

Love Potion Number Nine

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"St. Valentine was a sadistic prick," Lara Mullins muttered as she stomped past yet another lovebird-infested restaurant with a line out the door for the poor schmucks who'd forgotten to make reservations.

Valentine's Day always ranked pretty high on Lara's Top Ten Crappiest Excuses for a Holiday list, but this year Cupid had gone overboard and her day had been a spectacular suckfest since before dawn.

Her day had begun at five a.m. sharp, when a determined candygram deliveryman with the wrong apartment number came banging cheerfully on her door. If Lara had been an ER nurse already awake and getting ready for her early shift, the delivery would have been delightful and thoughtful. Since her upstairs neighbor was the ER nurse and Lara was the practicing witch who had been up mixing potions until the last second of the witching hour the night before, she was somewhat less than pleased by the noisy enthusiasm of the misdirected emissary of sugar-coated love.

After she bodily removed the candygrammer from her doorstep and pointed him upstairs toward his intended target, Lara had thrown herself back into bed, determined to steal another few hours of sleep, but the first urgent call from her boss had come less than an hour later. It was Valentine's Day, after all, which meant amateurs running amok with homemade love potions – and Lara running around all day fixing their cork-brained screwups.

Working as a potions expert for Karmic Consultants was her dream job, three hundred and sixty-four days a year. Her boss Karma was a savvy business woman with paranormal skills of her own, who had found a way to turn a profit by handling problems that fell outside the boundaries of the normal. Mediums, exorcists, psychics, and, of course, witches were all part of business as usual at Karmic. Lara loved it. Every day *except* Valentine's, when the stupid and romantically desperate cosmically aligned to piss her off.

So far today she'd been called to reverse the effects of eight true love potions gone wrong, one of which had brought her to an elementary classroom where every seven-year-old "prince" one pigtailed second grader kissed turned into a frog – and the eager brat was kissing as many as she could get her little lips on. The rest of Lara's day had consisted of

administering over two dozen doses of her temporary cure for a broken heart, and then diffusing the situation at a law office where a surprisingly effective lust potion had found its way into the water cooler. Visions of well-fed lawyers table-dancing on their own boardroom tables would haunt her for the rest of her life.

It had been a hell of a day and it wasn't over yet. St. Valentine had it in for her.

Lara glanced down at the napkin where she'd scribbled the address of her latest, and hopefully last, emergency assignment. She checked her own hieroglyphic scrawl against the gilt numbers stenciled on the front window of yet another trendy, upscale restaurant. Only one more block to go.

Movement behind the numbers on the window caught her eye as, inside the restaurant, a man who could have stepped right out of a cheesy jewelry commercial dropped onto one knee beside his date's chair. Lara didn't need to hear the words his lips were forming or see the ring he was about to pull out of his pocket to know what was going to happen next.

She strode quickly past the restaurant, hurrying toward the next block, shaking her head. How unoriginal could you get? Proposing on Valentine's Day. People these days were so swamped in clichés they wouldn't know real romance if it bit them on the ass.

Of course, it had been so long since Lara had seen anything resembling romance in her own life, it could probably take a chunk out of her own derriere and she wouldn't recognize it. She sighed. Well, she certainly wasn't going to feel the bite of Cupid's arrow tonight. One last remedy and then she would head straight home to a non-heart-shaped box of chocolates and a long, decadent bath. Alone.

Lara grimaced over her pathetic lack of lovelife, the grimace swiftly morphing into a frown as she spotted the street number on the building in front of her. Damn. She'd gone right past it.

She spun on her heel and strode back to the small, dark building sandwiched between an art gallery and a high-end restaurant. It had no windows and there was no indication of what kind of business it was, just a scarlet door with a small gold plaque off to one side. Lara stepped forward, squinting to read the stylized script on the plaque in the low light.

The Witch's Brew.

Her frown deepened. It couldn't be an actual potion shop. She would have heard if a new business catering to the occult had sprung up in the area. She shook away the idea. It was more likely to be an exclusive perfumery than a genuine potion shop. The name was probably just a strange coincidence.

Coincidence or not, it was the address Karma had given her. Lara rapped smartly on the door. It swung open almost immediately, revealing an interior just as dark and elegantly understated as the exterior.

Lara stepped into the dim entry and the door clicked softly shut behind her. Even accustomed to magic as she was, she had a healthy caution of inanimate objects that moved themselves, so she was relieved when the doorman stepped out of the shadows behind her with an obsequious smile.

"May I take your coat?"

As Lara shrugged off her grey wool jacket, she took the opportunity to look around the joint. And "joint" was definitely the right word for it. Everything about the place, from the low ceilings to the doorman's thin tie, reminded her of an upscale, Prohibition era speakeasy. Richly polished paneling caught the low light from the art deco fixtures. She walked slowly into the main room where liquid jazz poured out of hidden speakers. The club was empty, all the tables covered by overturned spindly black chairs except one. In the center of the small dance floor, a single table had been set up, and on that table rested a single oversized martini glass, filled to the brim with multicolored, swirling liquid.

"Of all the gin joints in all the world..."

Lara turned sharply at the sound of that deep voice. A man stepped out from behind the bar. An all-too-familiar man who was far from the average bartender. Lara sucked in a breath that turned into a strangled gasp as her lungs forgot how to breathe and her heart forgot to beat.

"Connor."

He smiled, the same sexy curve of his lips that never failed to melt her knees. "Hello, Lara. Miss me?"

Hell, yes. Lara clamped down on her tongue before the traitorous thing could confess just how badly she had missed him. Not that she'd had any right to. They might have almost been lovers once, two excruciatingly long years ago, but almost didn't count for much in matters of the heart.

He strode toward her, as innately graceful as ever, his movements deliberate and unhurried, as though his steps were part of a dance in time with the slow, hidden beat of the jazz that filled the room like smoke. Had he grown more handsome since she last saw him or had her memory dulled her idea of his beauty so she could convince herself that he wasn't the single most attractive man she'd ever laid eyes on? Either way, his looks stunned her now. The shape of his face. The way a lock of his dark blond hair fell across

his brow, unruly and boyish. The impish twinkle in his dark eyes. Eyes that raked over every inch of her as he moved steadily closer.

"Thank you, Emilio. That'll be all."

Lara started and glanced behind her. She had completely forgotten the presence of the doorman. Not to mention why she was there. And probably her own name, for a second there. Connor had always had the ability to scramble her wits without even trying. Lara wouldn't have minded if she could have returned the favor, but he'd never seemed as affected by her as she was by him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, fighting back the breathless quaver that was trying to hijack her voice. "I heard you'd moved to Guam or Ireland or something."

One night with her – or almost with her – and he couldn't leave the country fast enough. It was enough to flat out ruin a girl's self esteem.

Connor gave a low laugh and stopped his slow prowl directly in front of her. He stood just a little too close for her comfort, but Lara wouldn't let herself take a step back. If he could stand the proximity, then dammit so would she.

"It was Chicago, actually," he said. "My grandfather passed away and I had some family business to deal with."

Great. She couldn't exactly be pissed at him for walking out on her if he was off being all noble taking care of his family. Still, the bastard could at least have said goodbye. You don't just get a girl halfway out of her clothes, making her so damn hot she can barely put a coherent thought together and then disappear without a word.

But Lara didn't want to talk too much about Connor's sudden departure because then she would have to talk about the events leading up to his sudden departure and that was the last thing she wanted to do. Reliving the single most embarrassing night of her life was not high among her priorities.

She scanned the club, looking for something that would take her mind off of Connor and sex. The martini concoction on the table caught her attention. Was that the potion she had been called about?

"So where's the victim?"

Connor arched one eyebrow in self-assured amusement. "Victim?"

"I was called about a love potion foul up. So who drank it?"

"No one. Yet."

She frowned, irritated by his vague response. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Lara." Connor shook his head, still smiling. "You wound me. Do you really think me so incompetent that I can't even get a simple love potion right?"

He made a good point. Connor had always had a knack for love charms and love potions. As if he needed any more help with women. It was downright unfair to the fairer sex for a man to be both ridiculously good-looking *and* have magical seduction at his disposal. Connor wasn't a practicing witch, more of a dabbler, but he had an innate talent for it that had always made Lara green with envy – when she wasn't turning other colors with plain, old fashioned lust.

"So if your potion prowess hasn't changed, what do you need me for?"

Connor grinned wickedly. "To test it, luv."

"Excuse me?"

He took a half-step closer, his gaze intent. "This is a very *special* potion, Lara. It's the culmination of all my efforts. Love Potion Number Nine." He flashed her a sweet smile. "And I can't test it without you."

"Me?" Lara squeaked.

Great. He'd reduced her to squeaking.

"You." He leaned forward and for one perfect, terrifying moment, she was certain he was going to kiss her. But then he seemed to catch himself, drawing back away from her and giving a casual shrug. "You were always immune to every love potion. What was it Luke used to call you?"

Lara grimaced. "The Anti-Cupid."

"Exactly. My potion won't be one hundred percent foolproof until it can make the Anti-Cupid fall in love."

"And I'm just the fool to prove it for you, huh?"

"None other."

Lara eyed the multicolored cocktail dubiously. "You realize that you've handicapped your little experiment. You know as well as I do that love potions are much less effective if the subject knows they're coming."

Conscious resistance was a powerful thing. Now that Lara knew he was trying to magic her into love, all of her willpower could fight the effects of the potion.

Connor just grinned, completely unconcerned. "This is a very special cocktail." He strolled over to the table. "Of course, it's up to you to choose whether you want to drink it or not. I can't make you."

Lara heard the challenge in his voice and bit her lip. This was it. The moment of truth. She was alone in what could only be described as intensely romantic surroundings

with the man who had been the star of ninety percent of the romantic fantasies she'd had since puberty and he was offering her a love potion. All she had to do was drink.

But taking that drink would be galling in the extreme. It would be admitting that she still wanted him, even after he had peeled her half-clothed self off him, fed her that bullshit line about wanting to "take things slowly" and then vanished into the night never to be seen or heard from again. Until now.

Drinking that damn love potion would be acknowledging that she still *wanted* to fall in love with him. And, Cupid help her, did she ever want to fall in love with him.

She wanted to drink the potion. And what's more, she wanted it to work. She may be the Anti-Cupid on whom no love spell had ever succeeded. Her natural resistance might be legendary, but tonight she wanted to be a lightweight when it came to love. The ultimate cheap date.

There was no way she was walking out of here without downing that whole glass. But she still had her pride.

"It won't work," she insisted with a cocky tilt to her head as she sauntered toward the concoction on the table. "No potion ever has and no potion ever will."

His grin was even cockier than the tilt of her head, a man assured of his victory. "Then you have nothing to fear in drinking it."

She planted one hand on her hip. "Do I look frightened to you?"

"You look..." His eyes roved over her and he swallowed thickly. "You look exactly as I remembered you."

Lara pulled her eyes away from his compelling stare, more pleased than she wanted to admit at the idea that he had remembered her at all. Her gaze landed on the concoction in the martini glass. She seized it, sloshing some of the liquid onto the back of her hand.

She toasted him, sending more of the potion splashing over her hand and down her wrist. "Bottoms up."

Connor's response was so soft Lara couldn't be sure she heard him correctly, but it sounded an awful lot like, "I certainly hope so."

She drained the glass in one long draught. The taste wasn't unpleasant, as so many potions had a tendency to be. Sweet and mild, it lingered on her tongue for only a moment. Lara waited for the tell-tale tingle of magic, but she felt nothing.

There was no spark of love or lust. At least none that she hadn't been feeling already before she drank.

Connor watched her intently, searching her for any symptom of the potion's impact. Time stretched, seconds ticking by, the slow jazz flowing over them, but still Lara felt nothing. No stirring, no shivery warmth, no dewy-eyed infatuation.

"I guess it didn't work," she said finally, hoping Connor wouldn't hear the traces of disappointment in her voice.

"Give it a second," he urged.

He caught her hand which still held the glass, plucking it from her fingers and setting it aside before raising her wrist to his lips. His eyes still locked on her, he licked the droplets of spilled potion off the back of her hand, then softly sucked her moist skin into his mouth. Her skin flushed, a rush of heat radiating outward from the touch of his mouth.

"What are you, a cat?" she asked, needing the defensive barrier of the sharp words.

But Connor didn't react to the edge in her voice. He chuckled low, tightening his grip on her fingers when she tried to tug her hand away. "I was hoping to invoke a more chivalrous image."

He ran light, not-quite-chaste kisses up her arm, crowding closer with each touch. When he was close enough that a deep breath would press her against him, her head fell back of its own accord to meet his mouth, but Connor stepped around to her side, his kisses continuing on their path up over her bare shoulder. Lara closed her eyes, but she could still track his progress through his touch, across her shoulder blade, brushing aside the narrow strap of her shirt, teasing her nape then the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder. His breath ran hot against her skin and Lara shivered.

"I think that potion might be working now," he murmured against her neck.

"Mm-hmm," she agreed, dizzy and hot. She felt like she had been dipped in nitroglycerin, ready to combust at the slightest spark. The man certainly had a gift with love potions. There was no denying that.

His hands came around her from behind and took control of her body. Her stomach, hips, ribs, breasts, they were all his and every sure movement of his hands proved it. Her head fell back against his shoulder as he palmed her breasts and brushed his mouth along the underside of her jaw.

"Connor." His name was a plea and a demand, whispered with all the force of the desire pulsing through her blood.

He spun her to face him, his mouth claiming hers in a swift, merciless kiss. He pressed against her, urging her backward, guiding her until her calves bumped up against something soft and they tumbled down together onto a low backless couch that ran along one wall.

They struggled out of their clothes, helping one another when their hands proved too clumsy or they found themselves distracted by the urgent need to steal another touch, another kiss.

When his bare skin finally pressed against hers, Lara gasped at the sensation and the heady knowledge that they'd already come farther than they'd ever been. This was really happening. He wasn't going to push her away with some moronic platitude about caring for her too much to rush things. They were rushing forward now.

Her urgency matched his. Connor did not hesitate. He fit himself against her, repeating her name like a mantra as he slid into her. Lara wallowed in that long, slow stroke, digging her heels into the cushion beneath her and tilting her hips to seat him deeper.

He twined his fingers with hers, pinning their interlocking fists above her head as his eyes bored into hers and his hips began to pulse against hers. Lara fought to keep her eyes open and on him, fought to keep them from rolling back in her head in pure bliss as he drove into her. The rhythm he set stirred the cocktail in her blood, calling to the potion, to her natural lust for him and to the traitorous corners of her heart that still loved him. She moaned out incoherent vows of love, punctuated by ragged, higher pitched cries as her body tightened and coiled, reaching for the orgasm building within. She came with a shout, her hands and thighs holding on tight as her world exploded. Connor followed her a heartbeat later, his own shout of completion overriding hers.

When he rolled his weight off of her moments later, carefully so as not to send them both crashing off the narrow couch, the reality of what they had just done landed around her heavily.

Lara groaned. "We just gave Emilio the show of his life."

"Emilio is very well paid and under strict instructions to lock the door behind him when he left."

Lara shifted, suddenly uncomfortable mashed between Connor and the wall, where only moments ago she had been the picture of satisfaction. He had planned this, that much was obvious from the potion alone, but something about his words set her ill at ease. "Were you so sure of me?"

"No. *Hopeful*, maybe." He caught her back against his chest when Lara tried to lever herself away. "Lara, please. This wasn't exactly what I had planned." He flung out one arm, the sweeping gesture encompassing their hastily discarded clothing and the couch on which he held her.

"You mean you weren't hoping to get laid?" she asked, skepticism rife in her tone.

"Sex wasn't the goal."

"You could have fooled me." He had fooled her. Again.

He grimaced. "Well, sex wasn't the only goal. I love you, Lara."

She stiffened, drawing in tight on herself. The words were exactly what she had always wanted to hear him say, but suddenly they sounded so wrong. How could she believe him? Especially when the memory of him licking the love potion off of her hand was so vivid. Could he have been affected by it too? She knew that she truly loved him, had always loved him, but what if he had been caught by his own potion? What if everything that had happened since that first drop of liquid had hit his lips had been artificial? Could she be with him, knowing it was a lie?

"What was in that love potion, Connor?"

He cringed and Lara's stomach plummeted. This was it. He was conscious of the potion now. He would resist it. His love would evaporate like so much smoke and she would be left, naked and pathetic, without even the cold comfort of the words "Nothing really happened," because this time, something had happened. So much had happened. But it had all been magic, illusion. Just a chimera of love.

"It's a special potion," Connor repeated his earlier words, obviously stalling. "Secret recipe, and all..."

"Connor."

"Well, there was juice. And some water. And, er, food coloring."

Lara blinked, confusion and hope twining around one another in her thoughts. "What?"

Connor smiled sheepishly. "There was no magic in the potion. I just needed an excuse to get close to you."

"You..." She trailed off, words abandoning her.

Connor spoke rapidly, filling the void with as many words as he could cram into it, sincerity ringing in his voice. "I love you, Lara. I've always loved you. Always wanted to be with you. But my family isn't exactly the kind you want to bring Miss Right home to. My parents, grandparents, cousins, we don't always fall on the right side of legal. When we met, I didn't want to involve you, but when my grandfather died and I knew my responsibilities to the family would be changing, you were the only person I wanted to see. I had to see you before I went back to Chicago. I don't know what I thought I would tell you. I never meant for anything to happen, but there you were and you were so gorgeous and you seemed to want me too... God, it nearly killed me leaving you that night, but I couldn't make promises to you that I knew I wouldn't be able to keep. I didn't know when I

would be back, or if I ever would be. I had to get some things sorted out with my family, make it clear to them that I really was going legit, so I could be good enough for you."

Lara held herself perfectly still, listening with a sense of dizzy awe as Connor confessed to her, his arms still tight around her as if to keep her from slipping away.

"I knew when I came back I would need a miracle to get you back. Hell, it was a miracle you hadn't found someone better than me in the two years I've been gone. I thought the love potion would be a big romantic gesture. We would both drink it and then afterward I would tell you that there wasn't anything in it. But then I saw you and I forgot everything but you, wanting you, loving you. I couldn't remember my plan. I could barely remember my own name when you walked in tonight."

Lara beamed at him, unable to keep the happiness building up inside of her from bursting out.

"You're smiling. I'm thinking that's a good thing."

"It's a good thing."

"You forgive me for lying about the potion and for all of my Machiavellian plans to get you back?"

"I thank you for lying to me about the potion. I might not have been brave enough to tell you how much I love you without it. Of course, there is one flaw in your logic."

"Oh?"

"There isn't anyone better than you, Connor." She kissed him then, putting every ounce of love in her soul into it.

"Marry me, Lara," he murmured against her mouth.

Lara groaned, dropping her head against his chest and shaking with silent laughter. "You had to do it, didn't you? You had to propose on Valentine's Day. How cliché can you get?"

"Is that a no?"

"No, you fool, that isn't a no. Of course, I'll marry you."

Valentine's Day, a romantic jazz club, and the love of her life. Sometimes cliché wasn't so bad.

## **Biography**

Vivi Andrews is a mild-mannered accounting clerk by day, transforming into the (nearly) superhuman author of paranormal comedies each night. She currently resides in the Pacific Northwest with a laptop, a worn-out library card, and season tickets to the Seattle Mariners.

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