the bathroom every morning and didn't mind dirt. Curious to see how she responded, he said as they crossed the landing to the next staircase, "Did you know you've got cobwebs in your hair and uh, dirt on your shorts?"

Her fingers swept over her hair, and she twisted to look at her backside, a small frown on her lips.

Elizabeth wondered if he'd meant what he said as a criticism or merely to inform. From the way he managed to look at anything but her, she decided it was a criticism. Telling herself she didn't care, she quipped, "I slid down the banister, and the cobwebs are from the fireplace."

He eyed her like a guy who disliked Christmas fruitcake and had just received one. "What were you doing in the fireplace?"

Heat crawled up her neck. "Investigating a strange sound, if you must know."

"What kind of a sound?" he asked.

"I don't know. A moaning sound or . . . or the wind or something."

"Maybe it's a ghost," he teased.

Her chin lifted defiantly. "I don't believe in ghosts or any other superstitious nonsense. But I know I heard something." The question was what? It had sounded like voices in a whispered conversation. A conversation in the chimney?

Changing the subject, she said, "You'll have to see the fireplace when we go back down. It's in the biggest room in the house. Must have been a ballroom or salon or whatever they might have called it. The fireplace is all marble and taller than I am!"

Since she only looked about five foot four, Adam figured he wouldn't be overawed. But by the time they'd finished going from room to room, he making notes on his clipboard, her pointing out numerous architectural details, he was impressed. Despite the dirt, dust and neglect, the place could be a showpiece. *Except that you're supposed to make certain it never gets finished*, added the little nagging voice in his head. He squelched it by concentrating on the house.

By the time he stood beside the marble fireplace, he'd also decided Elizabeth Benning was no dummy and far from the ill-painted, brainless floozy Jerome had described. She defied categorization and piqued his interest in a way that was definitely not a good idea.

“So – uh, how much is it going to cost to jazz up this place?”

How long had she been watching him stare at the fireplace? He looked at her, then down at his clipboard. A much safer view. He pulled out his pocket calculator and plugged in numbers, jotted the total down, and handed the paper to her wondering if she’d have a heart attack.

She merely studied the paper for a few moments, nodding as if she was crunching the numbers in her head and getting the same answers, then looked up.

“When can you start?”

“Tomorrow morning. I’ll be out here with a five-man crew--you did say you wanted it done quickly?”

“Yes. The sooner everything’s been updated and inspected, the sooner I can move in.”

Adam couldn’t bypass the chance to ask, “Where are you staying now?”

If she found his question too personal it didn’t show. “I’ve parked a small trailer in the back. Rented it for three months. If I’m not here, just bang on the trailer door.”

He jotted another note, stalling. Her proximity was intoxicating, provocative and enticing, yet she seemed oblivious to how she affected him.

“You don’t think it’ll be past August before the house is livable do you?” she asked, her tone almost a plea.

“August?” He almost choked, then managed, “I don’t think so.” He didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth – with a house this old and neglected, the things that could go wrong were endless – without any help from him. In the best of circumstances, they’d be lucky to get the plumbing, wiring, and outside finished before snow fell. From what he’d read, Montana had winter ten months a year.

At his assurance, she beamed at him. Feeling good and bad down to the soles of his feet, he reached out and plucked a cobweb from her hair. “I think we’re both covered in them,” he said, trying to read her expression, and failing. She looked rather bemused. Reminding himself that in a sense she was his boss, he fought the urge to touch her hair again. Jerome did not have seduction of his ex in mind when he’d asked Adam for a “favor.” Adam had two million in construction deals riding on the outcome of this trip, and he wasn’t about to blow it for a woman – even one as appealing as Elizabeth Benning. Stifling a surge of guilt, he waved goodbye and climbed into his truck.

“Oo-la-la, he’s head over heels!” Sheryece said.

“The sparks were flying both directions!” Syd said before frowning at her own words. By gosh, she’d sounded excited. Ugh! What was happening here? She was going to do her job, but that didn’t mean she liked it. “Maybe they’ll burn the house down!”

Mel wore a sober expression that gave Syd the wicked thought of smoothing the wrinkle from his brow with her lips. He’d probably drop dead from shock. Or disgust. But oh, she liked the faint scent of tobacco that clung to his clothes. Irritated at her thoughts wandering where they shouldn’t, she

snapped, “Well, you’re my assistant. Don’t you have anything to say?”

His eyebrow lifted, making him decidedly sexy, but his words doused the alien sensation. “Don’t get too overconfident, ladies. The last thing either Elizabeth or Adam wants right now is romance. The fact that there’s an attraction only means they’ll probably avoid each other as much as possible.”

Syd, along with her sister, poo-poo’d Melvin’s grim prediction. Until it became apparent he was absolutely right.

Chapter Two

Each day, usually from the Victorian’s kitchen window, Elizabeth surreptitiously watched Adam work. She watched him measure boards, saw, hammer, joke with his crew, and most of all, avoid her. Somehow after their first meeting some kind of silent agreement had passed between them. Her attraction to him didn’t make any sense, and the last thing she wanted was some guy she barely knew taking over her life like Jerome. “Give ‘em an inch, and they’ll take a mile,” she muttered, eyeing him in the afternoon sun, his shirt off, sweat glistening across his broad back and wondering again why something zinged inside her whenever she saw him. “I don’t want zing,” she muttered to herself. “Who needs it?”

Adam laughed at something one of the guys said, and the sound carried through the open window. She liked the way he laughed. It warmed her like a pair of furry slippers. *I’m supposed to be figuring out what appliances I want here*, she told herself, *not staring at Adam Gardiner’s sun-bronzed muscles*.

His gaze flickered toward the kitchen window, and she quickly dropped the curtains and ducked, feeling like a girl with a first-time crush.

Flustered, she retreated to the front door and bee-lined for her tiny trailer home. Those poor guys all looked so hot and thirsty, maybe she should offer them a soda or something. She peered into her minuscule refrigerator, dug out the six-pack of diet soda she’d stashed and headed back outside.

This is probably a big mistake, her inner voice cautioned.

Probably, she mentally answered. *But being hospitable is not an invitation for a date. She’d do the same for any workman slaving on her behalf all day.*

Adam glanced up at the sound of approaching footsteps, half-hoping it was Elizabeth, half-hoping it wasn’t. Like a shy kid she’d been watching him at the window again, and he found it endearing. Had she finally mustered up her courage to talk to him? Her baggy shorts and overlarge t-shirt seemed to be her uniform of choice and should have been a turn-off, instead he narrowly missed his finger with the saw and hastily set it down. “Uh, hello, uh, Ms. Benning.”

“Elizabeth,” she offered, holding out a can of lemon-lime. “I thought you might be thirsty. . . and everyone else, too.” Scarlet stained her cheeks.

He grinned and popped the tab on the can, gulping half the contents before the sugarless-ness registered. He managed not to spit it out, but set the can down like it was hot-wired. “Uh, it’s sugar-free, guys, just what you need,” he called in a cheerful tone, not quite knowing how to tell her they all liked the real stuff.

Each man snagged a can, popped the tab, took a polite swig and hastily deposited it on the ground. At a look from Adam they all called, “Thanks, Elizabeth.”

She beamed toward the group, then focused on Adam, her gaze wavering from his face to his bare chest. The scarlet in her cheeks spread down her neck.

“You don’t have to wine and dine us, Elizabeth,” he said, testing her name out on his tongue and liking the way it rolled off. “You’re paying us.”

“It’s no trouble,” she said, nibbling on her lower lip in a way that fascinated him. Obviously a habit, he seemed to catch her doing it every time he caught her watching him. This shy act puzzled him. So did the soda thing. According to Jerome she was the type to guzzle a six-pack or two with a crowd of guys, then snag a man to take home for the night. So what was this innocent routine for? He couldn’t figure out what she hoped to gain by it. But then he couldn’t figure her out at all. Which made him glad to keep his distance and his head.

Feeling good, Elizabeth retreated from Adam’s scrutiny before the rest of her turned red. Back inside her trailer she sank onto the tiny bed until the inner shakes passed. One look from the man made her feel all gushy and klutzy and terrified she’d make an absolute fool of herself. A pioneer woman wouldn’t give a damn what he thought, she told herself, shoring up her defenses against their next encounter. She’d go about her business, say whatever needed to be said, and ignore him. Or that was the plan until two days later when Adam arrived with coffee and donuts for the crew and waved her away from her window-measuring-curtain-design project to join them.

She hitched up her jeans, smoothed her sweatshirt over them, then mentally chastised herself for caring how she looked.

Adam smiled at her as he held out a cup of gourmet coffee. “Thought I’d return your hospitality,” he said.

The cup warmed her hands. She cleared her throat and croaked out a “thank you.” If she had any smarts at all she’d run back inside and stay there.

“Chilly morning,” he observed between sips of coffee.

Noting how he and the crew all wore shorts and t-shirts, she said, “Am I the only one around here who gets cold?”

Adam raised an eyebrow as he snapped on his tool belt. “Hard labor gets the blood pumping, Elizabeth.”

“Yessiree,” one of the crew piped, “So does a few other activities I can think of.”

Elizabeth wondered if a person could die from embarrassment. Was her attraction to Adam that apparent? As the men laughed and headed different directions, Adam studiously studied his coffee cup. Tension arced between them. She finally got her feet to move and hastily retreated back to the safety of her trailer, calling over her shoulder, “Thanks for the coffee.” Deciding that Adam Gardiner was too darn likable, she determined to curb her hospitable instincts and keep her distance until the house was finished and the man on his way to his next renovation.

“They’ve hardly spoken to each other in two months!” Syd cried to Mel. “I have to *do* something!” She wrung her hands, terrified she’d make a fatal blunder. All right, she’d brought Elizabeth and her true love together, but they had to *admit* their love for one another and most of the time they acted like similarly charged electrons.

“Shhh,” Mel cautioned, “You’ll bring the house down with your moaning and groaning. Or worse, you’ll have poor Elizabeth believing she needs to be locked up.”

“You’re the one who needs to be locked up, Mel. And don’t stand so close to me. You reek like an old cigar, has anyone ever told you that?”

He stiffened and took a step back. “Not recently.”

Syd gave him her haughtiest look, wishing her stupid hormones would quit tingling every time Mel came near, and worrying she’d fail in her mission. Frustrated, she murmured a spell and felt a flash of satisfaction as thunder rattled the windows.

“You’re going to wake her,” Mel hissed.

“Oh she’ll never believe she’s hearing anything but the wind. And I need to let off some steam!”

Mel crooked a half-smile. “There are other ways to let off steam, my dear.” He waved a hand and a bubbling glass of champagne appeared. The window opened and a cool breeze filled the room, soft violin and piano music drifting in also. “What you need is to relax.” A table appeared with a candelabra in the center. Next came a chair, which Mel pulled out in true gentlemanly fashion.

But Syd merely twitched her fingers and everything vanished. “I’m not the target here, Mel,” she said, wondering if Sheryece had put him up to this mumbo-jumbo. “And I’d have to be daft to fall for you.”

“Fall for me? Why, I wasn’t wooing you, you arrogant witch, I was merely trying to be pleasant. Something you seem incapable of being. Burn the house down for all I care!”

In a puff of black smoke, Mel vanished, and Syd had the turret room to herself. Good. Now maybe she could think instead of being constantly distracted by that warlock wimp. Not that he looked like a wimp, but really, what was she thinking? *Snap out of it, Syd. He’s not even close to your type. He’s Sheryece’s type, but she’s already got her prince waiting in the wings, so he’s settling for second best.* Well, Sydney Mannville was second best for no one! Melvin the Magnificent could rot another century before she gave *him* the time of day.

Satisfied she had her emotions completely under control, she again considered Elizabeth Benning. Maybe if she scared the woman silly

A smile tugging at her lips, Syd called forth her book of magic and flipped through the pages.

Elizabeth knew she was awake, yet what had pulled her from sleep and urged her to her feet eluded her. She felt fuzzy-headed as though a part of her was in fact still sleeping. Beneath her bare feet, the cold trailer floor assured her she was conscious. Some inner voice compelled her to step out into the chill night air, an icy draft cutting through her thermal pajamas as though they were nonexistent.

“Elizabeth . . .” the mansion seemed to whisper. The misty air wrapped around her, ghostly fingers that tugged her up the steps and to the front door. Before she could touch the knob, the door swung open and the chandelier came on.

“Who’s there?” Silence. And the sound of the wind rustling the trees outside.

Was she awake? She pressed her fingers to the wall. Solid and cool. Real.

“Go to the tower room,” a voice whispered ominously. Elizabeth gripped the shining brass banister and climbed the renovated staircase. There were patch marks on the wall where plumbing and wiring had been replaced. Somehow they distracted her from her purpose, and confused her. What was she doing here?

Had Adam come back? Perhaps he’d forgotten something he needed at home. Thinking of Adam made her pause on the second floor landing, recalling the first time they’d met, and his semi-suggestive comment “Do I pass inspection?” Maybe she’d misread the interest in his eyes. Maybe the coffee the other day was merely a friendly gesture. Or maybe he sensed she was avoiding him and so was giving her space. Since she’d married and divorced Jerome, she didn’t quite trust her instincts when it came to men, especially a man who seemed as nice as Adam. He was too handsome to be so nice. She could tell, however, that his co-workers liked him, could see he got along well with them, whereas Jerome rubbed everyone the wrong way unless he wanted something. She peered around the second-floor landing and blinked. What was she doing here?

“Come to the tower.”

Why on earth should I do that?

Her feet, though, moved to the next staircase and she felt like she was floating upward on a cloud.

Adam shot into a sitting position in bed, his ears ringing with what had sounded like an explosion. He was dressed and in his truck, roaring through the small college town and up the hill, a panicky feeling in his gut. Something was wrong with Elizabeth. The sensation was so strong, so intense, his foot automatically pressed harder on the accelerator. By the time he wondered if he’d just had a nightmare, he was in front of the renovation.

Sitting in his truck, he rolled down the window and cocked his head. Crickets, the rustle of

leaves in the trees. Stars winked at him overhead, beckoning him to get out and study the endless diamond-studded blackness. Stifling a yawn, he checked his watch. Three a.m. Holy Hell, he had to be here to work in a couple of hours. What was he doing freezing out front of this old monstrosity? Everything was quiet. Peaceful.

The rusty peal of a hinge brought his gaze back to the house. Light showed through the crack beneath the front door. A feeling of uneasiness he couldn't identify had him running around back to the trailer. The trailer door stood agape. He tapped on the door and stuck his head inside. "Elizabeth?" The bed in the rear of the cramped living space was empty. He checked the minuscule bathroom, then dashed back to the house.

"Elizabeth?" he yelled at the bottom of the first staircase. He was going to feel mighty silly if she was just having trouble sleeping. "Elizabeth?" he called as he reached the landing.

Another hinge screech sounded from the third floor. He took the stairs two at a time. Light flowed into the end of the hallway from the turret room.

The feeling of being watched – a sense that bothered him every time he stepped inside the place – resurfaced so strongly that he paused and looked over his shoulder, scanning the corners of the room for movement.

A touch of wind chilled his face and he realized the turret window must be open. Rushing through the doorway, his heart jumped into his throat. "Elizabeth!" He leaped to the window and grabbed her shoulders, pulling her back from the ledge. "What are you doing?" He shook her harder than he intended, the metallic taste of fear still in his mouth. What would he have done if he'd arrived here to work in the morning only to find her body in the driveway? At the very least she'd break her legs, more likely her neck.

She blinked and stared into his eyes. "So green . . . like moss . . ." she murmured, her hand reaching out and touching his temple, the gesture so intimate his upset turned to mass confusion. This was hardly the time to be noticing his eyes.

Her dark brows drew together in puzzlement. She glanced past him toward the open window, then blinked at him again. "What are *you* doing in my dream?"

"Your dream?" He lowered his hands from her shoulders and stepped to the window, closing it. "I'm wide awake and you were about to jump three stories and kill yourself."

"Kill myself?" She laughed in disbelief. "You're joking, right?"

He shook his head, wondering what had brought him here, and half-hoping it was all a dream. Except the cold night air and the awareness of the woman before him assured him he was quite conscious. Struggling for an explanation, he asked, "Do you sleep walk?"

"No. Never." She shivered and crossed her arms, then suddenly her legs buckled.

He lunged to catch her. What was going on? Swinging her into his arms, he carried her downstairs and back to her trailer, painfully aware of her arms clinging around his neck, her face buried against his chest, and that she wore absolutely nothing beneath the form-fitting thermal top and pants. "Do you always wear these to bed?"

“Only when it’s freezing,” she murmured.

Did that mean she slept naked most of the time? Heat wove through his belly and funneled through his veins as he set her on the narrow bed, then sank down beside her. Those old sparks were flying again, scalding his skin like a blow torch everywhere their bodies touched, making him want to forget how he’d found her and what she’d been about to do.

He’d done everything he could to stay away from her the last two months, just to avoid a moment like this one. With her sleep-tussled, shoulder-length hair, her nipples hard nubs poking against her top, her voice raspy with fatigue, she was the most inviting sight he could recall ever stumbling upon. He wanted to forget all Jerome’s warnings and his own inner red flag that said this could be some sort of manipulative scheme. Except he couldn’t figure out how she’d awakened him and gotten him up here.

Elizabeth glanced at the trailer door standing open and felt bewildered. Why did she feel so light-headed and tingly? Had she been asleep? She realized Adam was sitting beside her on her bed and told herself she should scream or something. But she didn’t. Instead she resisted the inane urge to inch closer to his warmth.

His gaze met hers and a fluttery sensation of panic swept through her body. “It’s the middle of the night, isn’t it?” She heard herself asking in a tone that questioned his presence.

“Yes, it’s the middle of the night,” he said. “And after that stunt you pulled I ought to have my head examined for even thinking what I’m thinking.”

“Stunt?” Beneath the hard glare of the trailer light, she read hunger in his darkening eyes. It made her feel weak and wobbly as though she’d just taken her first ride on a bicycle. “I- I don’t understand”

“Neither do I,” he murmured. “Maybe this is a dream.”

It did feel like a dream, she thought, her hand straying toward his shoulder, the thought allowing her fingers to graze along corded muscle that tensed beneath her touch. There was no other way to explain why he was here or why she felt so safe with him.

As though reading her mind, he lowered his mouth to hers.

Adam couldn’t remember feeling anything as sweet as the softness of Elizabeth’s lips beneath his. His racing pulse urged him recklessly on and he tentatively traced her lips with his tongue. At thirty-two he knew better than to succumb to this kind of temptation, but the tantalizing touch of her fingers made him feel reckless.

Reeling with confusion, Elizabeth forgot everything at the gentle touch of Adam’s lips. Sculpted, sensitive, provocative lips. Melting into his warmth and the strength of his embrace, she welcomed him into her arms and her dream. He shuddered against her and eased back, uncertainty etched into his expression. His thumb brushed across her lips, questions in his eyes. “It’s only a dream,” she whispered.

“Is it?” He brushed his mouth against hers. “I’ve never had a dream this real”

The door banged open and shut with a blast of cold air and he shot to his feet. “Holy Hell, what is this?”

Elizabeth felt as though she'd fallen overboard into the Pacific. The abrupt cold alarming. Sobering. And assuring her this was all no sleepy fantasy.

It couldn't be. She stared at him, half-expecting him to disappear. When he didn't she jumped to her feet, stammering, "What are you doing here? You can't . . . I can't . . ." She whirled and grabbed her robe from the minuscule closet and yanked it on.

"Elizabeth, it's okay," he said it like he was calming a frightened doe. "You were sleepwalking . . . or, uh, something. Maybe I was too . . ." His hands touched her shoulders, his gaze holding hers. "Are you okay?"

How could she do anything but nod at the concern she read in his expression?

He stepped toward the door, looking like a man who didn't quite know what to say. "Get some sleep. We'll talk later."

Abruptly she recalled him snatching her from the turret window ledge. Numbly sank to her bed again, watching as he quietly closed the door behind him. Had she been sleep-walking? She must have been. But why? And why had he suddenly shown up to save her? Her thoughts muddled, she lay back and closed her eyes. They didn't stay closed. What if she slept and it happened again?

A new thought emerged, just as disquieting and profound. Adam had kissed her! And he'd said "we'll talk later." *We*? She didn't want to be a *we* ever again. *She* would work it out – by herself.

In the morning, she'd thank him for . . . for his rescue, and tell him the kiss was a mistake. The tingling in her body protested that the touch of his lips was heaven, no mistake about it. Sighing at what she considered her own fickle, unpredictable emotions, she closed her eyes, determined not to surrender to such passions again.

Adam stood outside Elizabeth's door, his body overheated and eager for more of her tantalizing touch. Blast the vulnerability in her dazed expression that made him feel protective and a whole bunch of other emotions he had no wish to feel. He was supposed to be "ruining" the woman not falling for her. "We?" he muttered under his breath. A woman with obvious emotional problems? And they seemed to be catching. Now who was out of his mind?

Shoving his hands in his jeans, he strode back to his truck and climbed inside. Elizabeth Benning was hazardous to his health, physically and mentally, and the further away he stayed from her, the better.

Syd didn't say a word as Sheryece wailed, "Oh no, what have you done?" How could she explain she'd thought Adam would rescue Elizabeth and wa-la! – happily ever after. Sheryece shook her head. "Now *he* thinks she's crazy."

Mel appeared in the center of the room. "And *she* thinks she's crazy too," he added.

"They're crazy about each other," Syd said. "Why do they make it so difficult? This is all their fault."

"Their fault?" Sheryece and Mel said in unison, both wearing mutual frowns.

Syd lifted her chin in exasperation. “All right, I may have helped a little. But Mel gave me the idea with his ‘needs to be locked up’ statement.”

“Me?”

“Him? Sydney, it was *your* spell that brought Elizabeth to the tower and Adam, too. *We* had nothing to do with it.”

“I had *good* intentions!” Every time she said that word she ground her teeth. Oh, she hated *good* almost as much as she hated her sister. If it weren’t for the oblivion practically staring her in the face, she’d ditch this whole farce and let Sheryece and Mel bring the two love birds together. Love! Ha! There was another misguided emotion. A woman who trusted a man enough to love him was an utter and complete fool waiting to have her heart cut out. She’d had the experience once and that was more than enough.

She suddenly realized Mel and Sheryece were huddled together and whispering, Mel standing much too close to her sister. Syd wanted to throw him out the window.

She crossed her arms and adopted a disinterested expression instead. “What plot are you two hatching?” she asked.

Sheryece shot her look of disgust. “Figuring out how to undo this mess.”

Syd looked down her nose at the both of them. “Pray tell. How do *we* do that?”

In the early morning light, Adam stepped away from the porch to survey the front of the house. Not too shabby, he thought, imagining it freshly painted in the off-white color Elizabeth had chosen, all the trim done in burgundy and light pink. He wasn’t much into pink, but he had to admit the test strip they’d done on the corner of the house looked great.

“There you are.”

He turned toward Elizabeth’s voice, suddenly uncomfortable but not sure why. The weird dream? He’d done a lot more than kiss her in some of his other fantasies, but last night’s dream of saving her from throwing herself out the third story window had been so vivid he’d had a hard time shaking it off when his alarm rang him awake. “Good morning,” he said, accepting the mug of hot coffee she’d brought and trying to hide his surprise. Since his last coffee offering she’d gone back to watching him surreptitiously from the kitchen window.

This was a nice gesture, he thought, taking a sip and enjoying it. He had a feeling he’d enjoy everything about Elizabeth, if he let himself. Their arms grazed and he was infinitely aware of how much more he wanted than a mere touch of her arm. Forcing a smile, he asked, “You like it?”

Soft pink colored her cheeks and he found himself wondering what the heck was on her mind. It didn’t seem to be the house. She wasn’t even looking that direction.

Elizabeth tore her gaze from Adam’s chest, desperately trying to put last night’s dream from her mind. Her brain, however, had other ideas, and images of making love with Adam Gardiner were

playing havoc with her ability to think. “What did you say?” she stammered.

“I asked if you like how the front of the house is shaping up.”

“Shape? Oh yes, the shape is fine.” She drifted past him toward the house and he followed her.

“Are you feeling okay?” The words conjured up a spooky feeling of *déjà vu* he couldn’t explain.

“Feeling okay?” she murmured, her expression dazed.

Was she on drugs? Some sort of medication? He suddenly found himself questioning whether last night *had* been a dream. Medication could explain her sleep-walking. If she had been sleep-walking. If he had been here. There was only one way to find out. He started around the house toward the trailer. He’d never been inside – except in his dream.

“Where are you going?” Elizabeth said, racing to keep up with his hurried stride.

He didn’t answer. There was no way he could explain. He just shoved open the door and stepped inside.

He swallowed. Goosebumps rippled over his arms. Now who was nuts? He didn’t believe in precognition or whatever one called that mumbo-jumbo psychic stuff.

“Just what are you doing?”

He turned as the door slapped closed behind Elizabeth, the sound too damned familiar. “Last night”

Her gaze swept from him to the bed as if she knew exactly what he was referring to. “It did happen, didn’t it?” he asked. His hands were on her shoulders and he didn’t remember putting them there. Staring down at her, he fought the impulse to see if the kiss in his dream had been as great as he recalled.

She stepped backwards. “It was a dream . . . how did you . . .?” Her skin, which had picked up a bit of sun turned the color of putty.

“That’s it! Cast the spell again before this blows up in our faces!” Mel barely kept his voice to a low growl.

“I did. I am!” Syd fired back, wondering what was wrong with her magic. It had worked fine bringing Elizabeth to the tower and Adam to her rescue, but the *other* dream spell to undo the first wasn’t working. “Mel would you get away from me!” she said, unable to concentrate.

Wearing a glare, he retreated two steps.

She took a deep breath.

“Dream weaver’s magic cast your spell,

Let the two lovers forget last night's farewell,"

Sheryece whispered to Mel, "Oh, dear, poetry was never her strong point."

Distracted, Syd said, "Shhh! The better the rhyme, the more potent the spell." She closed her eyes to concentrate.

"Make them as they were before

He ever stepped through her trailer door."

Adam blinked, feeling claustrophobic in the tiny trailer even as he tried to remember why he'd come inside. He saw his coffee mug on the counter and absently picked it up and took a sip. "Hazelnut. Tastes great."

Elizabeth stared at him, the strangest look in her eyes.

"We were discussing the paint, weren't we?" he asked, thinking she made damn good coffee and he'd better get out of there before the other guys got the wrong impression.

She opened the door and he followed her out. "Yes . . . I think . . . yes, we were."

"You don't like how it looks on the corner?"

She shook off the frown and found a smile, suddenly appearing more awake and like her usual self. "No, it looks wonderful. I think you're doing an excellent job."

"You do?" He smiled back, knowing he should say thanks and get back to work, also knowing he wasn't going to.

"Yes, I do."

He walked with her around to the front of the house again. "How about celebrating the completion of the plumbing by having dinner with me tonight?"

"Dinner . . ." Elizabeth felt heat sting her cheeks and wondered if he thought her an idiot, the way she was always repeating what he said. But she felt so strange and lightheaded around him.

Right now he wore such a disarming smile, it just made her want to melt. And there was a touch of anxiousness in his eyes that made him so likable and hard to refuse.

As though mistaking her silence, he said, "You can look at it as a free meal if you want. No strings, I swear. You just look so happy and the house is coming along so well . . ." By gosh, he was babbling or at least that's what it felt like. Her blue eyes had turned his brain to mush. He should never have asked her to dinner, he realized. It was like handing his namesake the apple – all too tempting to resist.

Elizabeth felt a stab of disappointment. He was backpedaling. Regretting his impulse? Recalling

the way he'd pointed out the cobwebs in her hair and her dirt-streaked backside the first time they'd met, she felt embarrassed all over again and determined to hide it. If he was sorry he'd asked her, then she didn't want to be with him. Men were nothing but trouble, and she'd do well to remember that the next time she wanted to melt around Adam Gardiner.

"I don't think I should," she said before she could change her mind. I've got wallpaper to pick out, samples of tile and carpet . . ."

"I've got a lot to take care of, too," he said quickly.

Too quickly. Dejected, she watched him walk away, aware that the sunshine suddenly seemed a bit dimmer.

Shaking her head at her own foolishness, she strode into the mansion and the pile of samples she'd stashed in one of the back rooms and buried herself in work.

"Great save!" Mel said, grabbing Syd around the waist and whirling her off her feet, their bodies chest to chest.

"Put me down, you big oaf!" she yelled.

Instead, he stopped spinning, tightened his hold and kissed her soundly, deeply, passionately. She felt as though something had sucked the air from her lungs and lit her insides on fire. Panicked, she shoved free and swung.

Slap. A bright red hand print formed on his cheek.

Something flashed in his eyes before they narrowed in anger. "I was merely congratulating you! One would think you hate men!"

"Not men, Mel. You." The urge to kiss away the palm print took her by surprise. What *was* this ridiculous feeling in her breast? She felt all sweaty and hot and her pulse was racing.

"Thank you for clarifying the situation." He glanced around the empty room. "Sheryece, where are you?"

Sheryece appeared, her smile disappearing as she took in Melvin's stormcloud expression. "Oh dear."

"Debt or no debt, I cannot abide this man-hating witch. No one has ever slapped Melvin the Magnificent. I shan't be staying."

"Just what does he owe you for?" Syd asked, crossing her arms and wondering what her sister had done for Mel to make him indebted.

Sheryece gave her a pinched, prim look. "None of your business, Sydney. Now I want your word that if Melvin stays to help you, you won't slap him again."

"What if he deserves a slap?"

Sheryece and Melvin looked at each other, their faces wearing the same secretive half-grin. Had Sheryece and Melvin . . . ?

Sheryece's voice was soft as whipped cream, "He would never do anything reprehensible. Would you, Melvin?"

He bent and kissed Sheryece's hand. "Never."

Sheryece smiled, then turned toward Syd. "There, you see. Now, give me your word. No more slaps."

Syd crossed her arms, planning to tell Sheryece to take a plunge in the nearby river, but what came out was a gruff, "Oh, all right. No slaps. Sorry, Mel."

He lifted an eyebrow, as though debating whether to stay.

"She needs your expertise," Sheryece whispered.

"I heard that," Syd said, telling herself she hoped Mel would leave.

With an exaggerated sigh, Mel acquiesced. Fluted champagne glasses appeared in his hand and Sheryece's. "To a happy ending," he said, holding his glass high.

Left out and resenting it, Syd snapped her fingers and vanished to the first floor where Elizabeth was flipping through wallpaper samples for the downstairs bathroom.

The sooner she got Adam and Elizabeth together, the sooner she could dump Mel and her sister. But not before she found out why the delectable hunk owed her twin a favor. She was determined to learn the truth. It might be just the thing to turn the tables on her twin. How nice it would be to see her sister squirm for a change. Ecstatically nice. Oh, yes.

Chapter Three

The sun was going down, a brilliant red ball whose dying wake set the sky aflame, when Adam pulled into the gas station. The entire day he'd been distracted and disgruntled by Elizabeth's turn-down. True, it hadn't been a slam the door in your face turn-down, but it had been firm enough. She'd disappeared into that blasted house and he hadn't seen her since.

Well, if she wasn't interested, neither was he. The last thing he needed was to get involved with her. He had a job to do, and he'd do well to remember it. If he lost the re-zoning permits he might as well kiss his business goodbye. He shook his head, still amazed at the streak of bad luck he'd had this last year – bad to the point he'd gambled on the last building project and lost. If not for Jerome's offer, he'd be filing bankruptcy. How could he stiff people who worked for him, trusted him? He'd been

desperate to find a way to pay everyone back.

His neck muscles tensed. What had taken twelve years of determination and hard work to build was now on the line. A broken water pipe or mixed up work orders didn't seem too much of a price to save his business, he told himself. Still, the compunction to come to Montana had gone deeper than all his recent disasters and the financial corner he was in now. Some gut feeling had urged him to take a break and go to Bozeman--a place he'd only seen on a map. Jerome's offer, however, had made it possible, and he'd found himself saying *yes* to the man when he'd intended to say *no*. The inane notion that maybe the spooks that supposedly haunted Elizabeth's house were behind his abrupt desire to visit Big Sky Country tickled his thoughts. Amused, he figured the house and its owner had his imagination working overtime and he needed to get grounded back in reality.

Determined to get Elizabeth off his mind, he looked for the blond behind the cash register, saw her and ambled in, perusing the shelves until the place was empty of patrons. He set a six-pack of soda on the counter. "So, how was that movie you went to see?" He couldn't recall the name of the film, only that she'd said she was going with a girlfriend, implying she was available.

"Scary." She shivered dramatically in the v-necked t-shirt, showing off some cleavage.

"What time does your shift end?" He'd forgotten that too. How could he remember every tiny detail revolving around Elizabeth Benning, and have no recall of his conversation two days ago with the blond, he wondered, eyeing her name tag to jog his memory. Lisa.

"I get off at six." She smiled. "Why?"

"I'd like to take you to dinner, that's why," he said, smiling back. So what if his libido didn't overheat. That didn't mean he couldn't have a good time.

Syd smoothed her black dress, checked the neckline to make sure it wasn't falling too low, and waved her black-gloved hands. She conjured the table and chairs and candelabra Mel had so recently whisked into the room to celebrate, a celebration she'd canceled with her own magic and an insult. She'd just have to do her best to "look and act" like her twin so she could learn Sheryece's secret.

Attempting a higher pitch than her own raspy tone, she cooed "Oh, Melvin, where are you?"

Nothing.

"Melvin?" If she spoke much louder, Elizabeth, still immersed in her floor samples, might hear. Drat that warlock. Where was he?

A burst of flame blinded her.

"Ah, my dear, you called?"

Blinking against the dazzling dots still dancing before her eyes, Syd stifled a curse, forcing a smile instead. "I thought we might share a drink together, for old time's sake." She gestured toward the table, and the candles flamed to life.

Mel's eyes lit with pleasure as she waved a glass of bubbly into his hand.

“Have a drink, Melvin.” Or two or three or four, she thought.

“Madame, you’ve outdone yourself. If this is an apology, I accept.”

She nearly choked on her own drink. “Apology?” she rasped before hurriedly raising her pitch to imitate her sister’s goody-goody voice, “For what?”

“Why for making me work with that blasted sister of yours, of course.” He pulled out a chair for her, then claimed the other one with a flourish of his cape. His champagne disappeared in one long gulp.

Her tongue burned to lash him with a few choice epithets, or better yet, make the chair disappear so he’d fall on his backside. She took a lingering sip of the pale gold liquid.

“After this caper, we’re more than even,” he continued.

“Do you think so?”

He threw her a quizzical look she wasn’t sure how to interpret. “Yes.” He stood, letting his cape drop to the floor. His black suit gave him a devilish air she appreciated. “You look positively dangerous in that dress,” he said.

A wave of pleasure washed over her even as she told herself the man had mistaken her for Sheryece the first time they met and obviously needed his eyes checked. When Sheryece made an entrance, the room glowed, and men flocked to her side. When Syd appeared, the room only darkened with drabness, and though she might elicit a whisper or two, no one ever approached. Well, not since she’d turned that one daring miscreant who’d broken her heart into a frog at her first and last magical ball.

Soft, romantic violin music wafted through the room. Mel’s fingers twined with hers and she felt a flutter in her stomach. “Forget the past,” he said. “I won’t tell if you won’t. Let’s dance.”

Before she could utter a protest, he swooped her to her feet and into his arms.

“Darling, you’re so tense. Relax.”

Darling?

He tightened his hold and whirled with her around the room until her vision spun, and she was clinging for dear life. When he slowed, it was only to draw her closer. His lips brushed her ear, and she couldn’t stop the shiver of delight, nor the way her pulse raced. “Let’s tango, shall we?” he whispered.

She pulled away, breathless. “I need to cool off.” She fanned her face with her hand. “Really Mel – vin, where did you learn to dance like that?”

“Oh, here and there. Now, don’t be a spoilsport. You know you love to dance.”

He had her spinning like a ballerina before she could speak. She was floating, whirling, moving like a bewitched Ginger Rogers. His arms were so strong, so commanding, his every move virile and exciting as their legs grazed and their hips brushed. Syd lost herself in the magic of his touch, shivered

with another light brush of his lips, and melted until they were chest to chest, hip to hip, thigh to thigh. Abruptly, the music faded, and he was staring down at her with his dark, penetrating gaze.

Feeling shaky with feelings she had no name for, she whispered, “Mel?” In the back of her mind she wondered if her sister and Mel were lovers? The champagne burned in her stomach.

A rakish look passed over his face that didn’t match his silly name. Of course, the name Sydney wasn’t exactly a black cat’s meow either.

He bent his head, and she knew he was going to kiss her. Alarm bells blared in her head. Had she called him Mel? Sheryece always used everyone’s full name. Had he noticed?

His lips covered hers, slanting first one way, then another, coaxing her own apart, offering a scalding fiery passion that ignited her own and blotted out her worries. So many heavenly sensations! And the undeniable need to get even closer to him, to become a part, melt, and merge. Oh did she want to merge! The feeling astounded, delighted, and vexed her, but as long as his mouth moved over hers, his tongue a hot, exciting mate to her own, nothing mattered but tasting more. More. More.

She clung to him, a lifetime of need hitting like a hurricane, sweeping away any niggling resistance she had left.

Instead of drawing her closer, however, he broke the kiss with a gasp for breath and stepped back, his expression shadowed and unreadable, his tone sounding shaken, older than his years. “Ah Sydney, I thought to teach you a lesson. Instead, you’ve taught me one.”

Sydney!

He knew?

Was he upset? Well, he might sound upset, but her toes were curling. “You knew? All along?” He’d just been teasing her from their first meeting when he’d pretended he thought she was Sheryece! She hadn’t realized until that moment how much his mistake had meant to her. And it was all a lie.

She hurled a ball of fire at him without conscious thought. She’d blast him into oblivion if it was the last thing she ever did.

Elizabeth rubbed her eyes and glanced at her watch. Seven-thirty! Her face felt imprinted by the carpet sample she’d fallen asleep over. She shoved the heavy book off her lap and climbed to her feet, feeling disoriented.

Stumbling to the kitchen, she poured herself a glass of water and gulped it down only to hear her stomach rumble for something with more sustenance. No, the rumbling was coming from upstairs. Or maybe outside? She peered out the kitchen window. The sky was dark with thunderclouds, and the ground looked wet. That was what she smelled, she thought, the scent of fresh rain and perhaps a nearby tree struck by lightning.

She checked the perimeter of the house, puzzled by the faint burnt odor, as though an iron had been left on a shirt too long or someone’s hair had been singed. Obviously her imagination was playing tricks on her again. Like that strange conversation she’d heard in the fireplace. Now she was smelling

strange odors.

What next? Seeing ghosts? Shaking her head at herself, she started toward her trailer to rustle up a sandwich for supper, then changed her mind and veered to her sedan. She would eat at the Grizzly, that rustic little restaurant near the museum, absorb some of the turn-of-the-century hunting atmosphere, and enjoy a meal she didn't have to cook.

Unfortunately, at the Grizzly, all the tables were occupied, and she had to take a seat at the smoky bar. With her eyes stinging, the man next to her obliviously puffing away on his cigarette, her appetite waned. "I've changed my mind," she murmured, sliding from the high stool, waving the smoke from her face.

Her elbow connected with someone stepping past her. "Excuse me," she said, squinting through the noxious smoke.

"Elizabeth!"

Her heart jumped a beat. "Adam! What are you doing here?" She wanted to swallow the idiotic question as soon as she said it. It would only make him think she preferred dinner alone to his company.

"Just finished dinner. You?"

Heat stung her cheeks. "I-I lost track of time, didn't feel like cooking. Thought I'd try this place out, but it's a bit too smoky."

"There's a table in back that's free now. Near a window and away from the smoke." Adam wasn't sure whether to ask if she wanted company or turn around and walk away. The tug on his arm reminded him he wasn't alone, and he regretted his impulse to ask out Lisa. Their dinner conversation had revolved around horror flicks, Lisa's favorite pastime, and playing footsie, her other pastime.

"Adam?" Lisa said.

Elizabeth's gaze went from warm azure blue to a cold ocean tide.

"Uh, Elizabeth this is a friend of mine, Lisa. Lisa, this is the woman I told you about."

Lisa nodded. "Nice to meet you. I told Adam there's all kinds of haunted house stories about that old place." Her eyes glittered with curiosity. "But he says nothing strange has happened and everything's going along fine."

Too surprised by the woman on Adam's arm, Elizabeth couldn't remember what she said before excusing herself to claim their vacated table. All through the meal she kept imagining the two of them sitting together, talking about the mansion and its cobweb-haired, dirt-streaked owner. Why did she ever get the notion Adam was interested in her?

Hot tears welled in her eyes. She swiped them away and buried her face in the menu. She was not going to cry. She'd turned down his dinner invitation, so why did it hurt to see him with someone else?

Lisa could have been Jerome's latest fling, that's why.

Oh, you silly twit, she thought, realizing that in the back of her mind she'd been hoping to run into him tonight. Trusting in fate, rather than herself. Well, fate had intervened all right. Adam Gardiner had other pursuits besides his polite invitation to his lady-employer.

She straightened her spine and ordered the buffalo stew. She needed to toughen up. Be like the pioneer women of old: thick-skinned and unflappable. Buffalo stew and a beer sounded like a good start to her single life in Montana. Who needed a man around to turn her insides to quicksand and her brains to mud? Not Elizabeth Benning. She was going to finish this inn and run it and be happy – all on her own.

So why was the stew so hard to swallow? And the beer, it filled her mind with a continuous buzz that followed her all the way into the hills and into her tiny bed, leaving a rotten, stale taste in her mouth.

Adam offered a few half-hearted kisses outside Lisa's door and ignored her invitation to come inside for a drink. If he hurried, he might catch Elizabeth at the Grizzly, buy her dessert, and make it clear he wasn't interested in Lisa. All the way back to the restaurant, however, one part of him pointed out, *You're supposed to be sabotaging the old mansion and sucking Elizabeth dry of every penny, not fantasizing about holding her in your arms and taking her to bed.* His thoughts at war with one another, he climbed from his truck and went inside. No Elizabeth.

He retraced his steps to the truck still at odds with himself. In the two months he'd been here, he hadn't thrown a wrench into any of the renovations, everything was moving along better than expected in the best situations, but Elizabeth Benning had muddled his plans. Jerome was probably tapping his fingers on his huge cherrywood desk, puffing on one of his fat cigars, and wondering what happened to Adam's progress report.

Eyeing the road that wound its way out of town and up the hills to the mansion, he forced himself to turn away, go back to his bare-bones house with its refrigerator warmth. He glanced at the phone on the kitchen counter. Like a call from God, the message light flashed, and he slapped the button.

"Adam, this is Jerome. I thought you were going to call last week. What's going on? Do I need to send a personal messenger?"

His shoulders tensed at the clipped words and the warning that lingered between them. He grabbed the phone and punched in Jerome's number before he talked himself out of it.

"Hello?"

Had he always disliked the phony English accent or was he just more aware of it now? "Hey, Jerome, it's Adam."

"Well, Adam. Good of you to call. I was just going over the re-zoning permits. When are you coming back to LA?"

Son of a gun. "Looks like it'll take a little longer than I thought. Elizabeth's in the house constantly . . ." He hated himself for making excuses instead of telling Jerome to find another bastard to ruin his ex-wife's life.

"So, get her *out* of the house. Ask her to meet you somewhere, then loosen a pipe and flood the

place.”

When Adam didn’t immediately respond, Jerome added, “Hey, a loose pipe is all I’m asking for. Give her a bit of her own medicine, you know? Here I’m working my butt off for our future, and she’s out screwing her boss. Then she takes me to the cleaners in the divorce.” Whatever Jerome might have lost in the divorce, it couldn’t have put too much in a dent in the man’s wallet, Jerome had millions. Adam’s best friend, Rick, however, had gone through a nasty divorce, and it had practically destroyed him. Just the recollection made Adam angry.

He found himself saying, “Don’t worry, the house won’t get finished.” But as he hung up, new doubts assailed him. Elizabeth Benning did not strike him as a pathological liar on the make. She had six single guys, all available, working on the place and she hardly noticed them. Even the looks she cast at him were from a distance and hardly seduction-type fodder. He closed his eyes a moment, trying to remember the name of the interior design company Elizabeth had worked for, then picked up the phone again and called Los Angeles information.

“Come on Syd, you can’t still be mad,” Mel pleaded appearing in the room corner an hour after she’d set his hair afire and he’d disappeared.

She wasn’t quite so upset, but not about to admit it. She hurled another fireball anyway.

He ducked. “You might set the house aflame,” he said becoming invisible.

“If I ever see your rotten face again it’ll be too soon. And if I do I’ll set your hair ablaze faster than you can conjure it away.”

“Blaze away. You know your magic can’t hurt me.”

Oh, that was not quite true. Sure she couldn’t blast him into nothing, but she could still give him a blister or two. “One moment of your agony will be worth the attempt.”

“That won’t help you make Elizabeth and Adam fall in love.”

Another rotten fact that was too true. Her jaw felt so tense she thought she might crack a tooth. She took a deep breath. “All right. Truce. But only until they’re hopelessly in love.”

“And engaged,” Sheryece said, appearing near the door.

Syd crossed her arms and tapped her toe. “Where have you been?”

Sheryece sighed. “Wouldn’t a wedding be wonderful here? This room’s perfect. The sun shining through the stained glass, the minister beside the window, the bride and groom basking in the colored light”

“Whatever,” Syd said.

Sheryece blinked, then stared at Syd. “My but you look very uh, nice, dear. What’s the occasion?”

Mel materialized by the window. “She was impersonating you. A feeble attempt that I saw through immediately.”

Syd slowly lowered her hand. A few more inches, and she’d singe a sideburn off with one well-aimed finger.

Sheryece put her hands on her hips, her perfect brow wrinkled. “Oh, Melvin, sometimes you are such an idiot.”

“Me?”

“He is?” Syd was so surprised she forgot to blast him.

“Yes. He is.”

Melvin’s mouth flapped, his gaze swiveling from Sheryece to Syd. His face reddened, and his mouth became a steely line. He raised his hands in a gesture of frustration. Lightning crackled outside followed by house-shaking thunder. Wow, could he *storm*, Syd thought as he vanished. She immediately squelched the surge of admiration. He was a mealy-mouthed lying warlock sneak.

Sheryece gave Syd a stern look. “Nothing would please me more than you stepping into my shoes, but let me know ahead next time, and I’ll give you a few pointers.”

“Like what?”

“That dress, for one thing. Have you ever seen me wear something that, well, it looks glued on, and it shows more skin than it covers. And I detest black.”

Syd’s thoughts spun. “You’re jealous!”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous, dear. Why, when my dear Prince Henry loves and adores me, would I be jealous of you?”

Syd lifted her chin. “Maybe because Mel *liked* my dress and the way I looked in it.”

Sheryece worked to hide her smile and the whoop of glee building in her breast. Getting Melvin and Sydney together was going to work! Mustering a frown, she shook her head. “This is all too tiring, Sydney. Do keep your mind on your task and quit distracting Melvin.” She vanished before her twin could say a word. Now to talk to Melvin and get him back by Sydney’s side. She just hoped all her fussing with her sister and Melvin didn’t leave Elizabeth and Adam alone to avoid each other for too much longer. Without the right nudges, Adam might go for the two million over Elizabeth and mess up their entire future together.

Now, if she could get Elizabeth into a dress like the one Sydney was wearing. Thinking Melvin could wait a few minutes, she popped back in on Sydney, who was once more in her usual long-sleeved, high-necked, black gown, and tossed out the suggestion about getting Elizabeth into a dress.

Sydney’s mouth turned down. “Oh why don’t I just mix up some love potion, get them both to drink it, and wa-la, happy ending?”

Sheryece sighed. “True love can’t be forced or coerced with magic. We can only bring the two

hearts together. The rest is up to them.”

“And how am I going to get Elizabeth, miz faded jeans and t-shirts, to don a dress?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll think of something, Sydney. You always do.”

Syd scowled at her sister. Somehow, Sheryece’s words were not encouraging. Every *good* intention Syd’d ever had turned *rotten*. And casting all these spells was exhausting. Her energy wasn’t limitless. Still, all she could do was try.

After her sister vanished, she turned toward the window, eyeing her reflection in the leaded glass and transforming her garb back to the sleek, black number Mel had liked. Sheryece jealous? The idea was preposterous . . . wasn’t it?

She waved the tight sheathe back into her traditional witch’s robes and dismissed the speculations dancing through her mind. She’d probably misread her sister’s expression just as she’d misread Mel’s interest. It was Syd who was always jealous of Sheryece. Yes, she’d admit it here and now, only to herself. And Mel . . . well, he was either in need of glasses, or so infatuated with Sheryece he’d accept a drab imitation.

So why did her deductions leave her so depressed? Disgusted with herself and the way her mind kept painting Mel’s portrait right behind her eyes, she popped over to Elizabeth’s trailer for a distraction. Elizabeth, however, was sound asleep, dreaming of buffalos of all things. A stampede.

Curiosity piqued, Syd focused harder on the woman’s thoughts. She’d never clued into a human’s dreams before. It might be fun to add a few touches of her own. And maybe, she’d get some inspiration on how to get Elizabeth into a drop-dead, skin-hugging gown that would send Adam’s temperature soaring into the uncontrollable zone and get the two together once and for all.

Chapter Four

“Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh.” Elizabeth’s pulse jumped, and she forgot to breathe as she bent and unwrapped the royal blue treasure from the yellowed tissue. The tissue crinkled with brittle protest, but the lovely velvet dress she unfolded looked undamaged, untouched by age. How had she missed it here in the corner of the basement? Surely she’d looked in and under all the stray boxes, hadn’t she? She held it against her chest, the fabric cool and soft. The hem touched the top of her insteps. Had it belonged to her grandmother? Would it fit?

It was lunchtime, and Adam and his crew had left. With no one around, she dug from the box of photos near the dryer the tiny black and white photo of her grandmother at eighteen, being escorted to a debutante’s ball. Yes! It was the same dress. But how had it survived all these years? And in such perfect condition?

Her fingertips trailed over the material again, but instead of envisioning herself in the dress, she wondered what it would feel like to run her fingers through Adam’s gold-streaked hair. He hadn’t cut it since he’d been here, and it curled up at the back of the neck like a shaggy mane. A mane any woman would love to tangle her fingers in, including the blond he was with last night. Well, what did she expect? He was single and fabulously attractive, bound to have a girlfriend.

Dismayed by her turn of thoughts, she hurried to the trailer and held the dress up to her chest in front of the mirror on the back of the bathroom door. It was magnificent. The urge to try it on overwhelmed her.

Even as she told herself she had no place to wear it, she stripped off her clothes and tossed them on the bed, then once more stepped in front of the minuscule mirror to try on the feminine concoction that had belonged to her grandmother.

She had to shimmy into it and do a contortionist act with one arm in order to zip the back. Then all she could see was the single shoulder strap, glittering with rhinestones and seed pearls. She wouldn't be able to wear this out to dinner, she thought, smoothing the rich, lush fabric over her hips. Anything she ate would show the moment she swallowed, let alone breathed. Yet it gave her a Marilyn Monroe, sex-goddess-type feeling to wear the dress her grandmother had worn the day she met the love of her life.

She found herself imagining how it must have been to walk into the huge formal ballroom with all those powerful families, knowing she was being shown off like a horse at an auction, yet floating on an air of excitement because she wore the most daring, most beautiful gown. She imagined the thrill of having every head turn as she descended the three steps into the room. Yet of all the men's admiring eyes, only one set had held her grandmother's, made her pulse race, her legs tremble, her heart pound out of control.

Elizabeth grinned into the mirror, recalling how as a child she'd always chime in at that point in the story and say, "Grandfather!" and then her grandma and grandpa would exchange the most wonderful looks, and Elizabeth would bask in the love flowing between them.

How could she have ever imagined Jerome loving her like that?

How could she ever trust herself again?

Again? Wait a minute, she didn't want to meet the love of her life. That was a fantasy. What her grandmother had found was a once in a million-type thing, not to be duplicated.

She'd better get out of this dress before Adam and the others returned and caught her masquerading as a shorter version of Julia Roberts. She snaked her arm up toward her shoulder blades and tugged on the zipper. It didn't budge.

"Meow . . . meow . . ."

"Drat this zipper."

"Meow . . . meow" The woebegone sound of a cat made her crack the door and peer outside.

Adam polished off the last of his steak sandwich, slugged down the bottle of water, and felt better . . . physically. Mentally, he was still upset over what Elizabeth's boss had admitted to him. Not only had she had an affair with the guy and one of her co-workers while she was married to Jerome, after the divorce she'd overcharged clients on design jobs, then tried to lie her way out of it when her boss

discovered the phony invoices. He'd admitted she had been a "good" employee, and because of that he'd fired her instead of prosecuting her.

Feeling like an idiot for falling for those big, lustrous blue eyes, he returned to the mansion and went inside.

"Elizabeth? Tom? Harry? Jack?"

Silence.

Good. In the bathroom he found the pipe he wanted, gripped the wrench and applied just enough pressure to cause a fast-dripping leak. They'd only turned the water on this morning, so it would be quite plausible for this to happen.

With a puddle forming behind the toilet, he hurried outside, tossed the wrench into his toolbox, then casually ambled down the steps.

In the distance he could see his crew, piled into three trucks, coming up the hill. He waved, then stifling an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, he sauntered toward the back of the house and Elizabeth's trailer, figuring he'd delay her a bit from going into the house.

"Here kitty, kitty. Come on down. I won't hurt you."

Elizabeth's voice registered before he reached the side of the house. Oh sheesh, not a cat lover. How could she seem so darn likable and be so deviously despicable, and care about cats? For him a cat person had a leg up and over everyone else. He had a great tabby named Boots that he had to leave with his brother for the summer. He missed Boots' plaintive yowls for attention and the way he'd leap into Adam's lap when he was home doing paperwork in his office.

The trailer came into view, he stopped, blinking, not quite believing what he saw.

Elizabeth was wearing a form-fitting gown that didn't just show off her figure, but gloved every curvaceous, lovely inch. A dress a movie star might have worn in the 1920s or '30s. A dress that hugged her luscious butt in the most provocative fashion even as he wondered how she'd ever gotten into it.

Guess she was looking to attract a man after all, he thought, disgusted that he could have been so mistaken about her, and aware the rest of the crew had arrived and were murmuring all kinds of suggestive comments about that dress and what was filling it out so nicely.

He had a mind to tell them to shut their mouths, but reminded himself it wasn't his business. She'd put on the dress – in the middle of the day – and the only reason he could come up with for her to be wearing it was to do exactly what she was doing . . . luring them all in like cheese on a mousetrap.

On tip-toe, arms stretched overhead, she craned her neck toward the trailer roof, a black kitten balanced on the edge just above her fingers. "Come 'ere kitty. Come to Mommy."

Mommy. Lord, she'd have all five guys coming to mommy all right.

A wolf-whistle blasted behind him, startling Elizabeth into dropping her hands and turning accusingly at him. He offered her an innocent shrug.

If possible, the front of her looked even better than the back. She had the kind of creamy skin that set off her raven hair to advantage and made his fingers itch to touch both. The blue of her dress matched her eyes, making them sparkle like sapphires. And the one bare shoulder had him imagining the other just as bare, along with the rest of her.

He yanked at his already loose collar, wondering where all his oxygen had gone.

“Can’t you see the poor sweetie needs rescuing?” she demanded, her cheeks turning pink.

Hey, his poor sweetie needed rescuing too. From the rapidly abrading fabric of his jeans. He cleared his throat. “I’ll get a ladder.”

He almost ran into his crew, all right behind him and ogling Elizabeth like starved canines after a fluffy meal. Only they were more interested in Elizabeth than the little black puff ball on the roof.

Elizabeth wasn’t sure who had wolf-whistled, but she could feel her blush clear down to her toes. She also was uncertain why it took five rugged guys to rescue one tiny kitten, but she decided it was better than having five pairs of eyes feasting on her. They made her self-conscious, especially Adam’s unswerving gaze. Until he’d gone for the ladder, then handed it off to the youngest of his crew, and muttered something about supplies and left. He’d almost looked angry. Which made no sense, since there was nothing to be upset about . . . unless he was a cat lover like her and wanted to throttle the person heartless enough to abandon this sweet little guy. He was probably working it off right now. A new flush of heat crawled up her neck at the thought of such a handsome hunk having such a soft heart.

The workman standing on the top rung gathered the kitty in his hands while the other four jockeyed for position around the bottom. It was kind of cute the way they stumbled over each other to take the kitten.

With a flourish, Tom, the youngest workman held out the black fluff ball. “Here you are, ma’am.”

She smiled her gratitude, then brought the straggly little tike to her chest and stroked it, eliciting a soft rumble. “Ohhhh, aren’t you just the cutest little guy.”

Adam was watching Elizabeth’s act from the cab of his truck. He’d meant to leave, he really had, but he couldn’t until he made sure the kitten wasn’t ignored for more elemental purposes. And something in him had demanded he see who she favored with more than a smile. Not that he had anything against her smile, he thought as it blazed toward Tom who was handing her the kitten. Although it wasn’t meant for him, her smile wrecked havoc on his blood pressure. He found himself climbing from the truck, telling himself that if anyone earned more than a smile from Elizabeth it was going to be him.

Are you nuts? His inner voice yelled.

Yes, another part answered, just as vehemently. “Yes,” he said aloud, as Elizabeth’s gaze swung his direction.

He held up the small carton of milk from his lunch bucket, glad he’d decided to save it for later. “Thought you might need to feed it.”

His five man crew cleared off at the look he sent them.

“Why, thank you, but I have milk inside.” Her head was bent, her fingers stroking the wiggly ball of fur. Man did that cat have it made, he thought, wishing he could rest his head between her breasts and have her stroke *him* like that.

“Aren’t you just a sweet little fellow,” she murmured, taking a step toward the trailer door.

He moved past her to pull the door open and followed her inside. “I’ll leave the milk here on the counter,” he said as she gave him a strange look he couldn’t read.

Elizabeth swallowed, trying to find equilibrium amidst the heat flooding her veins. Adam was so sweet and thoughtful and so masculine and hard and . . . any second she’d be tripping over her own feet to launch herself into his arms. Not a good idea when he was edging for the door. “Would you mind holding him?” she asked.

“What? Oh, sure.” He advanced a step and accepted the bundle, then grinned. “Hate to tell you, but this little fellow is a *she*.”

She felt a flash of heat sting her cheeks and tried to ignore Adam’s proximity as she minced to the fridge and reached above it for a bowl. “Such a pretty little girl,” she whispered soothingly as it scrambled up Adam’s shoulder.

“With sharp claws,” he said, easing it away from his chest.

“She’s probably starved, poor thing.”

She’s not the only thing that’s starved, Adam thought, catching a whiff of Elizabeth’s lemony shampoo as she stepped past him to the fridge. His gaze automatically drifted from her to the neatly made bed and the lacy bra, faded t-shirt, and shorts lying on top. The intense dream he’d had of holding her in his arms came rushing back.

He heard her pouring the milk and tore his gaze from the red satin and lace contraption. His brain sketched matching red lace across Elizabeth’s rounded backside. Holy Hell, did she wear this kind of underwear beneath those baggy clothes every day?

“Adam?”

“Hmmm?”

“Let’s feed it outside on the step.”

She opened the door and bent down to deposit the bowl and wait for delivery of the kitten.

Kneeling at her feet, he handed her the kitten, then noticed the side slit on her blue velvet dress had parted. He followed the gap up her leg to her thigh as she put the kitten down by the milk. The dress stretched, exposing skin up to her hip and a brief flash of red lace before she stood again.

“I have to change,” she said. “Will you stay with Velvet?”

“Velvet?”

“That’s her name. She’s as soft as this dress, don’t you think?”

He touched the hem of the gown, resisting the impulses flooding his brain to touch her shapely calf, then stroked the kitten. “Sure is,” he agreed, his throat so dry it was a wonder he could talk. Any second and he’d be purring. How she could still wear the soft air of innocence while seducing him with her every move amazed him. But instead of reeling him inside to finish the game, she closed the door. What the heck was she up to? He didn’t know whether he was relieved or peeved.

He didn’t know what to think. He found his gaze shifting from the kitten lapping at the milk, to the door and what lay on the other side. His imagination played havoc with his body temperature.

“Adam?” The door cracked open.

“Hmmm?” He wondered where his voice had gone.

“This is so embarrassing.” Her cheeks blushed scarlet as she spoke. “The zipper on this dress is stuck. Can you get it undone?”

I’ll bet, he thought, figuring he was about to get lucky and disliking the Elizabeth Benning he now knew her to be. He stepped inside and closed the door. His fingers fumbled with the zipper tab, but when he pulled it slid down like silk. A stuck zipper? Ha. My God, Jerome had been right. She *was* one heck of an actress. So good, she still looked flushed with embarrassment as she faced him.

“I swear it was stuck. I tugged and tugged”

Elizabeth could see the rapid pulse beat in Adam’s neck and the darkening of his green eyes, so dark they were like peering into a forest glade of mysterious shadows. Shadows that seemed dangerous. Dangerous? Adam? About to scoff the notion into oblivion, it caught with her breath when his hands rose to her shoulders, his thumb brushing seductively across the hollow in her throat, his mouth drawing closer and closer. The scent of him, male sweat, soap, musky aftershave, all filled her nostrils and sent erratic impulses firing to her brain. Suddenly it seemed like the dress, true love, and Adam were all part of a wild dream, one with buffalos and Indians and one blonde renegade who’d scooped her onto the back of his horse and carried her into the sunset.

“So soft,” Adam murmured, his mouth brushing her cheek, her ear, her neck. She could feel the single strap holding up the top of her dress slide down, feel the heat of his mouth where it had been. “Soft as velvet”

Soft conjured up her life with Jerome, how easily she’d gone along with his plans, done what he wanted, tried to be whatever would please him. *Soft* was not a pioneer woman carried off by Indians. *Soft* was not the Elizabeth Benning in Montana she wanted to be.

“No.” She shoved him back and retreated against the tiny dinette table while grappling to yank her dress back up, her heart thudding against her chest as though to escape his stricken gaze.

Something flashed in his eyes, and the word dangerous came to mind again. He took a long, deep, shuddering breath, the vast expanse of his chest straining against his t-shirt, making the faded beer logo almost seem alive. When he shifted his weight, she found herself looking at his crotch. His denim jeans were stretched taut, his maleness very apparent. She wanted to crawl through the floorboards and disappear.

Adam had never been shut down so darn fast by a woman in his life. Elizabeth Benning had him spinning and uncertain of which way was up. Had he jumped to the wrong conclusions? Misread the situation? Hell no. How could she look both aroused and surprised? What had she expected with that “zipper” routine? Anger surged, easing the major discomfort in his groin somewhat. He spun around and shoved out the door before he said something he’d regret.

“Yeow!”

He lifted his foot off the cat’s tail and it bolted. That was just what he should do, he thought. Bolt. From Elizabeth and Montana. Forget Jerome and the two million and A-1 Construction’s creditors. He’d downsize, work his butt off, pay everyone back even if it took ten years. And he’d damn well never see Elizabeth Benning again.

Elizabeth called, “Wait!” but he didn’t hear. She reached for the door, then stopped. Workmen were out there and this dress was falling off. She peeled the gown down over her hips and stepped out of it, then scrambled back into her rumpled oversized workshirt and baggy jeans. So much more comfortable, she thought, bending to tie her tennis shoes, then peering out the door and feeling like a thief. No one was watching. Heading straight for where Adam parked his truck, she halted abruptly and stared at the empty space. He’d left.

Just because she’d said *no*? Just because he was god’s gift to women didn’t mean she had to swoon in his arms and let nature take its course. Sometimes nature needed slowing down.

So why did she want to cry? Why did she feel so darned angry and abandoned and hurt? Wasn’t she worth a little time and effort? Wasn’t she worth more than the empty promises and the lousy diamond ring Jerome had given her? Heck, she’d forget the ring and settle for steadfast, loyal, and trustworthy.

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat, but it wouldn’t go down. It was obvious Adam Gardiner was much more like Jerome than she wanted to accept. Well, no more blinders, she vowed. If he wanted blondes and one-night stands, he could have them.

But what do you want?

I want someone who will treat me with respect and honesty. Someone like my grandfather, who after he met grandma, never once showed an interest in anyone else.

I thought you didn’t want a relationship.

Darn her niggling brain. *I don’t.*

Oh? Then what’s wrong with a one-night stand or a short affair with Adam?

No answer came as she stomped back to the trailer and slammed the door.

“Oh no!” Sydney wailed, despair seeping into all her pores, making her feel like a sinking ship. She was sinking all right, into oblivion. Cold, dark, black.

Snap.

She whirled from the window at the sound. “Mel!” It came out sounding like a shriek for help. Oh my gosh, she wanted to vanish, disappear, turn to air. Only she couldn’t. That would be the ultimate humiliation, and she was damned if she’d give him the satisfaction of running her off anywhere.

He gave her a sardonic look. “My dear Syd, you called?”

Angry at the streak of hope lifting her flagging spirit, she said, “No, I did not.”

He ambled over to the window, which she was tempted to block. She ground her teeth as he glanced out.

“Isn’t that Adam storming off in his truck?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“He doesn’t look star struck, does he?”

Her nails dug into her palms. One more snide quip out of him, and he was a human torch. He’d be lucky if he didn’t lose more than his sideburns.

“It was a good idea though,” he said softly, staring down at her, his dark eyes warm and intriguing. The compliment soothed her clear down to her toenails, and she could feel a flush of heat crawl up her neck.

She caught herself before the “Thanks” escaped her lips. “I don’t need the cheap thrill of looking into your eyes, Mel . . .,” although they were the most gorgeous shade, ginger brown with intriguing gold flecks in the center. “Nor do I give a whit for your approval. What I need is some assistance on *what to do now*.”

Her harsh rebuke tasted like acid on her tongue, but Mel’s lips merely curled up in a quirky half-grin. “Well, at least you admit I can be of assistance.” He threw back his cape as though preparing to cast a spell, then paused. “What will you give me if I help?”

“Give you!” Syd said. “You owe Sheryece a favor, remember?” Which reminded her of her quest to discover just what Sheryece had done for Mel to put him in this pickle jar with her.

“I will never forget,” he murmured, his gaze cloudy for a moment before refocusing on her.

The furious surge of energy flowing through her was unlike anything she could name. It was more than anger and strangely possessive. Why did his pledge to *never forget* make her want to hit him over the head with a broomstick?

“My debt is paid by my continued presence here. If you want my help, you must give me something.” He crossed his arms, the skin around his eyes crinkled in amusement.

“What did Sheryece give you?” she asked in the most sugary voice she could muster, resisting the urge to shove him out the window.

A purely smug look. “You’ll have to ask Sheryece.”

She tentatively touched his shoulder, her fingertips resting lightly on the cool black satin of his cape. He had the broadest shoulders, she thought. Shoulders made for a cape or maybe nothing at all. "I'm asking you," she said, for the first time in her life trying for a fetching smile and seductive look.

His dark eyes grew darker. He seemed to grow larger in the space before her. Then she realized he'd moved closer. "You really want to know what Sheryece did for me?"

She meant to say *yes*, but could only nod, her voice gone, stolen by his nearness and all that masculine heat washing over her in wave after exciting wave.

His lips brushed her ear and what little moisture was left in her mouth evaporated. "You bring Adam and Elizabeth to the altar, and I'll tell you," he said.

"Promise?" She felt so lightheaded she wondered if she'd gotten caught in someone else's spell.

"Only if you're nice to me," he whispered. "You promise *no more insults*, and bring Elizabeth and Adam together, and I'll tell you why I owe Sheryece a debt. Agreed?"

"No more insults, I promise," she said, trying to unscramble her thoughts.

"Now, about payment for services rendered," he said, his mouth moving dangerously close to hers.

"Yes?"

"I want you to kiss me."

Syd felt like she'd been struck by lightning. "What?" He couldn't be serious. "You're joking, right?"

His lips brushed hers. Her spine tingled. "No joke, I swear," he said.

"Why do you want me to kiss you?"

He swallowed. "Because I do." Impatience edged his voice. "Do we have a deal or not?"

She had a feeling if she kissed him she'd turn into a frog, but what alternative was there? "How do I do it?" She'd never kissed anyone in her life. Except when Mel had kissed her. The recollection made her both hot and cold, sweaty with desire and clammy with fear.

"Put your arms around my neck," he coached, his warm breath mingling with her own. "Lift your mouth and let yourself feel every delicious sensation of what I do, then it'll be your turn, okay?"

"Mmm." Her mouth was already meshing with his, the scent of tobacco and woodsy masculinity filling her with the desire to burrow deeper into his embrace. Every delicious sensation . . . There were so many she could hardly keep track. His mouth moved over hers, his tongue tracing between her lips, then retreating, then teasing and coaxing again. She felt like she'd landed inside a bubbling cauldron, but instead of pain licking at her skin, pleasure flowed and ebbed, flowed and ebbed. She caught her fingers in his hair and urged his mouth closer, lifting on her toes to mesh her lips to his with tectonic force.

His murmured "Syd" was lost in their shared heat.

Finally, she broke away with a gasp for breath. The look on Mel's face startled her. It was . . . well, rakish, or wolfish, she wasn't quite sure. Except he looked hungry. Very hungry.

For a moment she imagined herself as a luscious strawberry tart and Mel the King of Hearts, ready to steal her away. It vanished as she recalled Adam and Elizabeth and oblivion. Another thought struck just as quickly. "You put a spell on me!"

Mel gaped.

"Don't try that wounded look. You must think I'm an idiot. You may be a cape-toting hunk, but any fool can see you're in love with Sheryece. And you're only helping me because of her."

"Sheryece?" He laughed. And laughed. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes as he doubled over with mirth.

"What-is-so-funny?"

"You . . .," He gasped for breath, struggling not to laugh and failing. He gasped again. "You are the most amazing"

Amazing what? She wanted to kick him in the shins and force out the rest. Amazing imbecile? Amazing tart? Amazing kisser? She rather liked the last thought until she recalled all the fireworks muddling her head were nothing more than a well-cast spell.

"Whatever spell you've cast on me

Undo its mischief so I may clearly see."

She peered at him, now breathing noisily, but no longer laughing. His presence didn't seem quite so distracting anymore, she told herself. And with a red face, he wasn't quite so handsome. She arched an eyebrow. "A deal's a deal. I haven't insulted you. And I kissed you. Now, help me with Elizabeth and Adam before I melt into nothingness like that Wicked Witch of the West."

Mel smiled. A rather wicked smile though. Suddenly her toes felt pinched. She glanced down to see a dazzling pair of red shoes on her feet.

"As long as you wear the magic slippers you have nothing to fear," he said.

"Oh please, cut the fiction, Mel. I'm not Dorothy, you're not the wizard, and this sure isn't Oz." So why was she giggling? She clamped her lips shut, then held her breath, willing the shivers of humor into submission. Sydney Mannville did not laugh or giggle or joke or tease with anyone. Least of all a fruitcake of a warlock in love with her twin.

She opened her mouth to demand he remove the shoes, but they vanished before she could speak.

Floating just above the floor, he glided to the window and shoved it open. "Let's put our heads together and see what we come up with."

"Now there's an invitation I can't resist," Syd answered, her words dripping sarcasm. "If that's

the best help you can give, you can take a flying leap into the next century. Can't you see everyone's leaving," she added, listening to the truck doors slam and gravel crunch beneath tires.

"It's three-thirty, quitting time. Don't worry. They'll be back. And so will Adam."

"When? Next year?"

"Ah Syd, have a bit of faith," he said, not looking the least perturbed.

"Famous last words," she muttered.

"But good words." Her twin appeared, sparkling like a polished diamond, making Syd feel like a lump of coal. "I'm so glad you two are finally working together."

Syd lifted her chin and glared at Mel. "We have a deal, right?"

He placed his hand over his heart. "On my honor."

"And what's that worth?"

Sheryece interrupted, "Now, now, Sydney, don't ruin a perfectly nice beginning."

Mel said with quiet authority, "Remember your promise, Syd?"

She sniffed. "I'm sorry for what I said, Mel." The words were like burrs on her tongue, and she wanted to spit but managed not to. She wanted to know what he'd done for Sheryece, then she'd have her twin in the palm of her hand. Or at least, that's what she hoped. First, she had to get those two nitwit humans back together.

Chapter Five

Adam tramped into his shroud of a home, hauled out his suitcases, and began tossing clothes inside. The result was a crazy pile that reflected his state of mind. The woman drove him bonkers. Nuts. She gave off more muddled messages than a computer on the blitz. And he was sick to death of her blowing hot and cold like an ice machine gone berserk.

The phone rang as he was hauling his suitcases out to the truck. He should start the long drive back to California in the morning, he thought as he dashed for the phone, but all he wanted was to put as many states as possible between himself and Elizabeth. Now.

“Adam, you sound winded.” Jerome’s phony Brit voice reeked with curiosity.

“I was outside.”

“How are things progressing?”

Adam’s breath caught as he recalled the water pipe. “The first floor is flooded by now.” It was a statement to himself to shut off the abrupt need he had to rush back and fix the leak.

“That’s too bad,” Jerome said sarcastically. “Any more accidents and she might be ruined.”

Adam stiffened. “There won’t be anymore. I’m coming back to LA in the morning.”

A pause of disapproval. “I called to tell you the zoning permits passed. I’m certain your creditors will be quite relieved.”

“What’s the catch?”

A hesitation. “Give me one more small accident, and you’ll have my goodwill.”

Much as he disliked Elizabeth’s games, he hated Jerome’s more.

Silence stretched between them.

Jerome cleared his throat. “Did I mention I just hired your brother?”

“Ethan?” Ethan was seven years younger and had graduated from law school. Law school Adam had paid for, and he did not begrudge one dime.

“Yes, he’s quite an entrepreneur. I’m sure he’ll go far, as long as he keeps his sterling reputation.”

Adam could feel his hackles rise. “If you’re threatening my brother . . .”

“Now Adam, I didn’t mean to give you that idea.”

Like hell you didn’t. Adam paced, his thoughts racing. He had to buy some time, warn Ethan to watch his back, or better yet, find another job. “One more accident,” he said, forcing out the words.

“I knew you’d see things my way,” Jerome said before he clicked off.

“In a pig’s eye,” Adam said, resisting the urge to throw the phone. Cursing under his breath, he dialed his brother’s number, got the answering machine, and left a message. Next, he retrieved his luggage and dumped it by the bed. Then he climbed in the truck and headed back to the headache of a house.

Elizabeth found it terribly hard to concentrate on painting the turret room. She’d picked an off-white color with the slightest hint of pink. When the room was dark, the pink would add a rosy warmth, and in the light one would never notice the faint blush.

Right now, she could still feel the burn on her cheeks when she’d had to ask Adam to unzip her dress. Then to have it come undone as though it had never been stuck. She must have been pulling at the wrong angle. A glob of paint slopped down one leg of her jeans, and she told herself to keep her mind on her job.

Her brain, however, had other ideas, her dream of being rescued by Adam intruding first, then the memory of his embrace and the way his breath on her neck made her shiver.

Of course, the anger blazing on his face before he left was unsettling. She didn’t want to work with a guy who was mad at her, but she didn’t want to work with a guy who thought he could just . . . just what? Assume that because he’d unzipped her dress he could swoop her into his arms and make mad, passionate love?

“Be still my stupid heart,” she muttered, mashing the roller against the wall as though she could paint over her feelings. She paused to rotate her shoulders, aching from the up and down motion all afternoon. Another more elemental up and down motion came to mind, and she threw the roller in the tray and stepped off the short ladder, newspaper crinkling beneath her feet.

She was turning into a sex-starved maniac! Was it the clean Montana air that did it, or Adam Gardiner?

“Meow.”

She turned to see Velvet prance into the room, leaving little wet pawprints as she daintily crossed the newspaper-covered floor, slunk between Elizabeth’s ankles, and purred.

Little wet pawprints?

She looked out the window. No rain. The rest of Velvet was dry. Puzzled, an unpleasant feeling sinking into her stomach, she picked up Velvet and hurried down the two flights of stairs.

“Oh no” The plummeting sensation thickened and spread as she splashed through the quarter-inch pool of water at the edge of the bottom step. Cold seeped through her canvas sneakers. She shoved open the front door, and a small stream of water trickled out. She put Velvet outside on the dry porch and hurried into the kitchen. No, the tap wasn’t on. She crouched down and felt along the metal pipes. Dry. So was the bottom of the sink cabinet.

She tramped to the back of the house and grabbed a mop and began sopping up water in the hallway, worrying about the hardwood floor in the ballroom as well. If the wood warped it would have to be pulled up and redone. The kitchen tile would be fine, but the new carpet in the sitting room would have to be taken out. It would take days to dry everything. And if mold got into the walls at all she might never get rid of it or the accompanying unpleasant odor. They’d told her to leave the floors for last, but she so wanted to get started with decorating.

She wrung the mop into the bucket twenty more times, then dumped the bucket outside and paused to rub her back. Before she could change her mind, she ran to the trailer and dialed Adam’s number. “Adam, when you get this message, please call right away. There’s some kind of plumbing problem and the bottom floor is soaked, and I’ll probably be up all night cleaning up the mess. Oh, and-I-I’m sorry about what happened at the trailer.” She hung up and tried to catch her breath. What she really wanted to do was go to sleep, she thought, eyeing her bed with regret before returning to attack the flood.

Swish, swish, then wring out the water, over and over and over. Oh, but her back ached, and her side, and her shoulders.

The hallway now looked like islands and puddles, the kitchen, too. The carpet squished beneath her feet, and she had yet to make a dent in the ballroom or the hall on the other side.

“Elizabeth?” Adam’s voice accompanied a rap on the open door.

Grateful for the break, she tip-toed across the soggy Berber and stepped into the hallway. “That was fast.” The fact made her happy. Maybe he wasn’t too terribly mad at her after all.

“Fast?” Adam saw her gaze drop to the toolkit in his hand.

How the hell did he explain this?

“You must have raced right over after getting my message. I don’t think the leak is in the kitchen, but I haven’t had time to search for it. I’m trying to get the water up before it damages the wood.”

Tease or not, Adam felt lower than the basement as he stared at the dripping mop and Elizabeth’s soaked clothes. Was the basement wet? He checked the door, recently replaced along with the weather-stripping, not a drop of water had made it past. “I’ll find the leak,” he said, aware Elizabeth was tagging along behind him. “You keep, uh, mopping.”

She swiped a stray raven curl from her face, a trembling smile of gratitude preceding, “Thank you, Adam.”

If she only knew. Swallowing an admission, he squished and squeaked through the sitting room and hallway to the bathroom. He'd loosened the pipe more than he thought and the eight hours of a steady stream of water had done more damage than he'd imagined it could. Here the water was a couple of inches high. Silently cussing himself, he went outside and turned off the main water line, then returned and fixed the pipe.

His jeans were drenched up to the knees when he went to find Elizabeth. She was in the ballroom, her baggy, paint-smearred pants about falling off her hips from the weight of the water-saturated fabric. A splotch of water had soaked through the faded workshirt, clearly outlining one breast.

Elizabeth knew the moment Adam came into the room. The sudden heat on the back of her neck and the tingling down her spine a now familiar sensation. She stopped shoving the mop back and forth and looked up.

"Let me take over while you change into something dry," he suggested. "You're dripping everywhere."

Surprised, she frowned at him. "You're volunteering to mop?" Jerome would have laughed at the idea of a man doing anything that remotely resembled housework.

"Not all bachelors are slobs."

She held out the mop, figuring he'd take two quick swipes and quit, but by the time she'd changed clothes, he had the entire floor finished to a damp sheen, and he'd opened the windows so everything would dry faster. She took that information in with a glance, then forgot it as she watched him crouch and dry the far corner with a towel he must have retrieved from the laundry in the basement. He'd stripped off his shirt. Sweat glistened across the broad muscles of his back. His biceps bunched and the corded muscles of his forearms stood out as he wrung the water from the towel into the bucket.

Wiping his forehead, he got to his feet and turned. "How long have you been there?" he asked in a curiously soft voice.

"Long enough to see that you sling a mean mop. It would have taken me another hour to do all this." She gestured vaguely at the room, still mesmerized by Adam's naked torso. His chest was covered with blonde fuzz that spiraled down six-pack-abs and disappeared beneath the low-slung denim. "I could throw your clothes in the dryer," she said before thinking the offer through.

"It's a bit chilly to be running around in my birthday suit." He gave her a crooked grin that implied he wouldn't mind it in the least.

Now what? She couldn't very well take her offer back. "Well, uh, I'll, uh, get you a blanket."

"Where do you want me?"

Visions from her dream of him wearing only a breechcloth, riding bareback on a pinto as he scooped her from harm, thundered through her mind, her blood roaring with it. "Want you?"

My god, she was blushing again, Adam thought. How did she do it? Well, if actresses could cry on command he supposed they could blush too. "Do you want me to stay in your trailer or do you want me to wait in the basement with my drying clothes?"

The blush became more pronounced, and he would have given his molars to know what was running through her head. “The-the trailer I guess. It’s toasty.”

Toasty? He crossed the room, a bit chilled now that he’d stopped working, but warming quickly as he drew closer to Elizabeth. Annoyed that she had that immediate effect on him, he tried to ignore it. Despite the effort, he felt like every cell in his body perked up and took notice the moment she came within fifty yards.

She’d changed into a long sleeved, ankle-length black dress, and ballet-slipper shoes, which added no height to her frame. Her ebony curls had been hastily tied back with a red ribbon, stray strands already escaping to frame her heart-shaped face. Her pretty pink flush warmed her ivory skin. And her lips looked oh, so kissable. Sweet temptation, he was getting those signals again. The *I’m available and interested* kind.

Yeah and if he fell for the same tease job twice, he deserved a kick in the balls. He clamped down on the surge of elemental forces pounding through his groin and stepped around her and toward the door.

“Where are you going?” She actually sounded flustered.

“To the basement. I’ll dry my clothes and be on my way, and you can go ahead and get some sleep. It’s bound to be a long day tomorrow.” And a longer night tonight, he thought, wondering how his instincts about Elizabeth Benning could be so screwed up.

Elizabeth checked her watch as the basement door slapped shut. 10:30. Not *that* late. She must really be losing her senses. Okay, so she hadn’t been a pushover this afternoon, that didn’t mean he had to run away. *Unless* he was just amusing himself at her expense. The blonde’s perfectly manicured face swam through her mind, and emotions choked her.

Her attraction to Jerome had been much about how he’d seemed to value her so highly. Until they were married. Then he’d gone off to chase secretaries, women who looked like Adam’s dinner date. Had Adam slept with the blond? The idea tasted bitter.

She stalked back to her trailer, swearing all the way there she would *not* throw herself at Adam Gardiner again. Although, from his attitude, her donning a dress and trying to make her hair presentable hadn’t even registered.

My gosh, for the last ten minutes she hadn’t even considered the ruined floor and water-logged carpet, nor the fact that she’d be on the phone all morning with the insurance people, then repairmen. She’d definitely gone without sex too long, she thought as she lay down and turned out the light, or she’d be more upset about the house and paying out a deductible from her dwindling cash flow. She nibbled on her lower lip, realized she was doing it, and stopped. She hated that nervous habit, one she’d developed under Jerome’s critical glare.

She imagined Adam shivering in the basement, wrapped in a towel, his jeans flipping and flapping in the dryer. Another idea struck her, and she wished she’d just go to sleep, but the notion kept going around and around as though *she* were in the dryer with his jeans.

She wanted to be her *own* woman, not a soft piece of clay beneath some man’s boot, where the ring on her finger might as well be through her nose. But what did that mean? Her picture of a *hard* woman was one who slunk up to a bar, had guys buying her drinks all night, and went home with one of

them. That did not appeal since alcohol made her dizzy and ultimately gave her a skull-crushing headache, and going home with some guy she didn't know made her skin crawl. Of course if Adam were at the bar, she might not mind the going home part.

She rolled over and slapped her pillow, trying to get comfortable. Why did he have to be so nice and so darn good-looking?

Why did she have to have this old-fashioned streak about sex and love and marriage and forever, that they should go together?

Adam sat on top of the dryer and listened to the *clink, flap, flap* of his jeans while his brain wrestled with all the reasons why he should keep his distance from Elizabeth.

First there was the tiny fact that he'd come here under false pretenses.

Second, there was the fact that he'd loosened the pipe, causing the flood upstairs, which now had him sitting on the dryer, wrapped in a beach towel.

Third, if he made love to Elizabeth and Jerome found out, the man could ruin him. Or worse, ruin his brother, who unfortunately had aspirations to become L.A.'s youngest judge. Aspirations that any hint of scandal past, present, or future would kill.

Fourth, if he went after Elizabeth the way he wanted to, he'd have to tell her about his deal with Jerome, which was not going to entice her into falling into his arms.

Fifth, he was looking for a life-long partner, a woman he could trust with his heart and his wallet. And Elizabeth's boss had made it clear Elizabeth Holland, now Benning could *not* be trusted under any circumstances. Women like her gave marriage a bad rep, he thought, his butt toasty from the dryer's heat, the rest of him growing goosebumps the size of Mt. Everest. Of course, he imagined being married to Jerome would not be a picnic. Adam had done some calling around and learned that Jerome hadn't lost much sleep over his beloved wife's departure. Whereas, Adam couldn't imagine letting a woman like Elizabeth Benning get away. No, a woman like he *wanted* Elizabeth Benning to be, he reminded himself.

He slid from the dryer and checked his jeans. Still damp. Resetting the heat, he eyed all the boxes stacked along the side wall. They were neatly packed and labeled, except for a couple of open ones she'd obviously gone through recently.

He nudged the closest box with his foot so he could read the writing on the side.
PHOTOGRAPHS.

Of what?

He wrapped another towel around his shoulders, pulled up a dusty stool, and sat down beside it. A leather-bound album was shoved in on the side, a ton of loose photos dumped in the remaining space. He slid the album out and flipped it open.

Old black and white pictures with spidery descriptions covered the page. Me and Jack with Eliza. Eliza. Elizabeth's mother? Was this Elizabeth's grandparents? He flipped through ten pages, then

paused when he came to a blank page. A newspaper clipping, yellowed with age, had been glued in and fallen loose. He scanned it.

“What are you doing?”

He jumped at Elizabeth’s voice, dropping the album, and barely hanging onto his towel.

She was at the top of the stairs, wearing a robe and slippers, a red wool blanket slung over one arm.

“I was trying to get my mind off the cold.” He set the album down on top of the box.

“So was I,” she said as she descended the rest of the steps. “I thought you might want a blanket.” She held it out, and he gratefully threw it around his shoulders.

“Now if only my feet will thaw out,” he half-joked. Usually his hands and feet ran hot.

“Your jeans aren’t dry yet?” Her tone said she wanted to go back to sleep but wouldn’t until he was gone. That intrigued him. He’d rebuffed her, yet here she was offering him a blanket. A peace offering?

She surprised him by moving to the open box of photographs and picking up the album. “This belonged to my grandparents,” she said, love and loss in her voice.

He felt a wave of compassion. “I saw the article . . . about your parents . . . the car accident. I’m sorry.”

She nibbled at her lower lip.

His compassion turned into a niggling spurt of desire.

“I hardly knew them. I don’t remember this house either. I think my grandmother intended to renovate it as an inn way back then, but when my parents died, she and my grandpa decided to move to California so I could stay there. I’d just started first grade. They thought it would be less traumatic if they kept as much as possible the same.”

“I was twenty-one when my parents died, my brother sixteen.” It surprised him that he’d volunteered that information. He liked to say the past was behind him and leave it there. But Elizabeth Benning had a way of unsettling him to the point where he never knew what would come out of his mouth next, or what he’d do next.

Right now he was alternating between this sudden drive to talk and his freezing feet and the many ways he might warm them, besides retrieving his socks from the dryer and pulling them on.

“I’ve got the tea kettle on in the trailer. Would you like a cup of tea before you go home?”

He started to say no when the dryer buzzed. “Sure. I’ll be right there.” He waited until she’d gone up the stairs, then jumped into the warm denims, socks, and work shirt. Oh, did they feel good.

Not as good as Elizabeth Benning felt in his arms, but it would have to do.

He jammed his feet into his cold boots and tromped over to her door, then hesitated outside. It was after 11:00. Time for the hero in this farce of a situation to take his leave.

Cursing his weakness, he tapped on the door, and it swung open immediately. The scent of peppermint wafted toward him on a heavenly wave of warmth. It might be summer in Montana, but it had to be forty degrees right now. From a Californian's perspective, all that was missing was a winter frost.

She stepped back and slid onto the bench seat on one side of the small dining table. Two steaming teacups on placemats occupied the table space.

He shut the door behind him and slid onto the other seat. The quiet was neither comfortable or uncomfortable. *Companionable* described it best.

They both sipped tea, held onto the cups, and thought their own thoughts. This pensive mood of hers was catching, he decided. And another bent nail that didn't quite fit in the box he'd built around her. Nothing about her added up to anything he could remotely latch onto.

Her sapphire gaze shifted from the table top to him. A fragile smile lit her face.

Fragile? The woman who said *yes* and *no* in the same breath? Machiavellian was more like it.

"Thank you for helping me with the floor," she said.

"Hey, A-1 Construction always aims to please." He set down the cup, intending to leave. He suddenly noticed the blue velvet dress on a hanger in the bathroom doorway behind her and couldn't resist needling her a bit. "You get the zipper fixed?"

Her face didn't just blush, it burned. No mistake about it.

"It really was stuck, and I'm sorry if you thought . . . I didn't mean to give you the wrong idea." Her voice trailed off into uncertainty.

His own uncertainty swelled. He squelched it and forced a smile. "I obviously got my signals crossed. No big deal." He slid from the seat and shoved to his feet.

Elizabeth swallowed, wishing he hadn't said it was no big deal. It made her sound so unimportant, like he had so many women she hardly counted.

He retreated toward the door then pulled the blanket off and held it out. "Thanks for warming me up."

She took it and after he was gone, pressed it to her cheek. It was still warm from his body. His masculine scent filled her nostrils and brought back the longing to be wrapped in his arms, to rest her head on his shoulder and breathe him in as he held her. Holding and hugging had not been Jerome's strong points and she was only beginning to realize how much she longed for a man who would do both and not be in a rush for his own sexual gratification.

With a sigh, she climbed into bed, hugged the wool blanket like a pillow, closed her eyes, and dreamed.

Syd observed Adam's departure and Elizabeth's blanket-hugging sleep and thought and thought and thought. She had to get them talking again. But how?

Her midnight rescue in the turret room had backfired, and no other idea struck her as very promising at the moment.

Should she do anything about Jerome or let Adam handle it? Not trusting herself, she decided that *less* was probably best.

But as the days dragged by and neither Adam or Elizabeth seemed inclined to do more than glance at each other, she fretted and fumed and twisted the fabric of her black garb into wrinkles, lots of them.

Chapter Six

A week passed before Adam's brother returned his many messages. Irritated, Adam told him, "I want you to find another job ASAP."

"What do you mean? You know how long it took to get this one?"

"I don't care." He knew he was botching this, knew his little brother hated being told what to do, as though he were still a kid, but couldn't help it. To him, his brother *was* just a kid, a twenty-five year old kid. "I think Holland is crooked, and I don't want you within a hundred miles of that guy, is that clear?"

"It's clear you've gone off your rocker. When you have something sane to talk about I'll listen, but this . . . I'm studying for the bar, am up to my scalp in work, and don't need you telling me what to do."

Click.

Well that was just hunky-dory. *Great parenting skills, Adam, old boy.* He quit pacing and dropped the phone in the cradle, so full of frustration he could hardly stand still. He had to protect his brother. He picked up the phone and called Ethan back, got a busy signal, and slammed the receiver down. Dammit. Maybe he was crazy.

Holland was a highly respected business man, not some sleazy two-bit hustler. Yet the man made Adam think of hustlers, and he disliked this persistent knotted feeling in his gut that told him any way he ran he was headed over a waterfall without a raft, paddle, or life preserver.

Until he convinced Ethan to bail out, he'd have to stay here and at least pretend to kowtow to Jerome. Acid indigestion bubbled in his stomach. If he didn't have an ulcer by now, he'd have one

before this fiasco was over.

Telling himself to do his job and pray for a bolt of lightning to give him some inspiration, he went to bed. But the only electrical charges to strike in his sleep were the physical ones accompanied by vivid dreams of him and Elizabeth making love in her tiny trailer bed. He awakened sweat-drenched and as hard as concrete block, neither conducive to his usual carefree nature. Even after a cold shower, Elizabeth's lapis-colored eyes haunted him. At the local diner, he found himself ordering peppermint tea instead of coffee, then changing the order and deciding the best thing he could do was keep his distance from Elizabeth and get her out of his mind. If only he knew how.

He eyed the waitress, a college-aged kid his brother would probably go for, and wondered why, after all this time and at thirty-two, he had to fall for Elizabeth Benning. Yes, he'd admit it here and now, alone with his bacon and eggs and orange juice, the woman's proximity mangled every logical impulse he might latch onto and switched his brain and his body into caveman mode. He wanted to lay claim to her body and soul. Hold her and cherish her and protect her.

Whoa. He shoved his half-empty plate away, his hands suddenly clammy. *Hold, cherish, protect* – there was a four-letter word that covered all that ground, and he was coming perilously close to it. Alarm bells rang in his head, and he pushed that four-letter word and all it meant to the back of his mind. He was not ready for *that*. And especially not with a woman of Elizabeth's reputation.

But his conversation with Elizabeth that night in her trailer, the shared bond of them both losing their parents early in life, the thoughtful silence that had lingered pleasantly between them, nagged at him. Still, he had answers to shut down the voice.

He was a bachelor and a workaholic. He built houses, drank an occasional beer, thought camping out under the stars one of the best places he could be. Elizabeth played classical music on the radio, was into interior design, and he'd bet that trailer was the closest she'd ever come to camping in her life. Not to mention she'd cheated on her husband, stolen from her employer, and could not be trusted.

Of course the next morning at seven a.m. when Elizabeth appeared with coffee and donuts for the work crew, looking decidedly sexy in a overlarge, faded work shirt and baggy shorts he imagined were held up by a belt, all his good intentions to ignore her disappeared into overheated hormones.

"That doesn't mean I have to give into them," he muttered as he bit into a powdered donut.

Elizabeth, several steps away, flocked by the other five guys, shot him a sidelong look. "What?"

He shrugged, then said the first thing to pop into his head. "Haven't seen Velvet around. Where've you been hiding her?"

She handed the bakery box off to Tom. Coffee cup and napkin in hand, she joined him as he leaned against the front porch rail. "She likes to scamper off during the day. Explore the area. I didn't see her last night, but sometimes she sleeps in the ballroom fireplace." She held out the napkin. "You've got some sugar above your lip."

For a moment, Elizabeth considered kissing away the sugar. He had the tastiest looking mouth.

He brushed the sugar away and grinned as though he knew exactly what she were thinking. "Well . . . I miss her. I like it when she keeps me company."

“You do?” Was he saying he liked *her* company, or did he really mean Velvet?

“Sure. Who wouldn’t love a soft, silky little darling like her?”

Soft?

Silky?

His gaze traveled from her eyes to her hair. He cleared his throat and wolfed down the rest of the donut like a Great Dane inhaling a rump roast. “Uh, thanks for the treats and the coffee.” He hurried beyond the corner of the house as though he couldn’t wait to get out of her line of vision.

Adam inhaled and exhaled, feeling lucky he’d escaped before giving in to temptation. Of course, he couldn’t hide out along the side of the house for more than a few minutes. He hoped that by then, she’d be inside the house and out of sight.

Telling herself she’d misread Adam’s flirtatious tone of voice, Elizabeth climbed the steps and walked down the hallway, pausing in each doorway to survey the rooms. The four bedrooms were all sheet-rocked and ready to be textured. By the end of the week she could paint them! She hugged herself, relishing her good fortune. The place was going to be even more beautiful than she’d imagined. Every fiber of her being said she belonged here. But instead of envisioning the decor for the room she was in, she imagined Adam’s mossy-green eyes and the mysterious way they darkened when she caught him staring at her. Everything about him appealed to her senses, from his broad shoulders and shaggy golden surfer hair to his masculine scent, all musky and male and ever so heady.

“Meow . . . meow”

She turned toward the sound behind her. Empty space and a blank wall.

“Meow”

“Velvet?”

“Meow” Fainter this time. As though Velvet were in trouble or sick or something.

“Velvet!” She called the kitty’s name repeatedly, but the kitty’s cries seemed stuck in the room, specifically behind the wall. She ran outside. “Adam?”

At the sound of Elizabeth’s voice, Adam, bent over a sheet of plywood with his measuring tape, looked up, and forgot what he was measuring for. She sounded upset, yet she appeared fine. Better than fine, his brain whispered as he strode over to the front door. “What’s wrong?”

“I think Velvet is trapped behind the sheet-rock in the second bedroom.”

“One of the rooms we did yesterday?”

“Yes.” She nibbled on her lower lip again.

He swore he was having hot flashes, all centered in his pants.

“I heard her meowing when I was in there.”

Shifting his gaze from her delectable mouth to the door beyond her shoulder, he said, "Let's take a look." The idea of having to tear off sheet-rock and redo it didn't thrill him, but he wouldn't hesitate if he thought the cat had snuck into the wall before they'd sealed it. Especially not Velvet. She was beginning to be a mascot for the crew. Heck, she was beginning to win his heart. His own cat, Boots, had better watch out, he thought, missing the big Tom that was probably driving his brother nuts. Having a cat around who wanted attention like a dog, could be dangerous. Especially to a clean-freak like Ethan. God knew where his little brother got that trait from.

"In here," Elizabeth said, crossing the empty bedroom to the far wall.

He pushed down other thoughts about Boots and LA and moved to the center of the room. Offering a reassuring smile to Elizabeth, he listened. Nothing but the pounding and hammering of the guys outside and upstairs. "Sure you didn't hear her yowling from upstairs. She can be pretty vocal when she wants to be petted."

Elizabeth flushed, and he found himself wondering how vocal Elizabeth would be when "petted." She seemed on the quiet side most of the time. Almost shy. His mind conjured up an image of her in the blue velvet, skin-tight gown. Not shy – tricky. She knew how to make him drool, and she liked playing games. Maybe this lost kitty routine was another one.

Elizabeth watched Adam's face go from warm and friendly to cool and skeptical. Darn it, she was not making this up. "Velvet?" she called, determined to prove she wasn't hearing things. She didn't want to think why it seemed so important. "Velvet!"

"Elizabeth, it's"

"Meow"

Adam cocked his head.

"Meow"

He stepped toward the sound coming from behind the wall. Wanting to redeem himself because he was sure Elizabeth had seen the censure in his eyes, he ran outside and retrieved the drill and a hand saw. He drilled a couple of holes and listened. "Velvet," he crooned. "Velvet."

The faint meow sounded louder. He cut out a one-foot square of sheet-rock, spreading white dust across the floor and over his jeans. Crouched down, he leaned forward and shone his penlight into the wall, expecting to see cat-clawed insulation and a ball of black fur. "There's nothing here," he said, rolling back on his heels and handing the light to Elizabeth. "Take a look."

She knelt down and bent forward, her knee a hairs distance away from his, her backside provocatively positioned elbow height.

His fingertips tingled. Sweat trickled down his back and into the waistband of his pants. He could see the beam of light as she flashed it every which way. Finally she sat back and brushed her hair from her eyes to look at him, her expression perplexed and obviously occupied by kitty-worry. Whereas his had taken a sharp turn into the perils of lust.

"We both heard her meow," she said. "She's got to be here."

She was doing that thing with her bottom lip again. He was tempted to take the mini-mag from her fingers, swoop her into his arms, and kiss away her anxiety.

“Let’s ki-think about this rationally,” he said, his heart stopping for a sec. *Kiss* and *think* weren’t even close. But *lust* and *must* sounded pretty good. So did *kiss* and *bliss*. Grimacing at his side-tripping thoughts, Adam returned the light to his belt and got to his feet. He needed distance, lots of it.

“Rationally?” Elizabeth murmured, pushing to her feet and shoving her hands into her pockets, dragging the shorts down a few more inches so the hemline reached the top of her knees. He noticed there were five buttons on her shirt and that the top one was missing. Noticed the lemony scent of her hair and the slight smudge of darkness beneath her eyes that told him she’d put on mascara.

“Meow . . .” Velvet’s plaintive cry snapped him back to reality and away from the biggest mistake of his life. It also gave him an idea.

“Where are you going?”

“To check the crawlspace *under* the house.” He felt like an idiot for not thinking of it before cutting a hole in the new sheet-rock. But his mind hadn’t been centered on thinking for most of the past fifteen minutes. In fact, it felt like they’d been together in that room for hours, her oblivious to the heat stirring between them . . . or maybe just in his groin.

A nice crawl through dirt and cobwebs, spiders and god knew what else was just what he needed to get his head screwed back on straight.

Trying to recall when it had rained last and to figure how muddy he was bound to get, he retrieved the big flashlight from his truck cab, and dove into the opening beneath the house before he could talk himself out of it. If he had one of the other guys do it he’d look like a sissy. And if anyone was going to rescue the cat, it was going to be him. Because if Elizabeth was going to reward anyone, it was going to be *him*.

It felt like forever to reach the area beneath the bedroom where he’d heard the cat’s faint cries. “Velvet?” he called, pausing to brush a cobweb from his face. He flashed the beam toward a scratchy sound. Inky darkness and some old twine. Darkness or black fur? He flashed the light again.

The twine moved, and he scooted toward it. “You silly little kitty, getting all tangled in twine.” He scooped Velvet up with one hand, brought her into his chest, and waited until she stopped squirming. Holding her against his chest, he crawled like a three-legged crab toward freedom.

The first thing he saw after staggering to his feet and squinting against the daylight, was Elizabeth’s beaming smile. He let her take the cat and watched as she unwrapped the furry bundle from it’s tangled prison. Nimble as a thief, Velvet jumped down and pranced around Elizabeth’s legs, as though to say she could have done it herself given time.

Job done, he backed away. Filthy didn’t begin to describe the state of his jeans, shirt, and probably every inch of skin.

“Oh, Adam, thank you.” She flung her arms around him and gave him a hug, then brushed dirt from his cheek and kissed him. The sweetest thank you kiss he’d ever received.

“Watch out or you’ll end up looking like me,” he warned, throttling down his libido, aware the guys were watching the exchange with extraordinary interest.

She merely grinned and made a half-hearted swipe at the front of her shirt. “I can think of worse things,” she said.

He wanted to challenge her, flirt with her, then get her alone and see where this chemistry between them might lead, but what slammed into his thoughts was the fact there was a whole lot worse things going on here, and she didn’t know it, and he was a part of it. Jerome had called her a gold-digger and more, and her ex-boss had supported Jerome’s claims about the affair and embezzlement. He shouldn’t feel guilty.

But he did. The knowledge of his duplicity sobered every desirous, lustful thought into the far corners of the universe. Without explanation, he stalked to his truck and left. Maybe once he’d cleaned himself up on the outside, he’d figure a way to clean himself off on the inside.

And if he didn’t?

Another sober, unwanted thought. If he didn’t, then he’d keep his hands to himself, no matter how appealing Elizabeth Benning might look.

He spent the rest of the day trying to think of ways to get out from under Jerome’s thumb without doing any more damage to Elizabeth’s house. *Nada. Nada. Nada.*

The proverbial stuck between a rock and a hard place followed him into his dreams and he awakened with a renewed sense of purpose: to keep his distance from Elizabeth, get the job finished, and high-tail it back to LA.

Now what? For the next two weeks, Syd pondered scenarios with Mel. He found problems with every one. Exasperated by the amount of time flying by, she pointed at Adam with half a mind to make him fall off the ladder and get Elizabeth running to the rescue. The man was replacing the gingerbread trim along the edge of the roof. He’d been sawing, molding, and nailing that stuff all week, maintaining his distance from Elizabeth who was painting like a demon on the interior. She’d finished the turret room, and after the wood floor was refinished, she’d moved in an old brass bed, newly shined, an antique armoire, and a soft cream-colored rug which had pale pink flowers woven through it. It was a room Sheryece would love, all muted colors and romantic undertones. Syd had moved to the other side of the house, away from the turret room and away from Elizabeth’s current painting project in the other corner. All the rooms had windows on the third floor, but none had a window seat like the turret room or the oversized French windows.

Could it be she was beginning to like the turret room? Blehck! Dark and dinghy was much better. Besides, Elizabeth was moving in there. Syd preferred emptiness and dark shadows.

Mel appeared beside her. She jumped and threw him a “go away” glare which he ignored. She promised not to *speak* insults but she could still *look* insults at him.

“Nice view,” he said.

“So do you have any brilliant ideas?”

“Yes. Let’s take the day off and go sight-seeing.”

“I’ve already had weeks and weeks of sitting here with you, trying to find some new inspiration, and *nothing* is happening.”

“Keep your voice down. You can’t rush inspiration. You have to relax and let it come.”

She crossed her arms. “Oh, and you’re the expert?”

He gave her a smug smile. “I do have some experience.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

“I’m trying to develop some honesty and trust here.”

“Honesty and trust from a man?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, but if Elizabeth and Adam are any example, and they’re *meant for each other*, honesty and trust is a rare commodity.”

“Not a fair example. Adam’s been set up to believe the worst about Elizabeth, and despite that he likes her. And Elizabeth was married to Jerome . . . well, that’s bound to make anyone shudder at the idea of another relationship.”

“So why doesn’t she just go for a one-nighter with Adam?” she complained. “After one night they’d never let each other go. It’d be like trying to rip two magnets apart.”

Mel shook his head in disagreement. “Chemistry is important, but until they open up to each other and really communicate, they’ll think they’re in *lust* not *love*.”

Syd found herself studying Mel’s shoulders. “You know you look every bit as great as Adam. Why don’t you give him a . . . a run for his money?”

“Make him jealous?” Mel rubbed his jaw. “Now there’s an idea with some merit.”

“Don’t bowl me over with praise.”

He grinned at her and despite the constant annoyance she felt around him, warmth flowed from her hairline to her toes. Maybe the idea wasn’t so great after all.

In the blink of an eye he was dressed in a polished blue suit, white shirt, and red tie. His jet-black hair no longer brushed his shoulders, but was shortened to modern businessman length.

“So, what are you selling?” she asked.

“Advertising and marketing strategies for the Good Luck Inn.”

“No one likes sales people.”

“They do when they’ve asked them to come.”

“What do you mean?”

He bowed. “May I present Mel Stockwell of True-blue Advertising. Currently on his way here but never to arrive.”

Did Mel have a dark side after all? The thought gave her thrill chills. “What did you do with him? Turn him into a snake?”

Mel leaned forward, his warm breath tickling her ear. “The engine just dropped out of his car.”

“On his foot?” she asked hoping for something more dreadful to perk her up.

“No. On his cell phone.”

“How the heck did that happen?”

“It’s one of those odd experiences one can never quite explain.”

“Like your birth?”

He frowned.

“Sorry, it slipped out.”

“You’re lucky I’m in a good mood.” He straightened his shoulders and saluted. “Well, I’d best whisk up a car and *arrive*.”

“Just remember it’s all an act, Mel.”

“Why Syd. I never knew you cared.”

“I don’t, you jackass. But Elizabeth’s supposed to fall in love with Adam, and if she falls for you it’ll really mess things up.”

“There is that,” he said, another thoughtful look gracing his face. “But then if I leave her broken-hearted, Adam can patch the pieces together.”

She wanted to argue that this whole plan was ludicrous, but since she’d come up with the idea, she shut her mouth and watched him vanish, then looked out the window for his car.

Elizabeth heard the crunch of gravel beneath tires and glanced through the trailer window. A black Mercedes rolled in and stopped beside Adam's truck. The man who climbed out had hair the same color as the car and looked dressed for Wall Street, not construction.

"Oh my gosh!" The recollection of her appointment with the marketing person from True-blue Advertising struck her with a bolt of panic. And he was early, too. She dashed into the bathroom, yanked a brush through her too-thick, too-wavy hair, slipped on a dressy pink blouse and fitted black slacks, jammed her feet into black pumps, and swung open the door.

He was on the step, hand poised to knock, the other gripping a leather valise. "Ms. Benning?"

"Yes." She said, wishing she didn't sound so breathless.

"I'm Mel Stockwell. We talked on the phone the other day."

"Yes. I-uh, you sound different." She blocked the doorway, not wanting him to see the mess behind her. "Why don't I show you the house?" Without waiting for his answer, she stepped out, shut the door firmly behind her, and led him around to the mansion's front porch.

He paused to glance up, a grin pulling at his mouth. "Very nice," he said.

Another masculine voice asked, "What is?"

Elizabeth turned, desperately tamping down a rush of perky hormones and working for a casual tone. "Oh, hello, Adam. This is Mel Stockwell from an advertising firm I contacted. I want to have some brochures made and possibly do some advertising in travel magazines."

The two men took each other's measure.

Uneasy, she cleared her throat.

Both looked at her, and for a moment she just stared. Mel Stockwell looked almost like Al Pacino in the old Godfather film, she thought. Dark hair, dark charismatic eyes, arresting features, and an expensive smoky cologne. Adam, on the other hand, radiated outdoor masculinity with his sun-bleached blonde hair and ocean-green eyes. She wouldn't have been surprised to hear a seagull caw and swoop down behind him in a wave of salt spray and pungent seaweed. And the citrus and soapy scent of his skin gave her a heady feeling that made her want to forget everyone and everything around them. "Did you need something?" she said in a "Go away" tone to Adam, heat prickling her cheeks at his proximity.

He looked flummoxed. "No . . . yes. How's the kitten?"

Their eyes met, and she swore the world stood still. "Velvet's fine," she said.

He crooked a thumb in a front beltloop, and images of his broad blonde-fuzzed chest and hard-muscled abdomen flashed behind her eyes. One booted foot slid forward to almost touch hers. His stance seemed strangely possessive.

Possessive? Of all the absurd ideas she could ever come up with, this took the prize.

“Ms. Benning?”

She looked at Mel Stockwell and felt inspired and infused with hope and determination to be as strong and independent as her ancestors. “Call me Liz.”

He smiled, and she smiled politely back, then ushered him inside, closing the door on Adam and her rioting sexuality.

Adam watched the door swing closed, Elizabeth’s soft, sultry “Call me Liz,” ringing like an alarm in his ears. She *liked* that guy? That advertising snake-charmer?

He stomped down the steps and glanced back, half-hoping to see the guy thrown out on his ear. Liz? Like Elizabeth Taylor? There was a resemblance, now that he thought about it. And she acted circles around Adam, tying him into knots with each astonishing performance. “And the name of this movie is *Reckless Lust*,” he muttered to himself as he returned to his ladder perch and gingerbread trim. Why the hell hadn’t he kissed her the other day when they were alone in the house? The invitation had been there, a dark gleam in her violet eyes. His blood pumped faster at the fantasy of tugging the red satin ribbon from her ebony hair, then burying his fingers in the silky tresses as he tilted her head back and

He missed the nail and hit his thumb with the hammer, dropping the offending piece of equipment as he cursed profusely under his breath. The hammer thudded to the ground, his thumb began to throb, awakening to the fact it had been smashed, and he silently swore that from now on he would keep his overactive imagination in check.

Starting down to retrieve his hammer, the sight of Elizabeth and Stockwell smiling and talking in the second floor guestroom arrested his descent. She was *beaming* at him like she’d found *Mr. Perfect*. Perfect for what?

Indeed, the guy did look perfect. Not a hair out of place, teeth white as new snow, dimpled chin that Brad Pitt would have died for. What were they talking about? He leaned forward but couldn’t hear a thing through the triple-pane glass.

Stockwell chose that moment to glance toward the window. Instead of looking surprised or indignant, he grinned, an infuriating challenge of a grin. His free hand touched Elizabeth’s elbow, guiding her toward the door.

Unaccustomed to the heat radiating from his cheeks, Adam missed the next ladder rung. For a moment he seemed to float. Then he dropped, freshly painted exterior flashing by instead of his life. He grabbed onto a ladder rung with three fingers, wrenching his shoulder in the process as he swung crazily ten feet above the ground. A bit shaken, he slid one boot on a step further down, easing the weight off his strained shoulder. Everything from the calluses on his palm to the muscles of his back ached as he numbly finished his descent to earth. He sucked in several deep breaths of air until he felt centered, calm. Snatching up the offending hammer, he cast a glare at the near lethal ladder, and stalked back to his truck for a recovery break. He had to start controlling his rampaging fantasies before he killed himself.

Elizabeth finished the tour by showing Mel Stockwell the newly remodeled kitchen. Big and roomy, it had enough oak cabinets to hold cookware and dishes for a battalion. Two large stainless steel sinks were centered on one wall, surrounded by cream-colored tile. A butcher-block island with a rack

above it for pots and pans sat in the middle of the newly tiled floor. The island was almost as big as her tiny trailer bed.

The yen to cook a magnificent culinary delight – for two – in this wonderful, inspiring space filled her with momentary melancholy. She gave herself a mental shake. She did not need a man to cook for! She'd invite a friend over, like . . . like Annie the librarian.

Right and get scared by her ghost stories. Jerome had always called her a fraidy cat.

I won't get scared. I've been here nearly three months and other than the broken pipe nothing strange has happened.

What about the voices in the chimney?

Just the wind.

What about the wild dream and the déjà vu in the turret room?

Just my imagination.

What about your grandmother's dress?

What about it?

Doesn't it seem just a teensy bit odd that it looks brand new and fits like a glove?

I look a lot like my grandmother. I'm obviously the same size she was.

And what about the stuck zipper that came unstuck the second Adam pulled it?

Coincidence.

"Excuse me, Liz. You seem distracted. Am I keeping you from something?" Mel asked.

She shook off her flight of fancy about the house. "I was just imagining how all the rooms are going to look, each one reflecting a theme."

"Do you have all the themes worked out?"

"No, I've been struggling with that part."

He didn't offer any suggestions, and she was glad. She wanted to figure the problem out on her own. He cleared his throat. "I have some ideas about a brochure and some radio spots, advertisements in travel magazines, things like that. You mind if I take some photographs?"

"Don't you want to wait until everything's finished?"

His face flushed. "Well, of course, except, this room's done, right?"

"Yes, but I don't think guests will be interested in the kitchen."

“But it’s gorgeous. As a gourmet cook I can tell you . . .”

“*You* cook?”

He gave her a sweet smile. “Love to cook.”

She had the inexplicable urge to invite him to dinner. But then she’d be cooking, not him. And he might think she was interested in him. Was she? Tall, dark, handsome, the old adage fit, but . . .

“Hey, I’ve got a great idea,” Mel said. “Why don’t I buy some food and fix a meal for tonight? I know you don’t know me, so maybe you’d like to invite a friend, too? I’m used to cooking for my three sisters. Do you like chicken Kiev?”

Somehow she didn’t think she had to worry about him being an ax murderer. Not when he was rubbing his hands together with obvious anticipation as he described pounding boned chicken breasts to window-pane thickness then wrapping each one around a pat of butter, a slice of ham, and a chunk of swiss cheese.

“You sprinkle the chicken with parsley, dust it with flour, dip in egg, roll in cracker crumbs, and fry to a golden brown.”

“Sounds like I’ll gain five pounds.” Her stomach rumbled as though to say *who cares*.

“It has to bake an hour, so once it’s in the oven, I can show you and your friend my ideas.”

“Friend?” she said, her mind racing. Who would she invite? “Uh, Mel, would you mind cooking for seven or eight?”

His eyebrows lifted. “Your family?”

“The librarian. She’s really nice. And the construction crew. They’ve been working so hard . . .” So why did she see only Adam’s face?

“If they’d like to come, I’ll happily cook for them.” He chortled with glee, following her outside.

She looked around and glanced up at Tom on the roof. “Where’s Adam?”

“He fell off his ladder and took a break.”

What? A thread of panic fluttered through her. “Is he all right? Where is he?”

“In his truck.”

She dashed toward his truck, realized she was running conspicuously and slowed to a fast walk.

Leaning back against the headrest, eyes closed, Adam appeared asleep. His lids shot open when she rapped on the glass. Stretching, he unlocked the passenger door and shoved it open. She scanned his body from his wide shoulders down to the faded denim nicely molded to his thighs to the clunky work boots.

His brows drew together. “Did I miss something here?”

Oh dear, she'd done it again. "He said you were . . . you fell off the ladder." My gosh she sounded like a worried spouse. That, by far, was much more mortifying than staring too long at his intriguing blend of muscle and skin.

Adam's gaze skidded past her to Mel Stockwell. "*He* said that?"

How much redder could her face get? It felt fourth-degree sunburn hot.

Adam's aches and pains eased somewhat beneath the blush on Elizabeth's face. Not only that, but she was worried about him. The knowledge did strange things to his heart. Things he wasn't about to acknowledge. Still, it was nice. Other than his brother, he'd never had anyone worry about him before.

"I didn't say a word," Mel Stockwell vowed, his presence an irritant.

"Tom told me," Elizabeth confirmed. "Would you like some hot tea or something?"

Was peppermint tea her solution to every problem? "I'm fine," he said, offering a smile to prove it. But her words brought back the other night, mopping up the water, drying his jeans, learning she'd lost her parents at an even earlier age than he'd lost his, and sharing tea. He inhaled as though a part of him were trying to recall the scent, as though that would change who she was, who he was, and bring them together. Instead, he caught Elizabeth's lemony fragrance and his fingers tingled with the memory of her silky hair sliding across his flesh. Other memories bombarded him as she straightened and readied to shut the door: the way she'd looked gift-wrapped in blue velvet; the red strip of satin and lace strewn on her bed; the all too brief taste of her mouth, sweet and tangy as a tangerine. Holy Temptation, he had citrus on the brain!

"Mel offered to cook dinner here for everyone tonight. Can you come?"

Surprise didn't begin to cover what he felt. Mel? Dinner here? "Who's everyone?" What was she planning? An orgy?

"The librarian, Annie, and you and your work crew."

She looked like a ripe tomato her face was so red, but oh did he want to taste her. He forced himself to look at Mel. "You cook?"

"Of course."

Great, as in *not*, Adam thought. If anyone was going to cook to impress Elizabeth, he wanted it to be him. However, he didn't think noodles and spaghetti sauce from a jar would be all that impressive. He started to say he had plans but couldn't stand the idea of her being with Mel. "What's on the menu and what time?"

"Chicken Kiev," Mel said at the same time Elizabeth said, "Six o'clock?" She cleared her voice and said more forcefully, "Six o'clock."

"Hey, I never turn down a free meal."

"What about . . ."

“Don’t worry. Five single guys, you’ll have them salivating all afternoon in anticipation of a home-cooked meal.”

“Five single guys?”

“Well, six, including me.” He shoved open the door and got out, afraid he’d stiffen up and be unable to move for the rest of the day.

“You are hurt!” Elizabeth skirted the front of the truck. “Oh, look at your thumb! I’ll get some ice.” She didn’t give him time to protest, merely raced to her trailer and back before he and Mel could do more than eye each other like wary guard dogs.

“You married, Mel?” he asked as Elizabeth held out a sandwich bag filled with ice cubes. The throbbing in his thumb eased to a dull ache.

“Divorced,” Mel said, sliding a smile at Elizabeth. “What about you, Liz?”

“I’m divorced, too.” Her gaze dropped guiltily toward the ground. Well, at least she felt some shame about betraying her marriage vows, Adam thought with a glimmer of satisfaction.

Elizabeth glanced at Adam. “Since we’re all trading war stories, what about you?”

“Never been married,” he said, feeling a sense of failure that had never struck him before.

“Engaged?” she asked.

“No.” He knew he was scowling but couldn’t seem to stop. He didn’t mind Elizabeth knowing he’d never been engaged or married, but he disliked Mel Stockwell’s cocky grin.

“Just couldn’t find the right woman?” Mel asked, a little too pleasantly.

“Guess so,” he said shortly. He slapped the ice back in Elizabeth’s palm. “Thumb’s fine now, thanks.” Pins and needles jabbed his right foot as he walked away. Now that his thumb was numb, aches and pains all over the rest of his body roiled for attention. Nothing like a few wrenched muscles to make your day, he thought morosely.

Elizabeth watched Adam attempt to amble away, his upper body stiff and his right step a bit shortened. The man was obviously hurt. Why did he have to be so pig-headed? What would a thick-skinned, tough pioneer woman do? She hurtled after him and grabbed his arm. “Adam . . .”

“Ow! You trying to kill me?”

“I barely touched you!” The angry glare in his eyes hurt.

“Lady, right now I don’t want to be touched, okay?”

She backed away. His tone of voice was so mean, so condescending, so like Jerome, it stole her breath. It was almost as if he thought she was . . . well, something rotten. Humiliated, she whirled away and marched back to Mel. He was looking better all the time. “Just knock on the trailer door, Mel, when you get back, and I’ll help you with the cooking.”

He shook his head. "You look tired. Take a nap. When I wake you it will be to the most magnificent meal of your life."

Adam overheard Mel's declaration. "I'll bet," he muttered, feeling worse by the minute. He shouldn't have snapped at Elizabeth like that when she'd only been concerned about his welfare. But he could already see her seated next to Mel at dinner, batting her eyes at him with an invitation for an altogether scrumptious dessert – her – and it made him feel crazy.

So don't go.

I don't trust that guy and I'm not going to leave Elizabeth alone with him if I can help it.

Oh, come on. She asked him here. He hasn't lied to her or sabotaged her water pipes.

All right, so he was feeling guilty, what was he supposed to do now? His conversation last night with Ethan had made him feel trapped. Ethan didn't believe Jerome would do anything "underhanded," and he loved his job.

Which left Jerome's threat back on Adam's toes. Did he take the threat seriously?

Yes.

Did his brother?

No.

His thoughts bounced around from his brother, himself, Elizabeth, and Jerome all afternoon. At quitting time, he uncharacteristically hit the road before his crew, and after a quick shower and shave, he called his brother, rifling through his closet for something suitable to wear to dinner as he waited for Ethan's secretary to transfer the call.

"Yo, Adam, two calls in two days, you must be homesick," Ethan's tone was wary.

"More like crazy," Adam muttered, telling himself to ease up or his brother would be hanging up in his ear again.

"I'm buried with work." Impatience.

"How's Boots doing?"

"Eating like a pig and barfing by the front door every Saturday like clockwork."

Adam winced. "Guess he misses me."

"Guess so." Ethan's tone became teasing. "Wish he'd stop showing it so profusely. I'd let you talk to him, but he's sleeping."

"I haven't mastered cat-talk yet," Adam said. Geez, he'd love to see that big, fat lump of tabby fur at the end of his bed right now.

“So . . . I’m guessing you called for another reason beside cat-sickness.”

No way to ease into it, Adam thought. “I want you to do some checking on Jerome.”

Unhappy silence. “What kind?”

“I have a bad feeling about him. If I’m wrong, I’ll be happy to admit it. But I don’t want you caught in the middle.”

“He’s helped you with the zoning permits, helped save your business, and you’re complaining?”

“That’s just it. He’s helping me because of what he’s asked me to do here. Let’s just say it’s not exactly ethical. I want you to check into that business last year with Murchison concrete, and I want to know more about those ten houses that supposedly burned down due to faulty wiring. And I’d like to know how JS Construction got information on my bid for that shopping mall. They underbid me by peanuts, they had to know.”

“Get real. I have two full-time jobs right here on my desk, Adam.”

“Ethan, I wouldn’t ask if this weren’t important. If you don’t have time, then hire someone. I’ll pay. And, Ethan, don’t say anything to anyone. Promise me.”

A reluctant pause. “Okay. My lips are sealed. I’ll get on it first thing tomorrow and I’ll let you know what I discover.”

Relieved, Adam said goodbye. Maybe he couldn’t convince Ethan to leave Jerome’s employ, but evidence certainly would.

He just hoped it didn’t come too late.

Chapter Eight

Elizabeth struggled with the weight of the oak table, her end drooping precariously. *Please don’t scrape the wood floor*, she prayed.

“You okay down there, Liz?” Mel asked, looking untaxed as he led the way into the dining room.

“Yes,” she gasped, staggering the last two steps, then easing the table to the floor. “Thanks for the help, Mel.”

“You’re so very welcome, my dear,” he said with a merry wink. “Now I’d better get back in the kitchen or we’ll have a disappointed crowd.”

He'd taken off his suit jacket, rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, and tied on an apron. While she was setting places at the table for eight, he called from the kitchen, "Did you have a chance to take a look at my ideas?"

"Did I ever. They're fabulous." What the man had accomplished in the space of an afternoon, in addition to grocery shopping, astonished her. He'd designed a draft of the brochure and set up two radio interviews, one on a national station, in two months when the Inn would be finished. And he'd made a draft of a full-page ad idea for a national travel magazine that had an upcoming issue highlighting Yellowstone and surrounding areas for winter fun.

If only she felt sparks around him. She sighed. Seemed like these days, all her sizzle was reserved for Adam.

The *ding, dong* of the doorbell cut her thoughts short. She smoothed her black dress, finger-combed her loose hair back from her face, and hurried to open the door.

The librarian offered an impish grin, looking all of twenty-one, and held out a bottle of Chardonnay.

"Annie, I'm so glad you could come."

Her gaze skidded past Elizabeth toward the hallway. "Meet any ghosts yet?"

Elizabeth laughed. "No, but maybe we can have a séance tonight and call one up for you."

Annie offered a mock shiver. "That's okay. They can stay asleep or off haunting other houses."

They both turned at the sound of Adam's truck rolling to a stop by the porch. He climbed out, a bottle of wine tucked under one arm. He'd changed into a blue western shirt with black piping along the seams, black slacks, and black boots that looked freshly polished. His tone was cool when he spoke. "Elizabeth." His gaze swerved questioningly toward Annie and Elizabeth hastily made introductions, disliking the interest flaring in Annie's brown eyes and the congenial smile Adam returned.

Another truck rattled up the drive, the doors squealing in protest as four guys piled out, bearing two six-packs of imported beer. They'd all showered and changed into clean denims and western shirts, invading the house with their rowdy laughter and masculinity, and enthralling Annie as she trailed beside Elizabeth and Adam.

Elizabeth awkwardly stayed near the kitchen doorway as the congregation popped open bottles, then settled along the counter edges to drink and talk. Suddenly she felt tired by the crowd and a sense of invasion and wished she were alone.

"Where's Harry?" Adam asked of no one in particular.

"Had a date, but said he might stop by later for a few minutes," Tom answered, his gaze skipping from Adam to Elizabeth to Annie. Elizabeth wondered what the strange look he cast at Adam meant.

Mel took center stage as he opened the top oven, the warm delicious aroma of ham, cheese, and poultry wafting through the air.

Five minutes later they were all seated around the table and eating like starved wolfhounds. Utensils clinked and conversations flowed about baseball and rafting down the nearby Gallatin river with the food and drinks.

Elizabeth sipped her wine sparingly and poked at her chicken.

Mel, seated to her right, frowned. "Not cooked enough?" he asked.

"No, it's wonderful." She took a bite, chewed, and swallowed to prove it, wishing her appetite would return. Somehow Adam had wrangled the chair to her left, and she was finding it hard to breathe, let alone eat. Annie, seated across the table from Elizabeth and flanked by men on all sides, asked and answered questions nonstop.

"Let the poor woman eat," Mel groused, halfway through the meal.

Annie flashed a smile at him. "When do we get to see your advertising ideas?"

"Soon," he said enigmatically.

Adam scowled.

Recalling how he'd snapped at her when she'd shown concern about him, Elizabeth bit back a question now and studiously focused on Mel, all the while hearing snippets of Adam's conversation with his co-worker, probably the oldest of his crew, griping about his separation from his wife.

From the little she heard she figured the woman must have been a saint to put up with the man who complained that all she did was "cook, clean, and take care of the kids," like it was nothing.

"So she works three jobs, and you work one?" she said.

The guy glared. "Figures you wouldn't understand."

"You ever tell her you appreciate everything she does? Give her a holiday, sick leave?" Adam asked, his tone neither attacking or defensive.

Surprised at the insightful question, Elizabeth studied Adam's profile as Jack struggled for an answer. If anything, he looked thunderstruck. What Adam said didn't strike her as something a construction worker would say. Especially one who up until now had seemed more interested in sex than conversation.

The rest of the dinner passed with a fierce focus on library books, current movie trends, and more sports.

Over a chocolate decadence dessert that had everyone oohing and yumming after every gooey bite, Mel asked, "How are the theme ideas coming along?"

She hesitated, uncertain she was willing to venture her thoughts now in front of this group.

Mel offered a reassuring smile.

In the periphery of her vision, she saw Adam watching her, his expression interested. "Well," she

started, “I was considering literary themes or book themes. Like, for the turret room, the theme would be fairy tales. Rapunzel or Sleeping Beauty or something like that. It would be for honeymoon couples.” Having garnered everyone’s attention, she swallowed and plowed on, “Then in the other rooms I might have a *Last of the Mohicans* theme or *Gone with the Wind*.”

Adam surprised her by speaking first. “That’s a great idea.”

She smiled, warming under his approval.

Mel echoed him, then suggested *Don Juan* as a possibility. Then everyone talked at once about their all-time favorite books.

Adam leaned closer. “You know, you might consider a contest where entrants suggest a room theme, and the winner gets a free weekend here, in that room, when it’s finished. Might generate some free publicity.”

She heard Mel saying, “That’s a great idea, Adam,” even as she thought it.

The heat of Adam’s gaze held hers. “It is a great idea,” she said, her tongue feeling thick. “Thank you.”

The conversation died down. Jack shoved away from the table first, saying he couldn’t stay to see the advertising, and the other guys offered apologies and fled, too. Except for Adam.

He stood inside the door, next to Annie, his gaze touching Elizabeth’s face, then skidding away when she caught him at it.

Mel glanced at his watch. “Hey Annie, how about helping me clear the table?”

Alone, Adam wondered where his voice had gone. Elizabeth fidgeted, her fingers playing with the fabric of her full skirt. She wore the same black dress she’d put on the other night and the same red ribbon in her hair. And he was fighting the same instincts all over again. “I owe you an apology,” he said, drinking in the blue of her eyes, the sweep of her long black lashes, her high cheekbones now a delicate, enticing shade of pink. “I was feeling embarrassed about doing something so stupid as smashing my thumb.”

He could feel heat climb up his neck at the admission, but it was worth it when Elizabeth’s face softened.

“How is it?” she asked.

He held it toward her. “Swollen, but I think the ice saved the day.”

She gave him a doubtful look. “You didn’t have it on ice very long.”

“Long enough,” he said. “I didn’t realize you went by the name Liz.” He cast out the statement with a raised eyebrow hoping for an invitation to call her the more informal name.

She shrugged but made no such offer, and he found himself wondering if she and Mel had done more than talk during their little tour through the house. I mean, how many guys cooked for a crowd they didn’t know? Was she supposed to be the dessert? He cocked his head. “Sounds like Annie and Mel

hit it off.”

The two were laughing about something in the kitchen. He watched Elizabeth’s face but if the idea of Mel and Annie as a couple bothered her, it didn’t show. She’d had an affair with her boss, cheated customers, why did he think she’d care?

“Uh,” he said, “I’m glad to see the floors were okay.”

She glanced down at the wood beneath their feet. “Yes. I mean, me, too. All except the carpet, but the insurance covered most of it.”

Guilt jabbed him. “I’d like to pay the difference.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s very sweet of you, but”

“It’s not sweet, it’s good business. Obviously someone made a mistake. It shouldn’t cost you.”

“But it was an accident.”

“It doesn’t matter how it happened,” he said, while his inner voice scoffed. “I want to take care of it. Just give me the amount, and I’ll deduct it from the work that’s been done.”

She nodded slowly. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

He didn’t know which was worse, her gratitude or his guilt.

“So, um, would you like to see the turret room?” she asked. “I’ve almost finished it.”

He meant to jam his hands into his pockets, say no and goodnight, and leave. The wine had dulled his hyperawareness of Elizabeth through dinner, but now his head buzzed rather pleasantly and the alcohol dimmed his various aches and pains. A feeling of relaxation floated over him. “Relax,” whispered through his mind, so soft and mellow

His hands missed their mark and remained at rest at his sides. With a gesture toward the stairs, he said, “Lead away.”

Elizabeth climbed the steps still wondering why she’d asked him to view the turret room. Yes, it was almost finished, but beginning tomorrow night, that was where she planned to sleep. Asking him into her bedroom did not seem a good idea, especially when she had guests downstairs. She should tell Mel and Annie where they were going, but her feet kept propelling her upward, and the voice in her head told her to forget about Mel and Annie and concentrate on Adam.

Adam. The man mystified her. Enthralled her. Turned her insides to hot, gooey, pudding.

On the second floor landing, she paused to look down. Light from the overhead chandelier made the walls sparkle magically, made her want to believe in fairies and dragons and love’s first kiss.

Adam’s hands touched her shoulders. “Elizabeth?”

Her brain felt fogged in. “I think I had too much wine,” she said, turning in his arms.

“You shouldn’t tell a guy that. He might take advantage of the information.”

Something about his tone of voice bothered her. “Would you?” she asked, staring up at him.

“Do you want me to?” His green eyes swam before her gaze, drawing her into their unfathomable currents. Currents of hunger, desire, need.

“I don’t know,” she said, leaning closer, searching the dark green waters for deeper emotions and wondering why she thought she could see them. How could she distinguish between *love* and *lust* when the wine dizzied her so?

Wrong answer, Adam thought, fiercely resisting the wild impulses that had his fingers tingling, his blood quickening, heaviness spreading to his groin. He faked a yawn and stepped back. “I better not risk another flight of stairs tonight,” he said. He couldn’t believe what he was doing, especially when his head was clamoring for him to scoop her into his arms and carry her to . . . to where? Was there a bed in the turret room? There were a couple in the basement, but it was damn cold down there. And they weren’t made up with sheets and blankets, merely in storage.

If he ever got her into his arms, he didn’t intend for it to be a quick event, but a long, exquisitely drawn-out session of all night love-making. “Thanks for the dinner, Elizabeth.”

His bootheels sounded loud as he retreated back to the front door and pulled it open. He paused to call over his shoulder, “Thanks for dinner, Mel. Nice to meet you Annie,” their heavy breathing nearly as noisy as his retreat.

Mel’s tie was askew when he stepped into the entry. “You leaving already?”

“It’s after eleven and tomorrow’s Friday.” Not that it would have stopped him if Elizabeth had answered his question differently.

He remained by the door as Annie joined Mel, and Elizabeth arrived. Elizabeth looked flushed and unsettled. Feeling rejected? Heck, after all the yanking and pulling she’d done to his chain, he shouldn’t feel bad, he told himself.

Annie kissed Mel’s cheek, shook Adam’s hand, then gave Elizabeth a warm hug. Adam felt like he’d just struck out at bat. Not that he was interested in Annie, but he wouldn’t have minded a hug or a kiss on the cheek.

“I had a wonderful time, Elizabeth,” Annie said. “Thanks for the invite. Call me about lunch, okay?”

“Okay.”

Adam hesitated, unwilling to leave Elizabeth alone with Mel. Heck, she’d just met the guy.

As though reading Adam’s mind, Mel waved goodbye to Annie, then kissed the top of Elizabeth’s hand. “I had a wonderful time, Liz. Call me when the ballroom is finished, and I’ll take some photographs for the brochure.”

The bloom in her cheeks deepened, and Adam cursed his conscience for keeping him from a lusty visit to the turret room with her.

“I should be thanking you, Mel,” she said as he released her hand. “You cooked everything.”

“It was my pleasure, my dear.”

Somehow his saying “my dear” didn’t bother Elizabeth. It reminded her of her grandfather. Not that Mel was old, he was probably only thirty-five. But his courtly aura reminded her of someone from another century. Old-fashioned. Trustworthy. And divorced, like she was. While Adam had never even been engaged – a sure sign he was free and single and happy to be both. His actions, however, which if heated, nevertheless weren’t pressuring or disrespectful and if anything, confused her.

If Jerome saw a weakness, he exploited it. He’d made her feel like a candy tin being examined for cracks where he could insert a knife blade and pop the lid off, take what he wanted, then leave her feeling used and robbed and abandoned.

She realized both men were staring at her and new heat stung her cheeks. “I was just . . . day dreaming . . .,” she stammered.

“Dreams are a good thing,” Mel said, and she wondered what he’d read in her expression and why Adam was now stalling at the front door.

“I’ll call you in a week or two to set up a photo shoot of the ballroom,” Mel called over his shoulder.

“I don’t know if it will be done by then!”

He climbed into his Mercedes and backed up, the red taillights flaring. The car stopped, and the window slid down. “Then we’ll do something else, okay?”

His grin was infectious. “Okay,” she said, waving again before the black sedan faded into the night.

Alone with Adam, her lighthearted feeling evaporated at the sight of his blonde brows raised in disapproval. Abruptly he started down the porch steps. “I’ll walk you to the trailer.”

“There’s no need,” she protested, even while a part of her tingled at the mere hope of a touch, a soft look, a tender embrace. *No way*, the more rational part of her argued. *He’s trouble. Drool over him, but don’t touch him.*

He didn’t argue, and he didn’t leave.

Sighing, she took the key from the pocket of her dress and locked the door. Ever since the flood, she’d begun locking the door, and she wasn’t certain why. Just a feeling really that she was being watched. The sensation should have scared her but didn’t. Still, she wasn’t going to ignore it. Locking the house made sense.

The house, Adam, her own determination to discover who Elizabeth Benning really was and what kind of tough stuff she was made of, all seemed interconnected, she thought, walking with him to her trailer.

Adam remained at the bottom of the trailer steps, intending to keep his distance. “Goodnight.”

Velvet chose that moment to jump down and caress his ankle with body and tail, a very loud “purr” rumbling from her throat. Stooping, he scooped up the sweet little black ball of fur and brought it to his chest. This time her claws stayed retracted, and she relaxed under the stroke of his hand.

Elizabeth stood in the open doorway, a bemused expression on her face. “I think you’ve made a friend. Are you a cat lover, too?”

“Yep.” He felt a grin tug at his lips as Velvet crept up to his shoulder. Her fur softly brushed his cheek, and he stifled the memory of funneling his fingers through Elizabeth’s silky hair, the soft touch of her lips. Just enough to torture him with other needs, like the one tempting him now, to feel her mouth beneath his, open and inviting, hot, warm, exciting as he claimed the taste of her.

He tried to lift Velvet from his shoulder and into Elizabeth’s outstretched hands, but her claws hooked into his shirt. “I think you’re going to have to extract her,” he joked.

The cool night air had cleared Elizabeth’s head, but having Adam climb the steps to the door and stop beside her so she could shift Velvet from his shoulder to her chest had her heart flip-flopping against her rib cage and adrenaline surging through her veins. He smelled of soap and fresh laundry, and heat emanated from his skin like an inviting electric blanket. Now what would a pioneer woman do? Keep her virtue or pop the snaps on his sexy western shirt and rip it from his shoulders?

At her indecisiveness, he jumped the two steps to the ground and offered a nonchalant wave. ““Night, Elizabeth.”

She sighed. ““Night Adam,” and closed the door. Being as strong and independent as a pioneer woman was confusing.

Chapter Nine

“So, what happened to the real advertising guy?” Syd demanded two nights later when Mel joined her in the last newly sheet-rocked room on the third floor. Light from the moon streamed through the uncurtained window, casting the room with myriad shadows and a sense of dark mystery that Syd relished.

“Oh, he got a call switching him to another account,” Mel said blithely.

“What are you going to do when Elizabeth tries to pay you?”

“Quit worrying. No one turns money down these days. True-Blue Advertising will take the check, copies of all my work will be filed with their employee, so Elizabeth can get more brochures made if she wants. I’ll even leave the guy’s business card in her purse.” He glanced around. “How can you stand it here?”

“How come you prefer the kitchen?”

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, didn’t you know?”

“Skewered and roasted?”

“Ooh, you are mean.”

“Then why are you crowding me?” Syd asked, disliking the anxiousness she heard in her voice, stepping back until her shoulder blades touched the wall.

A foot between them, he cocked his head as though fascinated. “I was just wondering . . .”

“What?” she breathed.

His dark eyes held only inviting glimmers of gold in their depths. “If you’d like another lesson in kissing.”

Her heart thrummed in her ears. “Are you implying I need lessons?” It was supposed to be a barb but came out an inviting whisper.

“I’m implying,” he said, his voice a whispered caress, “that I would enjoy teaching you more about the art.” His fingers brushed her shoulder.

Desperate for a scrap of anger to save her from the ultimate humiliation of sinking against his chest and wrapping her arms around his neck, she lifted her chin and said, “What about Annie? Did she need lessons, too?”

A quirky grin. “Ummm, that was accidental. I was trying to give Adam time alone with Elizabeth. Which was working until *you* got them all lust-fogged and heading upstairs to the turret room.”

“Me?” She shoved him back a step. “They did the *lust-fogging* all on their own. I was trying to get them to the turret room so they wouldn’t be *interrupted*.”

“Interrupted from doing what?”

Her cheeks burned.

“From doing this?” He slid in close, gripped her shoulders, and trapped her mouth beneath his. His smoky heat filled her mouth and made her senses reel.

For a second she melted into the heavenly sensations bombarding her, then she twisted her head and shoved him away. “If that’s what you call accidental, I’m a fairy godmother!”

“Oh, come on Syd. Admit it. You like kissing me.”

“You arrogant cad. If you were a human I’d turn you into a swine and shoot you for dinner.”

Shockingly, he vanished into a cloud of white smoke. Then she saw the cute little pink pig at her feet, looking like Babe wandered from the farm. But the pig’s voice was Mel’s. “Like this?” he said.

“Could you really shoot me?”

Her lips twitched. She pressed them together, but they twitched again. A laugh escaped. Her mouth broke into a wide grin, and more laughter erupted until tears welled in her eyes and her stomach hurt. Other than the one time with Mel before, she’d never laughed in her life, except an unpleasant cackle, and the alien sound scared her. What was happening? “What do you think you’re doing? Change back from that ridiculous curly-tailed monster this instant!”

Pink smoke choked her. Coughing, she waved it from her face. Mel was Mel again. “What are you trying to do? Asphyxiate me?”

One raven eyebrow lifted in amusement. “You have a sweet laugh, Syd. Grumpy silence doesn’t suit you.”

“Grumpy? I am not grumpy. I’m a mean, nasty witch! Witches don’t laugh or go around kissing irritating warlocks. They shoot pigs and turn them into . . . into footballs.”

His smug expression didn’t change. “Irritating, huh? Does that mean you like me?”

“Like you? Like you?” She was repeating herself for witches sakes and sputtering like an old faucet. Lightning shot from her fingertip, struck him in the chest, and hurled him into the wall.

Stunned, he slid down to a sitting position and blinked.

“Oh . . . ,” she gasped in alarm but managed to stop herself from saying his name. Had she really hurt him?

Of course she had. She’d meant to, she told herself in a stern, no-nonsense inner voice.

“You pack quite a wallop,” he said as he staggered to his feet and straightened his cape.

Sheryece chose that moment to intervene. “Syd, please do not singe Melvin or electrocute him. His brains are needed on this assignment, not to mention the rest of his brilliant self.”

“She just caught me off guard. I’m fine,” Mel said, brushing invisible lint off his shoulders.

Syd, feeling a bit guilty at how hard she’d hit him, blustered, “Buzz off, Sheryece. He’s mine . . . fine.” Horrified at her blunder she nevertheless stood her ground. To disappear now would only make Sheryece and Mel believe the worst . . . that she *liked* Mel.

Sheryece grinned like the Cheshire cat. Mel, too. That did it. Mortified, she rasped, “I’m taking a week off. You’re in charge of Elizabeth and Adam, Mel. Do your damndest.” She vanished before either could protest. How much could happen in a week anyway?

Inside, she lamented, How could I have made such a terrible slip of the tongue? For a moment, she imagined she felt like Elizabeth did when she’d wanted to crawl beneath the floorboards. Feel humility like a human? A humble witch? Ooooh. She whisked up her broom and headed for the nearest black, gloomy spot she could find. She had to gather her wits and get centered, *fast*. Before she lost her mental faculties altogether. The thought was too awful to entertain.

Elizabeth rolled over in bed, then sat up at the heavy thud coming from the other side of the house. Either it was a rat the size of a man or

Her first night inside the house in the wonderful brass bed and now this. Frightened, she slid naked from her warm cocoon, pulled on her robe, and padded barefoot across the cold floor to the bedroom door. The mobile phone was downstairs in the kitchen. Scanning the room from the big brass bed to the area rug, nothing presented itself as a weapon.

She cracked the door open and peered out, straining to hear. The soft buzz of voices teased her ears, the words indecipherable. “Burglars? Vandals?” The surprising notion it might be Mel surfaced, and she questioned her brainpower. It was the middle of the night.

Creeping down the top flight of stairs to the second floor landing, she paused and listened. Silence. Her insides shaky, she crept downstairs to the entry. Should she go for the phone or the door?

What would she do outside? She was barefoot and wearing only a robe. The trailer was gone. The car locked. Her car keys were in her purse, on the kitchen counter beside the phone.

She sucked in some air, gathered her courage, and edged into the kitchen. Sliding her fingers along the barely discernible edge of the counter, she found the phone. Should she call 911? Or Adam? It was Saturday night or Sunday morning. He might not be alone, if he was home at all. And he probably wouldn’t like to be awakened because she’d heard a thump in the night. Finger poised, she found herself punching in his number anyway. The seven digits sounded earthshaking loud. She listened to it ring. On the fourth ring there was a *click* and a *thud*, then a hoarse, “Lo?”

“Adam, it’s Elizabeth,” she whispered.

“Elizabeth?” She envisioned him bleary-eyed and checking his watch, then stifling a groan.

“I heard someone in the house. Upstairs.”

“Where are you?” Now he sounded awake.

“In the kitchen.”

“You’re still in the house? Get out!”

“But I’m barefoot, and it’s freezing, and . . . I’m scared!”

“You sure it wasn’t Velvet jumping around?”

“Whatever woke me up weighed as much as I do or more.”

His silence transmitted doubt. Or did he have someone in bed with him?

“It’s probably nothing,” she babbled. “I’ll check it out myself.” She hung up before she could change her mind.

Adam heard the click and swore aloud. He started to jab in her number, then hesitated. If she wasn’t alone it would bring whoever was there right to her. Throwing off the covers, he bounded like a

fireman into his clothes and dashed out the door. Cursing her for calling him, he nevertheless sped all the way there.

He cut the truck lights and rolled to a stop at the bottom of the long drive, grabbed his flashlight and crowbar from behind the seat, then hiked up to the house. His breath exited in little white puffs that made him wish he'd snagged his ski jacket instead of the sweater.

Frost on the ground made the place look more magical than eerie, he thought as he twisted the knob. The abrupt thought that this might be a ruse to get him out here made him hesitate. If that was the case, he'd tell her Halloween was in October and to play 'trick or treat' on some other sap.

The door swung inward, and he hesitated, then whispered, "Elizabeth?"

The full moon lit the area, but he could see nothing beyond the grayed walls and floor of the entry. He switched on the flashlight. "Elizabe . . .," he jumped and narrowly missed sideswiping her jaw with the end of the tire iron. Grabbing her arm, he hauled her onto the porch, slapped his truck keys into her palm, and said, "Wait for me in the truck. And lock the doors."

Elizabeth got halfway down the driveway before worry got the best of her, or maybe it was her frozen feet and the gravel poking her tender soles. *Pioneer women do NOT run away. They help smash in the bad guy's skull.* Praying there wasn't a bad guy, she hurried back into the house and up the stairs.

Adam checked the downstairs out first, found nothing, and moved up to the second floor. He wore loafers and no socks, and now his feet, normally warm, were growing cold and the rest of him irritated. There was no sign of vandalism or of anyone breaking in. So unless an intruder dropped a rope from the roof and climbed down to a third floor window, there was no one here, but Elizabeth's overactive imagination, or game-playing tactics.

The second floor proved empty as well, although it was the first time he'd visited every room, and the amount of work they'd completed staggered him. The place was going to be ready *ahead* of Elizabeth's schedule. *Unless* he slowed things down, which he might need to do to buy time for Ethan. Nothing that would ruin the place or Elizabeth, he told himself as he climbed to the third floor. Maybe a leaky roof? No, too much like the leaky pipe. Broken windows? That would slow things down for a few days. Jeez, I'm turning into a thirty-two year old vandal, he thought, scanning each room with the light, and pausing at what appeared to be soot marks on one wall of new sheet-rock. Strange. He sniffed, didn't smell anything and shrugged, moving back into the hallway. So far, nothing here but ghostly dust-motes.

Returning to the landing, he started down the other hall, checking rooms as he advanced to the tower or what Elizabeth called the turret room. Wasn't that the room she slept in now? Curious, he made certain no one lay hidden beneath the bed or in the closet, and found himself standing before her antique bureau studying the two framed photographs, one an old black and white of a woman wearing the same dress Elizabeth had worn the day she found Velvet, the other of Elizabeth and another woman that appeared to be in her twenties, too. A sister? Friend?

Realizing he'd been inside awhile and Elizabeth was in his truck, he reluctantly retreated from the room's cozy interior. For a woman bent on seduction, the room was amazingly innocent. Probably because of the intended fairy tale theme.

Not expecting to find anyone but himself wandering the halls, he jumped when a shadowy figure

appeared on the stairs. He swung the flashlight's beam into the intruder's face, at the same time hefting the tire iron. "Holy Rice-a-roni, are you trying to give me a heart-attack?"

Elizabeth froze on the top stair, eyes squinted, one hand raised to block the light. "Is everything okay?"

He set the metal bar down and lowered the flashlight. "I told you to wait in the truck. I could have been a prowler. What are you carrying?"

"A-a silver candlestick holder." Her tone came out defensive.

"What were you going to do with that? Dent my head?"

Her mouth tightened. "I thought you might need help."

"Help from a hundred pound female I could toss over my shoulders and kidnap before she had a chance to scream?" Did she think he was an idiot?

She stepped up to the landing, her face glaring defiance. Her fingers whitened around the silver. "That's why I had this."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Yeah, right." He started past her.

She thrust out her chest and lifted her chin, indignation reflected in her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He should have kept going, down the stairs, out of the house, to his truck. He knew that, but his feet stopped in their tracks at her question, and he couldn't stop looking at all that tousled hair, dark as midnight, falling in waves across her fuzzy pink robe. A robe that showed enough for him to ascertain she wore nothing beneath it.

Did she want an honest answer? No matter what she'd done, he had no call to judge her. "It's late. Let's talk another time."

"I may not be as big as you, but I couldn't let you take all the risks when this is my property."

He was tired, and now he was getting turned on, and he wanted to end the conversation. "I wasn't referring to your ability to swing a candlestick holder. I was referring to your calling me over here in the middle of the night, wearing nothing but a robe from what I can deduce, to search for a prowler when all the windows are locked tight and there's no sign of anyone but you and me."

Her blue eyes widened and her jaw dropped convincingly. "You think I made it up to get you over here to" She swallowed.

To hell with talking, he thought, taking the candlestick from her hand and dropping it to the floor along with the flashlight and tire iron. Before she could react, he gathered her in his arms and did what he'd been aching to do for forever.

Her startled "oh" muffled as his mouth closed over hers. His pulse rate soared. Despite the warning voice blaring in the back of his mind, he steered her down the hall toward the bedroom. Their legs moved in unison, a backward waltz where each brush of her thighs heightened the roaring in his ears,

drowning the voice of reason in tantalizing sensations, her hip grazing his, her breasts soft against his chest. His blood felt like molten metal. Somewhere in the hall, he kicked off his loafers, suddenly glad he was wearing only a sweater and jeans. He swept her backwards into the bedroom and onto the big brass bed, not relinquishing his embrace or the pressure on her mouth as they tumbled onto the springy mattress. He landed on top.

Her lips were soft as rose petals and sweeter than whipped cream. He took his time with them, sliding his tongue along the outside edge, nibbling gently on her full lower lip. Feeling the exact moment her hunger level reached his, and her lips parted with a soft moan. Her fingers tightened around his shoulders, then slid up to his hair, pressing him closer. He slanted his mouth over hers to lay claim to the inner delights of her tangy wet heat. Such a taste. Pure honey. He felt like a man on death row who'd been given a new life. He could feast on this banquet forever, he thought. Forever and ever and ever.

Her warm breath became his as their tongues teased and darted and thrust together. A shared treasure of discovery. Here was a passion forged from something unnamable. Mysterious. Mystical. His mind waxed poetic as he besieged and offered his soul with every kiss, breathing her name, "Elizabeth," over and over as though to solidify she was there and this was happening. No dream fantasy tonight, no, and oh, the reality was so much better.

He felt her tugging on his sweater and broke from her mouth long enough to help her get it over his head. Placing his hands by her shoulders, he pushed up from her, and stared at her face as he settled his hips between her legs. Her eyes were half-closed and nearly dark as her hair. The satiny curls spread across her pillow, ebony wisps framing her ivory face.

The tip of her tongue flicked out, wetting her lips. That little movement alone drove all coherent thought from his brain. Muscles straining, he shifted his weight to one arm and tugged the belt of her robe free. A look of uncertainty flashed in her eyes, and he bent and kissed the hollow of her throat, the curve of her shoulder, the swell of her breasts. Lifting his head, he saw only desire mirrored in her eyes. This time they'd finish what seemed to have started the moment they met.

He captured one tender beige nipple with his mouth and sucked, his own body hardening and tightening along with the exquisite nub between his teeth. She gasped and arched, practically lifting them both from the bed, crying out, a loud shriek of wonderment and perplexity that shocked him. A woman had never done *that* so darn quick before. Hell, they were just getting started. He moved to her other breast, his hand replacing where his mouth had been, to stroke and tease. He looked up to see her chin, the long line of her throat, her head thrown back, her body half off the bed as she clung to him.

Her hips undulated against his, brushing the hard ridge that pressed for release and he shuddered and tried to ease back. One leg hooked over his hip, pulling him against the apex of her thighs. Her fingers twined in his hair and clamped his head to her breast offering the delicious morsels for more of his attention. "Perfection," he murmured, stroking and laving with his tongue, tasting and inhaling her intoxicating scent.

Moan after moan tore from her throat as she writhed beneath him. Oh lordy, she was one hot woman. If the windows weren't fogged with steam by now, they soon would be.

Elizabeth was beyond thinking. Waves of pleasure gripped her in a heat of need that wouldn't be denied. Engulfed in sensation after exquisite sensation from Adam's hands, his mouth, his body, she clung to him, greedy for more of these wild, new delights that made what she'd shared with Jerome a clear, cheap imitation of something so much more valuable, precious, everlasting . . . something that came from her soul as well as her body, made her feel as though they were a part of each other and of

something greater. She didn't want it to stop.

He kissed a heated trail to her navel, soft, erotic growling sounds escaping from his throat. His palms warmed her waist, her hips, slid across the small of her back and held her as he rubbed his face lightly against her thighs. She shivered and moaned, the sound desperate to her own ears. The little pulses from her first unexpected climax were tensing and coiling and begging for the relief of another.

Adam had found heaven. Nirvana. Bliss. Elizabeth made him feel like the king of lovers, the best of the best.

The scrap of red satin was damp, and the scent of her arousal filled him with an all new hunger to taste the hidden fruits beneath. He eased the fabric down her legs, pausing to kiss her knees, stroke her feet, her ankles, her calves. Smooth and silky skin that begged for more caresses.

With his hands, he worshipped her blessed curves and gave voice to each lovely detail. If ever a woman was made to be worshipped in bed it was Elizabeth Benning.

His own body, however, felt swollen and uncomfortable in the confining denim. He climbed from the bed and shucked his jeans, aware of Elizabeth's slitted eyes watching him. The awful thought that he didn't have any protection struck. Oh, he had some, bought in case he and the blond got it on, but they were in the glovebox, at the bottom of the long, cold, gravel driveway. With a sinking sensation in his gut, he wrenched on his jeans and sweater. "Don't move, don't even blink. I've got protection, but it's in the truck."

He half-fastened his pants, jammed on his loafers in the hallway and cursed himself for thinking with the lower half of his anatomy and getting into this painful condition. A condition he could hardly recall being in, in a long, long time. Damn, damn, damn.

The cold air nipped his skin but did nothing to ease the powerful ache in his groin. He felt like he had a third leg which made it awkward to walk, let alone descend the hill in the dark. Miraculously, he didn't slip and break the family jewels or anything else.

With the sought after packet clenched in his hand, he retraced his steps, shook off the cold as he closed the front door and took the stairs two at a time. When he reached the turret room a shudder of disbelief cut through him. The big old brass bed held an imprint of their bodies, but it was empty.

"Elizabeth?" He cleared his throat, his voice not his own, and tried again. "Elizabeth?" Heaven was rapidly becoming a hellish nightmare. There hadn't been that many women in his past, he was too busy working. The few he'd dated had failed to hold his interest. Not Elizabeth, however. The more time he spent around her, the more she intrigued him. A dangerous sign that he knew he should heed, yet was willy-nilly ignoring in favor of hearing another rapturous moan catch in her throat. The wonderment, the joy, the obvious pleasure she took in his touch was addicting. Just thinking of touching her shot adrenaline through his veins. He could lift the house off its foundation right now, he thought, if it stood between him and Elizabeth.

The stairs creaked. Twisting, he saw her on the landing, clothed in the fuzzy pink robe that made her look entirely too innocent. In one hand she held matches, cupped in the other three small candles, and tucked under her arm was what looked like a black tape recorder.

Music and candlelight?

In the hall her steps faltered when she realized he was there. Then she was gliding toward him, bestowing the gift of her dazzling smile as she passed through the doorway. “That was fast,” she murmured.

No, he thought, grinning back at her, *fast* was how his body reacted to the invisible sunshine that surrounded her.

Her and how many other guys? A part of him whispered. He squelched the voice. Tonight he wasn’t listening.

Her lithe steps padded to the bureau where she set the candles and the recorder. She lit the candles one by one. Each flickering flame added a bit more mystery to her luscious lips and porcelain skin, making him want to taste all of her, inch by glorious inch. A soft click, and music drifted toward him, low, melodious new-age stuff with tinkling bells and sounds of running water and rushing wind. She switched off the overhead light, casting them in the deep candle lit shadows.

There was a magic about tonight, he thought, and somewhere in the vicinity of his heart he hoped the night would never end.

He pulled his sweater over his head and dropped it on the floor. “Guess we need to start over.”

Elizabeth stared in awe at Adam’s naked chest. So much smooth muscle, all hard, well-defined bulges that enticed her fingertips to touch. No, not touch, but draw, she thought. She hadn’t drawn much since college, but she’d love to draw him. Even the most masculine part of him, which seemed to be increasing in size as she watched.

“Baby, I’m yours,” he said, moving to stand in front of her.

Baby? She felt a frown pulling her brows together. There was that tone again. It sounded like reluctant approval. She suddenly imagined him in bed with the blond, his fun-fest interrupted by Elizabeth’s call. And now she got to be the consolation prize. Something in his eyes reminded her of Jerome. Uneasy, and thinking a pioneer woman would never settle for being a consolation prize, she said, “You don’t have to be here.”

His gaze narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I think . . . that is, I think this is a mistake.”

“Mistake?” He shook his head. “The shriek you made, that was no mistake. You practically levitated and took me with you.”

My god, they were standing in her bedroom talking about sex. She’d never talked about sex with Jerome. Only with her best friend, who read romance novels and said she was missing the whipped cream. Until now, Elizabeth hadn’t understood that phrase. “It was the whipped cream,” she murmured, self-discovery awing her every bit as much as Adam’s gorgeous presence.

“Whipped cream?” Adam echoed, his brows drawn together. He took a couple of steps toward her and stopped a foot away. His fingers tightened around the small foil packet. “Look, there’s something I should tell you. About me.”

She figured this was where he said he wanted a no-strings relationship, and she interrupted, “You

don't need to say anything. I'm not dense." Now if she could only quiet the voice in her head telling her she was ruining the "mood."

"I don't?"

"You're the kind of guy who comes prepared, right?" She looked pointedly toward the packet in his fingers, wondering why she seemed to be doing her damndest to kill the flames between them. A few more words and she was afraid there would be nothing left but charred ruins. She clamped her lips together, her body and brain at war. He was so close, so tantalizingly close. She yearned for his warmth, his touch. If only she didn't keep seeing Jerome.

This was one of those conversations Adam knew he should avoid, but the censure in her eyes provoked him. He wanted to tell her the truth, and she was painting him with a "playboy" brush because he had a sense of responsibility about sex. Where was the fairness in that?

"Guess we don't need this, do we?" He shoved the packet in his back pocket, the ache in his groin losing to his pride. Too angry to stop there, he added, "You put on this innocent act, but you've got every guy on the crew drooling. You've kept me feeling like a fish on a hook since the moment we met."

Her expression darkened to what he interpreted as fury. Good. If she dished it out, she ought to be able to take it. "You think I do this all the time?" she choked out.

"If the shoe fits." He lowered his tone to a more seductive level. "Come on, Elizabeth . . . Liz . . . most women don't wear red lace underwear . . ." He swallowed, "or body-hugging dresses around a group of men unless they're advertising for it . . ."

Advertising for it? Advertising for it? Her brain misfired, the words rising like a tidal wave, raising a sense of incredulity. "Oh, and you're an expert on *most* women?"

"No, but I know about . . ." Panic flickered in his eyes, wiping the arrogant one-upmanship from his expression.

"You know about what?"

Adam wasn't about to explain he knew about her affair with her boss and co-worker. That would lead to questions he didn't want to answer. He didn't know what was worse, the growing fury burning in Elizabeth's eyes, or the fact he'd stuck both feet in his mouth, big time. He'd more than needled her, he'd lit a stick of dynamite. Something about all this didn't compute, but he decided it might be dangerous to stick around and figure it out. "This was a mistake," he muttered, backing toward the door. "Next time, call nine-one-one."

Elizabeth stood, watching him flee, her nails digging into her palms, pain and anger in equal measure flowing through her veins. She'd stood there and taken Jerome's nastiness in and out of the courtroom for the last six months. She'd stood there and taken her boss' lame accusations and let herself be fired. She'd listened to all the rumors and innuendoes and said nothing.

She stomped to the french windows and shoved them open with a *bang*. Adam was just coming out the front door. "Don't ever touch me again, you, you jerk!" The words made her feel better.

Until he looked up and snapped back, "It'll be a cold day in hell," and stalked down the hill into

darkness.

She closed the windows and sank down on the edge of the bed, feeling like a screwed-up teenager. Why did this have to be so complicated? Why did he have to be one of those double-standard-types: what was okay for the stallion was not okay for the mare? In her dream he'd looked scrumptious on a horse, too. That just proved dreams were mere wishful thinking. So why did she seem to hear Mel's voice whisper, "Dreams are a good thing."

Hadn't her grandmother always told her, "Follow your dreams and your heart will be full."

"I just want to renovate this place and start a new life," she said, staring at the newly painted walls. So why did it suddenly feel like she'd swallowed a bitter pill?

Chapter Ten

With narrowed gaze, Adam watched Elizabeth glide from the mansion, her arm resting on Mel Stockwell's, her expression warm, until her gaze landed on Adam. It cooled abruptly to a blue winter frost.

He quickly resumed hammering trim along the first floor window, resisting the desire to flatten Mel Stockwell's face into something scary. Heck, he had no claims on the woman. Far from it. He'd insulted her . . . after she'd insulted him. Okay, he was an attractive guy and yes, he liked women, but even without a wedding ring he was the monogamous type . . . for as long as the relationship lasted. He hadn't cheated on any of his girlfriends, and he'd had ample opportunity.

Feeling self-righteous, he scowled as Elizabeth and Stockwell drove off in Stockwell's Mercedes. His scowl deepened as he recalled Jerome's phone call that morning. And his brother's.

Jerome had asked for a progress report, which had Adam cursing his brother and promising Jerome some "action" by the end of the week.

Time was running out. He had to get Ethan to step on some toes if he had to, but to get more information than he'd acquired so far. And he had to get his brother out of LA.

Syd stood in the dark unfinished room, watching Elizabeth waltz out the door, her hand tucked into the crook of Mel's arm. A nasty bilious brew roiled in her stomach. That she had not made or drank any such brew didn't matter. She might as well have swallowed acid it burned so much.

Furious, but unwilling to consider why, she pushed up her sleeves, flipped through her magic book and plotted her own transformation. Two could play at this game.

Adam never saw her. One moment he was handling a two-by-four, the next he heard this *thunk*

and saw a redhead down for the count. She moaned and rubbed her temple as he dropped the wood and ran to her side. "You okay?"

He gripped her hand, helped her to her feet, and felt a strange zing shoot up his arm. Light burst behind his eyes, and he blinked.

Her smile about knocked the breath from him. Not in the exuberant way Elizabeth's had done, but in a less sanguine, slippery fashion that made him uneasy. Yet the smile was magnetic, energizing, impossible to ignore.

"You better sit down," he mumbled, leading her toward his truck and settling her in the cab. He hurried into the mansion, retrieved a glass of water and watched her drink it, intrigued by the way her throat moved when she swallowed, captivated by the fall of all that dark red hair.

He cleared his throat, wondering what the hell was happening to him. First Elizabeth whapped him with her big blue eyes, now this woman had him panting over her flaming hair. Was it the Montana water, mountains, the full moon, what?

He felt as though he was not himself but watching as an observer and found it disconcerting.

She finished drinking, licked her lips in a rather feline way, then handed the glass back to him. "Thank you."

Resisting the lure of her shiny red lips and mentally blasting his rampant libido and all the trouble it was causing, he asked, annoyance in his tone, "Who are you?"

She gave him an arrogant look that for some reason sent a chill down his back along with the message, this was not a woman to irritate. "I mean, if you're here to visit Elizabeth, you just missed her," he added in a nicer tone.

Her lips quirked up. "Elizabeth? No. I came to see you."

"Me?" Now he knew he was losing it. He'd never met this woman before, he'd swear on a stack of bibles. The only woman he'd dated here in Montana, besides his *encounters* with Elizabeth, was blonde, buxom Lisa, who kept calling him, despite the fact he told her he'd gotten involved with someone else. A half-truth at best since he'd snarled at Elizabeth and offended her. Why hadn't he kept his big mouth shut? Maybe because if he slept with her, he damn well had to tell her the real reason he'd come here.

Syd figured her attraction spell was working because Adam's eyes were glassy and his expression dazed. Good. When Mel returned Elizabeth to the house and saw Adam with her, he'd . . . he'd what?

Dump Elizabeth?

By stars, was she starting to care about that ridiculous warlock?

No, no, no.

Impossible.

Crazy.

Insane.

She was worried about Elizabeth and Adam falling in love, that was all. And Mel's great idea to get Adam jealous was working, so she'd get Elizabeth jealous, then the two lovebirds would finally dump her and Mel and wha-la, true love. Happily convinced, she said, "I'm here about the work you're doing on this house," while wondering if she could pretend to be a photographer from a fancy magazine like *Town and Country*.

Adam's stomach plummeted to new sickening depths. Jerome's spy, sent to check on him. Time to tread on eggshells and turn on the charm. "We've had a few problems," he said, wondering how fast he could get her back on a plane, convinced everything was under control. "What's your name?"

"Sydney Black."

"Well, Ms. Black, perhaps you'd like to talk over lunch?" Anywhere but here, where the work was going too darn smoothly.

"It's Syd to you, Adam."

She knew, she knew, she knew. The words whirled around his head in tightening circles which felt like a noose.

"So where are we going for lunch?" She fingered the fabric of her short black sheathe and shifted on the seat, the dress hiking up a few inches. "I'm really not dressed for . . ."

"You look great," he assured her, feeling trapped and desperate for a way out. He'd just have to go along and be nice until he found a solution. "It's the least I can do for hitting you on the head."

"You must have had other things on your mind," she said with a wink.

Any niggling uncertainty vanished. Jerome sent her. Stifling a groan, he said, "I'll need to stop by my place and clean up. It'll take five minutes."

"You look fine to me," she said, wanting to vanish before she had to say too many more pleasantries. This was a rotten idea. She'd thought it would be easy to act human, but now the act of smiling made her squirm on the bench seat. If he touched her, she'd give him a black eye. The thought brought up a howl of laughter. She'd zapped him with an attraction spell. No matter how he felt about Elizabeth, he'd behave as though the sun rose and set on Syd. It might be fun to give him a black eye. Practice for Mel. Once her vow not to slap Mel was over, of course.

Darn it, she hated Adam's expression. It wasn't star-struck, it was dumb-struck. She might be desperate to save herself from oblivion, but the look on his face made her stomach queasy and throwing up right now would not be a good idea. She snapped her fingers, undoing the spell. Now he'd quit looking all goo-goo eyed, and they'd have lunch, and she'd depart.

Then what?

She resisted the urge to twist a knot in her dress. There wasn't enough fabric to do it with, and she rather felt under-dressed already. Curse Mel for giving her the idea of wearing this slinky concoction

anyway. If he hadn't ogled her and made her feel sexy, she'd never have thought of it for this situation.

How could she get out of lunch? Whack Adam on the head and make him believe he'd fallen asleep in the truck and dreamed her? No, he was already feeling uncertain about his mental faculties on some level, he might wonder if he was hallucinating again. Once a spell began to unweave it was near impossible to stop the threads from pulling apart. She couldn't afford his recall of Elizabeth's near jump from the window, nor anything else she'd *spelled*. She had to go through with this, no matter how uncomfortable.

Resigned, she said little as he drove into town and pulled to a stop in front of a tiny white house. "You're welcome to wait inside," he said, radiating politeness as he held open the door.

"That's okay. I'll stay here and soak up the sunshine." Soak up the sunshine? Oh my god, those were Sheryce words if she'd ever heard them. She was coming undone, right along with her spells. Was this what oblivion was? Sinking into an endless brew of sweetness? Oooh, someone yank my sweet tooth, she thought as Adam shrugged and clomped inside the little box of a house.

Adam's head buzzed as he turned on the shower and stepped in the warm spray. Strange how his initial attraction to Sydney Black had turned to annoyance. Or maybe not so strange, once he'd figured out Jerome sent her. He'd have to be careful about what he said, for all he knew she could be taping the conversation for some nefarious purpose, like sending him to jail.

The phone was ringing when he shut off the spray, and he grabbed a towel and dashed into the kitchen in time to hear Lisa's angry, "I thought we had something. Why don't you call?"

Click.

My god, one date and she thought she owned him. He'd already tried to explain, she just couldn't seem to get it through her head that he wasn't interested. The phone rang again, and he made no move to pick it up. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now.

Click. No message.

Was it Lisa again? That was the third hang-up this week. But Lisa left angry messages and pleading messages, sometimes five or six in a row. Silence didn't seem her style.

As he dressed, he tried to recall when the calls/hangups had started. After Jerome's threatening phone call? Probably. Now if he could only fire up some inspiration on how to extricate himself and his brother from the long-stretch of Jerome's influence.

Pasting on a pleasant expression, while his brain wrestled with the problems at hand, he climbed into his truck and drove to a rather new-age eatery called the Castle Garden.

The front doors were painted to resemble a draw-bridge, the entry floor wooden planks made him sound like a two-ton elephant, while Sydney's heels wobbled precariously and made him wonder if she really couldn't keep her balance or just wanted to cling to his arm.

Painted climbing roses spread from the corners across the grey walls, potted plants trailing foliage from strategically placed planter shelves. Several overhead skylights gave the room an outside garden ambiance that reminded him of Elizabeth. She'd love the place.

Why did he think that? He'd run into her at the Grizzly, a dark, den-like restaurant with a meat and potatoes menu. This had a vegetarian atmosphere that the menu soon confirmed.

Seated across from Sydney at a glass table-for-two, he inhaled the sensational scent of Italian herbs. "You like vegetarian?" he asked, his mouth watering at thoughts of lasagna. As long as he kept the conversation centered on food, he ought to be okay, he reasoned. Didn't women love to talk about diets and such?

Not that he'd ever had that kind of conversation with a date before. A question about weight might come up, and he didn't know of a quicker way to commit suicide than answer, diplomatically or otherwise. The chances of success were a million to one. "Who cares about weight," which was his attitude, had once garnered him an angry scowl. It was all about chemistry, but she had interpreted his comment to mean she was fat. In fact, almost any statement he made would probably be construed negatively, thus, avoidance was key. Not that he cared to continue this date, but who knew how much influence she had with Jerome.

Sydney studied the cuisine and sighed. She wanted a desert, something fudgy, something crunchy, like toasted grasshoppers dipped in dark chocolate. Not to be found on a human menu, alas.

Adam held the menu between them like a highly prized fence. What could he be thinking? Sheryece would never eavesdrop. Syd cocked her head and listened. No dialogue. Lots of pictures. He was fantasizing about Elizabeth in that blue gown, seated on his lap, facing him, hands roaming beneath his shirt while he unzipped the back of her dress

She snapped back into her own head, suddenly hot in all the wrong places. Suddenly seeing Mel with Elizabeth in that position. "He'd better not be," she muttered.

Adam glanced over the top of the menu. "What?"

"I can't figure out what to eat," she said.

He ordered, and she found herself ordering the same thing and trying not to cringe. All that cheese. After three hundred years it was tough to keep her figure. Not that Adam had noticed. Not that anyone noticed, she thought morosely.

Except Mel, her inner voice chimed.

He noticed a resemblance to Sheryece, that was not the same thing, she argued.

He likes kissing you, the voice insisted.

He does not. He was just showing off, probably to make Sheryece jealous. As if her goody-two-glass-slippers sister would ever admit to such a wicked emotion.

A wicked emotion? The idea startled her. If jealousy was wicked, then she should embrace it, rejoice in it, and . . . act on it. Did that mean Adam and Elizabeth were wicked? Because Mel was trying to make Adam jealous. Ooh, she felt so confused she wanted to scream.

"You're not eating."

She stared at her steaming plate of lasagna and wondered when it had arrived. Exotic smells

tickled her nose even as she told herself this was not food fit for a truly wicked witch like Sydney Mannville. Still, she wasn't dressed like a witch, and she was playing the part of a human, and humans did have to eat. She took a tentative bite and thought of Mel's yummy kisses as her taste buds sang in appreciation. Candlelight, lasagna, and Mel, she thought dreamily inhaling more of the meatless extravagance and imagining Mel's dark eyes and raven hair. Midnight hair. So much better than the sunny gold locks on Adam's head. She wanted darkness and mystery. She wanted Mel.

Struck dumb by that unexpected thought, she swallowed more gooey cheese and noodles and caught Adam studying her. What in hell's flames was he grinning at?

Adam had never seen a woman cram so much of an entree into her mouth at one time. It was rather refreshing. A woman who actually ate the meal on her plate. Of course, Elizabeth had eaten her meal the other night, a meal cooked by Mel Stockwell, but Adam had other things on his mind.

Making love with Elizabeth permeated his days and nights, or the hope of it. They'd come close twice now, and the more he tried to tell himself she wasn't for him, the more his brain tempted him with provocative images that he could not squelch.

And now this problem. A nice enough looking problem, but a problem none-the-less. "I'm glad you're enjoying the lasagna," he said.

She swallowed and smiled back as she dabbed at her dark red lips.

"About the house," he began. "It's been kind of tricky"

"Oh, I just bet. Full of tricks and treats."

What did she mean by that? Sure he'd missed some unspoken message, he finished off his lasagna and crunched into the garlic french bread.

"But I'm sure everything will come out right in the end."

Adam offered a rather sickly smile. "Sure."

Sydney tried to think of something fascinating to say, but her thoughts strayed to Mel. Where was he? She closed her eyes and focused on him, catching a few miscellaneous brain waves and one inspirational one. Looking at Adam, she said, "How about joining me tonight at that little bar at the other end of town? There's a funky disco band performing from nine to midnight. I bet you know how to boogie."

It was Friday night, Adam thought, and he had nothing else to do, except vandalize Elizabeth's house again, which he'd avoided thus far. He paid the bill, then said, "Sure. Do you want to meet there, or should I pick you up at your hotel?"

"Hotel? Oh, uh, no, I'll meet you there. Say nine-thirty?"

So she was from out of town, Adam thought. He walked her back to his truck and frowned. "Do you have a rental car?" He couldn't recall seeing an extra vehicle at Elizabeth's.

"Oh, uh, yes. A brown one. Blends in with the dirt."

“Dirt?”

“I mean, it’s dusty.”

He waited until they were parked in front of Elizabeth’s, then said, “You can tell you-know-who that there’s nothing to worry about.”

Syd pushed open her door and climbed out, her expression non-committal. “I don’t know any you-know-who’s, but I’ll see you at the dance.”

Elizabeth found herself day-dreaming about Adam and whipped cream as Mel drove her home. Lunch had been nice, but when he held her hand, no fireworks. Not even a flicker. She felt like a dud, her hormones in hibernation. The only man able to wake them was Adam, and he’d probably tasted enough whipped cream to bury half the pies in Montana.

“ . . . a great band tonight. Why don’t I pick you up around eight-thirty?”

“Eight-thirty?” Oh, she’d forgotten about his dance invitation. She started to apologize and say “no” but what came out was, “I’ll be ready.” Watching him drive off, she shook her head. She hadn’t meant to accept.

Glancing toward the row of parked vehicles, she asked Tom, “Did Adam go home early?”

Tom shrugged, but Harry, who was packing up his tools, said, “Took off before lunch with a redheaded gal.”

One of the other men whistled. Embarrassed, Elizabeth hurried into the house. So now women were showing up here. Great, just great, she fumed. Determined to prove she didn’t give a fig about him, she called Annie, who was about her size, and asked if she had something she could borrow for the dance. Elizabeth had given away all her elegant dresses she’d worn when married to Jerome. They brought up bad memories. And she’d already worn her best black dress twice. That left a business suit, jeans, some splotted with paint, and casual summer shorts and tops that wouldn’t wow the socks off anyone. Annie answered, and Elizabeth explained.

“I’ve got just the ensemble,” Annie said. “I’ll drop it off at six and see you at the dance.”

Relieved that a friend would be there, Elizabeth spent the next two hours washing her hair with her favorite lemon shampoo, soaking in a tub scented with bath oil, then painting her nails a pale luminescent shade of pearl. By the time Annie knocked on her door, she felt like a queen.

Annie, still in librarian garb, held up a garment bag. “You’ll knock Adam’s boots off in this!”

If only, Elizabeth thought.

Annie’s grin faded into confusion at whatever she read in Elizabeth’s expression. “I figured you were going . . .” Her brow furrowed, “Who are you going with?”

“Mel Stockwell.”

Annie came inside and shut the door. “At dinner the other night you and Adam looked, well, tight. The molecules were really zapping, you know?”

Elizabeth didn’t want to talk about it. She led the way to the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“Sure.”

Then again, maybe it would help to get someone else’s perspective. Annie inhaled appreciatively as Elizabeth handed her a steaming mug of Hazelnut blend.

“So are you trying to make Adam jealous or what?” Annie asked.

She scalded her tongue and set down her mug. “No, I’m trying to get him off my mind, if you must know. And Mel is so sweet, kind, a great cook, gorgeous”

“So’s my brother, but I wouldn’t sleep with him. What’s wrong with Adam? The guy’s a hunk, and it’s obvious he’s crazy about you.”

“About me?” Elizabeth sputtered, her heart swelling with hope that she quickly squelched. “Adam’s too much like my ex. I don’t think we’re right for each other.”

“Too much, how?”

She shifted on her feet. “I interrupted his dinner once with a blond, and he left early today with a redhead. And . . . I just don’t want to deal with that.”

Eyebrows lifted in surprise, Annie said, “He didn’t strike me as that type at all, Elizabeth. I’m really sorry.” Her optimistic tone reasserted itself. “Well, maybe you’ll meet Mr. Right at the dance.”

“I don’t believe in Mr. Right anymore. Fantasies are fine as long as they stay in my dreams.”

“Ouch. Sounds like your divorce wasn’t too amicable.”

“Amicable?” Elizabeth gave a short rueful laugh. “Hardly. No one leaves Jerome Holland, even if he’s cheating on you, even if he’s mean, nasty, and manipulative.”

Annie’s eyes shone with empathy. “Sounds like an award-winning bastard.”

“First prize, and I won,” she said feeling more like an idiot than bitter.

“Who was it who said, it’s better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all?”

“I don’t know, but they obviously never met Jerome.”

Annie chuckled, then laughed.

Elizabeth found herself laughing too, her mood growing lighter. Jerome was history. She had a new life here and new friends.

“Oh my gosh, I’ve got to run or I won’t be ready on time.” Annie shoved the garment bag in her hands, saying. “It’s a size six, should fit you perfect. See you there.”

Elizabeth's excitement turned to dread as she stared at herself in the mirror. Maybe she could plead it didn't fit? Unfortunately it did. Too well. What there was of it.

The flared pants were so long she had to wear her highest heels, three inches. The bell-bottoms were a rich burgundy color, of stretchy crushed velvet that hugged her hips and showed her belly-button and a whole lot of skin all the way to the edge of a spaghetti-strapped cropped-top in matching material. It was outrageously funky and not at all what she'd imagined coming from Annie's closet. My gosh, the woman was a librarian!

Her gaze fell to the burgundy jacket. She could wear the jacket all night long, keep it fastened. She pulled on the smooth crepe, liking the velvet-edged collar, but a bit uncomfortable with the coverage. The front dipped low, showing bare skin from the edge of the crop top to the single button at the waist. At that point, the jacket cut away toward the outsides of her thighs, exposing the front of her hip-hugging pants and her navel.

She checked the back, relieved that it, at least, was completely covered, then stared at her front again, undecided. She didn't want to lie, she didn't want to disappoint Annie, and a part of her knew she looked like dynamite in this get-up. But the more prudent part was horrified she was considering stepping out of the house in it.

All her life she'd cared more about what other people thought than about herself. And she'd landed with Jerome.

But this? What message did this give off? Wild and fun-loving? Adventurous? Eat your heart out, Adam?

Oh, where did that thought sneak in from? But it was true. She didn't care what Mel thought, and he was her date. Despite everything, she wanted to impress Adam. Blondes, brunettes, redheads, they didn't matter.

Reason reasserted itself as she clomped down the stairs to answer the doorbell. They did matter, and she'd do well to put Adam Gardiner from her mind, for the evening and the rest of her life.

Mel looked *Esquire* perfect in black boots, slacks, a black shirt, and red tie. "Hey, we're color-coordinated," he remarked as he escorted her to the car.

Mustering some enthusiasm, she smiled and chatted about the great weather and the progress on the house, running out of steam as they parked outside the club. Disco music boomed, a fast number. Signs in front said, *Please smoke out back*, for which she gave a big breath of relief. The last thing she needed was watery eyes and a runny nose.

"Ready to step back in history a few decades?" Mel asked, leading her inside.

She nodded, instead of yelling "yes" over the din. The place was filling fast, but they managed to claim one of the tiny tables bordering the dance floor, midway to the stage. The band looked like Mod Squad imitators who could sing. When they began a soft tune, she could actually hear Mel ask her what she wanted to drink.

There were about five hundred beer bottles lining the back wall, no wine list. "Something imported," she murmured, hoping her head wouldn't buzz all night once the alcohol hit and glad when Mel told the waitress he was the designated driver and would have a club soda and lime. He really was sweet and caring and debonair.

Adam complimented Sydney on her outfit, a short sparkly dress of red sequins and red glittery shoes to match, that for some reason made him envision hellfire. Not an encouraging image, he thought as he led her inside the crowded bar. The lights were low, and overhead mirrored disco balls glimmered and shone over a small dance floor wedged with wiggling bodies.

The band actually sounded good. He'd expected a less-than-professional group out here in the sticks of Montana. Although from a Montana resident's standpoint, Bozeman, was a big town. A town, that at some point, had grown on him. *Like Elizabeth* his mind added.

Which made him wonder all over again why he was here with Sydney Black. He should tell her to go back to California and Jerome and leave Elizabeth alone.

And what about Ethan?

What about the new housing development? The sooner he got back to California the sooner he could oversee everything. Right now, his buddy, Rick, was breaking the ground and covering for Adam's absence, but the man had his own business to run. Adam was offering him a percentage, but he couldn't expect Rick to run the project indefinitely.

"You seem galaxies away," Sydney remarked from across the table, her tone blasé, jabbing his ego and making him miss Elizabeth's warm gaze that made him feel like superman, ready to save the world.

"Try a few states," he said, figuring she'd understand.

He cleared his throat, intending to ask her to dance. A flash of burgundy caught his eye. "Elizabeth?" His jaw felt like it had dropped and hit the tile.

"What?" Sydney glanced around. "What's wrong?"

He stood to get a better look, hypnotized by Elizabeth's gyrating backside amidst the crowd on the dance floor. Bell bottoms obscured her high heels, lengthening the line of her legs and tempting his eyes upward to a tailored jacket. Her dark hair was upswept by a rhinestone clip, a few stray tendrils falling behind her ears and the nape of her neck. A neck he remembered with delicious clarity. He wanted to wrap a feathery soft curl around his finger, then loosen all that gorgeous hair and bury his hands in it.

She whirled, giving him another glimpse of her face and the rest of her. Dry-mouth set in and his pulse rate soared. He loosened his collar and watched, hoping for another blessed glimpse, while working to believe what his eyes were telling him. She twisted right, then left, her jacket open, her midriff bare from hip to abs, the skimpy top covering little more than a brassiere. No innocent fuzzy pink attire tonight.

His fingertips tingled with the recollection of velvety skin. The rest of him heated with

remembered moans and luscious kisses. Without thinking, he skirted the table and cut into the crowd, stopping behind her. Mel gave him a dark, *get lost* look, and he felt like an idiot. Flamed by humility, he stalked off. She'd told him never to touch her again, and here he was, about to beg for a dance.

A slow song started and he reached for Sydney, pulling her to her feet and into his arms as the female vocalist belted out lyrics of a love gone wrong. Hell, his entire life had gone wrong the moment he arrived in this god-forsaken place. Who needed ten months of snow and frost-biting wind chill, all for two months of the most gorgeous summer weather he'd ever known. And no smog. Just clear blue skies, a deep, endless blue, like Elizabeth's eyes.

"Are we dancing or practicing for a statue contest?" Syd asked, one hand on her hip.

"Uh, of course." Adam whisked her in a circle, spinning slowly, scanning for Elizabeth in burgundy.

"Of course, what?" Syd asked in a plaintive tone.

He saw Elizabeth at a table across the room, sliding into a chair Mel Stockwell was easing beneath her. "What?" he repeated absently.

Sydney followed his gaze. Her mouth tightened.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing. How about a drink?"

While watching Elizabeth out of the corner of his eye, he waved a waitress over and ordered them both a beer.

Elizabeth looked ravishing, he thought. He tried to refocus on Sydney and lost the battle. He had to try again with Elizabeth. Apologize. Grovel. Whatever it took.

"Excuse me," he said to Sydney. Not waiting for a reply, he started winding his way through the crowd.

Chapter Eleven

Elizabeth pressed the damp napkin to her face and took another swig of cold beer. The refreshing liquid tasted great. She felt great, only too hot, hot, hot. All those bodies on the dance floor generated more heat than a cord of wood. Perspiration dampened her back and neck, and she finally gave into the urge to take off her jacket. Just for a moment. Until she cooled off.

“May I have this dance?”

She almost toppled in her chair as she twisted toward Adam’s voice behind her. His hand touched hers and drew her to her high-heeled feet, the circuits of her brain overloading before she could formulate a single word.

“I don’t-this-I’m not . . .” Three different protests tangled her tongue and brought a grin to Adam’s lips that turned the rest of her thought processes to “off.”

He pulled her close and waltzed her away from Mel. “Before you slap my face, which I probably deserve, I’m sorry for what I said the other night, Elizabeth.”

“You are?” He had the most gorgeous hair and the kindest, most intriguing green eyes. And he was apologizing, looking all contrite and cute like a naughty kitten caught with his paw in the catnip.

“I was way out of line, and I guess I felt a tad defensive.”

“Defensive?” How many times in the last week had she wished she’d kept her mouth shut that night? And now here he was apologizing.

“You’re like a quarterback calling plays I’m not prepared for.”

“Quarterback?”

“I didn’t mean . . . oh hell, I don’t know what I meant.” He swallowed. “I never imagined you in something quite like this,” he said, admiration lighting his emerald gaze.

“It’s borrowed, and its owner promised to be here or I would have never had the nerve to wear it.”

“Why not? Every woman in the place must be envious, heck, every guy probably hates my guts right about now.”

Her gaze dipped to his cowboy boots, traveled up his brown slacks, pausing at his belt, then continuing up the pearl snaps of his green shirt and up to his face. “You make a great cowboy,” she said, beaming at him.

He thought she might also be blushing, but in the dim light it was hard to tell. “You look mega-fantastic,” he said emphatically. He wished he’d studied poetry, because if anyone deserved a sonnet, she did.

“I-I feel uncomfortable . . . over exposed, if you must know.” Her cheeks flushed scarlet so he had no doubt about her blush. “And I didn’t mean what I said either . . . about you being a jerk.”

He bent his head, his breath warm on her ear. “So it’s okay for me to touch you?”

A delicious quiver ran through her. “Yes.”

“And make love to you?” His gaze caught and held hers. “Say yes.”

Her breath froze while her muscles threatened to melt. “Yes.”

“When?” His hips grazed hers.

Her knees weakened and his embrace tightened, the front of their bodies touching intimately. “I’m not sure,” she whispered.

“Tonight?” he asked, his tone hopeful.

Her gaze strayed toward Mel.

Adam felt his gut tighten with a surge of possessiveness. He wanted to ask if she’d slept with Stockwell but clamped his lips shut. For all he knew, Jerome had lied about her. And her old boss, too? his inner voice scoffed.

You’re falling for her, buddy, and your vision’s skewed.

Was it?

“Why don’t you come tomorrow night?” she asked. “I’ll make dinner and . . .” Another blush.

He brushed his lips across her cheek, then her mouth. “Stay with me tonight. The last three months have been agony. I don’t want to wait another night.”

Elizabeth felt pulled in two directions. Even though desire definitely had the better grip, she said, “But Mel . . .”

A chill entered Adam’s gaze. “I don’t like the way you say his name, I don’t like the way you smile at him, I don’t like him. The only guy I want you in bed with is me.”

“I haven’t . . .,” she started to say she’d only slept with one man since her divorce and it was a disaster, then suddenly noticed the redhead hovering at Adam’s shoulder. He did, too. “Hi Sydney,” he said, his face flushing to the color of her dress.

“I was wondering where you’d disappeared to.”

Oh no, how much had she heard, Adam wondered. I . . .”

Sydney’s gaze sent a chill through him, yet he sensed inexplicable triumph in the curl of her lips. “No explanation’s necessary,” she said.

Did that mean she had overheard? He had no time to ask.

Mel cut toward them, his expression remarkably friendly. “Why, Syd, darling, what are *you* doing here?”

“The same thing as you, apparently.”

Adam sputtered, “You two know each other?”

“Yes,” Mel answered as he whisked Sydney into his arms. “We do. And I’ll be taking this luscious redhead home.”

Adam stared. Somehow he'd misread the entire situation, he thought, feeling confused and relieved. Sydney must be interested in the house because of Mel Stockwell. She didn't know Jerome, didn't know why Adam had come to Montana. As the two disappeared into the crowd, Adam watched, feeling like an idiot. A delighted idiot.

The music shifted to a slow, sensual beat, and once more he drew Elizabeth into his arms. The soft pressure of her breasts against his chest, the feel of her body next to his, drove every question but one from his mind. "Come with me. Now."

When she didn't resist, he guided her toward her table to gather her jacket and purse, then bee-lined outside to his truck. His leather jacket was on the seat, and he draped it over her shoulders. The road seemed longer than normal to his place, and he couldn't think of a darn thing to say. His body was humming, his brain buzzing, his blood pumping like hot lava through his veins.

Elizabeth cuddled into the jacket and leaned against Adam's shoulder, his spicy scent filling her nostrils, his body heat welcome against the night cold. "Look, snowflakes." They were dazzling bits of white lace caught in his headlights, melting into tears on his windshield. Such a melancholy thought when she should be happy. She was happy. Right here. Right now. And excited. More so than she'd imagined possible.

His fingers lightly brushed her shoulder, her neck. He unclipped her barrette, and her hair fell free. Again his fingers caressed her neck, then delved into her hair to massage her scalp, spreading midnight magic with his heat. Anticipation dried her mouth, made her feel tongue-tied. They were going to his place. What was it like?

She shoved down negative thoughts of other women and tentatively lifted her lips to his cheek. She scooted closer and nibbled on his earlobe, liking the tremor that shot through him. Drowning in his scent, his warmth, and wanting more, she unbuttoned his shirt and pressed her palm to his naked chest.

He gently eased away. "We're almost there."

Elizabeth had never made love in a vehicle of any sort. She and Jerome had been very traditional in every sense. The fleeting thought that a pioneer woman wouldn't worry about comfort, they were used to sleeping on the trail, and that a pioneer woman would be bold, filled her heart with the need to experience something recklessly adventurous.

As he pulled into a dark driveway and switched off the engine, she leaned over and kissed him on the mouth. First a long, deep, soul-shuddering kiss that made him groan and wrap her in his arms. Then an experimental kiss where she explored his hungry mouth with her tongue.

Another groan caught in his throat, and he slid down until his back rested against the bench seat, taking her with him. The steering wheel jabbed her shoulder.

"Just a minute," he said, reaching beneath the seat. A flashlight beam cut across the floor to the gas pedal, filling the cab with pale light. His arm moved again and the seat slid back four more inches to give her operating room. Still twisted sideways, she said, "I think we need to readjust."

Adam stretched his legs into the passenger side as she straddled his hips, one knee between the back of the seat and his hip, the other threatening to slip off the seat edge. "A bed might be more comfortable," he rasped.

She rested her bottom against his thighs, her palms on his shoulders, liking the way his eyes were slitted and somewhat unfocused. “You say that like you don’t want to move.”

“I don’t,” he whispered, lifting his knees so she slid forward, her sex suddenly pressed against the most masculine part of him, velvet and denim between. His hardness lit a bonfire in her middle. She shifted, wanting to feel more, wanting to fill the aching emptiness inside, to get as close as she possibly could.

He funneled his fingers through her hair, cradling the back of her head with his palm, then gently drawing her mouth toward his. “You want me to stop, tell me now.”

“No.”

“No?” Adam felt panic slam into him. Gut-wrenching, soul-shattering panic.

“No, don’t stop,” Elizabeth breathed, her hands exploring his chest as she sprinkled his face with soft, fiery kisses that teased and promised in a mesmerizing combination of playfulness and sensuality. His panic melted into tiny shivers of pleasure as her fingers roamed from the planes of his chest down across his abs. Tantalizing. Erotic. Just short of agony.

Her hips slid back, pressing his thighs down. She fumbled with the zipper of his slacks her fingers brushing his erection and sending another delicious, yet agonizing shudder through his body. She brushed him again, watching with a sense of wonder that he didn’t stop to think about. The only thing thinking at that moment was at her fingertips.

The zipper gave way, bringing relief from the constricting fabric. She touched him through his jockeys. God, he was on fire.

A semi-wicked grin teased her lips as she maneuvered sideways so that he could kick off his boots, then yank off his slacks and underwear. The errant thought that he’d never made love in his truck before drifted through his brain.

She gently gloved him, her fingers offering more pleasure, her eyes darkening at his reaction. Too much more and this would be over too quickly.

He caught her wrists. “Sweet Elizabeth.” He pushed his jacket and hers from her shoulders. Blood roared in his ears as he cupped her breasts through the velvet. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and her nipples were hard beneath his touch.

“Oh, Adam.” Awe rang in her hoarse whisper. For a moment it baffled him, but he told himself she’d been married for four years. She’d had an affair with her boss and who knew who else. She was experienced. Convinced it was desire he heard, not awe, he ignored the small part of him that remained bothered by her reactions and slid the spaghetti straps from her shoulders.

“You’re sure I’m not too heavy?” she asked.

“Not in a million years.” Glory be, she was the most glorious weight imaginable.

He eased the velvet down to her waist. His mouth parched. “You are so beautiful.”

Pink touched her cheeks, or at least the light made it appear so.

He scooted sideways, his back pressing against the cold steering wheel, and eased Elizabeth onto her back, her legs parting for his weight on hers. The velvet hip-hugging pants were surprisingly erotic against his arousal.

She moved her hips, rubbing harder against him, her breath catching, her eyes dilated, her fingers twined in his hair, pulling his head down, his mouth to hers. "Oh, Adam," she moaned between kisses. "You feel . . . so good."

Her breasts, pillowed against his chest, tortured him with desire to feel more, taste more. He broke from her mouth and kissed his way down to the valley of perfection. With one hand he caressed one side, his mouth on the other, taking in the taut nipple and as much softness as he could.

She writhed and cried out, reaching for him, gripping his backside and drawing him against her. "I can't wait," she whispered hoarsely. "Oh, please."

Adam kissed his way down to her navel, tasting the indentation briefly, then lifting his head so he could slide the velvet bellbottoms and scrap of lace from her legs. They caught on her shoe, and he found himself unbuckling the lethal-looking high-heels and finding her feet enticingly erotic as well. This was definitely a new experience, turned on by a woman's foot. He kissed the top of her toes, upward to her ankle, and continued upward to her knee. His hands roved up further, paying homage to the velvet skin beneath his palms, worshipping every inch as he stroked and caressed and kissed.

Elizabeth's last logical thought was that nothing could feel this good, then Adam's hands found her center, his mouth trailing hot kisses on her thighs, and the ecstasy short-circuited all but the most primitive impulses in her brain.

One moment she was gasping, "Adam!" in surprise, the next her fingers were curled in his hair, her hips moving to some inner rhythm. She felt wild, crazy, and loved by his every touch. By the pure wonder and magic.

The ache building inside became unbearable. "I want you . . . now . . . please . . ."

He lifted his head, the green of his eyes so dark they looked black. "Elizabeth, you are incredible."

She tugged on his arms, and he grinned and kissed her navel, then the valley between her breasts. Arching, she clung to him as he teased first one breast then the other with his teeth. His fingers stroked where his mouth had been, and she convulsed with a shriek she tried to muffle.

His lips moved to her throat, tasting the hollow, then kissing their way to her ear and nibbling the lobe. She convulsed again, this time gasping his name. Her hands found his back and pulled. He resisted, drawing away, his hand shaking as he unlatched the glove box and pulled out what looked like the same packet she'd seen before. Still straddling her, he sat back, resting lightly on her thighs, his most arresting attribute proudly on display. Had Jerome ever been that big?

He rolled the sheathe down, down, down, and she swallowed.

Then he was kissing her mouth, her breasts, her ear, her mouth, and she forgot everything but the need to fill the ache inside. This time he didn't resist when she pulled, but gently pressed her knees wider

apart and ever so slowly lowered his hips.

With infinite care, Adam pushed deeper and deeper, the intoxicating feel of her squeezing him taking the last of his control. He drew back, the friction exquisite, then buried himself in her sweet heat, her cry of desire filling him with satisfaction and the need to hear more, feel more, be more. He moved to the rhythm of her hands tightening on his back, again, again, and again, the friction growing close to overwhelming.

Elizabeth yelped when he stopped and pulled her to his chest, rolling sideways, and sliding beneath her in one smooth motion that suddenly put her on top.

“Don’t stop,” he said, gripping her backside and encouraging her to ride him.

“Oh . . .” her hips moved faster. “Adam.” Her breath came faster. “I think . . . I’m coming . . . again.”

“Elizabeth!”

Adam thought he saw stars through the ceiling of the truck. Then he was a star, shooting across the sky, wave upon wave of pleasure all around him, engulfing him, a part of him. “Elizabeth!”

She convulsed around him again, sending him on another tidal wave of bliss.

She collapsed against his chest, her cheek resting on his shoulder, her hair feathery soft where it grazed his chin. Her fingers trailed over his shoulders, down his biceps, then up to his neck, his ears, his hair. “You’re hot,” she whispered, and he wasn’t sure if she meant the sweat dampening his brow or if she was complimenting his lovemaking skills.

“So are you,” he whispered, deciding it didn’t matter what she meant. For him this had been a blessed event, something he couldn’t put into words. She’d touched him on a far deeper level than just the physical. Her every cry of pleasure had brought him joy and made him want more. He had a feeling he would forever be wanting more with Elizabeth. That like an aging man who’d found the fountain of youth, he would drink and drink and drink, yet the only time he’d be satisfied was like this, with her in his arms, completely and resoundingly *his*.

Elizabeth wiggled, trying to get comfortable, but the previously exotic place to make love was now terribly cramped and uncomfortable. Adam pressed upward using his elbows, bringing her to a sitting position on his lap, her knee trapped between the back of the seat and his hip. She slid off him and into the passenger side while he groped for his pants.

“Stay here,” he said, yanking up his slacks. “I’ll get a robe for you.”

Before she could do more than curl up beneath his jacket, he dashed from the truck to the house, disappeared briefly inside, then reappeared with a black terry-cloth robe. He climbed into the cab and shut the door, then helped her wriggle into the robe. She shivered, the fabric little protection against the icy cold blast that hit her as she sprinted down the walk and into the house.

“I’ll turn up the heat,” he said, depositing their clothes and shoes in a pile on a stark, functional dresser. “Get in bed, and I’ll warm you.”

She didn’t know if it was the cold or merely the lack of personality that permeated the room, but

she hesitated. The more logical side of her brain was starting to function again, and it was quite unhappy with this turn of events.

He came over and hugged her, and it seemed to be what she needed, because her fears fell away. Naked, he climbed between the sheets and patted the space beside him. She crawled in and cuddled close, reveling once more in the feel of his skin pressed against the length of hers. His arms tightened around her as though making some unspoken statement. She lifted her head to look at him.

His lips curled in a quirky smile. "Get some sleep, sweetheart." With a gentle nudge, he urged her head back to his shoulder and kissed her hair. The last thing she recalled was the feel of his hands rubbing her back and arms, warming her to a comfortable glow that eased her into the sweetest dreams she'd ever known.

Chapter Twelve

Syd allowed Mel to waltz her around the dance floor because she wanted to keep an eye on Elizabeth and Adam.

"Relax and quit trying to lead," Mel said, a bit of annoyance creeping into his voice.

"Why should warlocks have all the fun?"

"Fun? You think leading a woman around a dance floor is fun? Have you ever tried it with a fairy who looks at you with pure greed in her eyes? Or a godmother who's more interested in your brother than yourself? Or a witch who'd rather blast a hole through your chest than kiss you?"

The last shot a twinge of guilt through her. "You said you were all right."

"I was. I am." His embrace tightened as they avoided a collision, and a moment later he whisked her through the crowd and out the back door. "Elizabeth and Adam are headed out the front," he said, his stride unhurried.

Yanking Mel by the hand, she skirted the corner of the building in time to see Adam lead Elizabeth to his truck. As they drove off, she nudged Mel, victory and salvation teasing her lips into a grin. "It's about time!"

Mel looked down at her with a peculiar expression. "Yes, it is."

Panic rippled through her as his arms encircled her waist. "Wait a minute, warlock!"

He lifted one eyebrow, looking decidedly sexy. "For what?"

She shoved at his chest, gaining an unsettling freedom that left her feeling bereft and vexed. “For-for nothing. Act’s over, Hamlet.”

“But we’re just getting started.” His gaze roved down her frame, then returned to her face. “And you look too good to just vanish without a . . . kiss.”

Why in heck was she hesitating? Had her dress caught fire, because she felt hot, hot, hot.

“I’d always thought redheads looked spectacular in pink, but you, my dear, put that red to shame.”

“I do? I mean, can it, Mel.”

He started to step closer, then stopped when she lifted her hand in warning. “Save your shenanigans for some fairy fool, or better yet, my sister,” she said.

“Why is it that you keep bringing her up whenever things are about to get interesting between us?”

“Interesting?”

“You do things to me, Syd. Can’t explain it. Don’t want to. Just want to enjoy it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh my sweet, sexy witch.”

“Sexy?” she breathed, backing up another step and forgetting to blast him when his lips brushed hers.

“Very sexy,” he affirmed, molecules zapping into a frenzy between them.

She shivered, and his arms wrapped her in warmth. This was not part of the plan. Adam and Elizabeth were finally letting nature take its course. But this, this disturbance with her equilibrium was baffling. It did remind her of Elizabeth and Adam’s attraction to each other, but that couldn’t be. She’d never

Abruptly, his embrace tightened and the small Montana street, the blaring music, and the cold disappeared.

“Mel, where are we?” She glanced at the massive marble fireplace that consumed an entire wall of the huge room, the flames crackling and snapping, heat wafting past her cheeks, toasty warm. The other walls were covered with medieval tapestries, one of a unicorn stabbed with a spear and hunters in the background that she rather liked, other tapestries of gardens and rare orchids abloom on fields of greenery that were too pretty. She took a step toward an 18th century painting of a witch burning at the stake, and her foot slipped on the polished granite floor.

Mel caught her and took advantage of her position to kiss her neck.

Choking back an indignant giggle, she regained her balance and mustered a frown. “Where in Hades are we?”

“My castle.”

He said it so nonchalantly that she thought she’d misheard. “Your castle?” Her thoughts spun. “But only the aristocracy own castles. The king and queen and their blood relatives.” A sinking sensation filled her. She felt like someone had tossed her over a cliff onto jagged rocks below. “You’re a prince?”

Another, more startling thought struck, and she suddenly felt like an idiot. Not only an idiot, but a stupid idiot. “*You* are Prince Mel?”

He had yet to get a word in edgewise, but his expression confirmed her worst fears. Not that they were fears exactly, she told herself. Really, she ought to be happy. Relieved. She was a witch. He could never take her as his wife. Royals married fairies or godmothers only. Sweet, good witches like her twin, Sheryece.

Wife? Wife? Where had that ridiculous notion popped in from? Certainly not her subconscious. She hated Mel. She only put up with him to save her soul.

He offered a smile that almost appeared sad. “Don’t look so surprised. You must have guessed.”

Not sad, she thought, but ardent. His dark eyes held hers, his finger tracing over one cheekbone, then gently wrapping a curl behind her ear. His other hand found the small of her back and pressed her close.

He was casting another spell, she thought, her body quivering as his lips brushed hers. She felt powerless to protect herself.

His chest grazed her breasts as he pressed his lips to hers, kissing her over and over. A tightening sensation rippled through her, made her arch closer, wanting more contact. His arms circled her waist, drawing her tight against him. He was raw, masculine power, hard muscles and planes. Everything from his raven hair and the tobacco scent that clung to his western shirt to the hardness filling out his jeans and rubbing against her thigh turned her on. She burrowed closer.

He bent her back, one arm supporting her, the other free to stroke down her side with arousing heat.

Recalling their kissing lesson, she tentatively explored his mouth.

He shuddered and groaned her name, then his tongue mated with hers, igniting more flames, melding them together.

Her own sense of power intoxicated her every bit as much as his devouring kisses, which were becoming much more demanding. He breathed her name, “Syd,” again and again as he claimed, and gave, and ravaged her mouth, with greater and greater hunger.

She kicked off her uncomfortable shoes, then yanked at his shirt, the snaps popping open, exposing a dark-fuzzed chest that she had the overwhelming desire to feel pressed to her bare flesh.

This is crazy! Insane! A part of her yelled. All the new sensations bombarding her burnt the

warning voice to a cinder.

He bent her back further, kissing her neck, then her fabric-covered breasts. She was tempted to make the dress disappear, but Mel, as though reading her mind, pulled the zipper down, the sound erotic and hypnotizing. He pushed the dress from her shoulders, peeling it down, then letting it drop in a puddle to the floor.

“No bra . . .” Mel rasped, his eyes feasting on her breasts with embarrassing intensity.

She stepped back, uncertain what to do or how to do it.

He moved forward, wrapping her in warmth, his hands rubbing her back from her shoulders down over her satin-clad backside. “You’ve missed so much, Syd. Don’t run now. Let me show you how glorious love-making can be.”

Now she knew what all this trembling was, it was sheer terror. Then he was kissing her mouth, her ear, her neck, her

She gasped, her fear melting, her knees weakening as his mouth closed over one nipple, sucking, then tenderly teasing it with his teeth until it turned hard. One hand supported her back while the other stroked her unknissed breast, his fingers gently plucking and rolling the tender tip into a hard nub that ached for more. She clutched his head, pressing his mouth to her, strange sounds erupting from her throat that reminded her of a cat’s purr.

Was this a nightmare? She’d never imagined pleasure coming from this, this raw, wild excitement that held her in its grip.

Mel lifted his head, his dark eyes smoldering black orbs that reminded her of a black cat’s gaze as it narrowed on its prey. Gold flecks shone in the depths. “Do you realize you’re shooting passion sparks from your hair?”

“That’s an old witch’s tale,” she murmured, “Otherwise something would have caught fire.”

“Passion sparks don’t combust.”

She was about to ask, *why not*, when his embrace loosed, and she had the fleeting thought this was some kind of practical joke as she started to fall toward the floor. A shriek rolled up her throat, trapped in her mouth as her backside and shoulders bounced on a mattress instead of tile.

Mel landed beside her, grinning. She scrambled into a sitting position, suddenly realizing that while she was almost nude, he had yet to bare anything but his chest.

She zapped off his shirt.

He got to his feet, and the rest of his clothes vanished with a blink of his eyes. Looking very much like a ravenous wolf, he whistled, admiration written in every line of his face.

She couldn’t stop staring.

He was, well, big, huge, enormous. Or maybe he just seemed that way because she’d never seen an erection this close before. She should have gone to the wicked witch orgies, she thought, feeling

new fear and desperation. "I don't think this is going to work."

Mel gave her a reassuring smile and joined her on the bed. A round bed, she noticed, trying not to see his most riveting attribute.

"I promise, everything will work just fine."

"That's because you have the easy part," she said, wishing she weren't so darn fascinated. She could blink herself out of there in an instant, but she didn't want to.

Tentatively, she reached down and ran her fingers along the side of his arousal from tip to base. The skin was smooth, hardness sheathed in velvet, and he moved under her caress.

"Sweet Syd," he said with a quick intake of breath. "Your touch is indescribably delicious."

"It is?"

"Hmmm." His eyes closed a moment, and a shudder ran through him as she stroked.

His fingers closed firmly but gently around her wrists and drew her hands away. His half-closed lids gave him a look that sent shivers through her middle. He fell forward onto his knees, straddling her legs, her hands trapped beneath his palms. Slowly, he lowered his body to hers, brushing his chest back and forth in a sideways motion against her breasts until the tender tips were hard nubs. She arched toward him for more contact.

A strange tingling rippled across her skin as he settled his hips between her legs and rubbed against her sex.

He swallowed her gasp with another round of hungry kisses. She pulled free of his light grip on her wrists and caught his back, pulling him tight against her, wanting more.

"Patience," he whispered, a laugh of delight in his voice that should have annoyed her, but only drove her to touch and stroke and caress every wonderful muscle within reach. Why had she never noticed how nicely, no, exquisitely put together Mel was until now?

He shifted his weight to rest beside her, then stopped her complaint with a devouring kiss that left her breathless. Or maybe it was the magic of his hands, roving, stroking, rubbing, discovering places she'd never imagined as erotic but were now. His fingers slid beneath her satin panties, and he murmured, "You're so ready, and so am I."

Without urging, she lifted her hips to help him rid her of the final article of clothing, trepidation creeping into her mind. With the deftness of an artisan, he stroked her fears away until she ached for release from the coiling tension taut within her.

He straddled her once more, his mouth covering hers, his tongue hot and exciting as it mated with hers. She opened her legs wider beneath his caress and gasped as his fingers filled her, offering the most blissful relief. She couldn't think, couldn't do anything but feel the waves of pleasure cresting over her. She wished she could relay every sweet sensation, but no words would form except passionate murmurs and moans she was unable to control. The waves receded, but before coherent thought returned, he was stroking and kissing and filling her again. Only this time, his fingers felt too small. "More," she choked out. "You, please."

Sweat glistened on his brow and neck as he held himself above her and slowly pushed into her. A ragged groan tore from his throat. "You . . .are . . .so . . .tight . . .and hot . . .and wet." A shudder ran through him. He lowered his mouth to hers and thrust his tongue deep, his hips moving in the slightest degrees forward and back, forward and back.

"I don't think I'm big enough," she said, feeling her body's resistance to further progress war with her unquenched thirst for more of him.

"You're perfect," he rasped. He lowered his mouth to one breast and sucked, then switched to the other, teasing and caressing until she clawed wildly at his back. All at once he thrust all the way into her, drew back slightly and thrust again. The slight sting became the most terrifying pleasure, undeniable. She sank her nails into his backside and pulled. "Harder," she said.

He lifted his hips and slammed into her, again and again and again. "Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop." Her words climbed in pitch as his tempo increased. The fleeting thought that she sounded more like her sister than herself got lost in all the heavenly sensations.

Suddenly, her body clenched, then convulsed. She saw stars, galaxies, universes expand and contract, a bliss beyond imagining, all hers. A gift beyond gifts. She cried out, unable to stop the joyful cry. Thunder cracked overhead, earth-shattering noise. It vanished as he thrust deep one more time and his own cry echoed hers.

The room filled with light, gold and red waves emanating from their bodies, pulsing bright, then dim in rhythm with their heartbeats. She'd never seen anything like it. His heart thrummed against her chest as though a part of her, and his breath resonated with each gulp of air.

"Why are we glowing?" she asked.

"Don't worry, it's a good thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Making love creates an energy of oneness in all beings. With witches, warlocks, and fairy godmothers, when the aura can be seen this clearly it is a good omen."

Evasiveness flickered in his eyes, but before she could pursue it, he kissed her lips, then murmured, "I must be crushing you," and slid from her, rolling to his side.

Yearning for his heat and his scent, she scooted into his embrace and closed her eyes.

Her ear tingled beneath his hot breath as he kissed it and whispered something too soft to distinguish, yet it sounded like an endearment. And it followed her into a quiet, peaceful sleep, the like of which she'd never known before.

Chapter Thirteen

Elizabeth awakened to the wonderful smell of fresh brewed coffee and cinnamon. She sat up lazily, pulling the blankets with her, one hand rubbing the sleepy dust from her eyes. Unfamiliar surroundings came into focus. “Oh my . . .,” she gulped the rest back as a very sexy Adam, wearing only a thick terry-cloth robe, appeared in the bedroom doorway, a breakfast tray in his hands.

“Hungry?”

“Starved.” Why did she suddenly feel awkward? She wasn’t sorry about last night, was she? No. But . . . Darn those *buts*. They kept coming up and confusing her, but she was determined to hold them at bay for as long as possible. She would not ruin a perfect day with a bunch of useless worries.

“Hope you like your coffee black,” he said, placing the tray beside her on the bed, then handing her a mug.

“Black is fine,” she said before taking a tentative sip. Hot and mellow and . . . “Hazelnut?”

He grinned. “Saw it on your kitchen counter and figured I’d try it at home . . . here.”

“*Here* is your home, isn’t it?” She glanced around at the bare walls and near-empty closet.

“For now.”

Somehow his answer bothered her, or maybe it was the way his gaze skidded away from hers a moment before returning to offer another heart-melting smile.

He sank carefully onto the bed beside the tray and brought the other mug to his lips. “I think I’ve been spoiled for life.” His comment could have been about the coffee, but the sensual look he gave her implied reference to their night together.

Did that mean it was as wonderful for him as it had been for her? “Me, too,” she murmured, unwilling to risk clarifying what her agreement meant.

“What would you like to do today?” He plucked a cinnamon roll from the tray and bit into it.

“Visit Yellowstone?”

His eyebrows rose. “Okay. We might get back late.”

She felt like singing. “I want to see Old Faithful.”

Adam choked, too surprised to hide it. He’d expected her to say she wanted to work on the house or go shopping or maybe take a walk at the college, but Yellowstone? Then Old Faithful? He couldn’t stop the thought that she needed lessons in the faithful department.

What if Jerome had gotten her boss to lie, had lied himself? his inner voice questioned again. Didn’t that make more sense?

What about the stuck zipper, the prowler that wasn't there, Elizabeth at the door in nothing but a robe? he mentally argued.

He pushed away his growing certainty that she was just as she seemed, sweet, honest, fun-loving and hardworking, sexy and warm and caring, because if it were true it made him and what he'd done to her house that much more despicable. No, she was just playing the field, and he'd lucked out.

The ego swelling idea that maybe he was just the guy to change her wicked ways pushed his uncertainties deeper underground, his blood quickening with memories of last night's bliss.

And how many poor saps had the same thought, his inner voice quipped sarcastically. He forgot it as he gazed into Elizabeth's captivating blue eyes. He would never be able to look at the Montana sky without thinking of Elizabeth's eyes, and vice-versa, he thought. Somehow the two went together, made him dream of staying out here in the sticks.

Elizabeth wore a quizzical expression. "If you'd rather see something else . . ."

"No, Old Faithful sounds great. I've always been curious about geysers. Ought to be fun." His mind raced to practicalities. "We'll need to stop by your place for warm clothes and hiking shoes. Did you want to shower first?" He imagined he'd be waiting an hour or two for her to get ready which meant reaching the West entrance to Yellowstone in the afternoon.

She started on a second cinnamon roll, swallowed a bite, then said, "A quick shower. Won't it take a few hours to get there?" She slid from the bed.

Distracted by her naked backside, he forgot the question, saying, "You want company in the shower?"

Her laugh warmed him. "I don't think we'd get to Yellowstone." She stepped into the bathroom and closed the door.

Listening to the sound of the spray, he lay back and sighed. Might as well take a nap.

It seemed like only minutes later someone was shaking him awake. Warm lips brushed his cheek, then cold water trickled down his neck. He opened his eyes with a yelp, then sat up, eyeing Elizabeth dressed once more in velvet and heels. Her raven hair was pulled back into a dripping ponytail. "What time is it?" he asked.

She pulled on the jacket and buttoned it. "Time for you to hit the shower, sleepy head."

He glanced at the clock. "Ten minutes? You took a shower and got dressed in ten minutes?"

She sat on the edge of the bed. "Did I break a speed record or something?"

"Or something," he said, throwing back the covers, determined to beat her time. "See you in five," he called over his shoulder.

Three minutes later, he returned to find her sprawled on a made bed, maps spread out across the worn chenille.

Hiding his second dose of surprise that she hadn't put on any make-up and seemed unconcerned with her appearance, he stepped into clean underwear and jeans, yanked on a shirt, and moved closer. "Most of the geysers are in the Southwest corner," he said.

She smiled at him. "Looks like a two or three hour drive. You sure you want to do this?"

He held her gaze. "I'm sure. Cross my heart."

The drive lasted closer to four hours because they dropped by Elizabeth's place for her to change clothes, then stopped along the way to check out several small historical museums. The history captivated Elizabeth, and it thrilled her to share it all with Adam. Adam appeared enthralled as well with the park's beginnings and ultimate protection by the government. The video of the huge blaze that had blackened much of the park had him spellbound.

On the last leg of the drive to Old Faithful, Elizabeth talked about the inn and how her grandparents had wanted to restore it long ago. "From the moment I saw that house, I felt something magical," she said, risking the admission. Jerome had put down most of her feelings as nonsense. But then he'd been hiding affairs from her and who knew what else. The fact that he remained an outstanding citizen in the public's eyes while smearing her reputation and getting her fired, galled her.

Adam recalled how he always felt like someone was watching him at the house. Certainly not a feeling of magic, yet from the moment he'd set his sights on Elizabeth, something had taken hold of him, drawing him to her and the house as surely as the moon drew the tide. He grinned and pulled her close. "The house brought me to you, it's got to be special."

Sunbeams, radiant and heartwarming enveloped him with her smile. His inner voice chose that moment to speak, *Tell her the truth. She might forgive you.*

Might?

She also might kill me.

You can't hide this from her. Not when you feel the way you do.

I'm not listening.

You love her. Admit it.

Damn his conscience. *Nag, nag, nag*, that's all it ever did. Yet, his gaze slid from the road to Elizabeth, and something in his heart softened. Was this love? This surge of protectiveness and desire and admiration? Whatever it was, he knew he had to tell her the truth. He swallowed, working on the courage to begin. "Eliza . . ."

"Oh look, Adam, here's the turnoff."

He hit his blinker and jerked on the wheel, his palms slick, his heart pounding loud in his ears. He could hardly breathe. Log cabin-type structures and a parking lot caught his eye, and he pulled into a space.

“I interrupted you, I’m sorry. What were you going to say?”

He chickened out and hated himself for it. “Just that you’re a great navigator.”

Elizabeth couldn’t get over the feeling of *rightness* being with Adam gave her. “I used to go exploring with my grandfather. We’d drive up the coast or to the mountains, and when we started out he’d hand me the map and ask for directions . . .” She’d forgotten. Happy tears welled in her eyes. “He trusted me so much. Made me feel like I could do anything.”

There was such a wistful note in her voice that once more Adam found himself questioning every negative thing he’d heard about her and saying, “You can do anything, Elizabeth.”

She kissed his cheek. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

He climbed out and went around to the passenger door, pulling it open for her, swinging her into his arms as she stepped to the ground.

She hugged him back. “What about you, Adam?” she asked. “I thought guys were supposed to do all the talking.”

“I enjoy listening to you,” he murmured, something flickering in his green eyes that sparked uneasiness. It was her past with Jerome running amok in her brain, she told herself. There was no reason to be suspicious of Adam because he didn’t monopolize a conversation. In fact, it was refreshing after Jerome’s obsessive need to control everyone and every situation.

Adam grabbed her hand, his gaze sweeping from what appeared to be a huge timber gift shop to the Old Faithful Lodge, a stream of people flowing in and out both.

He led her to the information desk inside the inn and asked about the geysers, learning Old Faithful would blow sometime in the next half hour, and there was a boardwalk hike they could take to view the other fabulous geysers in the area.

Walking with Elizabeth, their boots rapping lightly against the wood walkway, the late afternoon sun mild and invigorating, Adam couldn’t recall a more perfect day, except for the secret lying between them. He distracted himself by studying all the contrasts around them. The land was gold and green to a point, then where the geysers bubbled and surged, the ground appeared white, sometimes with orange or yellow mixed in, the odor of sulfur much more mild than he’d imagined.

When two buffalo unhurriedly paced by, he stared in amazement, thinking this would never happen in LA. Elizabeth beamed at him, and the sinking sensation in his gut prodded him to speak. “There’s something I . . .”

“It’s starting to blow!” Voices behind them screamed with excitement.

Elizabeth yanked on his hand, forcing him to jog with her. A wide arc of tourists were gathered on the boardwalk and beyond it on the dirt, some hoping to get soaked by the warm water, some moving further away to avoid the possibility.

The opening to the earth steamed and hissed. An abrupt stream of water shot upward a few feet, then dropped down, disappearing into the steam. He’d expected an overwhelming scent of rotten eggs, but as with the other geysers, the smells were more interesting than repugnant. Another stream shot

upward, this time rising higher and higher and higher.

Sounds of amazement rippled through the crowd, his own adding to them. Elizabeth pressed closer. "It's awesome, isn't it?"

He never imagined the wonder of something like this. Had never missed it in LA, but he knew he'd miss this, miss leaving his house and truck unlocked, miss the lack of traffic and daylight speed limits, the open space, the mountain ranges everywhere the eye could see, and most of all, Elizabeth. Sweet, hot, sexy, mind-blowing Elizabeth. And when he told her why he'd come, she'd have every reason to slam the door in his face and never talk to him again.

Which is why he put off telling her. They listened to pop country music on the way home, and she tossed another curve ball at him by knowing the lyrics to several. Obviously, her music tastes included more than classical arrangements.

By the time he took the first turn-off to Bozeman, she was cuddled beneath his arm, her eyes closed, her breath even, her soft warmth way too welcome. He rolled to a stop in front of her house, wondering if she'd want him to spend the night. His stomach rumbled, reminding him his usual seven o'clock dinner was several hours overdue.

Stroking Elizabeth's hair to wake her, he couldn't resist brushing his lips across her cheek as she sat up. In a sleepy voice, she asked, "We're home?" her gaze sweeping toward the house.

"You're home," he corrected, stifling the rampaging desire that made him want to make it his as well.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, still leaning against him, her face lost in the darkening shadows of twilight.

He intended to say no, that he was tired and should head home, but "Yes," came out instead, rationalizations parading through his mind. Tomorrow was Sunday. They could sleep in together. He could tell her the truth in the morning. After holding her one more night. Just one more night before he faced the music, he swore, already aching at the thought.

"I have some Spaghetti sauce in the fridge. Noodles in the cupboard. Sound okay?"

He pushed open the door, bathing them both in overhead light. "I'd eat peanut butter and jelly about now."

With a laugh, she followed him out his side of the truck, her hand fitting naturally within his, their fingers twined as they ambled up the walk.

Inside, she switched on the grand chandelier and nibbled on her lower lip. Was it anxiety that made her do that or the urge to drive him nuts? Dinner could wait an hour or two longer. He bent his head, liking the way her eyes darkened as she read his intent. The taste of her drove him recklessly on, until he was peeling her clothes off on the first set of stairs, and she peeled off his on the second set. They made love on the second floor landing, the new carpet much better than hard wood, then moved to the third floor and her bed to make love again. This time he moved at a slower, gentler pace, his fatigue vanquished by the adrenaline rush of viewing, feeling, tasting her delicious curves and valleys.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered later, holding her in his arms and feeling the inadequacy of

the statement. She was so much more than that.

"I think you're biased." She snuggled closer, a contented sigh tickling his neck. "Besides, you're the one who's gorgeous."

He kissed her forehead. "Does that mean you'd like to see me again?"

Elizabeth's thoughts raced. Was he talking "see" as in "sex" and no commitment? Sex and commitment? A pioneer woman wouldn't just wonder, she'd ask. She sat up on one elbow and summoned up her courage. "You mean you'd like to get to know me better or you just want to have sex with me again?"

He kissed her, long and hard and deep, rousing delicious currents she'd thought thoroughly extinguished by their previous love-making. Twining her fingers in his hair she kissed him back with equal fervor. Abruptly, his mouth broke from hers with a ragged groan. "This is more than sex, I want you to know that right now."

Then why did he look uneasy? Why was she suddenly feeling that something was wrong?

Climbing from the bed, he pulled on his underwear and jeans. "There's something I've been trying to tell you all day . . . and I can't do in bed. I'll meet you downstairs."

He's married, Elizabeth thought as she hurriedly dressed. *He's married or engaged or . . . something*. She realized she really didn't know much about Adam. Not where he was born or where he grew up. Only that he had lost his parents, too, and that he had a younger brother he'd raised and put through college.

At the bottom of the last staircase she paused to watch him in the kitchen, his back toward her as he measured out coffee and switched on the coffee maker. He looked great at the sink, she thought. Even if all he knew how to make were peanut butter sandwiches and coffee.

Crossing the entry to the kitchen, she dragged her feet, and he turned, looking sexy and disheveled and oh, so lovable.

Love?

She shoved that notion down. She was a pioneer woman who'd just had the best sex of her entire life. Obviously she was confusing it with love.

The idea unsettled her.

Another idea struck that explained the uncertainty she read in his expression.

Did he think he was in love with her? Was that what had him so upset?

How long did it take to fall in love anyway? She'd never felt like this about Jerome. But then he'd never looked at her the way Adam did. And Jerome certainly never made love the way Adam did. Heat stung her cheeks, and she moved to the cupboard and took down two mugs.

"Elizabeth . . ."

She handed him a mug. “Yes?”

“I haven’t said much . . . about myself . . . because . . . well, there are reasons.” His jaw tightened. He set the mug down and jammed his hands into his pockets.

This was the worst moment of his life, Adam thought, facing Elizabeth, struggling to find the words to confess to what he’d done. “You grew up in LA. So did I.” Maybe he could ease into an explanation.

Her eyebrows drew together in puzzlement.

His gut knotted. “I-uh-I think-I mean-I work for you, but I don’t”

The poor dear. It was almost painful to watch him force out words. “It’s okay. It’s awkward for me too. I hired you, but I didn’t expect to end up in bed with you.”

Adam felt like his brain had short-circuited. Sweat trickled down his back making his sweater itch. She’d jumped to the wrong conclusion, and he wasn’t sure where she was headed now. Nor could he summon the will to spill the rest while all he wanted to do was carry her back upstairs to the antique bed and make love all over again. And again.

Disturbed by this craving that hadn’t lessened one bit, he stood there, silent, his fingers still crammed in the front pockets of his jeans.

“It just happened,” she added.

“Yes,” he agreed, wondering how he could ever have let Jerome talk him into coming here, how he could ever have believed Elizabeth capable of anything Jerome accused her of, and feeling rotten from head to toe.

She sipped the coffee and sighed. “I don’t suppose you want to help me hang wallpaper?”

“Wallpaper?”

“Well, I’ve got all this energy.” Her face flushed.

He could think of better ways to burn it off, but merely shrugged. “Sure.” While she got the supplies together, he cooked the spaghetti noodles and heated sauce from a jar.

Spooning noodles and sauce onto two plates, he tried to think of a way to tell Elizabeth about his working for her ex that wouldn’t sound quite so awful. Joining her at the table, he decided not to ruin the evening, and had the sudden inspiration that he could fly home in the morning, convince his brother to distance himself from Jerome, talk to Rick about the development project, and tell Jerome he quit. Then there would be no reason to tell Elizabeth why he’d come to Montana.

A part of him scoffed that trying to hide something and getting caught was ten times worse than coming out with it.

But she didn’t have to find out, he reasoned.

Trying to convince himself it was the best plan, he shoveled spaghetti into his mouth and listened

to Elizabeth talk about more themes for the various guest rooms.

“Tarzan and Jane sounds good to me,” he volunteered, beating his chest and yodeling, enjoying Elizabeth’s laughter and promising himself he’d do everything he could to help her.

Which meant not staying the night, but going back to his place so he could get up early and catch the first plane to Salt Lake or Seattle, then a connection to LA.

“I hate to bow out on hanging wallpaper,” he said, “but I’ve got some business to take care of tomorrow and an early flight to catch, so I’d better take a rain check.”

Her gaze fell for a moment, then she said in a casual tone he disliked, “No problem. I like to sleep in on Sundays anyway.”

Elizabeth worked hard to hide her disappointment at Adam’s abrupt departure. Business on Sunday? Like what? Seeing the blond? Or maybe dumping the blond? That thought cheered her as she hung wallpaper late into the night.

With Velvet curled in her arms for company, she climbed into bed feeling hopeful and optimistic, slipping into sleep with a sweetness that had eluded her for a long, long time, the kitten’s purrs rhythmic and welcome.

Crash!

She sat up abruptly to sunlight and another *crash*. It sounded like shattering glass. Recalling the last time she’d panicked and called Adam, this time she pulled on navy sweats, jammed her feet into slippers and dashed downstairs to find the ornate stained glass window in the parlor room smashed in the center, cracks radiating outward like a sunburst. Something heavy must have hit it, but what and how?

Searching outside, she found a heavy river rock the size of a baseball lying at the edge of the deck. The awful notion that someone had thrown the rock stunned her. Why would anyone do that? Recalling the second crash she’d heard, she circled the house again fearing for the other irreplaceable artwork set in a side window on the first floor. Tears of relief stung her eyes when she found it untouched. Scanning all the windows, she found the broken glass from the second crash scattered beneath a second story, triple-pane window. Contemplating what action to take, she swept up the mess, called Adam, and when he didn’t answer, remembered he was out on business.

Her next call was to the local police who thought it was a random act of vandalism. “How often do you have such random acts?” Elizabeth asked, not the least bit placated by the policewoman’s assessment.

“This is the first time this year,” the policewoman admitted. “But you haven’t lived here that long, you don’t have any enemies that you can think of, and no one’s threatened you since you arrived. That doesn’t give me much to go on.”

Elizabeth thought about Jerome in Los Angeles. But a few broken windows was not his style. Besides, the divorce was final, he had his freedom, he’d already gotten her fired and ruined the good references she should have been able to expect. No, she didn’t believe it was him. Reluctantly she accepted the “random vandalism” theory and began calling glass companies.

Unexpectedly, Annie interrupted her dial-a-thon to call and apologize about not making it to the

dance. “My date and I never made it off the couch,” she confided, a teasing lilt in her voice.

Elizabeth thought of the bench seat in Adam’s truck and was glad Annie couldn’t see her face.

“How’d the evening turn out for you and Mel?”

“I-uh, had a nice time. Adam was there and we danced.” And she missed him already, she thought. “Can we talk another time, Annie? I’ve got a lot of phone calls to make. Someone threw a rock through two of my downstairs windows. One of them is stained glass, and it’ll probably take forever to find someone who can fix it.”

“Oh, not that beautiful one with the tulips and butterflies,” Annie said.

“Afraid so.”

After assuring Annie that she was fine and in no danger, Annie said, “There’s a teacher at the college who might be able to fix the stained glass window for you.” Annie rattled off the woman’s name and number, and Elizabeth promised to get together with Annie for lunch during the week. Then she called the art teacher, gave her the specific dimensions of the window, and got a ballpark figure of over a thousand dollars to replace the glass and do the repairs. A call to her insurance company confirmed her fears, the cost was not covered because she’d failed to insure it on a separate list for an additional premium.

By the time she crawled into bed Sunday night she wanted only to blot out the day and the nugget of fear in her stomach that wouldn’t go away. Could Jerome be behind this? Was she safe here? The chairs propped beneath the front and back doorknobs wouldn’t stop someone from coming through the windows. No, she thought, whoever had thrown the rocks could have snuck inside and done a lot worse. It must be vandalism. Maybe a kid mis-throwing a rock and too scared to tell anyone.

Mis-throwing a rock twice?

Two kids on some kind of dare?

With the house’s haunted reputation, maybe that’s all it was, a childish dare. Semi-satisfied she had the damage figured out, she fluffed her pillow and tried to sleep.

Dollar signs kept intruding. Vandalism or not, she couldn’t keep spending money this way. She’d paid Adam half the money due him for the complete job, and had the second half allocated in the bank, but she did need to heat the house, and to eat. If she replaced the stained glass window with plain glass, she’d lose one of the most beautiful attractions the old house had to offer. She tried to tell herself the chandelier and the massive marble fireplace, the wonderful design of the turret room were more than enough to draw customers to her inn. But her heart bemoaned the fact that she’d wanted the stained glass window in the background of the brochure when the parlor was completely furnished. She would just have to trust that nothing else would go wrong.

Adam deplaned at Los Angeles International Airport, eyes gritty and body heavy from fatigue. At his apartment, he showered, shaved, and called Ethan, all the while resisting the lure of his bed.

A smile tugged at his mouth, though, when he thought of Elizabeth. A few aches and pains were well worth the night of passion and the sightseeing, her hand in his, her smile warming him to his soul.

Being away from her left him feeling hollow and lonely. He wanted her in his life and his arms. This nightmare of deceit had to end.

Listening to Ethan's answering machine click on, he left a terse message and hung up. His thoughts continued to roil. What if he wanted more than Elizabeth did?

Yes, she'd responded to him more passionately than any woman he'd ever made love with.

Yes, she seemed interested in a continuing relationship.

But how well did he really know her? Maybe she was like this with every guy, and he was just one more.

The last sounded like Jerome talking, not what Adam's experience told him. He realized his hands were clenched and flexed his fingers in an effort to relax.

Where the hell was his brother?

Tired, restless, he called his buddy Rick and asked about the mall project.

"It's rolling, Adam. Smooth as silk. Don't know what strings you pulled to get those permits, but everything's great."

Adam didn't want to be reminded of the "strings."

"You still out in the boonies?"

"I'm home for a couple of days."

"You serious about me running the job to the end?"

His friend sounded like he'd been offered a dream and couldn't quite believe it. Adam chuckled. "Yep. You get the bigger salary and the headaches, I get to stay in Montana for awhile longer."

"Just what is so damn special about Montana?"

Adam thought of Elizabeth's blue eyes. "The scenery, the mountains, the bluest sky you've ever looked upon."

"Scenery, huh? As in female?"

"Rick, you have a one-track mind." Adam bantered for a few more minutes, then said, "I'd like

to come by this afternoon to see how things are going, answer any questions. You gonna be there?"

"Heck, yes. I'm still trying to find my desk since you dumped all this on me."

"Good. See you around two." Smiling, Adam hung up and hesitated with his fingers poised over the phone. He had to meet with Ethan tonight and, one way or another, convince his brother to quit working for Jerome Holland. Which meant digging up whatever skeletons were buried in Jerome's back yard.

What if there are none?

He couldn't accept that. Jerome played his game with Adam too smoothly; a man who'd done this kind of manipulation before, many times. He had to find some dirt on Jerome, and he had to find it fast.

Elizabeth stretched and yawned to the sounds of hammers pounding and footsteps moving across the deck outside. Thoughts of seeing Adam had her rolling from the bed to her feet, then dancing on her toes to avoid the cold wood between bedroom and bathroom rugs. Would he be back from his business trip already? Hoping so, she hurried through her shower, threw on her black slacks and sweater and paused to add a swipe of mascara to her lashes, a dab of blush to her cheeks, a bit of pink gloss across her lips.

Shoving open her third story window, she looked outside and didn't see him. Her excitement plummeted into disappointment.

With a mug of coffee in her hand, as casually as she could, she asked Tom, busy painting the last of the third floor bedrooms, "Is Adam around?"

His brush didn't stop, his gaze didn't waver, yet she felt as translucent as glass when he said, "No, ma'am. He called and asked me to handle things for a few days. Said he was tied up in LA. Told me that if you asked, he'd be calling you as soon as he knew exactly when he'd be back."

"LA?"

"Uh-huh."

"What business does he have in LA?" She voiced the question more to herself than to Tom, but he answered.

"Same business as here, I expect."

Her disappointment was rapidly turning to an alarm she didn't want to examine too closely. Yet her thoughts wouldn't be halted. Jerome was in LA. Among his many enterprises, Jerome was into land development. Land development meant construction contracts. She knew how Jerome worked. She backed out the doorway and retreated downstairs to the kitchen, busying herself with wiping the counters and rinsing the few dishes in the sink. Just finish the wallpaper in the foyer and parlor and quit jumping to conclusions, she told herself. Adam was *not* like Jerome. So why did she keep envisioning him with the blond, then the redhead? Why were her eyes smarting with tears?

Gritting her teeth, she marched into the foyer, measured the next section, wet the paper and hung it. After smoothing it into place, she repeated the process for the next area, then the next. At noon the urge to cry had subsided into a dull ache in her stomach. When she heard a tap on the door, she dropped the wallpaper roll and dashed to pull it open.

“Surprise.” Annie stood outside, bearing a grocery bag in her arms, her auburn hair tied back, a friendly smile on her face.

Stifling her let down, Elizabeth said, “This is a surprise. I’m afraid the outfit you lent me is still at the cleaners.”

“Forget that. I brought lunch. You do stop to eat, don’t you?”

“Oh, Annie.” Elizabeth sniffed, horrified when tears welled in her eyes.

“Don’t tell me you had more windows broken?” she asked, her smile fading to concern.

“No, no more windows.” Possibly her heart, but no more windows. She had to be wrong. LA was a big place.

“I brought smoked turkey sandwiches and baked potato chips,” Annie said as she set the grocery bag on the dining room table. “Want to tell the old librarian here what’s wrong?”

Elizabeth smiled. “If you’re old, I’m ancient. You must be my fairy godmother or something.”

Annie grinned and winked. “Hey, us single women have to stick together. It’s a MCPs paradise out there. Which reminds me, how was the dance?”

“MCPs?”

“Male Chauvinist Pigs.” Annie claimed a chair, unwrapped her sandwich and took a bite, swallowed, then repeated, “So, how was the dance?”

Sinking into a chair, Elizabeth forgot about unwrapping her sandwich as she remembered the magic of Adam’s embrace. Heat stung her cheeks. “It was great,” she murmured, tearing at the paper and taking a big bite, aware of Annie’s curious expression.

Annie grinned, then asked, “Who did you go home with?”

Was she that easy to read? She suddenly wondered if Adam’s confidence and overt interest had more to do with her being easy to read than with him feeling anything special toward her. No, he’d said what they shared was special. That it meant more than just bedroom gymnastics, not that he’d used those words. Of course, then he’d abruptly announced he had a flight to catch early the next morning and left.

Elizabeth found herself pouring out an account of Friday and Saturday with Adam and her fears about the broken windows, about being safe from Jerome. “I know it sounds silly, but I didn’t believe he’d really get me fired or smear my reputation either, and he did.”

Annie, who’d been eating while listening, swallowed the last bite of her sandwich and leaned forward. “Are you certain Jerome was behind what happened at your job? It’s not that I don’t believe

you, I just wonder how you know.”

At least Annie wasn't saying she was paranoid like her LA friends, Elizabeth consoled herself. “The last time he talked to me was after the judge ruled on our divorce. He called me, told me I'd be sorry I'd crossed him and hung up. A week later my boss tells me he's found discrepancies in my accounts that could lead to jail time for embezzlement. Then he offers not to press charges, if I leave immediately.”

Annie's green eyes shone with compassion. “The bastard.”

“That wasn't the worst of it. Another designer I work with called and told me the guy was saying we'd been having an affair the entire time Jerome and I were married.”

“Surely no one believed that?”

“My boss was an attractive man, and practically everyone knew I wasn't happy with Jerome.” She shrugged still feeling the sting from the doubt she'd seen in most of her co-workers faces. “In the end, I ran away. Came here to start over.”

“And I, for one, am glad you did. As for Adam working for your ex-husband, I think that conclusion's a bit extreme. I could see the guy was crazy about you when I came for dinner.”

Elizabeth felt her fears fade. Annie was right. She'd jumped to a wild conclusion that had no basis of fact. Cheered, her heart suddenly lighter, her spirit suddenly sure everything would work out fine, she held up her coffee mug and offered a toast, “To Montana's best librarian and my kindred spirit. Thank you for listening and for lunch.”

Laughing, Annie lifted her mug and clinked it against Elizabeth's. “To the unfolding of a great romance and to your wonderful inn. May I someday find myself in the honeymoon suite with the man of my dreams. Who, by the way, is named Larry.”

Elizabeth, feeling buoyant and carefree, certain she'd misjudged Adam, leaned forward and listened.

After several cups of coffee, Adam splashed water on his face, pulled on tennis shoes, and headed to Rick's temporary office and home, a trailer settled beside a nice stretch of beach. It had been Rick's temporary home for three years now, and Adam figured it would remain so until the guy got married. Rick's red mustang occupied its usual spot outside, and Adam could hear an old blues tune blaring from someone's stereo down on the beach.

Although only 84 degrees out, the sun felt hot compared to the Montana weather he'd left behind. Humidity had his shirt sticking to his back. He rapped on the door, and Rick answered, a phone headset on and in mid-conversation. Waving Adam inside, he pointed toward the tiny fridge in the kitchen and pantomimed drinking. Adam retrieved a beer for them both, and set Rick's on the one bare corner of his desk. While Rick talked, he studied the room. Not much had changed since the last time he'd dropped by six months ago. They'd shared a pizza and watched a ball game.

Rick said goodbye and looked at Adam. “Hey, sorry about that. “ He pulled a file from the desk drawer and handed it to Adam. “Here's the latest invoices and stuff. Your brother dropped by to chat

about the project, and when I said you were coming, he wrote you a note. It's in the front."

Surprised, Adam opened the folder and read. "Adam, just thought I'd do my lawyer bit and watch out for your interests. Rick seems to have everything under control. Couldn't stay to see you, but will call you tomorrow, seven a.m. Ethan."

"When did he leave?" Adam recalled talking to Ethan briefly about his plan to turn everything over to Rick. But he'd also asked his brother not to say anything to anyone. Had he? Did Jerome know? The thought sent an uneasy prickling sensation between his shoulder blades.

"Oh, fifteen, twenty minutes ago. He's gotten real polished since he started working for Holland."

Something in Rick's tone alerted Adam. "Why do you say it like that?"

"Look, I've got nothing against Ethan."

"So what's bothering you?"

"I just don't like Holland," Rick said vaguely.

"It's more than that."

Rick's dark eyes fixed on Adam, wary and uncertain. Not at all what Adam was used to seeing. "Holland did you a favor with the zoning permits. I know that. What I don't understand is why." Without waiting for an explanation, he continued, "I know I'm probably shooting my mouth off, but Holland's a bastard, and I don't want anything to do with him. The project's going great, building's ahead of schedule. We'll both come out of this deal smiling, so tell me there's nothing to worry about, and I'll be happy now."

Adam didn't want to hide anything from his friend, but he didn't want Rick hurt by any fallout, either. "Holland did me a favor for a favor. End of story."

Rick's gaze narrowed. "You're worried about Ethan. He's working for Holland. Doesn't add up."

"You say Holland's a bastard. Why?" Adam asked, stalling.

Rick wore an undecided expression. "It's not common knowledge. And if Holland found out my cousin blabbed . . ."

"He won't hear it from me, if that's what you're asking."

Rick leaned forward. "You sure about that?"

"What are you implying?"

"Word is, you went to Montana to do a job on Holland's ex-wife."

Shocked, Adam asked, "Who told you that?"

His friend's gaze leveled him to humble. "Is it true?"

"Whatever my reasons for going to Montana, the reason I returned was to find out something I could use against Holland to keep him off my back and away from Ethan."

"So he *is* using your brother to get to you."

Adam didn't correct him. It was close enough to the truth. "Who told you I was working for Jerome?"

"My cousin used to work in his office. She's an assistant bookkeeper. A few months ago she overheard Jerome talking on the phone about his ex-wife."

Adam clenched the armrests. Trying to sound casual, he asked, "Elizabeth Benning?"

"That's her. Seems she recently relocated to Montana after Jerome paid off her employer to, shall we say, lie about her, uh, reputation, and, uh, fix certain records to frame her for embezzlement. Evidently that wasn't enough. She walked away with a chunk of change from the divorce and that Montana monstrosity she'd inherited from her grandparents, and he wanted her to lose it all. So he sent you."

Adam felt like he was sinking in quicksand, felt it closing over his eyes and nose, stealing the air from his lungs. His friend's disgusted expression was bad enough, but far worse was that he truly had misjudged Elizabeth. "Are you saying she wasn't having an affair with her boss or stealing from the company?" How could he have been so gullible?

"According to my cousin, that's it in a nutshell. Gloria was so upset after hearing the conversation she gave four weeks' notice and came to me for a job."

"And told you why she'd quit."

"Eventually. Yeah."

With mixed emotions ranging from exhilaration that Elizabeth was exactly what his heart insisted she was, to dread that he owed her an apology and a full explanation of the truth, and that she'd likely never speak to him again if he did. How could he tell her he loved her after admitting what he'd done? She'd hate him.

Rick tapped the desk with his fingers. "I've flapped my jaw. Your turn, buddy."

"Look, when I took the job, I thought I was merely giving some rotten, two-timing, thieving divorcee a bit of justice. Then after I met Elizabeth, worked around her . . . got to know her . . ." he cleared his throat, "I knew Jerome had lied. When I told him I would be returning without doing his 'little job' he said it would be a shame if Ethan's reputation were smeared across the news."

Rick jotted a name and phone number on the back of a business card and slid it across the desk. "You can trust this lady. She may look like somebody's grandma, but she's sharp and gets results. Tell her everything you know about Jerome, and tell her we need enough on Holland to keep him friendly or to have him arrested."

Adam pocketed the card, made the call that night, and the next day missed the call from his

brother so that he could work as an assistant P.I. He felt damn conspicuous tracking Holland's movements and making notes of his comings and goings.

Two days passed before he connected with Ethan. Ethan told him he hadn't hired an investigator yet. "Forget it, I've got someone," Adam said. "Holland's using your reputation as a means to blackmail me, Ethan. I'd feel a lot better if you weren't working for him."

"What do you mean blackmail?" Ethan didn't wait for an answer. "Just what are you talking about? Where's your evidence?"

Ethan's incredulous tone infuriated Adam, but Adam didn't want to admit what he'd done. Ethan had always looked up to him, respected him. What would his brother think if he knew the truth? "I-I don't have all the facts," he said.

"If you can't give me any facts, then I don't want to hear another slanderous word. I've got a good job here. I can't believe you're trying to ruin it. Jerome's a great guy. He makes a ton of money. He has no reason to blackmail anyone."

"Don't be so damn naive, Ethan." It was the wrong tone, and he cursed himself for losing his temper.

"I'm not," Ethan said, his tone hard, "but I'm not going to believe everything you say just because you're my great older brother. For all I know, you misinterpreted something Jerome said."

Adam clamped his lips shut. For the first time in his life he heard jealousy in Ethan's voice, and it floored him. Where the hell had it come from? Or had it always been there and he just never saw it?

Ethan's voice lost a bit of its edge. "You show me proof positive against Jerome, and I'll quit. Deal?"

It was the only peace-offering he was going to get. "Deal."

With that unsuccessful conversation behind him, he hesitated to call Elizabeth. He put off calling her another day because he was unsure of what to say. Finally, after talking to Tom on Wednesday night and hearing Elizabeth had asked about him again, he dialed her number.

Her breathless "hello" stole his voice. Images of her heart-shaped face, her dark blue eyes, tempting mouth and sweet curves, all flashed in his mind. Lust and longing and love combined to hold his tongue captive.

"Hello?" A puzzled pause. "Adam? Is that you?"

He swallowed and managed a hoarse, "Yes."

A torrent of questions poured over the line, and he fielded them as best he could. "I'll be back sometime Saturday," he promised, hoping it would be true. "Then we'll talk. I've missed you," he added.

Her voice lowered to a whisper of need that shot fire through his blood. "I've missed you, too, Adam. Very much."

The words “I love you” caught in his throat.

“Hurry back, okay?”

Something in her voice alerted him. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no, everything’s fine.” But her tone said the exact opposite.

“What’s happened? Are you sick?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s just . . . someone threw a rock through two of the downstairs windows Saturday night after you left. I’m a bit jumpy, that’s all.”

All Adam could think was that Jerome had sent someone else to Montana after all. And he had his suspicions as to who. “I’ll be back Saturday. You keep the place locked and call the cops if you see or hear anything suspicious.” He hung up and rummaged through the pockets of his slacks and was rewarded with a business card from Mel Stockwell.

First thing in the morning, Adam called the Insurance company and was unpleasantly surprised to learn they did have an employee named Mel Stockwell. “Could you describe him, please,” he asked, just to be thorough.

“About five-eight, grey hair, a kind of teddy bear physique, raves about his wife and kids.”

Not at all like the man who’d landed on Elizabeth’s doorstep with his charming smile and award-winning act. With a grim sense of satisfaction, Adam thanked the receptionist and called Elizabeth. When her answering machine picked up, he opened his mouth to tell her Mel was a fraud sent by Jerome, then didn’t speak, but hung up. She’d ask questions he wasn’t prepared to answer. Not until Ethan was beyond Jerome’s dirty reach.

Frustrated, he grabbed his coat and headed to Ethan’s. Whether his brother knew it or not, today was his last day working for Jerome Holland.

Chapter Fifteen

Syd yawned and stretched and felt the hard muscle and soft fuzz of Mel’s chest beneath her palm. She moved one leg, tangled in his, and his arm snaked around her waist and pressed her close. Even as she tried to tell herself it was a dream, the reality of Mel’s strength and warmth stung her wide awake. Pure panic rushed over her. She sat halfway up and could hardly breathe.

Oh my stars, I’ve done it! She’d succumbed to Prince Mel, the biggest witch womanizer in the universe. Not only succumbed but actively, wantonly participated!

Mel gazed at her through heavy-lidded eyes. “What’s wrong?”

She snatched at the sheet to cover her bare torso. “How can you ask me that? After what you did?”

“What *I* did?”

“Yes, you, you virtue-robbing warlock!”

A sardonic smile lifted his lips. “A virtuous witch? I believe you’ve got your occupations confused . . . unless you plan to turn into a godmother like your sister”

Red fury overcame her. She would never become a godmother. She’d cast her lot long ago. One with which she was quite happy.

As though he’d read her thoughts, Mel said, “Never is an awfully long time. It’s not impossible for a witch to change.” He gave her a lecherous grin. “Improbable maybe.”

Her entire body shook with rage. She leaped from the bed and hurled a blast of fire.

He suddenly sat up, yelping, “Ouch!” as he disappeared. The bed roared into flames.

“Where are you, you rotten, two-timing Casanova warlock?”

“We’ll talk later, Syd. Once you’ve cooled down.” His voice echoed throughout the massive room, but he did not appear.

“Chicken!”

“A warlock is wise who knows his limitations.”

Hurling another blast at the nearest tapestry and a loud curse to go with it, Syd returned to Elizabeth’s restoration project and planted herself in the corner of the ballroom’s huge fireplace, the only dark, dreary place she could find. She focused on Elizabeth and Adam, determined to keep her thoughts off Mel.

Elizabeth and Adam were missing each other. Wonderful.

Elizabeth was here. Adam was . . . in LA. Not wonderful. She needed him to propose, finish this true love garbage so she could leave. Grumbling, she zapped herself to LA, and as the invisible woman, followed Adam who was headed to his brother’s place, and tried to decide what to do. She could hit him with another “Go to Montana,” spell or help him find the mud on Holland. But she kind of liked Holland and his manipulations. The man had power and enjoyed using it. A real man, she told herself, while her mind conjured up infuriating images of Mel.

“Prince Mel,” she murmured in disgust. The warlock who swept witches, fairies, godmothers, any magical female in his sphere, off their brooms, wands, or pumpkins and into his enthralling embrace.

“Enthralling!” Disgusted by her own turn of word, she scowled into Adam’s rearview mirror but couldn’t see her face because she was still invisible. Her mental tirade, however, gained momentum. Prince Mel, the magnificent. Every witch’s fantasy. Prince Mel, who rumor had it had lost his heart and

never recovered and so broke the heart of every lover he took. All poppycock nonsense. So why did her chest feel so tight, so constricted, so out of breath?

Because these two humans were apart, that's why, she told herself with a huff. Until they said "I do" oblivion lay waiting on the horizon like a case of bitter poison, all for her to swallow.

She'd much rather taste another heavenly kiss from Mel.

No, no, no, she mentally shrieked. Her brains must be addled by Adam's wild driving. Did the man have a death wish?

She clung to the door handle as the tires squealed and the car slid sideways.

Weaving a safety spell, while wishing she could make him drive off a cliff instead, she exhaled with relief when he finally cut inland and parked.

Adam jabbed the door buzzer, then rapped on the door a minute later when no one answered. Shifting on his feet, he glanced around, wondering why he felt like someone was watching him. The sensation had struck out of the blue as he'd climbed into his car and he couldn't shake it. He'd driven like a maniac all the way here, in case he had a tail, but the nape hairs on his neck still wavered uneasily. After a final jab, he retreated down the stairs in disgust. Ethan was avoiding him, no question about it.

He thought about his tabby, Boots, and retraced his steps. Dammit, he had a right to see his cat. Inserting the extra key his brother had given him last year, and, stifling a wave of trespassers guilt, he pushed open the door and went in.

"Boots?"

A yowl sounded from the end of the long hallway. A second later Boots appeared, bounding as fast as his chunky body could bound. Adam crouched down and caught his cat as it leaped to his chest. "Purrrr." It rumbled beneath the stroke of his hands.

"It's good to see you, too, buddy," he said, unaccountably thinking of Velvet and Elizabeth and whether they could be a family. Squash that thought until Jerome's history, he told himself as he set Boots on the floor. Leaving his cat meowing by the door was almost as tough as leaving Elizabeth had been. Almost.

He considered driving to Holland's business building, then discarded the notion. He didn't want to announce his intentions, yet. The P.I. said she had something and to "hang tough" a few more days. Easy for her to say, it wasn't her neck in a noose.

Yeah, and whose fault is that?

Okay, okay, I get the message.

Standing by his car, he recalled his conversation with Elizabeth, her sexy voice, the breathy way she said his name, the fact that she missed him. How much would she miss him when he told her the truth?

Maybe he could fly back, find out who broke her windows, like Mel Stockwell, and she'd be so happy with that information that Adam's confession would seem like small potatoes. Not really convinced, yet liking the idea better than spinning his wheels here, he went home to pack.

Under the morning sunlight, Elizabeth accepted the brochure Mel Stockwell held out, and studied it. He'd centered the newly repaired stained glass window just under the script THE GOOD LUCK INN, and beneath it, it read: *With rooms for a romantic weekend getaway or a vacation to the beauty of Yellowstone.*

She opened the flap and read, *Experience the ultimate fantasy of a night in Sleeping Beauty's turret room, the wild adventure of Blackbeard's pirate hideaway, or the exotic beauty of Scheherazade and the Arabian nights suite.*

Seeing the exquisite photos made her dream even more real. Elizabeth blinked, emotion rising in her throat. "It's wonderful, Mel. And so fast. One day. I didn't expect . . ."

"A-1 always aims to please, Liz. If you approve, I'll go ahead and have several thousand printed and delivered at the end of the week."

He lowered his voice. "How did everything turn out the other night after the dance? I lost track of you two."

Heat swept up her throat to her face. "Oh . . . it turned out fine. What about you and . . ."

"Syd," he said, something flickering in his dark eyes that made her want to hug him in comfort. "Guess you'd say it's a rocky relationship." He didn't meet her gaze or wait for a response, but added, "I'd better get going. Glad you liked the brochure."

She started after him, but stopped and watched him drive away. Who was she to offer advice? Adam had been gone a week now and other than one cryptic phone call, she hadn't heard from him. Hardly inspiring.

As though sensing her melancholy, Velvet came out from beneath the porch and rubbed against her calf, purring insistently. Elizabeth picked her up and stroked the soft fur, thankful for the sweet kitten who was nearly full grown and on her way to becoming a fat cat.

Still feeling lonely, she headed back into the house and away from the eyes of the workmen, the sound of gravel crunching beneath someone's feet barely registering.

"Elizabeth!"

Her heart leapt in her throat. Velvet jumped out of her arms. She whirled and threw herself into Adam's embrace. "You're back!"

Several wolf-whistles cut through the air as she pressed her lips to his. He hugged her tight, his mouth hungrily returning her kiss, then abruptly breaking free. "Whew, maybe we better continue this reunion inside."

She squeezed his hand and resisted the urge to dance up the steps and into the kitchen. "You

hungry? Have you had lunch?"

"I've eaten, thanks. Was that Mel Stockwell who just left?"

Surprised by the drop in temperature in his tone, she said, "Yes. So?"

"So, what was he doing here?"

Annoyed with his proprietary tone that reminded her of Jerome, and with the fact that she'd hoped he'd sweep her off her feet and into bed, she said, "It's none of your business."

Adam's expression darkened, and she wished she hadn't said it with such a hard edge.

"The guy's a phony, Elizabeth. Whatever he's here for, it isn't advertising."

She laughed, the sound bubbling up unexpectedly. "I hate to burst your bubble, but I'm no *femme fatale*, Adam. Mel's interested in Syd, so there's no reason to get so charged up about him visiting me."

"I wasn't concerned about *that*. Well, I mean I was, but I'm not anymore."

She crossed her arms. "Is this a backhanded compliment, or are you leading somewhere?"

"I don't know what the guy's up to, Elizabeth. But he isn't Mel Stockwell of A-1 Advertising, I checked. *That* Mel Stockwell is a short, pudgy teddy bear, according to the receptionist who answered the phone, and he's married and has two kids."

Incredulous, Elizabeth marched into the dining room, plucked a brochure from the table, returned, and slapped it into Adam's palm. "For a guy who doesn't know advertising, he's done one heck of a job. I don't know who you talked to, but you're mistaken about Mel."

Adam opened the brochure, turned to the back and stared, shaking his head. "I don't understand this." He met Elizabeth's gaze. "I really thought I had this figured out."

"Had what figured out?"

"The . . . broken windows. I thought it was him."

"Why would you think that?"

Adam glanced around like he wanted to either disappear or make a dash for the door.

Confused, she tried to ignore the sinking sensation hitting her in the solar plexus. "What is it you're not telling me?" When he didn't answer, she asked, "Does this have to do with your trip to LA?" She didn't want to believe the dark suspicions crawling through her mind.

"That was just a business trip. Maybe I made a mistake about Stockwell." He studied the brochure again. "Can I have this?"

"I guess so. Where are you going?"

“To make a few phone calls,” he said over his shoulder at the front door.

“When will you be back?”

“I’ll call you.”

“What are you going to do now?” Sydney asked, one red eyebrow arched provocatively as she eyed Melvin and Sheryece. They were all crowded in the back corner of the fireplace again, rubbing shoulders and elbows in the dimly lit gloom. Sheryece would have much preferred one of the upstairs bedrooms, but Sydney stubbornly refused to talk anywhere but here. So here they were.

Sheryece didn’t mind. Melvin said they’d shared fireworks together and more, confirming in her mind that the two were meant to be together. Though Melvin didn’t care about his Royal status or losing the lifestyle he was born into, it would be nice if her sister and Melvin could be together as equals in the Realm. If she could only convince her stubborn twin to quit confining herself to a witch’s status and to let herself flow “outside the lines,” as humans put it. Much as Sheryece would love to save her sister from her self-imposed prison, only Sydney could change her own thoughts about who she was and what she deserved.

“I’m not allowed to do anything. This is your job,” Sheryece answered.

“You’re supposed to help,” Sydney said in a sarcastic tone, her gaze shifting from Sheryece to Melvin. “How are you going to get out of this, Mel?”

A casual shrug. “I’ll intercept Adam’s calls, and he’ll believe he must have made a mistake before. Simple. Now let’s blow this smokestack and take a vacation, Syd.”

Sheryece nudged Melvin with her elbow. “Sydney has a job to do, and you’re supposed to be helping her, not distracting her.”

“But distractions are so much more fun.” He brushed his hand through Sydney’s hair and wrapped a red curl around his index finger. “Aren’t they, Syd?”

She slapped his hand away with a scowl that didn’t match the glimmer of pleasure in her eyes or the very revealing blush darkening her cheeks. “No, they are not. I wouldn’t go anywhere with you if you were the last warlock in the Realm.”

Melvin laughed. “Pretending you don’t want me won’t work anymore, Syd. Not after . . .”

“If you say one more word,” Sydney warned.

“I think you two need some privacy,” Sheryece interrupted. “Melvin, don’t forget Adam. He’s almost to his place, and he’ll be making those phone calls in a few minutes.” With that she zapped herself back to her castle in the clouds and into the waiting arms of her own dear love, murmuring a prayer that everything would indeed turn out happily ever after.

Adam returned home to fifty phone messages, all from Lisa, demanding to know where he was,

and that he call her. His polite “I’m not interested” responses were obviously not working. Maybe silence would get the message across. He erased the phone tape and called A-1 Insurance.

A few minutes later, after talking to the secretary he mentally admitted defeat and said, “Thanks for your time.” Perplexed, he dropped the phone in the cradle and ran his fingers through his hair. Had he dreamed that phone call to A-1 before? He’d been exhausted, running on adrenaline. He couldn’t come up with any other way to explain the mistake about Mel Stockwell. He flipped open the brochure again. The guy had done a great job, so why did Adam’s brain still insist Stockwell wasn’t what he seemed?

Tossing the brochure on the kitchen counter, he paced around, telling himself he’d let his jealousy get the best of him. He needed to worry about Jerome and his brother, not Stockwell. This insecure feeling was an experience he wished he could throw off like a wet raincoat. “All because I haven’t told Elizabeth the truth,” he muttered to himself. “I’ve got to come clean.”

Frustrated, he called the PI he had working on Jerome. The woman said she was still digging. “Hang in there, Adam.”

What else could he do? Hang himself?

Now there’s a happy thought.

“You’re keeping tabs on my brother, right?” he asked, needing reassurance that something was being done to protect his brother.

“Yes. I’ve got an inside source watching over him and searching for dirt on Jerome. We’re checking into the concrete deal you mentioned and the fire that destroyed those ten houses, and we’re digging into JS Construction to see if we can find a link to Jerome. We’ve got several other possibilities to check as well, but the man knows what he’s about, and he’s covered his tracks.”

On that uninspiring note, he said goodbye and decided to head over to Elizabeth’s and do some work. There were still a couple hours left of the workday. Though most of the crew had finished their jobs, Tom was painting the molding on the inside, completing the detail work Elizabeth wanted done. Adam could help and, he hoped, figure out how to tell Elizabeth about Jerome and what was going on.

His hand was on the door when the phone rang.

“Adam, so glad I caught you,” Jerome’s phony accent came over the line, soft and insistent. “I’d like a progress report.”

Damn, damn, damn. He used the first thing to pop in his head. “She had some windows broken and just had them replaced. One was stained glass, very expensive.”

“But she had the money to replace them.” Disapproval.

His fingers tightened around the phone, and he wished he could strangle the man. Or his brother.

“She’s almost completed the house, hasn’t she?” Jerome asked.

“Yes.”

“Then an electrical fire that destroys the house might be in order.”

Destroy the house? He hated this guy. “What about insurance?” he asked, hoping to stall. He just needed a few more days.

Jerome’s voice mellowed. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll make sure whatever insurance she has is lost at the company’s end. You make sure the policy is burned when the place goes up.” He chuckled, the sound reminding Adam of a vicious hyena. One Adam was determined to put behind bars. Blast it all, this conversation would be so perfect to do just that. If only Jerome were talking to someone else.

“I’ll wait until the end of next week when all the workmen are done,” Adam said.

“You aren’t going soft on her are you, Adam?” The man’s fake British accent hardened into words chipped from ice.

“Soft? Of course not,” he forced out, while his mind conjured up Elizabeth’s wonderfully soft curves. He’d gone soft all right. The memory of the way she’d run into his arms and kissed him filled him with guilt. If he had to choose between Elizabeth and his brother, what would he do? “Don’t worry,” he assured Jerome. Sweat dripped into his eyes as he hung up. Swallowing another curse about his circumstances, he headed to Elizabeth’s.

Syd nibbled her bottom lip, realized she was picking up an Elizabeth trait, and stopped. She looked at Mel who was bouncing on Elizabeth’s bed, boredom etched on his face.

“A-1’s been handled,” he said.

“Yes, I know. We’ve been listening to Adam’s phone calls together, haven’t we?”

“So, what’s wrong now?”

“It’s Jerome. He doesn’t believe Adam. He’s coming here. He could ruin everything.”

“Or he could put his neck in a noose and get caught,” Mel said, wearing a smug look.

“You put that idea into his head, didn’t you?”

“No. I can’t do anything without your say-so. This is your true love case. But if you don’t like it, change his mind. It’s your soul on the line.”

“Yeah, and don’t you look happy about it?”

He rocked to his feet and in two long strides had his hands on her shoulders. “Syd, I’m only allowed to *help* you. The decisions are yours, as are the consequences.”

She shoved him back. “And my oblivion really concerns you?” If she believed that she deserved oblivion, she told herself.

His mouth tightened a moment, then he said, “Yes, it does. Didn’t the other night mean anything

to you?"

"Wait a minute, that's my line, Mel. You're the warlock with the reputation."

"Have you ever thought that maybe those rumors aren't true?" he asked, glaring at her, his stance rigid, his dark eyes angry.

She rather liked him with fire in his eyes. Little chills ran down her spine as she glared right back. There was something so stimulating about this. Exciting. Steamy.

Steamy?

As in hot?

Oh my stars, was she hoping he'd kiss her?

I must be out of my mind, she bemoaned to herself, moving back a step when he moved forward.

"My castle or yours?" he said, the smug expression returning to his face.

"I don't own a castle. I live in a cave . . . like all true, nasty, wicked witches."

"Who're you trying to convince?" He touched her hair. "Not me. I don't believe you're nasty or wicked. You're gorgeous and oh, so exciting, Syd. You do things to me."

"What things?" she breathed, her heart speeding out of control as he brushed his lips across her cheek. Then she realized what she'd said and how she'd said it. As though she was ready to melt into his arms and let him take her away to his castle for another magic-fest in bed.

For the first time in her life she felt conflicting emotions tearing at her. She'd never imagined that a part of her wanted what Mel offered, but there it was, warring with the other side of her that liked her comfortable, isolated, miserable life.

Miserable?

It wasn't miserable.

She liked the dark rooms in her cavernous hideout and the lightning and thunder she conjured up outside for entertainment. True, she'd never gone in for the really bad stuff, conjuring demons, hurling humans into hellish nightmares, or trapping people into animal forms. Other than the one miscreant who'd danced with her and made her feel special only to ask her for help in getting a date with Sheryece. That spell had only lasted a fortnight. So what did that mean?

A flush of heat crawled up her neck as she met Mel's gaze. He'd taken a step back and was watching her, his arms crossed, feet apart, body once more donning a black tux and splendid cape, dark hair magically grown out and brushing his shoulders again. A surge of desire gripped her, so strong it stole her breath, made it hard to think. Yet one shocking idea lingered. What if she wasn't meant to be a witch?

Ridiculous!

She'd always wanted to be a witch.

Hadn't she?

Ever since Sheryece declared she was going to be a godmother and help humans find true love, a soft voice whispered. A voice she did her best to ignore.

The feeling of envy and a sense that she could never follow in her twin's wake, or she'd forever be in shadow, gripped her tighter than a boa constrictor. Much as she tried to push back other feelings and memories, she couldn't hold back the recollection of despair and her thought that she was meant to forever be in shadows, meant to be a witch.

All because she believed she wasn't good enough?

Syd shoved that idea back into the black hole it crawled out of. Of course she was good enough! She was Sydney Mannville, and she loved her gloriously rotten reputation. All this poppycock in her head was Mel's fault.

"Why are you scowling, dear Syd?"

"I'm visualizing you as a penguin, outcast to the furthest regions of the Arctic."

"Syd, Syd, you hurt me, you really do." He knelt down on one knee. "Don't freeze me out. I want you. I love you. Marry me." He suddenly looked like he'd spit up a huge toad, his face pasty, his mouth open.

She waited for him to say what his expression already told her. "Slip of the tongue, Mel?" she asked as the silence became strained.

His bow tie vanished and he loosened his collar. "Syd . . ."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't hang Prince Melvin the Magnificent with a wedding vow. Although being engaged to a witch would get you demoted and thrown out of the Royals, wouldn't it?" She should do it, she thought. Tell everyone he'd proposed.

They'll never believe it.

They'll laugh at me, not Mel.

They'll call me a liar.

No, they'll call me a warped witch out to ruin Mr. Perfect.

So? It would be true. You would be trying to ruin him, wouldn't you?

Yes, but . . .

But what?

She stared at Mel, appalled at herself. She didn't *want* to hurt him, let alone embarrass him.

She didn't know how to label this absurd sense of protectiveness, but she was not giving in to it. "Look, Mel, I won't say a word about this, it's forgotten . . . if you'll tell me why you owe Sheryece."

"Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"You can't deny your proposal. I'll stand on the mirror of truth and . . . and swear to it if I have to."

Instead of appearing upset, he grinned, then laughed. "I do believe you mean it. Dear, sweet, Syd. I don't want to deny my proposal. I admit it surprised me, coming out unplanned like that. But if there's ever a woman of magic for me, it's you."

"Don't call me dear or sweet or any other sickening endearment! You can't possibly stand there and tell me you love me. That's the most preposterous thing I've ever heard."

He snapped his fingers, and suddenly she was in the castle room where they'd spent the night. Only now, one wall was mirrored, and she stood before it, Mel beside her, he in his tux, she in a floor-length, skin-tight red-sequined gown, long red gloves on her arms, a heavy diamond necklace fastened at her throat, her red hair arranged in an array of curls trailing down her back.

Mesmerized, Syd blinked, indecision gnawing at her. Was this her or a trick of Mel's?

She lifted her hand to her face, touched her hair, watching the vision in the mirror do the same. For one exquisite, unbelievable moment, she felt like a queen worthy of Mel. She felt beautiful, like the most prized possession in a dragon's secret treasure mound. Then she imagined Sheryece beside her, a radiant smile blazing so brightly Syd paled into a piece of cut glass. The diamonds around her neck lost their sparkle and the dress its allure. Most of all, Syd saw her every short-coming, from her horrible hair color to her yucky complexion to her overlarge curves.

Sheryece's hair was more golden-red, her complexion more like cream, her curves more willowy. Even Sheryece's eyes were a darker, more hypnotizing shade of green.

She realized Mel was speaking to her, and that she hadn't heard a single word. Good. She didn't want to hear what he had to say. The man was trying to make her feel like a fool and succeeding.

With a wave of her hand, she was back in her comfy black robes, her hair a loose, wild, tangled mass. With a whispered word the familiar black walls of her cave surrounded her, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Home. Safe. Alone.

So why did she feel damned to oblivion now more than ever?

Chapter Sixteen

Elizabeth waited until Tom had left before approaching Adam. Adam seemed obsessed with

completely insulating and sheet-rocking the basement, even though it would only be used for storage and the laundry and hadn't been a part of his bid.

She descended the stairs quietly and stopped at the bottom to watch as he pressed the final sheet into place and slammed nails home, *whack, whack, whack, whack*. He'd taken off his shirt, and it lay in a heap near her feet. Without thinking about it, she retrieved it and put it on the washer. When he lowered his hammer, she said, "Adam?"

He jumped and turned in one motion. "You startled me."

In a good way or bad way, she wondered, recalling the texture of his sun-bleached hair, the smooth and hard sensation of his muscles beneath her palms, the strength of his hands and the fluid way he moved, as though every aspect of his job were easy. Should she ask him to stay for dinner, for the night, or wait for him to say something? What would a pioneer woman do? "I put some lasagna in the oven. It'll be ready in thirty minutes if you'd like some."

The hesitancy in Elizabeth's voice jabbed Adam's heart. He'd barely spoken to her. He was being a jerk. But he felt so damn bad about everything. How the hell could he tell her? He eyed the hammer in his hand, thinking it'd be easier to brain himself than hurt her. Determined to do the right thing, he closed his toolbox, hefted it, and started toward the stairs and her.

"I'd love some lasagna," he said, thinking he'd love anything Elizabeth cooked. "I'll go home and clean up, be back by six. That okay?"

He wanted to kiss her, but figured he smelled like a hot, sweaty horse and sidled by, climbing the stairs quickly, pausing at the top. "See you in thirty minutes."

He race-walked to the truck and sped down the drive.

Elizabeth grabbed Adam's shirt and ran to the door, but his taillights were already half a block away. Heck, she decided she'd wash it and give it back to him nice and clean and soft. With the washer filling, she threw in some soap, tossed in her own clothes, then pressed his shirt to her face, inhaling the scent of him on the cloth and imagining his arms wrapped around her, his mouth warm on her ear, her neck, her . . .

Enough already. She started to throw the shirt in the washer. Something stiff moved beneath her fingers. She unbuttoned the breast pocket and pulled out several business cards, smiling to herself. How many times had she washed her jeans with tissues in the pockets? Well, she'd saved Adam's cards from a soggy fate anyway.

As the washer agitated and rumbled, she climbed the stairs, leaving the cards on top of the dryer.

Envisioning a romantic dinner, she set candles on the table, put out two gold-rimmed china plates, bright yellow napkins, her grandmother's antique brassware, and the crystal wine glasses that had belonged to her parents.

Her reflection in the hood of the stove reminded her that she needed to change clothes and brush her hair. She dashed upstairs, peeling off her t-shirt and baggy jeans as soon as she crossed into her bedroom. Without a thought, she smoothed the rumpled bedcovers before laying out her new dress, then washed her face, brushed her hair and slipped on the soft, summery concoction that fit her perfectly. With a hop and a skip of excitement, she hurried back to the kitchen. Everything was ready.

Except Adam's shirt.

She dashed down the stairs and transferred the wet clothes to the dryer. Reaching for the fabric softener sheets from the shelf overhead, she sent his business cards scattering across the cement.

The buzzer for the lasagna went off. Scooping up the four cards, she rushed upstairs, turned the oven temperature down to warm, and began straightening the cards into a neat pile. Two had turned over and had numbers jotted on the back in pen.

She blinked, staring at the second number in disbelief. Jerome's work number? "The nine could be a seven," she told herself, a knot forming in her stomach, stealing her breath. She yanked out the kitchen drawer where she'd stashed Adam's estimate and compared the numbers. Both were in Adam's writing. And the nines were nines. Jerome's number.

LA.

Business.

Broken pipe.

Broken windows.

Broken heart.

The doorbell rang twice, and she couldn't move. Could hardly think past the shock. Adam knew Jerome. Jerome had promised he'd destroy her. The card slipped from her fingers, fluttering to the tile, landing with Jerome's number face down, Adam's name and the name of A-1 Construction on the front.

The sharp raps on the door wrenched her attention from the card. He was here. What should she do? Confront him? Pretend she didn't know?

Her jaw clenched at the idea of pretending anything. She'd tried to pretend everything was all right with Jerome and look where she'd landed. Not again. Never again. She was a pioneer woman, and she'd been betrayed.

Tears smarted in her eyes, and she brushed them away, swallowing back the rest as she stalked to the door and yanked it open. She'd never hit anyone in her life and didn't imagine doing it now. But when she saw Adam's smiling face, blood roared in her ears, her heart sped, red fury scorched her insides, and she swung, her fist slamming into his jaw.

Adam's smile disappeared as his head snapped back.

Pain throbbed through her hand and up her arm.

He staggered backwards on the porch, mis-stepped and crumpled to the deck.

"Adam!" Oh my gosh, what had she done? Cradling her throbbing knuckles, she knelt beside him, all her anger spent. She shook his shoulder, relieved when he groaned and blinked.

“What-what happened?”

“I . . .” She helped him sit up. “I . . . hit you.” She bit back an apology. He deserved it. Deserved worse, if it were true. IF. Did she really have any doubts left?

He gingerly touched his jaw. “You’ve got one helluva punch. Who did you think I was? A burglar?”

Adam rubbed his jaw, feeling like his brains had been squeezed through his left ear and were now a scrambled mess.

Elizabeth’s green eyes narrowed at his questions and the sympathy fled from her expression. She rolled back on her heels and stood over him. “I would have preferred a burglar.” She stalked into the house and slammed the door.

He staggered to his feet and pushed open the door, hesitating just inside, not wanting to get slugged again. “Elizabeth?”

“What?”

It came from the kitchen. He approached warily. “Can we talk about this?” Whatever *this* was.

She came out, holding one of his business cards and his work shirt, laundered and folded. The shirt hit him in the chest, and he caught it with one hand. “Thank you. I think.”

She slapped the card in his other hand. “Don’t forget this.”

“My business card. What . . .” A horrible, sinking sensation slammed into him as he flipped the card over. Jerome’s number. Hell and damnation. He’d really screwed this up. “It’s not what you think . . .”

One raven eyebrow lifted. Her stormy blue-violet eyes appeared almost black. “Oh?” Pure derision laced her tone, no hint of softness or salvation.

He opened his mouth to deny everything, but the lie wouldn’t come. “I do know your husband, your ex-husband, but I don’t like him.”

Another disgusted look. “No? You just work for him? You come here and pretend to be my friend, pretend . . .” Her voice broke. The look in her eyes made him feel like crawling beneath the tile. “How much did he pay you to make the pipe leak and break the windows?”

Not waiting for an answer, she brushed past him, strode to the door, and yanked it open.

“Elizabeth, it wasn’t-I didn’t-Elizabeth . . .” Words choked him. There were none to take away the hurt in her eyes. He deserved to be squashed like a blood-sucking mosquito for ever believing one word Jerome had said. But he’d wanted so desperately to get solvent again, pay back his creditors and his friends that he’d been willing to believe the man even against his own gut instincts. Now his instincts implored him to stick with the truth, get on his knees, and beg for forgiveness.

“You can send me the bill for the work you’ve done. There’s only a bit of molding left and Tom

can finish that up tomorrow. I don't want you to come near me or this house again. If you do, I'll call the police and turn you in."

Humiliated, his face burning, he forced his stiff legs to move and carry him out to the porch, feeling like a wooden soldier who'd been gutted and thrown on a trash pile. And he had no one to blame but himself. He faced her one last time. "Give me a chance to ex"

The door swung shut, the lock clicked into place, and the silence echoed in his heart. Telling himself she just needed time to cool off, that it wasn't the end, he climbed into his truck and drove. But the emptiness inside disputed the notion of her ever trusting him again.

Finally, driving on fumes, he pulled into the gas station where Lisa worked and filled the tank, relieved not to see her inside. The last thing he needed was another confrontation. He'd told her he wasn't interested, but the woman had the persistence of a piranha.

"You're all dressed up."

Mentally, he stifled a groan as he turned and faced the blond. She must have gone across the street to the video store because she had a rental in her hand. "Hello, Lisa."

She offered him a bright smile. "Want to come over and watch a movie? I just got off work."

His brain wrestled with his anatomy. "Uh, no. Actually I'm on my way to the airport."

The smile faded, and she gave him a pouty look and brushed her lips across his cheek. "Sure we can't have some fun first?"

He eased back, wondering if he was being a fool, but unable to envision making love with anyone but Elizabeth. "Look Lisa, I enjoyed our date before, but . . . you're a lot younger than me, and we have different interests."

"I know where your interest is, so don't waste your breath. You don't want to be with me? Fine."

Before he could respond, she stalked off.

What next, he wondered as he drove home. Once there, he picked up the phone and dialed Elizabeth's number. Her machine answered. "Elizabeth, it's me. Please, talk to me."

An hour later, he tried again. And again. And again.

He fell asleep with the phone in his hand.

Elizabeth listened to Adam's third message and turned down the volume on her answering machine to zero, then climbed the stairs and buried herself beneath the blankets on her bed. Usually the cocoon of warmth made her feel better, but tonight her brain wouldn't stop running, nor her tears. She hugged her pillow, told herself she was a pioneer woman, she didn't need a slug like Adam in her life, and cried some more. It seemed like she'd just dropped off into sleep when something awakened her.

Surely Adam wouldn't pull another stunt now. Grabbing her robe and pulling it on over her nightshirt, she snagged the flashlight and padded downstairs to the kitchen, carefully peering between the window blinds.

Nothing.

She realized she was holding her breath and exhaled. At the same time, the dark silhouette of someone's head passed by the window.

She dashed to the front door, hefted the flashlight, figuring she'd shine it in his eyes, and opened the door a crack.

Coming up behind the person she realized it wasn't Adam, wasn't a man. Whoever it was, was busy painting graffiti on the exterior.

Elizabeth pressed the switch, flooding the woman's back with light. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

A squeak of fright. The woman whirled, throwing the spray can at Elizabeth's head. Elizabeth dropped the light as she deflected the can. "Wait!" She ran after the blond, dashing down the driveway.

Gravel dug into her bare soles and she yelped in pain. The woman vanished into the darkness while Elizabeth backed to the porch and brushed the offending rocks from her feet. She'd gotten a glimpse of the woman's face, and it seemed to ring a bell somewhere, but where?

Oh my gosh. Did this mean Adam was innocent?

No, he had Jerome's phone number, and he admitted he knew Jerome.

But that was all he admitted, another part of her chimed.

Maybe you should give him a chance to explain.

She tromped back into the house and called the police, resisting the urge to call Adam as she waited for them. He'd lied to her and betrayed her trust, and she had no reason to call him.

Except that you love him.

She told that still, small voice in her head to shut up and distracted herself with a cup of hot cocoa as she waited for the police.

Like before, they made a report of the incident, took down her description of the blond, and said, "We'll look into it."

Elizabeth politely said, "Thank you," thinking she wouldn't hold her breath and returned to bed. Now, more than ever, it felt big and empty, and she missed Adam's comforting warmth beside her. Telling herself she'd get over him, stroking Velvet who was curled on the empty pillow beside her, Elizabeth squirmed deeper beneath the blankets and closed her eyes. A pioneer woman did not lose sleep over a lying, deceitful man, she told herself.

Unfortunately, this pioneer woman did.

Chapter Seventeen

Syd's palms were sweating. Even her hair hung limp and straight on her forehead and shoulders, the natural curl fading as her anxiety mounted. This was going all wrong. All wrong. She watched Elizabeth talk to the police, thinking that now Elizabeth would give Adam a chance to apologize and explain, but instead the dimwit had gone to bed.

Mel suddenly appeared in the fireplace, his feet in the light, the rest of him shadowed. "She's not a dimwit. She has every right to be upset. I told you this would happen."

"Oh, and you're the expert on true love?" Syd snapped, wishing he hadn't said anything of the sort.

"As a matter of fact, I know a thing or two."

Though she couldn't see his face, she knew he was wearing one of his arrogant, smug expressions. The kind that infuriated her to no end.

"Well then, Mr. Warlock know-it-all, what should I do now?"

"Give her time to cool down. Then manipulate things a bit so the two run into each other and *have* to talk."

She began to say that was a lousy idea, but found herself liking it instead.

"And while they're cooling their jets, we can take a mini-vacation to the stars and get our relationship straightened out." He glided from his corner to hers and put his arms around her.

"Relationship? What relationship? What is it with you and vacations? I said *no* before. Are you deaf?" She shoved against his chest, but his embrace merely tightened.

She opened her mouth to tell him he was one second away from becoming a flaming shish kebab when his mouth swooped down on hers and claimed it with a very possessive, passionate kiss that left her breathless and spread a scalding tide from scalp to toenails. She'd never made love in a fireplace she thought as he kissed her again, his tongue finding hers, teasing and tasting even as she tasted his own smoky blend of masculinity.

"Marry me, Syd," he whispered between kisses, his voice strangely husky, the sound affecting her knees, which were becoming more and more unstable.

"I can't," she murmured, all the whys lining up in her head and lending a sense of desperation to

her kisses. He was a prince. A Royal. He was in love with Sheryece and willing to accept her as a substitute. His brain was fogged with lust, and he didn't know what he was doing.

His kisses left her mouth to torment her ear, first one lobe, then the other.

"Change your ways, Syd. Become a godmother. Marry me."

The words sank in as he buried his face in her cleavage, kissing her breasts through the black fabric of her robes.

A godmother? He wanted her to become a godmother like Sheryece? She didn't want to be Sheryece. She'd spent her entire existence trying to separate herself from her sister's shadow. He expected *her* to change, to give up her life, such that it was, for *him*? All the fire of passion erupted into fury. With a shove of her hand she transported them both to the Gallatin riverbank, and he toppled in. Drenched from head to foot, he staggered from the current, cursing with every soggy footstep. "You damned obstinate witch! If there was an oblivion for witches, I'd hurl you there myself!"

If there was . . . "What did you say?"

A veiled look closed over his face, and he froze, then said with a glib pretense, "Nothing, Syd. You caught me off guard. I was just blowing steam. Angry." With every word he lost credence, and finally he seemed to realize it and shut his mouth with a tight expression of consternation.

"Angry, huh?"

Angry enough to let something slip? He had the face of a guilt-stricken human. She should know. Adam's face had worn the same little-boy-in-trouble expression when Elizabeth accused him of working with her ex.

"Now Syd," Mel took another squishy step up the bank, waved his hand, and was dry and perfectly coifed again.

Syd lifted her arms and lightning flashed, striking the ground beside him, and making him jump. She smiled as a roar of thunder rolled across the heavens, transporting her yell through the other realm with all her supernatural force. "Sheryece!"

Her twin took several minutes to respond. Minutes in which Mel appeared beside her, then shifted from foot to foot under her scrutiny. He opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and closed it again.

Sheryece blew into view amidst a white fluffy cloud which dissipated into mist with the lift of one finger. "Oh my, Sydney, you're all covered with cinders and cobwebs. And that stormy expression doesn't suit you at all. What in black hats and white rabbits is the matter?" She shot Mel a questioning look, and his cheeks actually turned an apologetic pink.

Sheryece covered her mouth with her hand, muffling her "Oh, dear."

"Oh dear. That's all you have to say?" Syd snarled, feeling like a lioness who'd been on a leash and now found herself free. "You lied to me, didn't you?"

Sheryece faked an ignorant look that Syd saw through immediately. They were twins after all.

Her innocent, “Lied about what, Sydney?” didn’t cut it either.

“Sending me to oblivion. The curse. You never cast it. You just said it to manipulate me! To--to--to turn me into a goody-goody-glass-slipper-toting-godmother!”

Sheryece wished Melvin hadn’t blown it, but now that the black cat was out of bag, she felt a curious mixture of relief and anxiety. She didn’t approve of lying, and this lie had bothered her since she’d lost her temper and hurled it at her twin as though all the force of doom lay behind it. Yet, she’d come so close to seeing Sydney transformed that it hurt to watch her sister’s face once more bearing the ugly scowl that for the last few months had hardly ever crossed her features.

Not only that, but Sydney had shredded Melvin’s pride once too often, Sheryece could see it in his rigid stance and the tight furious line of his mouth. No matter how he felt about Sydney, he’d never admit it again or admit he would give up his title for Sydney now. If only she could make them see how meaningless all this bickering was. If only Syd could love herself and see herself as Sheryece saw her. As Melvin saw her. The warlock was top-hat-over-black-boots in love. Something he’d decided long ago would never happen. Not after

“I’ll let you two mirror images work this one out without me,” Melvin said, breaking into her fast-firing thoughts, then vanishing with a blink of his dark eyes.

“There’s nothing to work out,” Sydney said, venom in her tone, her green eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. “I may not be as powerful as you, but I will find a way to get even. That’s what witches do best, don’t they?”

“Sydney, wait” But her sister disappeared in a stinky black cloud of smoke that left Sheryece coughing the rest of her sentence, “What about Elizabeth and Adam?”

She’d given this matter of true love to Sydney. She couldn’t interfere. Sydney had to bring them together. And she had to convince her sister to do it. But how?

Adam heard a knock on his door and yanked it open, the word, “Elizabeth?” dying on his tongue as he faced a thirty-ish policewoman built like a tank, her badge in her hand and held up for his inspection.

“Adam Gardiner?” she asked.

“Yes?” All he could think of was that Elizabeth had accused him of vandalizing her house. He probably should have expected it, but she’d said she wouldn’t, and he’d believed her. Of course, he deserved to be prosecuted.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions about Lisa Trembly.”

“Lisa who?”

She stepped inside, and he stepped back and closed the door, wondering how many neighbors were spying on him through their window blinds. He’d never felt so conspicuous or so guilty, and he hated both.

After a glance around, she pulled a notebook, saying, "Lisa Trembly. Your girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" His brain finally kicked in. "You mean the Lisa from the gas station that I took to dinner one time?" He leaned against the edge of a barstool. "We had one date, and she's been calling and bugging me ever since. I keep telling her I'm not interested, but she doesn't seem to get it."

"So, you're saying she's not your girlfriend?"

He wished he could tell what the woman was thinking. "No, she's not! I hardly know her. Elizabeth is the one I" The word *love* choked him, and he cleared his throat under the woman's polite but cool stare.

"Would that be Elizabeth Benning?"

"Yes, but what's this all about?" He mentally kicked himself for not asking the question sooner.

"Apparently, Lisa Trembly's been vandalizing Elizabeth Benning's house. She spray-painted red graffiti all over the outside of the house last night, and Ms. Benning scared her off. We found a spray can and ran prints. Ms. Trembly has since confessed to breaking Ms. Benning's windows and spraying the house with paint out of jealousy over you. She was hoping Ms. Benning would leave and you would go out with her again."

"What?"

She repeated her statement.

Mind-boggled didn't begin to describe how he felt about this turn of events. Nor did it describe the surge of gratitude that Elizabeth hadn't turned him in after all.

He had to see her. Stifling his impatience, he answered the policewoman's questions, then followed her out the door. "Does Elizabeth know?"

"Yes, I called her prior to coming here."

Hope rushed through him. Maybe she'd talk to him now. Give him a chance to explain.

Curbing more impatience he stuck to the speed limit through town and parked outside her house, seeing movement behind the half-open blind in the kitchen. Tom must have finished because Elizabeth's car was the only one here besides his truck. As he climbed out, he wished belatedly he'd brought flowers and candy and anything else the local market might have that would soften a woman's heart. He remained by the truck, considering a hasty retreat. She'd seen him drive up, and she'd wonder what the heck he was doing if he backed back down the drive and left.

No, he'd better go ahead and apologize, explain, beg for forgiveness, and bring an armload of presents next visit. Assuming there was another visit.

Of course there would be, he told himself. There had to be. The idea of a lifetime without Elizabeth in it, the loss of her brilliant heart-thumping smile, never to feel her exquisite body in his arms or experience her mind-blowing passion again shot him full of a panic worse than the threat of jail. Hell, he'd rather go to jail than hurt Elizabeth.

With that thought to spur his courage, he climbed the front porch steps and rapped on the freshly painted door. Realizing it only as his knuckles came away wet with light grey paint. He stepped back and noticed the shadow of lines beneath the newest layer of paint. Elizabeth must have been up at the crack of dawn. It was going to take another coat though to completely eradicate Lisa's handiwork.

The front door opened abruptly, and he forgot the graffiti, forgot everything in the rush of heat that struck him upon Elizabeth's presence. She had changed from paint duds to what looked like new and form-fitting navy shorts and a white and navy t-shirt. Bare armed, bare legged, and bare foot, she looked deliciously down to earth and sexy. Oh, so sexy. Her face was pink, as though she'd just scrubbed it, but a smudge of paint remained next to her ear.

She self-consciously nibbled on her lower lip, and the desire to kiss her anxieties away overwhelmed him. In two strides he stood before her, had his hands on her shoulders and his lips on hers. "Elizabeth," he murmured between kisses. "I've missed you, and I'm sorry. Please believe me."

"Oh, Adam. I'm sorry, too." She eased back, her mouth looking oh so kissable, but the rest of her saying she needed to talk. He throttled down on his racing pulse and lowered his hands to his sides.

"I should have given you a chance to explain," she said. "When I found out you weren't responsible for everything that's happened, I felt terrible. I mean, people are supposed to be innocent until proven guilty, and I didn't even let you defend yourself."

It would be so easy to let her believe Lisa was responsible for it all. That his acquaintance with Jerome was just some old business, the card long forgotten in a work shirt he hadn't worn in ages. "Let's talk inside."

Once seated in the kitchen, the half-truths lined up in his head, Elizabeth perched on a chair across from her, leaning forward expectantly, he couldn't speak. He heard the coffee pot bubbling madly and said, "Could I have a cup of coffee?"

With a smile he didn't deserve, she said, "Yes," and brought two mugs back to the oak table. He held it, studied the wolf painted on the ceramic, knew she was waiting, and took a deep breath. "I'm not completely blameless," he forced out, meeting her gaze, waiting for the openness in her eyes to disappear.

Elizabeth shook her head. How sweet of Adam to try and take the blame for some jealous woman's fantasies. "It's okay," she said, putting her hand over his, feeling the warmth of his skin, liking the way her fingertips barely reached past the knuckles of his big fingers, recalling the wonderful sensation of his touch, the hard planes of his body and the gentleness he was capable of.

"No, you don't understand." He withdrew his hand and straightened in his chair, drawing back as though wanting to put distance between them.

The notion that he and the blond had done more than just go out on a date or two occurred to her, and she tried to figure out why that should matter, since he was here and not with the Trembly woman, but her pioneer instincts were quivering, aroused, and she disliked the distrust rising in her chest, making it hard to breathe. "Was she doing it because you wanted her to? Because Jerome put you up to it?"

"No . . . hell, I hardly know her, Elizabeth. We went out once, then I told her I wasn't interested, and she kept calling and calling, and I should have realized she had a screw loose."

The flood of relief was so strong she jumped from her chair and threw her arms around his neck. “Oh, Adam. I’m sorry I misjudged you.” She kissed his ear and felt him shudder, kissed his neck and felt his arms wrap around her waist, pulling her sideways onto his lap. “You told me you only knew Jerome, and we never really talked about him, there was no reason for you to mention him, and I was wrong to jump to such a wild conclusion. You’re nothing like him.” Her words came out in a breathy rush between the kisses she planted on his stubbly cheek. He hadn’t shaved, but she figured rough whiskers would hardly stop a pioneer woman from apologizing to the man she loved.

His hands roamed up her back and down her side, warming and stroking, fanning the sparks between them into white-hot flame.

Adam knew he should set her away from him and finish with the truth, but her mouth was on his, her breasts soft beneath his exploring hands, her backside pressed intimately against the bulge in his jeans, her palms under his shirt, rubbing his chest and back. She squirmed on his lap, pulling away slightly so her fingers could loosen his belt and the buttons of his fly. When she stroked him through his jockeys, he knew there was no way they’d make it up the stairs to her bed.

Figuring he’d better move while he still could, he scooped her into his arms and carried her down the hall to the first guestroom, Casanova’s hideaway.

Chapter Eighteen

Sheryece stood outside Sydney’s dismal, depressing, cave, and called out, “Sydney!”

After several more tries, she hurled a lightning bolt at the mountain. It rumbled as though its sleep were interrupted. “Sydney! I must talk to you.”

A second lightning strike got Sydney to appear in the entrance. “What . . . do . . . you . . . want?”

The words were so sharp, angry, that Sheryece hesitated. Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea. Certainly, hurling lightning bolts and making curses were not godmotherly-type functions, but a godmother could do anything for the ultimate good of the person she swore to help. And she knew this was the right thing to do to get Sydney out of her bad habits and into new, more constructive ones.

“Why are you hassling me?” Sydney asked, her face pinched, her hand half-raised as though to blast Sheryece, or make the attempt.

“Because I love you. You’re my twin, and I want to see you happy.”

“I am happy!”

“Oh, Sydney, you are not. Why won’t you admit it? You were glowing with happiness when you were with Melvin. And he was happy, too.”

“He wants you, not me,” Syd said, wondering why she was standing here conversing with her twin. Sheryece had lied to her. This was probably another well-meant lie.

“Oh, fiddle-sticks. Melvin in love with me. That’s ridiculous! He’s only been in love once before and she”

Syd’s scalp prickled with curiosity. “She what?”

Sheryece frowned. “I shouldn’t say, but . . . will you forgive me if I tell you?”

“Forgive? As in forget?” No chance, sister, Syd thought.

“Forgive as in try to bring Elizabeth and Adam together and promise not to hurt Melvin.”

“What about hurting you?”

Sheryece sighed, the sound so depressingly sad that it tugged at Syd’s heart and for one second made her want to comfort her sister with a hug. Not a witchy-type response at all. Blast it all, she was not going to give in.

“If I tell you my secret, give you the power to hurt me, will you give Melvin a chance and help Elizabeth and Adam?”

Syd kept her mouth closed, uncertain what would come out, her thoughts racing. Finally, she said, “I’ll *talk* to Mel. And I’ll *consider* helping Elizabeth and Adam. If they need it.”

Sheryece figured that was the best she was going to get from Sydney. Sucking in air for courage, she said softly, “Prince Henry disliked me when we first met.” She swallowed, wondering if Henry would forgive her or leave her.

Sydney placed one hand on her hip, unimpressed. “So?”

“I fell in love with him. Love at first sight.”

“And he fell in love with you,” Sydney said, her tone impatient. “I know.”

“He was supposed to marry Princess Chantal, Melvin’s cousin, and I talked Melvin into wooing Chantal away from Henry. Melvin could turn a woman to putty.”

“I know,” Sydney drawled, eyebrows drawn together in irritation.

“So Melvin swept Chantal off her feet, and Henry finally noticed me. We fell in love and we’ve been so happy.”

“*That’s* the big secret?” Sydney demanded, incredulous and half-wondering if this were pure fabrication. “Who the hell cares now?”

Sheryece twisted the fabric of her gown with her hands, and Syd was startled by how much she could see of herself in her sister at that moment.

“In wooing Chantal, Melvin fancied himself really in love with her.” Her voice broke.

Syd sneered, “So?”

“When she learned he’d showered her with attention because of me, she refused to see him again, never forgave him.” Sheryece twisted another knot in her skirt. “He was broken-hearted, and on the day she wed another he determined to destroy himself. I stopped him and convinced him he’d get over Chantal.”

Syd gritted her teeth, annoyed. “I still don’t understand why this could hurt you.”

“The one thing Henry can’t stand is manipulation. If he knew that I’d plotted with Melvin to stop his marrying Chantal, I-I don’t know what he’d do.”

Syd rubbed her hands together as though celebrating her sister’s ruin. Strangely enough, the power didn’t ease the empty sensation inside or make her feel better. At the moment, hurting Sheryece seemed, well, anti-climactic. What bugged her was Mel. “How did you convince Mel he’d get over his broken heart?” Syd asked, thinking she’d like to slice Chantal’s heart into a thousand pieces and feed them to Elizabeth’s cat.

“I used my power to see into the future and find his true love. I convinced him that if Chantal had been the one for him she would have forgiven him, not run off and married that silly Duke George.”

“Not the blonde warlock with the frilly clothes?” Syd asked, recalling his brief appearance at Sheryece’s wedding. About as brief as her own, she thought.

“The very same. They’re sort of happy, I suppose.”

A grin tugged at Syd’s mouth at her twin’s doubtful tone. An unexpected chuckle caught in her throat as she remembered more of her sister’s wedding day. Syd had hoped to appear in a blast of red fire like Maleficent in the Sleeping Beauty tale and ruin the wedding. Not only had her timing been off, she’d appeared after the nuptials, but somehow, her stupid rhyme had gone askew, and she’d appeared with coils of red wire wrapped around her limbs, interrupting the celebration not with fear but paroxysms of laughter. Just another humiliating spell gone wrong.

She’d hibernated in her cave for half a century after that horrible foible, refusing all her twin’s invitations and entreaties, until finally Sheryece had hurled that awful curse at her. One that didn’t even exist. “I must be the most gullible witch on the face of the Realm,” she muttered, forgetting Sheryece, distracted by her thoughts.

So why did she want to laugh about it now? This change in her made no sense. It felt as though the past didn’t matter. But it did, she told herself, willing the chuckle and smile pulling at her lips into submission.

Sheryece cleared her throat. “What are you going to do?”

Syd raised an eyebrow, feeling decidedly wicked as her sister’s expression became more fretful. “I still don’t understand why Mel said he owed you a debt. From what you’ve said, I’d say you owe him

one.”

“I saved him from destroying himself,” Sheryece said.

“So, that makes you even.”

“Not to Melvin. He swore that if I ever needed him to help two humans find true love, he would. He’s a warlock with a very honorable heart.”

“Honorable heart?” Syd scoffed. “Try, a warlock in love. He’s in love with you and you’re too blind to see it.”

“Melvin is *not* in love with me,” Sheryece said with so much confidence that Syd found herself asking, “Then who is he in love with?”

“With you, you dimwit.”

Syd stared. Sheryece never used derogatory names or lost her temper. Well, hardly ever, she amended, recalling the “curse.” Her heart fluttered in her chest and a strange sensation akin to a warm glow washed over her, the words, “You really think so?” flowing from her mouth before she could regain control.

“Yes. But if you want him, you’re going to have to approach him. You’ve humbled him once too often. He does have some pride, you know.”

Pride, dignity, wide shoulders, great buns Oh my stars, it was happening again. Her imagination painting sexy images of Mel in her brain. She felt as though she stood on the edge of a precipice and with one wrong word or action she’d fall. But fall into what? And why did fear permeate her being as though she were facing oblivion after all? “I never said I wanted him,” Syd protested way too late and felt her face burn beneath her sister’s perceptive eyes. Annoyed, she turned away. “Goodbye, twin.”

“Wait,” Sheryece pleaded. “What about Adam and Elizabeth? You know I can’t interfere. I gave you the power to help them. I can’t do anything without your approval.”

“I said I’d *talk* to Mel, and I’d consider helping Elizabeth and Adam.”

“What about Henry?” her sister’s whisper followed her into the depths of her cave.

“Who?” she responded, wondering why she was being so damn nice, then deciding she didn’t really care. At this moment, she was uncertain just what she cared about. And until she figured that out, she was staying inside her cave. She hadn’t said *when* she’d talk to Mel or *when* she’d consider helping the two humans. The way time flew in the Realm, they could be dead before she turned her attention to them. The nasty thought reassured her that she was still as wicked and witchy as ever.

The Casanova room was meant to appeal to both men and women. Two walls were textured with beige on white string paper that added depth, a large red-framed mirror covered most of the third wall, and the fourth wall, behind the bed, had bold black, white and red stripes covering the bottom half, white molding along the edge, and red roses cut from wallpaper and individually pasted in a row above

the molding.

The bureau and bed frame were black lacquer, but the white bedspread, splashed with a red rose print mellowed the *Wolf on the Prowl* look, Elizabeth thought, eyeing it all from the bed's rumpled sheets, the morning sun shining through the red and white curtained window. Since the ballroom and sitting room and kitchen took one side of the first floor, she'd divided the other half into four bedrooms and had extra windows installed, so every room had natural light and a view of the mountains and blue sky.

She'd filled the smoke-colored glass vase on the bureau with red paper-maché flowers that were already dusty and decided fresh-cut red roses would be an improvement. Another expensive one, she thought, thinking she needed to downsize her Marie Antoinette tastes before the IRS guillotined her.

A whisper of warm air tickled her lower back, followed by teasing fingers. She caught Adam's hand. "Enough already."

"You sure about that?" Adam asked, flopping back against his pillow, his hair very gold against the red sheets, his green eyes full of humor and a dash of lust.

"Yes," she said, not sure at all. His touch had turned her to marshmallow creme last night. A smile built in her heart and tugged at her lips. She felt silly and romantic and told herself she should stop beaming at him but couldn't. Maybe it was her new pioneer spirit, but she felt like she'd claimed him last night in about every way a woman could claim a man, and the fact that he'd done his own "possessing" in action and words made the world sparkle today.

There was no place she'd rather be, she realized with a sense of delight, than right here with Adam. He looked downright sinful in red, and his bare chest made her fingers itch to run across the hard muscles, feel the soft blonde fuzz beneath them. She gave into the urge to touch him, and morning turned into afternoon.

"Shower together?" he asked much later, pulling her toward the bathroom, both of them wearing only goosebumps.

She laughed, nodding, feeling so much joy she could hardly believe it.

Beneath the hot spray, she hugged him tight, reveling in the feel. "I love you," bubbled out of her mouth before she could think to hold it back.

"What?" Adam eased away and brushed dripping hair from his face. "I didn't hear you."

Her heart hammered in her chest as though trying to warn her. She swallowed. "Would you like to go out for lunch?"

Adam ducked his head under the water again to hide his disappointment, mumbling, "Sure." He'd thought he'd heard the word "Love" but she'd been asking about "lunch." The way he'd felt when he'd imagined she'd said *I love you* to him, words he'd never said to a woman yet, made him acknowledge what he'd been trying to downplay since the moment he saw her. He loved her. In her baggy shorts and overlarge t-shirts, in her paint-smeared jeans, in her prim shirts and slacks, and in her breath-stealing blue velvet dress that outlined every sumptuous curve and gave new meaning to the word "seductive." He loved her, for better or worse. He had to tell her the entire, unvarnished truth before the load of guilt turned into an avalanche.

He waited until they'd eaten lunch, then suggested, "Let's take a walk by the river."

Sunshine, a cool breeze, Elizabeth's radiant smile, he hoped they'd all make his confession easier. They didn't. They walked along a tree-lined trail, the blue sky reminding him of Elizabeth's eyes, the sunshine, her inner goodness, and he felt like dirt. Even the soothing sound of the river didn't help.

Elizabeth could tell Adam was nervous. Was he going to propose? It was the only reason she could think of, after last night, for him to be so distracted. Deciding to help him out, she gathered her pioneer courage, gripped both his hands, held his gaze, and said, "I love you, Adam Gardiner."

She smiled up at him, waiting for the anxious edge in his eyes to disappear. It didn't.

"You do? I mean . . . that's great."

That's great? A queasy sensation sucked the air from her lungs, her thoughts spinning downward. Oh my God, she was such a fool! He didn't love her! Humiliation burned her cheeks. She crossed her arms, hugging herself, wishing she could disappear.

Half his brain ecstatic, the other half in a panic, Adam blurted, "I-I have to tell you something. I keep putting it off, and I can't anymore."

He was married, Elizabeth thought. Or engaged or . . . something.

He stepped back, as though anticipating she might take a swing at him again. "Last night you were only partly right . . . about me and Jerome."

"Jerome?" Her fingers curled into fists.

"He did hire me to come out here and . . . and see that you failed."

Elizabeth didn't know which was worse, the fact that her "I love you" had garnered a distracted "that's great," or the fact that Adam had been working for Jerome. For all she knew he still was.

"But I changed my mind," he blurted, speeding his words as storm clouds gathered in her eyes. "I told him the deal was off, and he threatened to ruin . . ."

"Was that before or after you loosened the pipe in the bathroom?" she asked in a loud caustic tone she didn't recognize as her own. It got louder, "It was you, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but . . ."

And higher. "And it was you faking the sounds in the house to scare me, too, right? So you could come rescue me?" She could feel heat crawling up her neck. How could she have been so gullible?

"No, I didn't . . ."

"And I suppose seducing me was just another duty?"

He didn't know when they'd stopped walking, but she was standing slightly above him on the

riverbank, glaring at him one moment, her hands on his chest shoving him the next.

He slid backwards, lost his balance, and fell backwards into the shallow current. Icy cold seeped through his jeans and the back of his shirt before he could get to his feet. By the time he did, Elizabeth was gone. With his truck? No. He wrestled the keys from a wet pocket and hurried up the trail. She'd need a ride back. She'd have to listen.

Elizabeth sobbed, great, gulping sobs that hurt her throat and, if anyone heard, would embarrass her to death. But they wouldn't be stopped or smothered or controlled.

She dashed up the trail in the opposite direction of Adam's truck, desperate to get away, while tears splashed down her cheeks with a will of their own. She ran, crying and sobbing, until her legs tired and her emotions dulled, then slowed to a walk.

She tried to tell herself he didn't matter. That got her legs pumping again, got her stomping up the road and across pasture in the direction of her house. A dot on the far hill.

Damn him. And damn Jerome. And damn herself for falling in love with the worst and most rotten guys around. *I should have punched him.* That shove had been far too "nice."

What would a pioneer woman do?

Whatever it was, Elizabeth promised herself she wouldn't accept anything from him again. Including explanations.

A pioneer woman would not let a man ruin her life, she decided. No matter if he'd ripped her heart out or not. She climbed the next hill with a fast and furious pace. By the time she reached her house her lungs were burning like she'd swallowed flames.

At the door, she paused to catch her breath, saw Adam's note taped to the molding and ripped it from the wood. Call him? He had to be crazy.

Stomping into the Casanova room, she tore the sheets off the bed, hurried to the basement, stuffed them into the washer and slammed the lid, cursing Adam all the way.

Upstairs, she kicked off her tennies, stripped off her sweaty clothes, and climbed into the shower. She was hot and sticky and tired. But the warm spray reminded her of their beautiful shower together and all the other precious moments, shredding her heart all over again.

She turned up the spray and leaned into it as deep, shuddering sobs erupted. She cried, and cried, and cried. And when she couldn't cry anymore, she dried off and crawled into bed.

Sheryece, who prided herself on never losing her temper, was ready to kick Melvin in the backside. “You love her, don’t you?” she demanded, exasperated by his brooding silence. He was worse than Sydney. Sitting in his gloomy castle tower, acting like a spoiled, petulant warlock who’d abruptly been told “no.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he finally said, glaring at her.

“Curse it all, Melvin, quit acting like a baby and grow up!”

His mouth dropped open. His neck reddened. His jaw snapped shut and tightened to a furious clench.

Oh dear, she’d said more than she should have. “You promised to help Sydney with Elizabeth and Adam. And *they* need help. Elizabeth won’t talk to Adam or give him a chance to make amends. And Adam’s feeling so guilty, and rightly so, that he’s letting Elizabeth slip away!”

Melvin’s gaze clouded.

“Melvin, are you listening?”

“Yes!”

“And?”

His gaze narrowed. “I’ll think about it.” He vanished in a puff of black smoke before she could ask for a more definitive answer.

She closed her eyes, seeking inspiration. Unfortunately, her own worries about Henry pervaded her thoughts. Would Sydney tell Henry? Or hold the secret over Sheryece’s head for a thousand years? Both scenarios frightened her. No, losing Henry frightened her because she loved him so much.

Maybe it’s time for him to learn the truth, her inner voice whispered.

What if he leaves me?

He loves you. He’ll come back.

She found herself twisting a knot in her gown. Irritated, she lowered her hands to her sides. The last thing she needed was to pick up one of Sydney’s bad habits. She had to handle this, no matter how scary, she couldn’t run any longer.

She stared at the wisps of smoke curling toward the sky and found herself wondering if she and her twin were so different after all. She had trapped herself with a lie and had denied it and tried to ignore it, and here it was, rising up again; whereas Sydney had trapped herself in negativity, believing the worst about herself, twisting every beautiful thought into a terrible one. Maybe, in her desire to save her sister, Sheryece realized, she just might liberate them both.

Maybe.

Before she could talk herself out of action, she returned home, but remained outside, seated on a

puffy, comforting cloud and drinking in the sight of the castle she and Henry had created together. It soared above the lovely fluffy cumulus, rising toward the sun, awash in a brilliant glow of pale light, a rainbow ribbon arching over the tallest spire. It was a place of love, meant to lighten and inspire and transform. And now she had to go in and tell Henry the truth.

Before she could snap her fingers, Sydney's magical call tugged at her awareness. When she didn't respond right away, Sydney's caustic tone filled her mind, "Do you want me to help them or not? If you do, then I've got an idea."

With one last glance back at the castle, Sheryece followed Sydney's message to the source.

"Hanging out in the chimney again?" she asked Sydney, wondering if this change of heart meant she wouldn't have to tell Henry anything, then feeling guilty for the thought. No matter what, she would tell Henry. Maybe not today, but soon.

"It's dark and quiet, and Elizabeth doesn't come in the ballroom much," Sydney said.

"So, what's your idea?"

Melvin abruptly appeared, dressed in a skimpy blue swimsuit, his skin glistening with water, a puddle forming around his feet. "You called, oh wicked one?"

Syd frowned, irritated at his lack of attire. "Where were you?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I was taking a dip in the Iristani's magical pools in the Realm."

Syd had heard the pools were for tortured souls in need of solace. Mel appeared neither tortured or in need of anything. He looked like an Olympic swimmer, tanned and fit, his wet hair dark as midnight, his eyes darker still and oh so hard to ignore. "Carrying on with the gate mistress?" she asked sarcastically.

His eyes slitted, and he spoke through clenched teeth. "I have had enough of your insults, Syd. You want my help, you stick to our *work*. Is that clear?"

Feeling miserable and mystified and guilty, Syd bit back a nasty retort and laid out her plan.

Sheryece didn't say a word, but her expression was not enthusiastic.

Melvin's face was an inscrutable mask. "You're in charge," he said.

Why did the words sound so ominous?

Adam spent the next day and night dialing Elizabeth's number and leaving messages, again and again and again. Finally, he fell asleep, then dreamed of three ghosts urging him to wake and go to her. Not just any ghosts either; the advertising guy, Mel Stockwell, and the redhead Sydney Black, and another Sydney, wearing white instead of black. Twin ghosts?

He awakened, puzzled, the ghostly images lingering in his mind. The urge to go to Elizabeth's

tugged at his resistance. It was cold and late, and she didn't want to talk to him, let alone see him. Why pummel himself with more rejection?

The three ghosts' voices rang in his head, "She loves you. Don't let her down."

Boy, his imagination was working way overtime. Still, he couldn't stop himself from driving by the place, hoping for a glimpse of her in the window, if only to torture himself. It was after eleven. She'd be asleep. Or awake and hating him.

He pulled to a stop at the bottom of the drive, eyeing the restored mansion, his chest aching as though someone had blasted a hole through it.

Would she believe him if he told her he loved her? She'd probably haul off and slug him. Why should she believe anything he said now? He was such an idiot, putting off the truth until it smeared everything with a liar's brush. He meant to back up and pull onto the road, but instead found himself climbing from the cab and tromping up the hill to her front porch, his fist poised to knock.

Elizabeth sat up in bed, a headache pounding behind her eyes, her mouth tasting of cotton balls from the half bottle of wine she'd consumed instead of dinner.

She frowned at the shimmering light filling her doorway, then rubbed her eyes only to look again and see three figures now standing there. Ghosts? Twin ghosts, both women redheads? The third image was male and familiar. In fact they all seemed familiar which maybe explained why she didn't feel afraid. She could see through all of them . . . to the hallway and staircase landing beyond.

Recognition struck even as she decided she was hallucinating. "Mel?" she gasped, wondering how his hair could have grown to his shoulders in the short space of time since she'd last seen him.

One of the redheads spoke. "We are the ghosts of this house. Condemned to haunt until we bring about true love between two humans. You alone can free us. We've brought Adam here. Please listen to him."

I'm hallucinating, Elizabeth told herself. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, staggered to the bathroom, and splashed her face with frigid tap water.

The pounding's getting worse, she thought as she patted her face dry and peered out the bathroom toward the doorway.

No one there. Definitely too much alcohol.

Whap, whap, whap. The pounding on the door, combined with the jackhammer inside her skull, dragged a groan from her throat.

Snatching her robe from the end of the bed, she pulled it on and padded downstairs, still trying to shake off the dream and the lingering headache. Through the peephole she saw Adam's anxious expression, sleeplessness etched around his eyes. She reached for the knob, barely stopping herself in time. He didn't deserve to be heard. Especially not at this time of night. He deserved to rot in misery for a year or two, maybe more.

As though he sensed her presence, he called, "Elizabeth!" The door shook.

“Go away!” She pressed her palms against her forehead, hoping to ease the pain. Pain that was all Adam’s fault.

“Please listen to me. Please.” The doorknob turned, the door shook again.

“I’m calling the police!”

“Elizabeth, please.”

She stood there, irresolute, her heart and her brain at war. How many times would she let herself be hurt?

Wasn’t love worth the risk? the other part of her returned.

No, she thought. Not anymore.

“Elizabeth, it’s freezing out here. Can’t we talk?”

She could feel herself weakening, her steel backbone slowly rusting away. Furious at herself and at him, she hardened her heart against his pleas and punched in the police department’s number. “I’d like to report a disturbance . . .”

Five minutes later, her resolve not to respond whittled down to a few metal threads, her fingers touching the knob, she heard a distant siren and trembled in relief as the door stopped shaking. Taking a deep breath, she looked through the hole. Adam was gone. She wanted to cry.

Adam raced down the hill, the idea of being arrested giving wings to his flight. Damn it all, why wouldn’t she at least give him a chance?

No, a better question was why had he listened to a stupid dream? Three ghosts? For Pete’s sake, he needed to have his head examined.

He pulled onto the road and was half a mile away when a police car whizzed past. Thanking his stars he’d avoided that humiliation, he returned home and spent the rest of the night tossing and turning in his lonely bed. Bound to be lonely for a very long time, he thought morosely. He’d lied to Elizabeth, and, if tonight was any indication, she was not about to forgive him.

Syd shook her head, facing Sheryece and Mel, the three of them in the chimney listening as Elizabeth told the police the prowler had gone. They listened as she climbed the stairs and the bed sighed beneath her weight. Not one of them said a thing. Finally, Syd couldn’t stand it. “All right. So it didn’t work. It should have. It worked for Scrooge.”

“I think the timing was off,” Sheryece said, her “nice” tone only annoying Syd more. She hated *nice*.

Mel lifted an eyebrow, leaving Syd to guess his thoughts, which was even worse.

Before Syd could talk herself out of the impulse racing through her veins, she waved her hand and took herself and Mel to his castle. To the same room where they’d . . . She banished those

thoughts from her mind and glared at him. “Out with it. Before I go nuts.”

“Out with what?” His raised eyebrow implied perplexity.

“Out with ‘it was a stupid idea’ and ‘only an idiot would have thought it.’ Sound familiar?”

“I wasn’t thinking that.”

She put her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. “Oh, Paa-leeaaaaaa-ssss-ee. It didn’t work, did it?”

“It almost worked, Syd. Sheryece and I went along with your idea because it had potential.”
Like you, his tone implied.

Potential? Hah. “All right. If you weren’t thinking I’m the dumbest witch in the land, what were you thinking?”

His midnight eyes darkened to mysterious, moonless depths. “I was imagining you . . . in my arms. . . .” He swallowed. “Kissing me and making all those luscious sexy sounds you make when. . . .”

Her face flamed hot. “That’s enough!” she sputtered, mortified at the blush she could not control. “I know Sheryece’s secret. I know about Chantal’s broken engagement to Henry and why you believe you are in my twin’s debt. And I know you’re in love with Sheryece. So you can stop all this nonsense she’s put you up to.”

“Nonsense?” Mel’s face darkened. “How dare you. You insolent witch!”

She backed up a step, then clenched her hands, determined not to give up another inch.

“Apologize,” he demanded.

“For what?”

“For doubting my word as a warlock,” he said through gritted teeth.

Her heart thudded against her rib cage, but she wasn’t about to back down. “You lied to Chantal for Sheryece. Why should this time be any different?”

Mel’s fingers curled into fists at his sides, his arrogant chin came up so that he was looking down at her through slitted eyes. Dangerous eyes. His mouth pressed together in a furious line.

Feeling like a mouse who’d just snagged a hungry cat’s attention, she froze. She might singe him a bit with a quick blast, but he could do a lot worse to her. In a war between a witch and a warlock, the laws of magic were clearly on the warlock’s side.

“Are you calling me a liar?” he asked in low, furious voice.

“If the boot fits,” she choked out.

His hair began to glow with dark purple light. She had provoked him beyond reason.

Her legs shook when he lifted his hand, readying to blast her into ash. She was doomed. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath.

Shockingly, his hand caught in her hair, holding her immobile as he crushed his mouth against hers. His tongue invaded to pillage and steal a response even as his searing kiss broke away, leaving the hot, wonderful taste of him in her mouth and on her lips.

Shaken, she opened her eyes in time to see a blast of magic erupt from Mel's fingers, hurling her into darkness. The blow didn't hurt, but it seemed to suck the air from her lungs and leave her gasping.

A second later, she found herself back in her cave. In one miraculous piece, powers intact, perfectly safe. And alone.

Happily alone, she told herself, sinking into a drab, dark corner and pulling her knees to her chin, blinking back the emotions swelling in her chest. Mel's scent lingered on her clothes, the taste of him lingered, too. That smoky, sexy taste that made her feel all mushy inside. She glanced around and swallowed the impulse to go back to him and apologize.

She was *not* sorry. If he loved her he would have denied her accusations. In this case she was certain the boot fit perfectly. He just didn't like wearing it.

"I'm glad! Do you hear me? Glad!" Certain her twin was listening somewhere and probably Mel, too, she yelled louder, "I'd do it all over again!"

Sheryece's voice blew soft as a summer breeze through the cave. "Elizabeth and Adam need you. Don't give up, Sydney. Not on them or yourself. Please."

"Then you help them," Syd said, knowing Sheryece had given that power to Syd and liking the sensation of clout it gave her. She'd gloat, watching her sister fret over those two human fools as they threw away their chance at love, then she'd hold Sheryece's secret from Henry over her head and see how her twin liked living beneath a sledgehammer just waiting to drop.

Chapter Twenty

Syd was jarred from sleep by the sound of pounding on the thick door to her cave. Someone must be hitting it with a battering ram, she thought as she clambered to her feet. She waved off the locking spell and stepped back, allowing the door to swing inward, gratified to see her sister on the step.

"You must have received my note," Syd said, wishing she hadn't been too impatient to stay and watch until Sheryece found the envelope with the threat inside. Syd had delivered it to the castle hours ago.

Sheryece wore a confounded look. "What note?" Her tone was frantic. "Haven't you been

paying attention to Elizabeth and Adam?”

What note? She hadn't even opened it yet? Hadn't even started to sweat yet? While Syd had been here waiting and waiting and waiting. Her sister's panicky tone should have made her feel happy, so why was guilt pricking at her instead?

“Sydney!”

“What?” she snapped.

“Jerome's here. He's inside Elizabeth's house. In the basement. He's doing something to the wiring. You've got to stop him.”

They faced each other in the doorway, neither moving. “Where's Elizabeth?” she asked, stalling, knowing it would drive Sheryece up the wall. “Let her handle Jerome.”

“She's not home.” Sheryece rung her hands. “You need to cast a spell to bring her back *now*.”

“Where is she?”

“With her friend, Annie. They're drinking coffee and commiserating over men, and it'll be another hour or longer before she leaves if you don't do something.”

“Oh, why should I?”

Sheryece's expression tightened with anxiety, her green eyes bearing a stricken look that nudged Syd with more guilt. Her twin said in a soft, pleading tone, “Because Elizabeth could get hurt. She could die. Because I gave you the power to help Elizabeth and Adam. Because you promised to help her. Because I asked you to. Or does all that mean nothing to you?”

Syd tried to act bored. She manufactured a yawn. “I'm a witch, remember. You must have me confused with someone like you.” She swung the door closed, determined to block out her sister's nagging. Damned if she was going to give in to this niggling sensation tugging at her heart or the guilt that now threatened to choke her. She was a witch, dammit. And she was going to stay one. No more namby-pamby goody stuff for her. Ever!

Adam took one long last look around the place he'd called home for the last six months, then drove to the landlord's and gave the old man his key.

From there, he took one pass by Elizabeth's place, didn't see her car, and figured fate was telling him to forget her, go back to LA, and salvage what he could before Jerome tried to destroy him. The man might not be able to sabotage the current project, but Jerome had a long arm and longer memory, and Adam had no doubt he'd be watching his back for years.

The thought of his brother paying for Adam's mistake turned his neck muscles to steel bands. He stopped at the one big gas station near the freeway, where he'd met Lisa, and filled his truck. At least *she* wasn't bothering him anymore.

As he finished pumping the gas, he heard a familiar voice and glanced around.

Jerome? Without the phony accent?

Uncertain, he left his truck and skirted the building, pausing at the corner to peer carefully around it to the other row of pumps. He scanned the area for Jerome's tailored presence and almost missed him. The man, dressed in faded jeans and t-shirt that appeared ready for the rag heap, stood next to a rent-a-wreck black Cadillac. He was talking to a mechanic from the adjoining car repair shop and had a map spread on the Cadillac's faded black hood, his back toward Adam.

The mechanic tapped the map. "Just follow this road clear through town and a few miles past. It 'll seem like there's nothing out there but a few farms, don't worry. Airport's not that far."

The airport? Wondering why Jerome was here and heading for the airport, Adam returned to his truck, waited until he saw the black Caddy hit the road, and followed. Whatever that bastard was up to, this time he wouldn't get away with it.

At the quaint little one-runway airport, Adam watched Jerome ditch the Caddy at the end of the parking lot and, carrying one overnight bag, head for the small departure area. There were only two gates and one small plane outside. Why was he leaving? What had he been here for? Trying to make sense out of Jerome's actions, Adam almost missed it when Jerome veered into the men's restroom. Adam followed him in.

Their gazes met in the mirror over the sink.

Adam said, "What are you"

Jerome swung the suitcase into his chest, knocking him against the wall, then lunged for the door.

Shaken, Adam nevertheless launched himself at Jerome and caught him at the waist. He hit the tile on his side, tangled with Jerome. Jerome's elbow slammed into his ribs. Biting back the pain, Adam swung a hard right that connected with Jerome's jaw. Jerome's head snapped back and his eyes glassed over.

Pain throbbing through Adam's knuckles, he grabbed the front of Jerome's t-shirt and dragged him to his feet. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Jerome blinked, his gaze clearing. "None of your"

Adam shoved Jerome against the wall and readied another punch.

"Wait," Jerome gasped.

"You've got three seconds to start talking." He prayed no one came in and interrupted them, or they'd both end up in jail.

"You weren't doing your job. So I saw to it myself." The phony accent was back, along with the snobbish, self-righteous tone.

Adam shook him. "And?"

"And she has a wiring problem in the basement. I wouldn't be surprised if a fire broke out and

Elizabeth's precious house burned down."

A sense of dread sucked the air from Adam's lungs. That kind of fire was unpredictable. It could smolder for hours or be a raging inferno in ten minutes. "How long ago did you do it?"

"Thirty minutes?" He shrugged. "You can't get there in time."

"What about Elizabeth?"

"What about her?"

Adam wanted to hit him again. "She could be hurt, you bastard."

"She's not there." The way he said it, like "Who cares?" infuriated Adam. Only his worry about Elizabeth made him let go of Jerome and run.

Syd couldn't stand the silence of her cave another second. It was driving her nuts. No, thoughts of Mel were driving her nuts. No, Sheryece's pleas, still echoing in her mind, were responsible for this anxious energy she couldn't dispel. She paced, recalled her twin's face and felt guiltier than ever. "Oh all right," she muttered, flexing her fingers and focusing her energy on Elizabeth.

"Your visit must abruptly end,

An urgent message you must send.

You hurry home to make the call,

Then forget the reason and into sleep you fall."

Another lousy rhyme. She waved her arm, ignoring the dissatisfied inner voice. It would do.

Leaving her car at the bottom of the hill, needing the physical climb to clear her head, afraid her pioneer woman was becoming a hard-drinking lush, Elizabeth huffed and puffed her way up the drive to the front door.

She had to get to the phone and call . . . someone. She turned the knob, shaking her head at herself for forgetting to lock the front door. Of course, now that Adam knew she knew what he and Jerome had been up to, she figured she was safe. Jerome was vindictive but not stupid. At the very least, he'd lay low for awhile. And she wouldn't be so willy-nilly gullible to accept everyone at face value.

If only her heart would stop aching like it had been trampled by a herd of wild mustangs. She kicked off her shoes and padded into the kitchen, reached for the phone, then put the kettle on for tea instead. Who was she going to call?

Adam?

Certainly not.

She tried to banish him from her thoughts. But everywhere she turned, she saw him. In the kitchen lounging against the counter, smiling at her as though he really cared; at the dining table with the rest of his work crew and Annie and Mel, all of them talking and laughing and enjoying Mel's great meal; in the ballroom mopping up water. Water he'd caused to be there, she reminded herself, hardening her heart against more tears.

Oh, forget the blasted tea. She turned off the kettle. Sniffing, feeling fuzzy-headed and muddled and like an emotional wreck, she climbed the two staircases to bed and flopped on top of the bedspread. It was a nice, warm summer night, for Montana, and the alcohol made it seem warmer still. Sighing, she settled her head more deeply into her soft pillow. She shut her eyes and drifted toward sleep. No more worries.

At the top of Elizabeth's driveway, Adam slammed on the brakes and leaped from his truck, leaving the door open. By his watch, twenty minutes had passed. He'd run two stop lights and three stop signs, driven like a madman to get here. Was he too late to stop the fire from destroying the house? Though he saw no smoke, that didn't reassure him. He leaped up the porch steps and rapped on the door, then when he didn't see any lights go on, he grabbed the knob.

The door swung open. He stepped inside. "Elizabeth?" Switching on the chandelier, he moved beneath the dazzling light to the basement door, then listened. Not a sound. Elizabeth was probably asleep. Should he wake her or check the basement first?

Opting for the electrical box in the basement, he retrieved his flashlight, then raced down the stairs to flip the breakers off and turn off the juice. With any luck the wiring would be hot but not yet burning.

He sniffed, caught a whiff of smoke and flashed the beam of light up and down the sheet-rock.

Like a genie leaving its bottle, a curl of smoke drifted upwards from behind the dryer. Holy Hell, the fire was burning behind the dryer. Positioning the light on a shelf behind him, he bent and grabbed the sides of the dryer and scooted it sideways. Smoke began funneling into the room.

The wire to the dryer plug had been stripped, another wire crossed with it, disappearing into a four-inch hole cut in the wall. Smoke poured out of the hole.

Swearing, Adam ran up the stairs and dialed nine-one-one, then yelled "Elizabeth!" and ran back down to the basement. Where was the fire extinguisher? It had been at the bottom of the stairs. Frantic, he searched all along the wall, covering his mouth with his hand. His eyes began to sting, and he started to cough.

"What are you doing?" Elizabeth raced down the stairs and began to cough.

"Wait upstairs for the fire truck," he ordered.

She grabbed a t-shirt from the laundry and covered her nose and mouth, trying to comprehend what was happening. She saw the neatly cut hole in the sheet-rock and the wire, saw flames begin to lick at its edges, eating away the evidence. She saw Adam stumble over something and curse. "Where's the

fire extinguisher?" he yelled, the words turning into a coughing jag.

She dashed to the corner and hefted the heavy red cylinder. "Here!"

With a hammer, Adam tore away a chunk of sheet-rock around the hole. Heat and flame leapt toward him. He jumped back, and Elizabeth sprayed white foam into the hole. More flames erupted, and she sprayed again.

Adam tore out another chunk of wall. Then another. She sprayed again. He yanked off pieces of sheet-rock as fast as he could, praying they could contain the fire before it traveled past the ceiling. Elizabeth put down the extinguisher long enough to dampen two towels. She draped one over his hair, one over hers, then hefted the canister again, spraying until nothing was left.

Shrill sirens blared in the distance, getting louder, until they were a scream in Adam's ears. By now, the smoke in the room was like thick, heavy fog, burning his eyes and throat.

He grabbed Elizabeth's arm and hauled her up the stairs and outside, then gasped to the herd of yellow coats, "It's in the basement. Started behind the dryer. Flames behind the walls. Don't know if we got them all."

Elizabeth stood a few feet away, wheezing and wiping her eyes. Their eyes met and hers grew cold and furious, and he felt as though he'd been slapped.

"Elizabeth . . . ," he started, appalled that she could believe he'd do this.

"Don't even start, Adam. I don't know why you had second thoughts, why you changed your mind, and I don't care. I suppose I should thank you, but right now it's all I can do not to deck you."

"It wasn't me! It was Jerome."

"You must think I'm an idiot. Do I need to have you arrested?"

Feeling the eyes of their closest neighbors, now in Elizabeth's front yard, and of several fire personnel, Adam closed his mouth. Being accused was bad enough, being arrested with an audience would be too much to bear.

He swallowed his protest and backed away, the odor of the singed hair on his forearms still in his nostrils, the smell of smoke in his mouth and throat.

He retreated slowly, carefully, backed his truck around the fire engines, and stopped for a moment at the bottom of the hill, glad to see the firefighters already coming out. At least he'd saved Elizabeth and the house, he consoled himself. Even if she believed he'd set the fire, then changed his mind.

Maybe, if he could prove Jerome set the fire, she'd talk to him. But he had no proof. And she obviously hadn't caught Jerome inside the house, just him. Depressed, he headed back to his rented house, then remembered he'd turned in the key, remembered he was supposed to be on the road for sunny California.

Everything in him constricted. The tightness in his chest made it hard to breathe. How was he going to live without Elizabeth in his life?

Chapter Twenty One

Elizabeth didn't know how to answer the policewoman's question regarding the fire and who might have set it. She didn't want to lie, but she couldn't face seeing Adam arrested. She finally said, "My ex-husband, Jerome Holland, is the most likely candidate."

"Do you have a photograph?"

"Of Jerome?" Did she? She'd tossed most of them, but maybe in one of the boxes downstairs. "Let me check."

She actually found one, a snapshot taken when Jerome was being nice and trying to get her to reconsider the divorce. Kept to remind her just how sincere a lying snake could be. Her heart twisted at the thought of Adam working for Jerome, another snake.

The policewoman took the photo and said she'd be in touch and left, leaving Elizabeth to face a smoky basement and torn up sheet-rock. She didn't even go down but trudged into the kitchen and made coffee, thinking she'd call an electrician tomorrow and a carpenter.

A tear splashed into her cup, and she swiped another one from her cheek. She would *not* cry over Adam. Or what might happen to him. But her pioneer spirit was deflated as an empty potato sack, and it took all her energy to make it upstairs to run a hot bath and climb in.

Sometimes a pioneer woman just had to soak her cares away . . . and cry.

"Well, this is a disaster," Syd said to herself, still confused by her own actions. Why, oh why had she changed her mind and decided to help Elizabeth? And worse, she'd decided to tell her sister not to worry about Henry, her secret was safe. Just as soon as she fixed this mess. *If* she could.

She'd brought Elizabeth back with her spell, and it had made everything worse. Adam was no longer in the doghouse, he was in a bottomless pit.

Maybe she should quit listening to her sister's ideas and follow her own instincts which, right now were telling her to let the humans work it out. Or maybe she was doomed to be rotten even when trying not to be. For some reason, one she didn't care to examine, the thought depressed her.

"You could help get Jerome convicted," Mel said, his abrupt appearance making her jump.

She swiped at her hair, wishing he hadn't caught her looking so awful, then horrified at the thought. She did *not* dress for anyone but herself. And who cared if her hair had cobwebs in it? "Who

invited you into my cave?”

“Sweetheart, you visited my castle, remember? And I was curious to see how an ugly, rotten, mean-spirited witch lives.”

Ugly?

Rotten?

Mean-spirited?

His words were like nails through her heart, sucking the air from her lungs, stealing coherent thought from her brain. “How dare you come here and insult me like-”

“Insult?” he sneered. “I was giving you a compliment, Syd. You *are* a witch. and you’ve been saying all along how rotten you are, how ugly, etc, etc, etc. I merely agreed with you.”

Oh, the nerve. Her fingers curled at her inability to argue with his logic. Determined to get rid of him, she forced out, “What. . . do. . . you. . . want?”

He leaned against the cave wall, examining her as though she were an insect that might need squashing. “From an ugly witch like you? Nothing.”

Ugly? Did he really think she was ugly? What about when they made love? Or had that all been some horrible joke, just like she’d thought? To make fun of the witch.

His dark brows came together, and his gaze narrowed further. “I came to tell you that I saw the note you left Sheryece . . . I didn’t believe you would do something like that. Threaten to ruin your own sister’s happiness.”

The contempt in his eyes was unbearable. She wanted to vanish, but his gaze held her.

“And now you’ve destroyed Adam and Elizabeth’s chance at happiness, too. I suppose I should congratulate you on your achievements.” He paused, his jaw tightened and his fingers fisted. “I hope you enjoy them. I hope you enjoy living in this hole . . . alone. . . for eternity.”

Before she could protest that she’d left the note for Sheryece as a threat she never meant to carry out, that she’d been trying to help Elizabeth and Adam, Mel disappeared. No smoke, no theatrics, no sounds, just terrible, earth-shattering silence.

And emptiness. The emptiness seemed alive, consuming, and she sank down into the shadows wondering how long it would take to consume her.

She’d lost him! The only warlock she’d ever loved! Suddenly the crush she’d had at her first and last magical ball seemed paltry and insignificant. Nothing like what she felt for Mel. The only one who’d ever made her feel like a woman. Her eyes smarted with unshed tears. She didn’t deserve him, wasn’t good enough for him, would never be good enough.

She was hopeless. As a witch and as anything else.

You mean a godmother, a part of her whispered.

I'll never be a godmother, her pessimistic side retorted.

And I don't want to be. That's Sheryece's job.

But if you could be a godmother, would you? Her inner voice persisted.

Maybe. Her answer stunned her, a momentary distraction from her woes. Had she been harboring a secret wish to be a godmother all these centuries? Had her hatred toward Sheryece really been about jealousy? Disturbed by the questions, Syd curled into a ball and tried not to think at all.

Adam drove to LA and turned himself into the police. He might end up in jail, but hey, he had a helluva attorney to defend him, didn't he?

Ethan appeared at the station, his face filled with worry and consternation. Dressed in a navy three-piece suit, expensively cut, white button-down shirt and burgundy tie, his brother looked like a Jerome-clone. "What the hell are you doing?" Ethan demanded after they were left alone in the interrogation room.

"Telling the truth." Adam gestured toward the other chair and watched as Ethan sat down.

"The truth? I don't know what you've been drinking, Adam, but come on, get real. Jerome Holland isn't a vandal or a killer."

"You're certain of that? A man you've known professionally for all of four months?"

Ethan hesitated, and Adam felt a surge of relief. Jerome didn't have him completely snowed under, not yet.

"The police are checking out my story," Adam said. "They've mentioned immunity in exchange for my cooperation in nailing Jerome."

Ethan shifted on his seat, looking less like a lawyer suddenly and more like a younger brother. Then the lawyer was back. "That means Jerome already had their attention, that he's done something . . . I can't believe . . . I'm going to talk to him."

Adam reached over and grabbed Ethan's arm before he could stand. "No. Talk to the cops first. Now. Then we'll take care of Jerome."

Adam lucked out. The PI he'd hired had followed Jerome and taken photographs of him at LAX, going in the men's restroom dressed in a business suit and coming out dressed in faded jeans and the ragged t-shirt he'd arrived wearing in Montana. Jerome had never looked at the elderly lady twice.

The PI, now seated in the District Attorney's office with the DA, a police detective, Adam, and Ethan, handed the photographs to the DA saying, "He paid cash for his round-trip ticket and bought it under the name Ethan Gardiner."

Adam stared, hearing this part for the first time. “He was going to frame Ethan.”

Ethan’s face paled to a chalky white.

The DA examined the photos and looked at Ethan. “There is some resemblance,” she said. “A good defense attorney might argue that it was Ethan.”

The detective, chewing on an unlit cigar, took it out of his mouth and spoke. “Jerome had to know though, that if any of this got out he’d be under the microscope as the instigator. He’s the one with motive.”

The grandmotherly PI smiled. “He doesn’t expect it to go anywhere. He still thinks he’s in control. This is supposed to give him an ax to hold over Ethan’s head. And Adam’s. My guess is he’ll be contacting you, Adam, to tell you to keep your mouth shut and why.”

Adam felt like a gunslinger in the old west who’d just been challenged by Jerome to a showdown at noon.

The police detective, a guy about Adam’s age, shook his head as though reading Adam’s thoughts. “Don’t try to do this on your own. You need to play it our way. Jerome’s slick, one careful SOB. From here on out, we script everything you say and do. Is that clear?”

Reluctantly, Adam nodded, wondering how long this would take and whether Elizabeth might talk to him when it was over.

“There are some other facts I’ve unearthed,” the PI added, pulling a file from her briefcase and setting it on the corner of the DA’s desk. Ethan flipped it open while the PI explained, “There’s a paper trail from JS Construction to Jerome Holland’s subsidiary business in Oregon.” Her steely blue gaze met Adam’s. “You were underbid because JS had inside knowledge just like you thought. I got someone to admit it. Also, the ten houses that burned down, I’ve found a link to Holland. The concrete, nothing.” She shrugged as though to apologize for failing to get anything on Holland on the concrete disaster.

“That bastard!” Adam said, furiously considering strangling Holland at the first opportunity.

Ethan was frowning and flipping through the PI’s file. He shut it and handed it to the DA. “You ought to be able to nail him on something with this.”

She offered a tight smile. “I want to nail him for attempted murder.” Her gaze swung to Adam. “You up to it?”

“What do you want me to do?”

She explained.

Under her scrutiny, he picked up the phone and punched in Jerome’s number. “We need to talk,” he said after being put through.

Jerome’s clipped voice didn’t give a hint as to his emotional state. “I’m listening.”

“Not on the phone. You could be taping me or something.”

“It’s a bit late for such cautions, don’t you think?”

“Actually what I’m thinking about is going to the police,” Adam said, matching Jerome’s soft, steely tone.

A pause. “I’ve got a business meeting until eleven. Why don’t we meet for a drink after lunch, say around one o’clock at the Crystal House.”

Adam looked at the DA, who nodded. “All right. I’ll be there.” He hung up and exhaled, his heart pounding. Cloak and dagger stuff was definitely not for him. He felt like he’d aged ten years since he’d agreed to help Jerome. Only now did he see a light at the end of the tunnel, and he was in a hurry to get there.

Elizabeth busied herself with planning a gala opening party. She’d thought she’d wait until spring for such a big affair, but with all the publicity from the fire, more haunted rumors had shot up, and more public interest. A perfect time to host a gala and encourage customers to stay at the Good Luck Inn. Not that she was in the gala mood, but the wiring repairs were finished, and the smoky smell only noticeable in the basement. It was time to earn some money instead of spend it.

If she wasn’t feeling so morose, the irony of the inn’s name might have made her laugh. As it was, she felt like crying most of the time and kept swallowing back tears.

Often her mind drifted back to that night, standing on the stairs, seeing Adam in the basement with the hammer and fire extinguisher, and realizing that the only way he could be there was to know about the fire. A fire he obviously started.

So why did she feel guilty? Why did she have any doubts?

If this was what love was, wanting to believe in someone even when he’d proved over and over again he was untrustworthy, then she’d be better off alone.

Now if only she could get her heart to believe it.

Adam paced outside the restaurant, trying to work off his nervous energy before he went inside. He was fifteen minutes early, knew Jerome was on his way, and felt horribly conspicuous wearing a microphone beneath the lapel of his leather jacket. Thank god it was a cool day, the fall weather finally kicking in to drop the daytime temps. Even so, he was sweating.

Recalling Elizabeth’s face and the reason he was doing all this, to keep that bum from ever hurting her again, he steeled himself and strolled inside to the bar. It was dark and crowded for one o’clock which was probably why Jerome picked the place. Neither of them would be very noticeable amongst the other suits there. The detective had told Adam to pick a table in the back, away from the kitchen and bar noise, where the mike would best record their conversation.

He waited until a table was vacated and claimed it as a waitress wiped it off. Her smile invited conversation. He glanced out the window, saw Jerome and straightened, irritated that he felt like a school kid about to face the principal. That made him want to punch Jerome, especially when the man

gave him a cool, condescending nod and sat down.

“So, you wish to talk?” Jerome said in an arrogant tone.

His jaw was slightly discolored still, and Adam took some satisfaction in that and needled him. “How’d you explain the jaw? A fall down the stairs?”

“I don’t give explanations. Tell me, if you go to the police, how do you plan to explain your involvement in vandalizing Elizabeth’s house?”

“I point the finger at you and mention the zoning permits. They do a little digging, and we’re both guilty.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Adam felt a flare of panic. Did Jerome know the cops were listening to this?

“The zoning permits were business. Just as Ethan’s employment is business.”

“I just knew you were going to threaten my brother again,” Adam said, praying Jerome would admit everything and that it all got recorded.

The waitress approached. Jerome ordered a martini, Adam a beer.

After she left, Jerome leaned forward, his dark eyes two angry slits. “You listen to me, you stupid construction bum. I didn’t come here to listen to you talk. I’m not threatening anybody. Got that? I don’t do threats. I act.”

The smug glimmer in Jerome’s eyes worried Adam. What was the bastard up to?

“*Act* as in set fire to Elizabeth’s house?” Adam asked.

“Interpret it as you will.” Leaning back in his chair again, Jerome glanced toward the bar.

Adam leaned forward. “If I hadn’t gone back, Elizabeth would have died. Fire climbs up the walls, smoke seeps everywhere, and before you know it, the house is an inferno. You must hate the woman.” When Jerome said nothing, Adam goaded, “What she’d do? Tell you how lousy you were in bed?”

Jerome’s mouth tightened.

Bull’s eye, Adam thought.

“That bitch screwed me over and thought she could get away with it,” Jerome said in a low, savage tone, all traces of accent gone. “No one walks out on me.”

“So you set me up to make sure her house never got rebuilt, and when I refused to finish, you stepped in and completed the job.”

A grimace. “Sometimes one must do the job oneself in order to get it right.”

“But the house didn’t burn down,” Adam said, enjoying Jerome’s fury.

“The game isn’t over, and you’re in over your head. Along with your brother.”

“You mean your attempt to make it appear Ethan flew to Montana and set the fire? I saw you in Bozeman, remember?”

“And who would believe you? A man trying to protect his brother. A brother who was helping you destroy the woman who’d rejected your advances.”

“That wouldn’t even fly in a soap opera,” Adam said, trying to sound shocked and outraged while feeling thankful this was being recorded and several people were listening.

Jerome smiled. “You’d be surprised.” His voice dropped, “No one crosses me.”

“And no one cons me,” Adam said, shoving back from the table just as his beer arrived. He took one sip, stood, and threw a five on the table.

“Watch your back,” Jerome said as Adam stepped away.

He clamped his mouth shut and kept walking.

Chapter Twenty Two

Elizabeth was planning the gala event of her life and livelihood, and she was miserable. The police had said that Jerome had been arrested for setting fire to her house, and that Adam Gardiner was testifying against her ex.

Would Adam go to jail, too?

The newspapers focused on stories of her house, the haunting history and her restoration, and barely mentioned the trial in California. She was relieved she needn’t testify but would have liked the excuse to see Adam.

She kept telling herself that Adam’s life was none of her business, but his face intruded day and night, scattering her thoughts with worry. Finally, she couldn’t stand it. She asked Annie to oversee the plans while she was gone and boarded a plane for LA. She would offer an apology face-to-face, clear her conscience.

Was she being a fool?

Probably. But she couldn’t stop herself.

She rented a car and drove from the airport to Adam's address, scanning the park across from the condominium complex, then eyeing the cement walkway from the parking lot, trying to get the courage to climb from the car. He'd saved her life and the inn; she owed him an apology, even if he'd lied about why he'd come to Montana. Gearing up her pioneer spirit, she left the haven of the sedan and strode beneath the palm-lined walkway until she found his condo. Standing at the door, finger poised over the buzzer, she hesitated. What if he shut the door in her face? He didn't love her. That had been painfully obvious during their conversation at the river. What did she expect now?

She steeled herself, telling herself to expect nothing. She would say "I'm sorry" and go home. Before she could chicken out, she jabbed the button and waited.

And waited.

She rummaged through her purse for his business card. Maybe he was at work. Maybe she should call first.

No, he might refuse to talk to her or see her. She had to do this now, before her resolution deserted her completely. And it was rapidly dwindling away.

The drive to his office took fifteen minutes. Dry-mouthed, anxious all over again, she once more climbed from the car and marched up to the row of office buildings. Before she could knock, the door swung open and a darkly tanned, dark-haired stranger stepped out. He was in heavy boots, denims, and a faded t-shirt, had a clipboard under one arm and lunch pail in the other and a baseball cap on backwards.

She jumped out of his way just as he saw her.

"Sorry," he said, shutting the door behind him. "If you're the reporter looking for Adam Gardiner, he's not here. Like I told you on the phone, he's shut down his business, and he won't be coming back. So give it a rest."

He stepped around her and started toward the curb and a new white pickup.

Stunned, Elizabeth didn't move for a moment, then desperation kicked in, and she dashed after him. "Excuse me, but I'm not a reporter. Do you know where he went?"

The man glared at her as he skirted the front of the truck and opened the driver's side door. "Lady, the only thing I know is he doesn't need to be dogged by another news hound. Holland plea-bargained for five-to-ten, and Adam's a free man."

"He is?" she whispered, relief washing over her.

The man didn't answer, just climbed behind the wheel and slammed the door. The engine roared to life, and he pulled away from the curb, Elizabeth shouting "Wait!" behind him.

He sped up, his tires spitting gravel at her.

Left alone on the curb, Elizabeth drifted back toward her car, her relief turning to hopelessness. He'd sold his business. He could have gone anywhere.

No, he had a brother. She wracked her brain for the name while sitting in her car. Surely Adam

's brother would know where he'd gone.

Sheryece couldn't stand the waiting any longer. Sydney had threatened to tell Henry and hadn't done so, yet. The sensation of her neck on a guillotine block struck afresh every day. Every time Henry left the castle, she feared the look on his face when he returned.

She had to tell him the truth. Before Sydney did.

Trouble was, now that she'd girded herself with the courage to do so, she couldn't find Henry. What if he was learning the truth at this very moment? Painted by whatever terrible innuendoes Sydney might have made in her rotten penmanship.

She twisted her fingers in the fabric of her skirt, caught herself doing it, and wanted to scream in frustration.

Shoving open the door to the throne room, a darkly paneled room that resembled a bear-hunting lodge of old, with its mahogany thrones, low ceiling and animal trophy heads lining the walls, she found Henry. He was seated in one of the council chairs, Melvin was in the other.

Both looked up, their conversation stopping abruptly as she entered. She'd never liked this room, even though the trophies were fake. Henry hated hunting and wouldn't hurt a fly, which was partly why she loved him so much. But he insisted on this black-cat of a room to put at ease the more macho warlocks who came to call. However, Melvin was not one to need such impressing and she was surprised to find him here.

"I-I need to talk to you Henry," she said before she lost her nerve.

He stood, his countenance one of concern. "Excuse me, Mel." Leaving the council table, he met her by the door. "What is it, my dear? You look unwell. Should I call the royal physician?"

He lifted her hand to his lips, love brimming in his eyes.

Words choked her. "I-I have something to confess."

His eyebrows lifted in puzzlement. Turning toward Melvin, he said, "Mel, would you excuse us a moment?"

Melvin stood and came over. "Actually, I believe what Lady Sheryece has to say concerns me." His gaze was reassuring, and she felt a wave of gratitude that he would stand beside her. Would it make a difference? Would Henry forgive her?

Still wearing an air of puzzlement, Henry looked at her.

"I lied to you," she began, her words running together faster and faster in her hurry to get them out, "... and I asked Melvin to sweep Chantal off her feet, make her not want to marry you, so that you would be interested in me. And then you were ... interested in me, and we fell in love, and I've been so happy, but I never told you the truth, and I should have." Finally she ran out of breath and stopped to gulp some air.

Henry looked from her to Melvin, his expression unreadable. Sheryece's stomach contents flip-flopped sickeningly.

Henry's lips curved at the corners. "Then I have Mel to thank for saving me from marrying Chantal." He grabbed Melvin by the shoulders and hugged him, ending with a slap on the back. "Bet Duke George wishes you'd saved him as well, eh?" He laughed and Melvin laughed.

Confused, Sheryece sputtered, "But aren't you mad?"

He pulled her into his arms. "Mad about you, yes. I guessed about Chantal and Mel a long time ago, darling. I probably should have told you I never loved Chantal, dreaded marrying her, but I liked having you a bit jealous." He kissed her fingers, doing warm and wonderful things to her insides. "Forgive me, too?"

"I would always forgive you, Henry," she murmured, thinking how blessed it was to have no more secrets between them. And it was all because of Sydney.

Melvin made a sad sound, almost like a sigh. Then he vanished, and Henry's mouth closed over hers, and she forgot everything except how wonderfully, exquisitely happy she was in his arms.

"Go away!" Ethan Gardiner tried to shut the door in Elizabeth's face.

She jammed her foot against it before he could get it closed and was glad she'd worn her waffle-soled walking boots with the steel toes. "Wait! I'm not a reporter. I'm . . . Elizabeth Benning!"

The door ceased crushing her foot and swung open a couple of feet, Ethan eyeing her with cautious suspicion. "You have proof of that?"

Brother, she'd never been asked for proof of ID at a front door before. Digging through her purse, she yanked out her wallet and flipped it open to her driver's license tucked beneath clear plastic. He eyed it, then her, then stepped back to allow her entry. "Sorry. Hope your foot's okay. But you wouldn't believe how pushy those newspaper people are."

Unfortunately, she would, she thought, recalling all the microphones stuck in her face as she left the divorce court with her attorney. And the phone calls . . .

She pushed the memories down and followed Ethan Gardiner into a small living room. Studying him, she was first struck by his quasi-resemblance to Jerome. Except he was younger and his face was softer, his expressions more genuine. He gestured toward the tan leather couch, and she perched on the edge, afraid she'd sink into it and have to be pulled out.

"So, Ms. Benning. I thought you were in Montana. What are you doing here?"

What was she doing here? Besides making a fool of herself. Yet, she'd come this far. "I'm looking for Adam. Someone at his office said he'd left town."

"You must have talked to Rick. Adam's turned everything over to him."

"Then he has left?" she asked, her heart sinking.

“Yes.” Ethan sat down on the other end of the couch. “Call it a lawyer’s curiosity, but what did you want to see my brother about?”

Heat crawled up her neck, and she hoped he didn’t see it. “I-I’d rather tell him first.” She glanced around. “I was hoping he might be here.”

Ethan shook his head. “He left straight from the courthouse.”

She swallowed back tears and the hopelessness welling into her throat and forced herself to stand. “Well that’s that, then.”

A photograph of Adam at Ethan’s college graduation was sitting on the TV, and she paused on her way out to study it. “He looks happy,” she said, wondering if she’d ever feel happy again.

“Relieved is more like it,” Ethan said. “That I’d actually graduated.”

She recalled the pride in Adam’s voice when he’d mentioned his brother. She put the photograph down. She meant to ask for his new address, but the idea of showing up again on his doorstep unannounced, unasked for, kept the words trapped behind her lips. Adam knew where she lived, knew how she felt. If he cared. The realization hit that she’d come to apologize with an unconscious motive: the hope that he’d sweep her into his arms and declare his undying love. Mortified, she wrenched open the door and stepped outside. By god, she was such an idiot. Still, she found herself asking, “Could you . . . could you tell him I came here to talk to him?”

“I’ll tell him next time we talk,” Ethan promised. She imagined the glimmer of a smile, told herself she was overtired, thanked him, and headed for the airport.

She might be heartbroken and feeling empty as a rotted out fencepost left over from the wild west days, but she had an inn to oversee and a costume gala to put on.

She was a pioneer woman, after all.

Chapter Twenty Three

Elizabeth surveyed the new furnishings in Sleeping Beauty’s turret room. She’d moved her old brass bed and antique dresser down to the basement because of all the reservations rolling in, from the publicity surrounding the fire, the history of the mansion being haunted, and Jerome’s conviction. Despite the first flurry of dazzling snow, she’d booked every room for almost every weekend through the New Year, and it was only September. And she’d booked enough mid-week reservations to keep her plenty busy and to cover expenses.

Too bad she couldn't stay in Sleeping Beauty's room indefinitely. She loved the french windows and the window seat, and the antique feel of the new king-sized four-poster bed. The mere size of the bed gave the room masculinity while the beige lace bed curtains, tied back with burgundy velvet ribbons, added femininity. And darn it, she couldn't help thinking how much fun it would be to spend the night with Adam in that bed. Although, they'd managed quite well in her brass bed before. Her thoughts straying to off-limits territory, she descended the stairs in search of a distraction.

Annie was in the kitchen, readying hors d'oeuvres, her Cinderella costume hung in the doorway. She turned when Elizabeth came in and said, "I still think you'd make a great harem girl."

Elizabeth harrumphed. "I don't feel like being a harem anything. The mood I've been in, the witch's costume is perfect."

"You could ask his brother for his address."

No need to ask who she was referring to, they'd been talking about it since Elizabeth's return home yesterday.

Elizabeth shook her head. "I did everything but ask him to marry me, Annie, and . . .," she swallowed, "all he said was 'great.'" She took the rolling pin and thumped it against the pie crust dough. "Not exactly inspiring, you know?"

They'd gone over this before, too.

Annie paused in arranging crackers and paté on a tray to give her a hug. "Hey, sweetie," she said in a playful tone, meant to lighten her mood, "ease up on the crust before it's too thin to lift into the pan."

A half-grin tugging at her lips, Elizabeth continued, "He knows where I live. It's not like he couldn't find me if he wanted to." She didn't know what she'd do without Annie's friendship, she thought. She lifted the crust, and her fingers poked through. "Damn him. I wish we'd never met."

Annie took the crust and laid it over the pan, repairing the damage.

Elizabeth gave up trying to help and sat down to watch.

"Shouldn't you go get ready?" Annie said as she slipped the last pie into the oven.

"Do you think I've got enough food?" Elizabeth said.

Annie laughed. "You try to fit one more dessert on any of the tables, and they'll topple. Not to mention all the finger foods you've got on the two sideboards."

"I noticed you like the pot stickers," Elizabeth said, attempting to get in the party spirit.

"Oriental anything," Annie said, lifting her eyebrows in a mock leer. "If Jackie Chan were coming tonight, I'd be first in line for an autograph. Especially if he stood in front of those sushi rolls in the fridge. You don't know how hard it's been to stay away from them."

"I bet Adam would love the piroshkis," Elizabeth mused before she could catch herself. "That's it." She shoved to her feet. "I am not going to say his name again for the entire evening. I'm going to go

get ready, and smile, and chat, and be the perfect hostess.”

“Oh, the band will be here any minute to set up. Where do you want them?”

“You mean the three-piece orchestra?” Elizabeth asked.

“Orchestra. Band. You know what I mean.”

Elizabeth led Annie into the ballroom. They both sighed. The grand room, painted in pale yellow, glowed from four overhead chandeliers. She felt small beneath the twelve-foot arched entry. Across the huge room, the eight-foot high fireplace mantel, decked in green and gold garlands, supported two heavy antique brass candlestick holders that rose another two feet up the wall, the white candles already lit. She’d needed a stepladder to reach them.

“Put the band in this corner, away from the fireplace. I don’t want them to roast to death later.”

“Most of the heat goes up the chimney, doesn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.” Elizabeth frowned, thinking about the strange voices she’d heard the day Adam arrived on her doorstep. In the chimney for gosh sakes. No wonder Adam had believed Jerome. She had probably sounded looney tunes.

Hugging herself, she stepped into the hall. Annie returned to kitchen duty, and a moment later Elizabeth heard the faucet. She took her costume from the closet and carried it into the basement. Her nose wrinkled as it always did, imagining the scent of smoke, and her eyes invariably searched for the patches in the sheet-rock.

“I must be the world’s most gullible romantic,” she said aloud as she slipped into the long black witch’s gown. Settling the pointy hat on her head, she stared at her reflection in the small mirror she’d hung above her dresser. Dark and drab. Perfect.

She heard the doorbell and climbed the stairs, stretching a smile across her face as she reached for the knob. Party time.

Adam pulled off the road and into a tourist stop for a quick bite to eat. He’d been driving this moving van for two days, and he felt like hell. But Elizabeth’s gala was tonight and he was determined to make it, even if he arrived on her doorstep at midnight.

He eyed the costume he’d bought before leaving LA. With Halloween only a month away there’d been a great selection. For whatever reason, he’d been drawn to the magician’s costume. Probably because it would take a miracle to get Elizabeth to let him in the house. Right now Boots was sleeping on it. He ruffled the cat’s fur until Boots rumbled with content. “Hang in there, fella. We’re getting close.”

His stomach growling, he left Boots curled in the cab and went into the country diner. The waitress, a motherly type, handed him the menu.

“Two cups of coffee and a hamburger,” he said.

Surprisingly it was ready faster than fast food, and he gulped it down just as quickly. He reached

into his jacket pocket and felt the small velvet box again, reassuring himself it was still there. It made him feel like a kid with money burning his palms. Pulling it out, he stared at the box but didn't open it. He'd never asked anyone to marry him before, and even on the best of terms, figured he'd be terrified. The only thing that gave him courage was the fact that Elizabeth had said she loved him. That had to mean something.

Of course, that was before she'd shoved him into the river. A dunking he'd deserved.

What if she didn't like the ring?

No, what if she said "get lost"?

"Gonna pop the question?" the waitress asked as she refilled his coffee and set the bill on the table. She had to be sixty if she was a day, and her light blue eyes twinkled like he'd imagine a fairy godmother's would.

He grinned, suddenly feeling hopeful. "Yes."

"Mind if I take a look?"

"No." He flipped open the blue velvet lid and held the box under the overhead light.

"Oh Lordy, it's gorgeous. Why I've never seen a setting like that. Is that a sapphire?"

A three-thousand dollar sapphire, he thought, nodding. "Four carats. But not as pretty as her eyes." He lifted it out and let her see the wedding band.

She oohed and aahed over the tiny diamonds set in the gold and the way it intertwined with the sapphire engagement ring. "Lucky woman."

"I hope so."

She handed the ring back, and he put it away. As he left the diner, she called, "Good luck."

"Thanks," he called back. Once on the road, he thought about Elizabeth's inn, The Good Luck Inn, and he prayed that for tonight it would be . . . for him.

Sheryece couldn't stand being so happy and seeing Sydney so miserable. Her sister wouldn't come out, wouldn't talk, wouldn't even threaten to turn her into a frog. This quietness was new and disturbing, and she didn't know what to do.

That darn Melvin. Where was he? Disappearing on the eve of success.

She banged on Sydney's door again. "Come on, Sydney. Adam's on his way, but a touch of magic would be nice when he arrives."

Indistinguishable grumbling sounded on the other side of the door. It swung open. "You want magic, you do it. You have my permission. But if I have to look at any more lovey-dovey gazes or listen to any more sickening sweet pledges of love, I'm going to be ill for the next hundred years."

“Oh ill, schmill. You may not be facing oblivion, but you deserve to see the end of your mission.”

“I told you”

“Just because you’re mad at me . . . ,” Sheryece began.

Too tired to edit her thoughts or the resulting words, Syd interrupted, “I’m not mad at you. I’m glad for you. Really. Now, go away.”

She shoved the door closed, and it disappeared, leaving them face-to-face. “Bring my door back,” Syd demanded, determined to close out everything.

“In a minute.”

“Now!”

“First I want to thank you,” Sheryece said.

Syd was certain she’d misheard. “What?”

“I want to thank you for forcing me to tell Henry the truth about Chantal and Melvin.”

Syd wanted to be mean and nasty, but all that came out was a half-hearted, half-guilty, “I threatened you, I didn’t intend to help you.”

“But you did. And I’ll be forever grateful.”

She’d never had her sister express gratitude to her before for anything, and it warmed something in her, made her feel strange, made her eyes smart.

“Oh my stars, you’re crying!” Sheryece stepped close and hugged her before she could protest or magic away the dampness trailing down her cheeks.

The darn hug was her undoing. It made her feel, well . . . lovable . . . likable . . . nice. Suddenly she was overwhelmed with feelings. She shoved away and took a shaky breath. “That’s enough, Sis. I gotta breathe.”

“I love you, Sydney,” Sheryece said in a soft, gut-wrenching tone.

Syd swallowed, feeling dazed and confused. “Don’t go thinking I’m a marshmallow just because I let you hug me.”

Sheryece quirked a smile. “I won’t.”

“Good.” She cleared her throat. “Now, can I have my door back?”

Sheryece’s smile broadened. “Of course.”

But the door that appeared was not the heavy wooden one Sheryece had magicked away, but a lovely mirrored door wrought with silver and gold and twinkling diamonds.

A door to invite visitors not shut them out, Syd thought, eyeing it with apprehension. Yet, she left it intact and, in the back of her mind, hoped that maybe her next visitor would be Mel.

Chapter Twenty Four

Elizabeth smiled and chatted and danced and flinched every time the doorbell chimed. By the time eleven-thirty rolled around, she stopped running for the door when someone arrived and stopped hoping that Adam would be there.

Annie snagged Elizabeth's glass and refilled it with champagne, whispering, "Dance with Mel, he looks lonely."

Indeed, the man did look lonely. He was dressed as a vampire, widows peak and black cape, black suit, old-fashioned spats over his shoes, even white gloves. A handsome guy. Why couldn't she have fallen for him? Why did it have to be Adam's sun-drenched hair and golden smile that had instantly attracted her?

Determined to be a good hostess, she crossed the polished ballroom floor and held out her hand. "Care to give an old witch a spin around the room?"

He mustered a smile that failed to wipe the bleakness from his eyes, then said with teasing charm, "Liz, you're not even close to old."

"Oh, and you're an expert?" she teased back, wanting to cheer him.

The strange flicker in his eyes gave her a feeling that he was old. Ancient. The champagne had obviously pickled her senses.

"You're too pretty to look so melancholy." He took her hand and drew her into his arms, moving to the waltz with the ease of an expert dancer.

"You cook, you dance, you say all the right things. Some woman's going to luck out when you fall for her."

He smiled, but it didn't dispel the shadows in his eyes.

"I dreamed about you," she said, not knowing why she recalled the dream so vividly, nor why she wanted to share it now.

One raven eyebrow rose. "Oh?"

"You and Syd. That was her name, wasn't it? The red-haired woman we ran into when you took me to hear that band?"

“That was her name, yes.”

“If you don’t mind my saying so, you two looked crazy about each other.”

A flicker of amusement crept into his eyes. “You and Adam looked crazy about each other, too.”

“Guess I should keep my mouth shut,” she murmured.

“No.” The music stopped, and he reached for a new glass of champagne, handing one to her as well. “Was there anyone else in your dream?”

Elizabeth hesitated. But heck, she’d brought it up. “Syd and another redhead. They looked like twins. I’m not sure who was Syd, maybe they were both Syd, but one wore a sparkling white gown and had lace and diamonds woven in her hair, and the other wore a long black gown, kind of like this.” She gestured at herself.

“A witch, a godmother, and me,” Mel said before draining his glass in one long gulp.

“I guess,” Elizabeth murmured, not sure what to make of his comment. His gaze grew cloudy, and she decided to leave him alone. That was what she wanted, too. To be alone.

Taking another glass of champagne, she asked Annie to play hostess for awhile, then climbed the stairs to Sleeping Beauty’s room. She’d sit by the open window, enjoy the happy sounds from a distance, lose herself in the mountain view and the twinkling stars, and with any luck at all, forget about Adam.

From beneath a cloak of invisibility, Syd watched Mel dance with Elizabeth. Using magic, she listened to their conversation, amazed when Elizabeth described the dream and Syd and her sister as looking the same.

Disquieted by the flood of pleasure those words brought, she tried to discount them. Elizabeth, however, had excellent eyesight, was great at interior decoration and sizing things up. So how could she make that kind of visual mistake about her and her twin? It didn’t make sense.

Unless

Mel’s words came back to her and her own. She’d been so sure he was out to hurt her, trick her.

Maybe

No.

Maybe, that inner voice persisted. Maybe you’re the one with skewed eyesight.

She shoved that thought away, unwilling to entertain it any further.

Elizabeth left Mel by the window. What was he thinking, Syd wondered as he stared through the glass as though mesmerized by the night sky. She could try to eavesdrop on his thoughts, but if he caught her she'd be totally humiliated. Yet, wondering was driving her buggy.

She waved away her invisibility, ignoring the startled look of the man next to her, and glided toward Mel. Stopping just behind him, she whispered, "As humans would say, a dollar for your thoughts."

Mel didn't turn. His stance stiffened. "I believe it's a *penny* Syd."

His tone was cool, wary, and made her want to whisk them off to his castle so she could create some fireworks. The fear that what she felt was completely bonkers, that she was trying to fool herself into believing he cared, made her hesitate. It had always been Sheryece, Sheryece, Sheryece, for as long as she could recall. Sheryece, the bubbly one, the dazzling one, the delightful one. No dark brooding silences or challenging glances there.

He finished the champagne and set the glass on the window sill, then stepped past her and threaded his way toward the door.

Something twisted in her heart. Panic flared and flamed, and she ran after him, catching him on the porch. "Mel, wait!"

"For what? An insult? I don't think so."

"Mel!"

He vanished before she could apologize.

Apologize? Did she really intend to do that? Well, whatever she intended, it was too late now.

No, it isn't, another part of her insisted. *It's never too late.*

She magicked her way to Mel's castle and found him standing before a blazing fire in the massive fireplace, at the other end of the huge room where they'd made love.

He turned his head slightly to look at her. "I didn't ask you here."

"You didn't keep me out either," she said, telling herself it had to mean something. He could have cast a spell to prevent her entry or to make her go through the proper channels Royal etiquette required, which would have meant an announcement to the doorman and a much longer wait.

He studied the flames again.

What was she doing here? He hated her. The panic inside propelled her closer, poured words from her lips that she couldn't control. "Do you like my dress? I wore it for you. I thought . . ." She managed to shut her mouth before more humble words spilled out.

He looked at her again, his expression inscrutable. "You thought what?" he asked, his voice cold.

He wasn't going to give her one teensy, weeny, spells worth of help. What did she expect? She

'd slammed him every chance she got. But she was terrified. It was so much easier to reject than be rejected. "I'm sorry," she said in a whisper torn from her heart.

One eyebrow rose as though to say she had his attention but only for a moment.

She smoothed her hands over the red satin and told herself she looked good but didn't believe it. Yet Mel had put her in this dress once and liked it on her, and Elizabeth had said she looked like her sister, and her sister was beautiful. She licked her lips. "You were right. I think. I think you were right. I'm just not myself . . . I don't know who I am" The last came out sounding lost. She was so ashamed of everything she'd done. She almost waved herself invisible.

Surprise lit his face. Incredulousness. His dark eyes softened and gave her the courage to remain.

"Stay with me, Syd," he said, facing her at last, drawing her tenderly into his embrace. "We can discover who you are, together." He nuzzled her neck, nibbled on her ear, kissed her cheek, then brushed his lips across hers.

The most incredible sensations shot through her, and she panicked in an entirely new way. "I'm not sure I'm ready for this, this, whatever's happening." She shoved against his chest.

"Blast it, Syd, don't do this," he said as he released her.

"Do what?"

"Come here, give me hope, then run away. You're driving me mad."

"I'm driving," she echoed, "you mad?"

"To utter, complete distraction. You're the only female in the Realms who makes me feel like this," he said, stepping toward her.

She retreated, her face burning from the compliments. That she had the power to distract anyone, especially a Royal, and without magic, was hard to believe. Yet all she read in his face was sincerity and passion. Desire. Want. Lust. Love.

Whoa, as Elizabeth would say, don't jump too far. Lust was just fine.

His hands rested upon her shoulders, warmth invading her skin, spreading need for more of his touch, more of his heat. Memories of making love filled her mind, blurring the *then* with the *now*.

"Sweet Syd," he said, his voice husky with wonder and gratitude, his eyes darkening pools, "You came to me."

"I had to . . ."

His mouth closed over hers, and she lost the rest of her sentence and the thought that went with it. Her mouth parted in hungry anticipation, and he didn't disappoint her. No slow, teasing kisses this time. He hungrily tasted her mouth, his tongue enticing hers to explore as well. With his mouth he claimed and possessed, ravished and took, and she gave and gave and wanted to give more.

The ceiling spun. Her legs wobbled. She yanked at his clothes before remembering she could magic them off. When his clothes vanished, he lifted his head and gave her a devilish grin of delight. "Such impatience, my little witch." He snapped his fingers and her brazen red satin dress vanished, leaving her in red lace undies.

His dark eyes narrowed, smoldering with desire. "You look very sexy in red. Have I told you that?"

Yes, she thought, but the word disappeared into a moan as he kissed his way to her throat.

Abruptly, with his mere murmur of magic, they were lying on a thick furry rug before the fire, his body braced over hers, the touch of his skin to hers filling her with a thirst for more. "Sweet Syd." He brushed his lips across hers with tantalizing slowness, then his chest grazed her breasts.

Zing, zing, zing. Passion sparks flew from her head. She gasped in surprise while he chuckled deep in his throat. "I wonder how many more sparks we can ignite," he whispered before nibbling on her earlobe.

Burning pleasure enveloped her as his hands roamed and stroked and his mouth laved and tasted and suckled.

Twining her fingers through his midnight hair, she felt mini-shocks radiating from the silky strands. Surprised, she started to pull her hands away, then realized the energy didn't hurt. Her skin felt vibrantly alive, tingly, hot.

She hadn't thought anything could be better than her first time with Mel. She was wrong.

And he proved it to her again and again and again amidst the most beautiful array of rainbow colored light, all radiating from their joined bodies. Love consumed her completely, light blinding and cleansing as he moved within her. For the moment, the past was vanquished and the future too far away to worry about. There was only now. This joy. And Mel.

Chapter Twenty Five

Two miles outside of Bozeman, Adam heard a pop, then the *flap, flap, flap, flap* of rubber slapping cement. The moving van swerved, and he hit the brakes, fighting the wheel for control. His heart lurched as the big truck zigzagged across the lanes. Wrenching the wheel right, he aimed for the roadside, thankful for the miles of empty pavement that had previously felt lonely. The van rocked and skidded.

A ragged breath escaped his lungs as the vehicle shuddered to a stop. He sucked in air, working to dispel the chill of fear still gripping him. Boots was on the passenger floor, mostly squeezed beneath the seat. "It's okay, buddy," he said. After another deep breath, he repeated it to himself and climbed

out to survey the damage.

A flat tire. Hell. What next?

He muttered a string of expletives as he hefted the jack and shoved it into place. Determined not to miss Elizabeth's grand opening, he worked like a demon to get a new tire on and get back on the road. Sweat dripped down his back and across his brow. Finished and anxious, he climbed back in the cab, took a deep breath, and hit the gas. Somehow, he had to make it, had to be there before all the celebrating ended.

The road seemed to go on forever. Finally, the Bozeman exits came into view. His heart began to pound in anticipation and trepidation. What if she slammed the door in his face?

Just take it one step at a time, he told himself, wishing like hell he'd learned to meditate or something that would calm him.

Eyeing his greasy hands, he pulled into a gas station to call Tom and ask if he could clean up there. No answer. After two more calls, he gave up. Most likely, the entire crew was at the party.

He'd have to use the washroom here. The cold water froze his fingers and stung his face. His hands shook as he tugged on his costume and hurried back to the van, trying to ignore the stares. "Nothing like making a fool out of myself," he muttered to Boots. The last five miles to the inn seemed to steal ten years from his life. Facing a firing squad suddenly seemed preferable to facing Elizabeth. Why would she want to marry him, after all he'd done? He must be out of his mind.

Cars lined the driveway and the road below the house, forcing him to park half a mile away. He sat for a minute arguing with himself. The more determined part won. Hefting Boots into the cradle of one arm, he tromped back to her driveway. "Okay, good buddy, don't desert me," he said to his cat. At least he'd have one friend with him. Patting the ring in his pocket, he eyed the mansion. The place was lit up like Christmas.

Swallowing his fear, he climbed the hill, then the two steps to the porch and front door. Soft violin music wafted from inside, a jazzy piece that energized and offered hope. A sultan and a harem girl were sitting in the newest addition to the deck, a porch swing, rocking back and forth to the beat. He raised his hand to knock on the door, and they said, "Go on in."

Summoning courage, he shoved open the door. Boots leaped from his arms and took off up the stairs. "Thanks a lot," he said, feeling momentarily abandoned.

Delicious smells that normally would've had him salivating assailed his nostrils as he moved from the entry room and slowly threaded his way through the kitchen toward the ballroom, searching for Elizabeth.

"Here, try one of these," someone said, pushing a tray into his face. He absently took one and chewed and swallowed without recognition, not the least bit hungry.

"These are delicious," a grey-haired Cleopatra said, holding a silver tray out.

"So are these," Mark Anthony added, swinging a second tray his direction.

He fought his way around trays as well as people.

“Have you seen Elizabeth?” he asked several times without success, finding it faster to take an item from the offerings shoved in front of him rather than to try and explain he wasn’t interested in food.

Finally, he made it to the ballroom. If food were courage, he was stuffed full of it, he thought, scanning the crowd for Elizabeth’s dark hair and heart-shaped face, her big violet eyes, and those sweet, sexy lips that he hoped to kiss forever and ever.

Unless she refused to hear what he had to say.

Unless she hated him.

She had every right. He was tempted to just keep eating his way right back out the door and flee down the hill.

He forced himself to move through the crowd, to pause and say a few words with the people he knew before asking if they’d seen Elizabeth. Evidently, she was there earlier, but no one knew where she’d gone. Expecting to see Mel Stockwell, he was surprised when he didn’t. Nor the redhead, Syd Black.

The musicians in the corner paused a moment, then resumed their play, filling the room with a soft rendition of a love song whose title escaped him.

He saw Annie and waved. Offering her a tentative smile and glad for the distraction, he hoped she could tell him if his cause was hopeless or not. She looked as good as any Cinderella he’d ever seen, and she appeared to have several princes at her side, one who looked like Blackbeard, the other a genie.

Her mouth dropped open when she saw him, and, after a second of staring, she beckoned him over. Uncertain how to interpret her surprise, he hoped she wasn’t about to tell him to get lost.

Just in case, he said quickly, “I’m looking for Elizabeth.”

“She’s not here,” Annie said.

His heart plummeted. “She’s not?”

“Nope. She’s down the hall or upstairs. Said she wanted some quiet and asked me to play hostess.” She grinned at her two companions. “Which is turning out to be a lot of fun.”

“Upstairs,” he echoed, wondering if she were in her bedroom. Wondering if he dared knock. “Is she . . . do you think she’ll talk to me?”

Annie’s lips quirked up. “Depends. Is this a short stop to somewhere else or are you going to be around for awhile?”

He deserved the flash of censure in her eyes and held steady. “The rest of my life if she’ll have me,” he said, wishing his stomach wasn’t suddenly revolting against everything he’d swallowed. He couldn’t ever remember being so nervous.

“Then, good luck,” Annie said before Blackbeard swept her into a dance.

“Thanks.”

He checked the basement first, just to satisfy his curiosity that the repairs had been done right and the place was sound again. And maybe to buy time to steady his nerves, the voice in the back of his mind whispered. He ignored it and surveyed the room. A great repair job. Everything done right. Her bed and dresser down there surprised him, though. Did that mean someone had reserved the tower room?

He climbed the stairs slowly, trying to procrastinate without admitting it to himself. Recalling the night she'd called him, all scared and upset, and his search of the house, he started down the first floor hall. In the doorway to the Casanova room, memories struck him afresh. If he lost her . . .

Sweat trickled down his back, and he forced himself to breathe. Boots meowed, drawing his eyes to the bed where his cat had made himself comfortable, next to Velvet. The smaller black cat was sleeping next to his tabby. Letting Boots stay on the bed was a bad habit to allow, but he couldn't summon the desire to tell his cat to move. The two felines were too darn cute. His cat gave him a lazy look of greeting, then closed his eyes. “I'll deal with you later,” he promised, taking one last look around the room. Other than the presence of Boots and Velvet, the romantic hideaway appeared the same. Fresh roses filled the smoky vase on the bureau, the scent staying with him as he retreated into the hall. Continuing his search, he found himself hoping that the inn's occupants found as much joy here as he'd found with Elizabeth.

Despite all the fear crowding into his gut, he admired Elizabeth's handiwork and attention to detail in each room.

Would she like the ring? Hate it? Throw it in his face? Hand in his pocket, he gripped it tight as he climbed the stairs to the second floor and moved from room to room.

No Elizabeth. Relief and despair warred in his mind.

He climbed the stairs to the third floor and checked the tower room first. The door was locked. Turning away, he checked all the other rooms, puzzled when he finished and still hadn't found her. She lived here. This was her grand opening. She couldn't have ducked out. He returned to the tower room, twisted the knob again, and pushed.

Locked.

He felt something beneath the toe of his boot and lifted his foot. A brass key.

To the door? Had someone dropped it?

With a shaky hand, he retrieved the key, slipped it into the lock, and twisted it. A small click sounded. Carefully, he opened the door, intending to close it just as quietly if a stranger were in the room. “Elizabeth?”

At first he thought the room was empty, locked from the outside, that maybe Elizabeth didn't want anyone intruding here.

The french windows were ajar, and he stepped over to close them. Soft moonlight gave the furnishings just enough distinction for him to avoid a bruised shin.

Sigh.

The whisper of sound shot him toward the ceiling.

Turning, he switched on the night light and saw Elizabeth's sweet face, her eyes closed, her lips lightly parted, her body snuggled beneath the blankets of the canopied bed.

Syd stretched, feeling languid and happy and soooo good. Mel's arm snaked around her waist and pulled her close again, his lips tenderly kissing her shoulder and neck. "Mmmm," he murmured, "I'm hungry again."

She liked the sound of that and enjoyed every moment until afterward when Mel said, "So, what shall we do now?"

He was asking about the future. Something she wasn't ready to tackle. "Why ask me? I'm just a lowly witch." She didn't intend the words to be mean or harsh, but they sounded both sarcastic and uncaring.

Mel stiffened, then climbed from the bed, his back toward her. A red and black satin dressing robe appeared on him as soon as his feet touched the floor.

"Mel?"

When he turned to face her, he had something in his hand. He held it out.

She gasped. It was a necklace of fire opals, rubies, and diamonds. And it was real. Minerals, precious stones, jewels, could be copied with magic, but they were never as bright, as alive, as the real thing, and this was oh-so-gorgeously the real thing. A fortune draped across his fingers, being offered to her.

"Marry me, Syd."

His words startled her more than the necklace. He was asking for the impossible, and he had to know it! He was accustomed to his world--royalty, power, prestige. If he married her, he would lose all that. It would be like an earthly king giving up his throne for love. How could she do that to him?

He knows that, and he's still asking, a part of her whispered. Say yes, it's what you want. Take it.

She reached for the necklace, brushing her fingers over the smooth stones. They were perfect, gorgeous.

How could she ever make up for what he'd lose? She drew her hand back. It shook and she crossed her arms, determined not to give in to the part of her urging her to say yes. Was this what love was? Wanting the best for someone even if it hurt?

She couldn't take everything from him. Not now. Especially not now.

He moved to the edge of the bed where she was sitting and lay the necklace against her skin. It was warm from his hand, warmer still against her flesh as he fastened it into place.

"I can't," she whispered, tears stinging her eyes. She blinked them back. "You know I can't. You'll lose your Royal status. I'll only drag you down."

"I don't give a damn about status or castles or any of that, Syd. I want you."

"But for how long? You'll change your mind. You don't know . . then you'll hate me."

"You have to trust me."

Trust? The very word conjured knots of anxiety in her stomach. She'd never trusted. He was asking for the impossible. She bit back a sob, reached down into the darkest part of herself for the anger that had once come so easily. She could see that it was the only thing that would convince him she wasn't interested. All she needed was a scrap, just a scrap of her old manner. "This was a mistake," she choked out in a cold tone, so cold her own blood suddenly felt like ice water.

He stared down at her, coolness flowing into his gaze like a rising tide. It drowned her heart in pain. Her throat burned with the need to tell him she loved him.

"Mistake?" he asked, his voice raw.

She couldn't speak. Was afraid to.

"Do you love me?"

She knitted her fingers together. Ten crossed fingers . . .good for ten lies. She only need to tell one. One convincing lie. "No," she said with all the conviction she could muster.

His gaze narrowed, and she trembled, afraid he might read her mind. She used a quick thought-spell to block any attempt.

"You're attractive," she said, using the same chill tone, " . . . and persistent . . . and I like you, but"

"Like?"

Evidently her tone was very convincing because his face paled to a ghastly white.

He swore.

He vanished.

He reappeared.

He swore again. "How could I have been so blind?" he muttered, his voice laced with fury and pain. He paced away, paused by the fireplace as though to pull himself together, then slowly returned, his expression controlled and resolute. "This was your best trick yet, fooling me," he said, pain and venom in his tone. He looked like he couldn't decide whether to strangle her or kiss her. He reached toward her, and she couldn't move. His fingers slid over her cheek, caressing in the manner of one

saying goodbye.

Then he vanished. In her mind came a whisper that might have been her imagination, “You’ve shattered my heart, Sweet Syd.”

She stifled another sob and unfastened the necklace. It wasn’t meant for someone like her. Mel was too good . . . too honorable The necklace slipped from her fingers and landed in a fiery tangle on the floor. She clenched her hands to her body, terrified he was watching, might hear the slightest sound of remorse. She had to appear unmoved, uncaring, rotten. Well she was a witch wasn’t she?

She wanted to die. To experience that black oblivion Sheryece had threatened her with.

He’ll get over it . . . me, she told herself. Feeling all shaky inside, she wished herself back in her cave. He’d gotten over Chantal. He’d soon forget her.

But she would never forget him.

Chapter Twenty Six

Adam stood and watched Elizabeth sleep, drinking in the sweet curve of her lips, the fall of her dark lashes against porcelain skin, the soft rhythmic rise and fall of her chest. Her fingers were curled in the blanket, holding it beneath her chin, her other hand tucked under the pillow. From downstairs, he could hear the violin and cello and bass combining in a crescendo of musical passion.

He shifted on his feet, his mouth and throat dry as sandpaper, his body and brain feeling disconnected. Now what? Pulling the blue velvet box from his pocket, he studied it. Should he wake her or wait until morning?

If he waited until morning, the anxiety might kill him. He cleared his throat.

She rolled from her side onto her back and sighed again as though having a wonderful dream.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he knelt and brushed her forehead with his fingers. Her lips curved up in a little smile. Bending closer, he lightly pressed his lips to hers, silently promising her everything he could give if she would only look at him with love and not hate when she awoke. “Elizabeth?”

He brushed her silky hair from her brow and tried to ignore the knots of tension in his back. “Sweetheart,” he whispered before sitting back on his heels.

Her eyelids moved, and she blinked. She sat up slowly, her puzzled expression fixed on the window. Her gaze swung abruptly toward the door, then stopped. “Adam?”

Red-hot insecurity shot through him, and his brain cells suddenly felt barbecued and unfunctioning. He worked his jaw but nothing came out.

“Is this a dream?” Elizabeth stared, certain this strange apparition of Adam as a magician would disappear. But the scent of his aftershave was so very real.

The ghost of a grin touched his face. “Not unless we’re both dreaming, Elizabeth.” His fingers found hers and closed over them tenderly. She felt them tremble.

“You’re really here?” She pulled her hand free and sat up, uncertain what to say or do. One part of her wanted to punch him for taking so long, the other part to grab his lapels and yank his mouth to hers before she went crazy with longing.

“Yes, I’m here,” Adam rasped, blood pounding in his ears. The blankets had fallen to her waist, revealing a scanty black lace bra cupping her perfect breasts.

Breasts he wanted to cherish, along with the rest of her. “Tell me you’ll forgive me. That you’ll give me another chance,” he said in a rush before he lost his nerve.

She ought to make him crawl across the floor, she thought, resisting the urge to kiss away his fears. He deserved to feel rotten, for a few more seconds anyway. “How’d you get in? I locked the door.”

“You must have dropped the key. Elizabeth. . . .”

“Your knees are on my costume. Would you hand it to me?”

Wearing a perplexed expression, he handed her the puddled black witch’s garb. She didn’t put it on but merely set it aside, drawing out the moment.

“Elizabeth. . . .”

“So,” she interrupted with more calm than she’d ever imagined herself possessing, “you found the key. What were you looking for?”

He rocked to his feet, the move impatient, and sat on the edge of the bed. Reaching for her hand, he clasped it between his. Her pulse danced, and she forgot every hurt as she drank in the love in his eyes. “I was searching for the woman of my dreams,” he whispered, taking her hand and placing it on his chest. “The woman who captured my heart from the moment I first saw her. The woman I love and don’t want to live without.”

She knew she ought to say something to all that, but the joy bursting inside eclipsed words.

“Elizabeth. Say something,” he said, his eyebrows drawn together with worry.

“The woman of your dreams?” she repeated, her tone uncertain.

“A never-ending dream,” he said. He leaned close, his breath mingling with hers, his gaze fixed on hers. “Marry me, Elizabeth Benning. Please.”

Her blue eyes widened.

He held his breath, time suspended, the sheer terror of her saying no clawing his insides. He'd done everything he could to make amends. "I know I owe you an apology and a lot more. Let me make it up to you for the rest of our lives."

She shook her head, and the claws sliced his heart. Then she giggled. "Oh, Adam. One apology's enough. You don't have to apologize for the rest of our lives."

"Our? As in *yes*?" His pulse quickened.

"Yes."

He gathered her in his arms and kissed her thoroughly before she could say anything more. Her answering passion lit his on fire. Still he pulled away. "This isn't just an attraction thing, Elizabeth. I want you to know that. I-I love everything about you. From your giggles to your baggy shorts, from your artistic talent to your business sense, from your gorgeous blue eyes to your pink painted toenails."

He stopped as tears brimmed in her eyes, making them even darker and more luminous. That she was laughing and crying at the same time somewhat reassured him. "Have I made a big enough fool of myself for you?" he asked. "Or would you like me to lock the door and provide more entertainment?"

Her face flushed. Taking that as a yes, he shut the door and turned the key, leaving it in the lock. Looking at Elizabeth, he said, "I feel like it's been a hundred years since I held you. Think we can make up for it in one night?"

"I don't know." Elizabeth wiped the last of her tears away and patted the bed, thinking that a good pioneer woman would give it her best shot. "May take a life time."

The love shining in Adam's eyes, his tender, teasing expression, meant more to her than the world. "Think your guests will miss you if you don't reappear?"

"Any guests still awake will be too tired or too plastered to care," she said, unwilling to share Adam with anyone.

Mid-stride in his return to her bedside, he stopped and reached into his pocket. "I forgot the most important part."

She lifted one dark brow and joked. "I know which part that is."

Wearing a silly grin, Adam pulled his hand free and held out a ring case, snapping it open as he knelt beside the bed.

She gasped at the huge blue stone, the magnificent setting, the tiny row of twinkling diamonds.

As though she were made of glass, Adam took her hand and gently slid the ring on her finger. The band fit perfectly. She held it toward the light, then smiled at Adam and reached for him. "I've never made love to a magician before," she said as he lay beside her.

Adam kissed her cheek. "I've never made love to a naked witch before."

"I'm not naked."

He kissed her neck. "Give me a few minutes to cast my spell."

She laughed as he grabbed his cape and dramatically pulled it over their heads. She felt her bra straps slip from her shoulders, felt his warm fingers unhook the back. He tossed the bra and cape to the floor.

"Ready for more magic?" he whispered.

She slid her hands beneath his long-sleeve shirt, reveling in the sensation of his smooth, hard muscles. "Only if I can assist."

"I might not survive the act," he said as her hands slid lower.

"I'll think of something to revive you," she promised, stroking him.

A groan tore from his throat. "Aren't we going to set a date?"

She nuzzled his neck. "Let's wait until morning. I've never been a magician's assistant before, and I don't want to stop the show."

Neither do I, he meant to say, but the words never made it past his lips.

"You weren't peeking at Elizabeth and Adam, were you?" Sheryece asked, her tone suspicious.

"Of course not!" Syd said, rearranging her skirt and her sitting position on the roof.

"Then why are your cheeks pink?"

Syd frowned. "Because I was thinking of Mel, if you must know." Thinking of Mel, missing Mel, aching as she remembered his wickedly delicious smile and the way he'd said her name when he made love to her that last time. *Sweet Syd, his little witch*. The words haunted her now. Made her feel desperate and lonely and old and depressed.

Witches were supposed to be depressed, she told herself.

Sheryece scooted closer and touched her shoulder. "Do you love him?"

"What do you think?" she snapped before she thought. She quickly added, "Of course not."

Unconvinced, Sheryece said, "I think you should tell him."

"Tell him?" Syd was incredulous and words spilled out. "He wants to marry me and I said no. I can't tell him anything. He's probably wooing some other gullible witch as we speak."

Even in the pale starlight, Syd could see Sheryece's eyes widen. "Oh my. He asked you. . . and you said *no*?"

"You sound shocked."

“Well, yes.”

Syd glowered at her twin. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone, except you. His precious reputation is safe.”

Sheryece brushed her hair back from her face, the gesture more of irritation than need. “I wasn’t worried about his reputation, and I doubt he’s worried either or he wouldn’t have asked.”

“How *did* you become a godmother?” Syd blurted, her hand covering her mouth as soon as the words were out. Blast and damnation, now Sheryece would think she *wanted* to be one, too.

Sheryece inhaled as though considering her words with great care. “There are no hard and fast rules, no matter what anyone says, Sydney. It’s all a matter of attitude and heart, and when your heart is ready, it happens.”

Syd had believed what everyone said, that you had to be *born* with the godmother potential, and she’d assumed Sheryece had it and she didn’t. Now her sister was telling her anyone of the Realm could be one. . . with a change of heart. Well, she’d had a change of heart. Done something for Mel’s sake instead of her own and nothing had happened. Except heartache. Excruciating, nauseating, humbling heartache. “When did it happen to you?” she surprised herself by asking.

“That’s a long story. One I’d like to save for another time, Syd.”

“How does one know if it’s happened?” She’d already blown it, she might as well ask all the questions building on the tip of her tongue.

“Something shifts inside you. The world looks different, smells different, nothing is the same. There’s a sense of connectedness and rightness that stays with you no matter what.” She flushed as though unsettled by her words. “I feel like I’m floundering. But when it happens, you’ll know it.”

Syd shook her head. “It’s not going to happen to me. I was just curious. I’m not looking to become another you.”

“You’ll never become another *me*,” Sheryece said in an exasperated tone. “You’ll become an even greater *you*.”

Confused and feeling vulnerable, Syd said, “Nothing’s going to change what or who I am. No matter what you say.” She floated off the hard shingles, readying to depart. “And Mel’s better off without me.”

“Syd wait. Promise you’ll be at Elizabeth and Adam’s wedding.”

Are you crazy? she thought, saying, “I’ll think about it.” She thought for one second. “Is Mel going to be there?”

“Maybe,” Sheryece said.

“I’ll think about it,” she said again, a part of her insisting silently, *No way*.

“I promise not to bug you for a hundred years if you come!”

Syd found herself grinning. A hundred years of freedom from her badgering, do-good twin's nagging? She couldn't pass that up. "Deal. Signed, sealed, and delivered."

Only as the wedding day approached did she wonder if she'd struck such a great bargain. She might have to face Mel.

Who knew what earthquakes and lightning he'd strike into her heart with just one brooding glance. Worse, what if he showed no signs of bemoaning her rejection but instead had a female Royal as an arm decoration?

That filleted her control. No way was Mel going to forget *her* so quickly. If she was going to sit around and pine for him, he'd damn well better be pining, too.

Pine?

Is that what she called this dismal, depressing, disparaging feeling she couldn't seem to shake?

Sydney Mannville pined for no one! She kicked her big black kettle and pain rocketed through her toe and up her leg. Hopping, clutching at her throbbing toe, she eyed the offending pot.

It was an omen!

She'd make a brew.

If Mel showed up with a new love, Syd would slip a potion into his champagne to transform him into a frog. Not that it would last long, an hour or two, he was too powerful. But his Royal companion would be humiliated and so would Mel.

And with any luck at all, a *ribbet* or *croak* would sneak out of his throat from time to time to remind him never to mess with a witch's heart again.

She grinned. "Hell hath no fury like a jealous witch."

Chapter Twenty Seven

Elizabeth wore her grandmother's royal blue velvet evening gown for her wedding. A pioneer woman defied convention, and besides, Adam loved her in that dress. He'd threatened he might forget their wedding vows, might lose his voice altogether, if she wore that dress.

Of course, the fact that he'd seen her in it before the wedding was supposed to be bad luck. But she didn't believe in that superstitious nonsense. She'd worn white and done everything expected when

she'd married Jerome and disaster had followed. No, this time, she'd follow her heart and spirit, lock, stock, and intuition.

Annie, her bridesmaid, wore a pale blue, floor-length concoction that made her appear quite demure. Of course, whomever she married would soon find a firecracker underneath, Elizabeth thought, grinning. If she married. Her friend had decided that dating was much too fun to ruin with a serious relationship.

Annie nudged her and pushed open the dressing room door at the front of the church. "It's time. Now don't be nervous."

"Who's nervous?" Elizabeth's heart rapped hard and fast. She minced out the door and down the narrow hallway and around to where they'd make their grand entrance. Maybe, she thought too late, the high heels weren't such a great idea. She had the horrible vision of herself tripping as she walked down the aisle and losing her bouquet to the crowd before the wedding.

Life's an adventure, she reminded herself. Live it and enjoy it. And who knew, if she did a triple somersault, Adam might be the one to catch her. Now if only her stomach would settle down, she might be able to breathe. Steeling herself, she smiled at Mel Stockwell. He'd graciously accepted her invitation to "give her away."

Annie, paired with Ethan, glided down the aisle first.

Mel offered Elizabeth a charming smile and tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. "Ready, my dear?"

She took as deep of a breath as the constricting dress would allow. "Ready."

Adam heard the wedding march begin, the organ blaring out the notes, and watched Elizabeth step daintily into sight at the other end of the aisle. He sucked in air, dumbstruck again by his good fortune. Good fortune was way too mild, he thought. He'd struck platinum and more. More than he ever deserved. She was exquisite, gorgeous, perfect, a vision etched into his mind that would last for the rest of his life. Along with the memory of their first meeting. He grinned at the mental image of the cobwebs in her hair, her dirt-smudged cheek and filthy backside. Not too perfect but entirely right for him. And today, in that dress, she was decidedly sexy and amazingly sweet, all in one delicious package he couldn't wait to unwrap.

He swallowed hard. She drew closer. His nerves frayed when he saw her death-grip on Mel's arm.

Was she having second thoughts?

The minister, a kindly leprechaun of a man with short white hair and a merry smile, started to speak.

Staring at Elizabeth, Adam prayed she hadn't changed her mind, that she'd say *I do* when the time came.

She said her vows so quietly, he strained to hear them, but the *I do* was there. Blessed relief.

The minister's eyes fixed on him. His turn. His voice buzzed in his ears, not sounding like

himself. He worked to keep his hand steady when he slid the wedding band on her finger. His heart swelled with love and pride and gratitude.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Elizabeth wobbled as he leaned toward her. “Oh,” she cried, falling against him.

He caught her, laughed with her, then kissed her thoroughly.

Chuckles and giggles rippled through the audience.

Syd couldn't keep her eyes off Mel. Her heart ached, and her eyes were misty and . . . and . . . she hated feeling this way.

Was the woman sitting next to Mel his new love? She appeared quite lovely and aristocratic in her white silk suit and diamond watch and earrings, an elaborate silk scarf at her neck. A Royal, no doubt.

Syd fingered the potion in her pocket and later at the reception found herself clenching the vial while Mel danced with the woman in white.

She's too old for him, Syd thought. Much too old. But that didn't keep Mel from dancing with her or smiling at her or embracing her with obvious fondness.

Shaking with fury, her heart in turmoil, Syd strode forward with two glasses of champagne. One sip of his and the no-good rat would become a croaking frog. Pasting on a smile, she sidled up beside him. “Hello, Mel.”

He froze for a second, then barely acknowledged her with a slight turn of his head. “Syd, I didn't expect you to come.”

“Obviously,” she said, unable to keep a frown from her face. Working to find another smile and failing, she said, “Who's your friend?”

The background music abruptly ceased to the sound of a man's voice. “Time to toast the bride and groom, everyone.”

Syd held the extra glass out to Mel. “Here.”

He took it and handed it to the woman. “You take it, Mother. I'll get some more.”

Syd choked on the air in her windpipe. “Mother?” she gasped.

Mel lifted a questioning eyebrow at her loud tone. “Yes. Mother, this is Syd Mannville.” With a courtly half-bow, he left to retrieve another glass of champagne.

Horrified and tongue-tied, Syd watched the older woman lift the glass toward her lips. By the stars, she had to *do* something!

With panicked fascination, she watched the glass draw closer--to disaster. An image of Mel's mother shrinking into a frog hopped through her mind. A shriek of panic built in her throat.

"Don't!" she blurted, snatching the bubbly from the woman's fingers. "There's a fly in your glass," Syd added as liquid sloshed over her hand and the waist and skirt of her red dress, then dripped to the floor. She quickly tossed the glass and contents in the garbage behind her. Not soon enough.

She moaned as the cold, wet front of her dress changed from red to frog-green. A stain spread across Syd's knuckles. Tiny green splotches decorated the floor by her foot. All her feelings of awkwardness and ineptness flamed to the fore. Heat stung her cheeks. Mel's mother would blast her for sure.

"Let me," the older woman said in a calm, smooth voice. She waved her hand to cast a spell, but instead of being burned to a cinder, Syd's dress, her skin, and the floor, were restored to normal.

Shocked, it took Syd a moment to blurt, "Why aren't you mad?" Surely she had to know Syd had planned to turn her son into a frog.

"Why should I be? There's no harm done." She offered Syd an amused smile that was so like Mel's it hurt. "You have a strange way of showing you care about my son, but it's obvious to me that you do."

"It is?" I should feel humiliated, Syd thought.

But the woman's calm happiness, radiating from her like a warm breeze made it impossible for Syd to feel bad. "You're a good match for him," she said.

Syd blinked, certain she'd misheard. She'd broken his heart and tried to turn him into a frog. His mother should be furious. She knew she was gaping at the woman but couldn't seem to stop.

"You love him, don't you?"

A "yes," slipped out before Syd could swallow it back.

Across the room, Adam's brother was holding up his glass. "To the bride and groom!" Everyone echoed his words and drank.

"Even if he forgave me, he'd lose everything," she murmured.

Mel's mother raised an eyebrow as though questioning her reasoning but offered no advice.

Syd scanned the room for Mel.

And saw him near the bar. No, she couldn't apologize. No matter what his mother said, Mel was better off without her. She had to believe that. She didn't ask herself why.

"Is that your sister, Sheryece, with Henry?" Mel's mother asked in her musical voice that seemed to offer only approval.

"Talking to Mel? Yes."

“Shall we join them?” She didn’t wait for an answer but led the way.

After a few minutes conversation, Henry and Mel’s mother joined in the dancing. Syd eyed Mel and wondered if he could hear her heart thumping against her ribcage. Mel’s mother might believe Syd right for her son, but right now the son looked like he’d rather burn at the stake than talk to her. Had he seen her make a spectacle of herself with the frog potion? No, she decided. He’d be giving her more than the silent treatment if he knew she’d almost turned his mother into a frog.

Sheryece tapped her arm. “Elizabeth and Adam are dancing.”

Syd glanced toward the human couple. In the periphery of her vision she saw her sister throw Mel a glaring look of disapproval.

Mel’s lips tightened. Sheryece nudged his elbow.

Syd pretended not to see. She sighed, the sound so wistful and melancholy that she wondered if it had really come from her lips. Witches didn’t sigh. But then, right now, she really didn’t feel much like a witch.

Mel stepped in front of her and held out his hand. “Would you like to dance?”

“Of course she would,” Sheryece said before Syd could refuse.

It was all she could do to remain stiff and unyielding in Mel’s delicious embrace. With perfect poise and steps, he waltzed her around the room several times, which took a very long time. Hope against hope, she prayed that he’d break the tension and say something.

If she were a godmother she’d marry him, she thought, the wistful, wishing sensation growing stronger and more unsettling. Then he wouldn’t lose anything, wouldn’t have to give up anything for her. A niggling part of her brain began to whine, *If he’s willing . . .* She clamped a lid on it and tried to take secret pleasure in the fact that he’d offered to give up his Royal status for her. How many witches could claim such a thing? If she blared it all over the Realm she’d be famous.

Famous while treading on his heart and rubbing it into the dust? Once, she wouldn’t have hesitated. Now, the notion tasted like dirt on her tongue.

The realization left her breathless. Or maybe it was Mel’s touch, the warmth of his hand, the heat of his body that inspired an answering heat within herself.

No, she had changed, she realized, wishing she hadn’t. She’d rather be her old self, not this new, tormented self that thought about everything and hesitated lest she hurt someone’s *feelings*. The unsettled, uneasy sensation within her grew stronger and more annoying. Whatever it was, she would ignore it until it went away.

The music ended, and Mel abruptly bowed and strode from the room.

Syd watched and wished and mourned. She’d changed enough to hurt inside, but not to become a godmother, the one thing that would make marriage with Mel possible. No matter how much that whining miserable voice in her head pleaded and cajoled, she was not letting him give up everything to put a ring on her finger, only to regret it later as she knew he would.

Are you certain?

The nagging voice was giving her an excruciating headache.

She left the party and returned to Elizabeth's house to float through the empty halls and, for the second time in her life, cry.

At first, the sound was alien and frightening, and she tried to stop. When she couldn't, her sobs slowly started to sound familiar, and in an odd way, comforting, like an old friend who offered a release she desperately needed.

With new abandon, she cried until her insides felt dry as an old sponge.

A sponge completely squeezed of tears and emotion. Except the fluttery, wistful sensation that wouldn't go away. Now that she'd run out of tears, she noticed that the niggling, unsettled feeling had grown even stronger and more demandingly persistent.

In an effort to distract herself, she calculated how many days until Elizabeth's first guests arrived, then envisioned their smiling faces. Lovers on holiday. Families on vacation to Big Sky country and Yellowstone. The inn would be filled with happiness and joy, not a place for a rotten witch.

The uneasiness in her stomach expanded and was surprisingly pleasant. How could she feel sad and wistful and uneasy and find it appealing? Loving Mel had certainly messed up her head, she thought, manufacturing some grumpiness, yet unable to hang onto it.

In the ballroom, she passed the wall of french doors which opened to the back deck, purposefully ignoring her reflection in the glass, not wanting to see her miserable self. She stood before the massive fireplace, studying the ornately carved mantel, the green and gold garland, the brass candlestick holders which had been in Elizabeth's family for generations. They seemed to stand for everything she'd rejected and now would never have. Her heart ached with remorse for her past and for the lonely eternity she faced. She tried to deny it, just as she was trying to deny the overwhelming desire to hug and forgive herself. She didn't deserve it.

Well, maybe she did. She'd saved Mel from ruining his life.

She crossed her arms and gave her ribs a tentative squeeze, feeling absolutely, ludicrously ridiculous. But she did feel better.

Perhaps she could fill her eternity with a different path than the one she'd been treading down for so long.

"I'll help other mortals find true love," she said aloud, needing to hear it, not quite sure she was convinced by all this newness spreading through her. Even as she spoke the idea gained momentum, blossoming in her heart and giving her hope. The odd, fluttery feeling made her feel like she'd felt after her first flight on a broom. Excited. Thrilled. Awed. Her hands felt warm and tingly, and she glanced down at them and stared. They were glowing with white light. . . like a. . . .

Like a Godmother!

She turned and stepped in front of the nearest french window and gasped. Her hair shone with diamonds, her green eyes sparkled, her face radiated love, and her entire body shone with ethereal light.

“I did it,” she whispered, her fingers touching the glass as though to assure herself her image was real. “I can marry Mel,” she said a bit louder, still not quite certain this was happening.

“I heard that.” Mel’s voice took her by shockwave. He appeared in the french window’s reflection beside her own. She turned toward him, intending to ask forgiveness. She didn’t get the chance.

“We knew you had it in you!” Her sister and Henry suddenly stood before her. A cacophony of voices flowed into the room.

She whirled on her toes and fought panic. A huge crowd appeared, filling the entire floor. Sheryece, Henry, and Mel all grinned like well-satisfied Royals.

“You are now a godmother,” Sheryece proclaimed.

Amidst a roar of cheers, Mel swept Syd into his arms and kissed her. Strange, but the only thing to come to Syd’s mind as Mel’s lips captured hers was Sheryece’s favorite saying, *I just love happy endings*.

When Mel released her, she was in the central courtyard of Mel’s castle, along with the rest of the Realm crowd. Dazzling fireworks exploded across the night sky, champagne flowed in a waterfall from a central fountain, and Mel’s arm stayed at her waist, warm and reassuring. Everyone approached in ones and twos to congratulate Syd on her “awesome” transformation and to congratulate Mel on his good taste.

This inspired Mel to wrap her in his arms and thoroughly taste her mouth again. The heat of his lips turned her legs to jelly and sent her heart rate soaring higher than the fireworks.

Finally, a breathless Mel released her. How could she have ever thought she could live without him she wondered?

Sheryece nudged her and grinned, and Syd found herself grinning back like a love struck fool. Sheryece raised an eyebrow, and Syd knew they were on the same wavelength.

Syd smiled. “What are we standing around for? I know there must be a woman who needs our help.”

“Our?” moaned Mel. “Surely you don’t expect me to help in this foolishness again?”

Syd batted her eyes, caught his hand in hers, and pulled him close. Flirting with him felt crazy, silly, and wonderful. “Come on, Mel. This’ll be sooo romantic. There’s bound to be a lovelorn woman in Hawaii. A great place for a honeymoon, don’t you think?”

“Honeymoon? You mean. . . .”

“Yes, you dolt, I do.”

Mel wrapped her in his arms and kissed her again. Soundly. Thoroughly. Wonderfully. Passion sparks erupted, shooting into the night. Everyone cheered, but the sounds were eclipsed by the delicious sensations bombarding her from Mel’s heavenly embrace.

In the back of her mind, she felt her sister's smile, imagined her twin dabbing at her eyes, and heard her loving whisper, "I just adore Happily Ever Afters. Even witchy ones."

END