

Invisible Love
Amanda Steiger

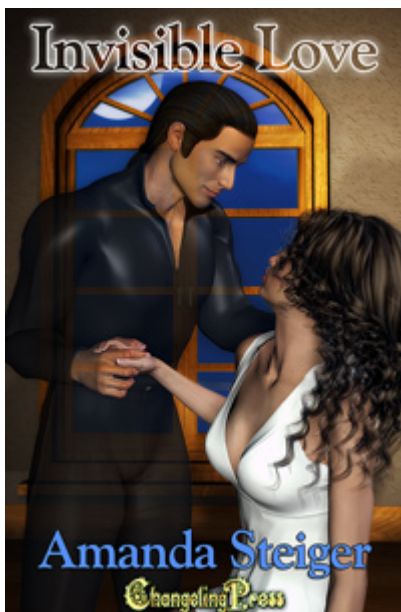
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Invisible Love

Amanda Steiger

Gregory, an ambitious sorcerer, tried to become immortal... but the spell went wrong and transformed him into a bodiless spirit. For five hundred years, he's roamed the world trapped between life and death, cut off from all human contact. Then he meets Linda, a young psychic who can feel his presence.

Shy, lonely Linda hasn't felt a man's touch for a long time. Then one night, a gorgeous man appears to her in a vivid, erotic dream... and the next day, she hears his voice in her mind. At first, Linda thinks she's going crazy, but she can't ignore the man's desperation, his hunger for human contact. When he asks her to open her mind to him, she can't refuse.

By inhabiting Linda's body, Gregory discovers, he is able to feel again. After five hundred years without pleasure, he is overwhelmed by the sensations. Linda, meanwhile, discovers that having Gregory's spirit inside her is surprisingly erotic. Though she can't see him, she can sense his essence moving through her, even feel his hands on her body. Before long, she finds herself falling in love with this strange, lonely, passionate man. As her feelings grow, Linda vows to help Gregory escape the empty half-life of a wandering soul and become human again... but to save him, she must make a terrible sacrifice.

Chapter One

Gregory floated above New York City. He stared through the patchy clouds, at the tiny skyscrapers and high rises below. At night, the city glowed with a thousand points of light, like a mirror image of the starry sky. Cars crawled through the maze of streets like ants through tunnels. How faraway, how unimportant everything seemed from this distance.

Wind howled around him. A few fat snowflakes spiraled down from the sky. Gregory felt no cold. He had felt nothing for hundreds of years. He wondered -- for the thousandth, the millionth time -- if he would ever escape this empty, gray half-life, or if he was doomed to wander the Earth as a spirit for all eternity, unseen, unheard. Alone.

He drifted down toward the city, like a feather on the wind. His feet touched the ground. He walked down the sidewalk. People hurried past, talking loudly, cell phones glued to their ears.

It was that time of year, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, when the whole of America seemed caught in a frenzy of commerce. People clutched brightly colored shopping bags filled with toys and the latest electronic gadgets. Store windows glowed with warm light. Signs boasted low, low prices to entice consumers. Passersby walked through Gregory's dim, translucent form as though passing through a cloud of smoke. Their thoughts and memories swirled through his mind, like leaves on the wind. He took no notice. The thoughts of the living were dull and repetitive, centered around the details of their hectic careers and their confused love lives.

He stopped outside an apartment building and looked up.

On the third floor, a window glowed with lamplight. He stared at the window, wondering why it held his attention. He felt a peculiar tug in the core of his being. Something drew him toward that square of warm, yellow light. He floated off the ground, hovered outside the window, and peered in.

A young woman sat upright in bed, legs tucked beneath her, an open book in her lap. Long, wavy hair spilled over her slim, pale shoulders, hair so dark a brown it was almost black. It shone with a soft luster in the lamplight as she twined a lock around two fingers. Her full lips were parted, relaxed, as her eyes moved over the lines on the page. She wore only a sleeveless, white cotton nightshirt and a pair of white panties.

Gregory stared. An ache of longing pierced his soul, so deep and sharp it was almost pain. How long had it been since he had touched a woman? How long since he had tasted soft lips, or felt his cock sink into a warm, welcoming body? The sight of this woman -- so delicate, yet so lush, like a tropical flower -- made him hunger for things he could never feel again. The hunger roared inside him like a caged tiger.

His gaze traced her slim, white neck, slid down to the delicate hollow between her collarbones, then lower, lingering on the swell of her full breasts. She wore no bra beneath the nightshirt, and he could see the shape of her small, pert nipples. He thought about taking one into his mouth, feeling it harden between his lips, sucking it through the thin cotton like a piece of candy.

His eyes moved lower still, devoured her slim, smooth thighs -- the skin would be petal-soft to the touch, he was sure -- and followed them to their juncture. Her panties clung to her mound. He could see the outline of her plump lips, the tempting crevice between them.

He wanted to mark that smooth, white flesh with his mouth and hands. He wanted to plunder those soft lips. He placed a hand on the window and stared at her through his own translucent fingers. His hand curled into a fist. A part of him wanted to turn away. It was almost unbearable, being so close to something so beautiful, so untouchable. But he couldn't take his gaze from her.

He reached out a tendril of thought and brushed the surface of her mind. She was reading a love scene, her attention completely focused on the book in her lap. He heard her sigh, saw her shiver as she pressed those silky, white thighs together.

He probed a little deeper, examining the structure of her mind. It felt different, unlike other mortals', more open, more receptive. If he hadn't known better, he would have said she was a seer... but that was unlikely. The gift of second sight had died out almost completely in this modern era. Humans' subtler senses were anesthetized by television and computers, the whispers of intuition drowned out by the noisy details crowding their minds.

Still... perhaps there were exceptions.

He drifted in through the window and walked across the room to stand beside her bed.

The woman looked up. She had enormous, liquid black eyes, like pools of shadow, framed by thick lashes that curved upward at the ends. Her eyes moved back and forth, scanning the room. A tiny furrow appeared in her brow. She set her book down and rubbed her arms, as if she were cold.

She felt his presence!

He leaned closer. "Can you hear me?" he said.

Long lashes fluttered. She bit her full lower lip, but didn't respond.

Still, she sensed him. A tingle of excitement raced through his being.

"Hello?" the girl called. Her voice was soft, high and clear, like soothing music. She stood. He admired her movements as she walked across the room, her nightshirt clinging to her slender form. Her ass was small, round and firm, and swayed gently as she walked. The young woman checked in the closet, then under the bed, like a child checking for monsters. She shook her head, sighed and brushed a lock of hair from her face. "I'm getting paranoid. There's no one here." She crawled into bed, pulled the covers over herself and turned off the lamp.

Gregory stood and listened as her breathing grew slow and even. Once she was asleep, he moved closer.

Her silky, dark hair spilled over the pillow, and her eyes were closed, her lashes dark, feathery crescents on her white cheeks. She rolled over, onto her side, and the covers slipped away. Her chest rose and fell with each breath, her full, soft breasts straining against her thin nightshirt.

The ache of longing swelled within Gregory again. He imagined her naked on the bed, bare breasts heaving, thighs spread to expose her pussy. Heat swept through him, leaving him dazed and astonished. He had not felt desire for centuries. Since becoming a spirit, he'd had only the memory of desire, cold and remote... until now. There was definitely something different about her, if she could affect him like this.

He needed to learn more.

The girl stirred in her sleep. Frustration clenched his heart. A woman he desired lay here before him, so close, yet he could not touch her. He could only imagine the satin softness of her full lower lip, the heat of her mouth. He imagined that mouth in a wet, soft O around his cock, sucking him, while those slender fingers stroked his tightening balls...

He groaned and cursed his lack of physical form. He looked down at the faint, ghostly outline of his

body; transparent, immaterial, a mere shadow. With each passing year, that form grew a little dimmer as his memories of life faded. With each year, he felt a little less human, a little less *real*. Yet now, human feelings burned in his mind, bright and forceful.

She couldn't hear his voice. But perhaps there was another way. Humans were more receptive when they slept. If he could enter her dream, perhaps he could form a mental connection with her.

Gregory leaned closer. He watched her large eyes moving in tiny flickers beneath the lids. Then he slipped into her mind.

I'm dreaming, thought Linda.

She lay in bed, on red silk sheets, naked. It wasn't her room. Her room didn't have a huge, scarlet canopy bed with velvet pillows, or a floor of what appeared to be black marble, or walls painted a soft, dusky rose. She also didn't have a large, oval-shaped mirror with a dark wood frame on the wall directly opposite her bed. In the mirror, she could see herself, looking more or less as she did in her waking life, but somehow more striking, her skin ivory white against the scarlet sheets, her dark hair fanned out across the pillow. Rose petals had been strewn across her belly and breasts, her thighs. One rested on the smooth mound of her pussy, as if it had been placed there for modesty, though it wasn't really large enough to hide anything.

The window was open, red curtains billowing lightly in the breeze. It was dark outside. The only light came from a small, round lamp of red glass next to her bed. Cool air gusted into the room, whistling softly. Linda shivered, feeling the caress of air against her bare skin. Her nipples puckered and tightened to sharp points, and goose-bumps broke out on the smooth flesh of her breasts and thighs. Her tongue crept out, moistening her lips.

It had to be a dream. If she were awake, she'd be terrified to wake up in a strange room, completely naked. But she felt drowsy, relaxed... and aroused.

For a moment, she wondered if she'd been kidnapped. Maybe her kidnapper had slipped her some kind of drug. Was that why she wasn't freaking out right now? The thought provoked a flicker of anxiety, but it quickly faded.

Another shiver ran through her. She touched her stiff, aching nipples, massaged them lightly with her fingertips. The soft, cool touch of air on her naked pussy was like a lover's caress. Her clit tingled and swelled.

She looked up, into the mirror... and gasped. A reflection of a tall, dark-haired man stood beside the bed. It seemed impossible that she hadn't noticed him before, but when she looked up, there he was, standing over her. He was huge, imposing, with massive shoulders and a wide chest. He wore a dark, silk shirt, with pants to match, and his hair was tied back in a tight queue. His face was handsome, but severe, with high cheekbones, a firm mouth and proud, aquiline nose. His brows were dark and straight, his eyes perfectly black, like polished ebony. They stared deep into hers. She stared back, captivated. There was a sense of tremendous depth to those eyes, yet she couldn't read anything in them.

She was suddenly very aware of her own nakedness. Heat rushed to her face.

"I've been watching you, Linda." His voice was husky, rough, a deep rumble rising from his chest.

Large, warm fingertips touched her face. She could feel the slight roughness of calluses as they trailed down her cheek, over her neck.

“Who are you?” she whispered. Her heart pounded.

“A man who desires you.” His fingers slid over the slope of one breast. His thumb brushed her hard, jutting nipple, traced the puckered areola.

She moaned softly. Her thighs parted.

She would never allow a complete stranger to touch her like this. Not in her waking life, anyway. But this was a dream, right? It didn't matter. She could give in to the hot need surging through her body.

“God... it has been so long,” he murmured. “So very long, since I have tasted the sweetness of a woman's flesh.” His dark eyes burned with need. She stared into those eyes, unable to look away, as his hand covered her right breast and squeezed. His mouth found her neck. He softly kissed her racing pulse. “You desire me as well, do you not?” he whispered, his lips moving close to her ear.

There was something odd about his speech -- something a little more formal, a little more Old World than she was used to. Not that she minded... and at the moment, she wasn't inclined to wonder about it. “Yes,” she breathed.

His large hand slid down the length of her body, over her stomach, between her thighs. He cupped her aroused pussy, his touch gentle, yet possessive. He rubbed his broad, rough palm against her. “You're wet.” His voice was a deep, soft rumble, vibrating in her ears, in her bones. “Very, very wet.”

She shivered and ran her tongue over her lips.

His hands slid over her thighs, pushing them wider apart. He stared at her pussy. She could almost feel his eyes on her, like a physical caress, burning hot. His thumb grazed the hood of her clit. The tiny nub stiffened and poked out like a pink button. The rough ball of his thumb brushed over it again, giving her a delicious shock of pleasure, then moved lower, sliding down her wet slit until he found her small, tight hole. He stroked it once, lightly. Then he lowered his head until she felt his breath on the tender flesh between her thighs. His tongue traced the cleft of her pussy, and Linda went limp with pleasure. When his teeth scraped, ever so gently, against the tender lips of her sex, she moaned.

His harsh, rough breathing filled her ears. He climbed onto the bed with the fluid, powerful movements of a big cat and positioned himself over her. His naked body filled her vision, all gleaming, bronze skin and hard muscle. A line of dark hair ran down the center of his chest and belly, ending in a patch of thick curls between his legs. She couldn't recall exactly how or when he had undressed. It was as if his clothes had vanished by magic. But then, this was a dream, after all.

God, he was enormous. Every part of him. His chest was a solid wall of muscle, tapering down to a narrow waist. His legs were long and powerful, bulging with muscle, and his cock... she went weak at the sight of it. His cock was thick, rigid, so red and engorged it looked like it must hurt him. Prominent veins ran from the root to the tip. A bead of clear fluid clung to the slit of its smooth, bulbous head.

She touched that huge, erect cock and heard his soft intake of breath. Her fingers slid slowly down its length, then slipped beneath it and brushed against the rough surface of his balls, which hung between his legs like ripe fruit, firm and round and dark. She cupped them, feeling the weight of them in her hand.

He growled softly under his breath, a sound of animal pleasure. He grabbed her hand and curled her fingers firmly around his cock. "Let me feel," he whispered hoarsely. "Let me live again, through you. Give me life."

She had no idea what he meant, but in that moment, she knew she could deny him nothing. She felt his need, deep and penetrating and unbearable. He was like a man dying of starvation, and this was his manna. She nodded, breathless.

He leaned down, until his lips almost touched hers. She could feel his warm breath against her lips. His black eyes were directly over hers. Those eyes pierced her with their burning hunger. She felt something very large and very hot pressing against her sex, demanding entrance. Her thighs trembled and spread a little wider...

There was a loud click. A shrill *beep-beep* filled her ears.

Linda opened her eyes and blinked in confusion. She was flushed, damp with sweat, her heart pounding. She looked around. She was in her own drab apartment, her own bed, and she was alone, tangled up in her sweaty sheets.

The alarm clock beeped again.

"Damn it!" She reached over and, after fumbling around for a moment, managed to hit the snooze button. Closing her eyes, she pressed her face against the pillow and groaned.

Just a dream, after all. Of course she'd known that, but disappointment still weighed on her heart.

She'd had wet dreams before, of course, but never one so vivid, so real. A little shiver traced its way down her spine at the memory of those dark eyes, those big, warm hands on her skin. She pulled the covers down and looked down at her panties. They were soaked. And she was still aching and unfulfilled.

She glanced at the clock and sighed. No time to do anything about it. She had barely a half-hour to have her coffee and get ready for work.

Linda kicked aside the covers and got out of bed. She muffled a yawn against one hand, walked into the bathroom, slipped off her panties and nightshirt and stepped into the shower. She closed her eyes when the hot spray hit her. The dream-man's face filled her mind again, unbidden. She could still see those strong features so clearly.

It had been far too long since she'd felt a man's touch.

Linda grabbed a bar of soap. She rubbed it between her hands until she'd worked up a lather, then washed herself. She rubbed the thick suds into the cleft of her sex, and a tiny moan rose from her throat. She was still so aroused. It would probably only take a few minutes to bring herself to climax. Giving in, she leaned against the stall wall, closed her eyes, and slid a finger into her body. She worked it in and out, thinking about the man from her dream -- his dark, intense eyes, his powerful body -- and let out a sharp gasp as she came. The walls of her pussy shuddered and clenched around her finger.

Linda breathed a sigh. She really needed to get out more. She was masturbating over a man who didn't

even exist, for God's sake, a man her subconscious had created out of loneliness and sexual frustration.

Once she'd rinsed away the last suds, she turned off the water and stepped out of the shower stall. She draped a towel around her shoulders, glanced into the steam-fogged mirror and froze. Next to the hazy outline of her own body, she could see someone else, someone standing just behind her, someone much taller and bigger than Linda. Heart racing, she turned slowly... but there was no one there. She looked back at the mirror, and the shape was gone. She exhaled softly. "Just your imagination," she murmured. But her heart wouldn't stop pounding.

She brewed a pot of coffee and gulped down two cups, not bothering to add cream or sugar.

She got dressed and tugged a brush through her hair. Wet, it hung straight down around her face like a curtain. She braided it with an ease born of long practice, then turned to leave her apartment.

"Linda," said a voice.

She froze, then whirled around. No one. Her heart slammed against her ribs. She was certain she'd heard a voice. It had sounded *soclose*, as if the person were standing right there, behind her. She scanned the apartment again, checking to assure herself that no one was hiding behind the couch or TV, took a deep breath and placed a hand over her racing heart.

First the shape in the mirror, and now this. What was going on? Was she losing her mind?

Linda shook her head. She could worry about it later. Now, she was late for work.

Linda grabbed her purse and ran out the door.

Chapter Two

Gregory trailed behind her as she hurried down the street. She'd changed into a dark blouse, a long black jacket and black slacks. She carried an umbrella.

It had begun to rain lightly, an icy, sleety rain which might later become snow. People scurried along with their heads bowed and their shoulders hunched, hiding under hooded coats and umbrellas. No one looked at Gregory, though a dog paused to sniff his pant leg. People walked straight through him, their high heels and patent leather business shoes clicking on the sidewalk. Most of those people paid no notice, but occasionally, someone shivered and glanced over their shoulder. Gregory wondered what they felt. A patch of cold air, perhaps? A tingling sensation, like ants on their skin? Or just an ineffable strangeness?

He followed the woman -- *Linda*, he thought, *her name is Linda* -- his hands in the pockets of his coat, which lay flat around him despite the sharp gusts of wind.

He watched her dark hair bounce against her shoulders, watched her hips sway. Lust shot through him. Lust, pleasure, heat -- he had not felt those things for centuries, but she made him remember them. She made him yearn for life, for the thrill of a beating heart. Sharing her dream, he had shared her pleasure. He had *felt* .

But a dream was not the real thing.

Linda stopped and looked over her shoulder. He stopped, too, watching her. Her lips were parted. Her large, clear dark eyes moved back and forth, searching. Her brow furrowed. She felt something, that much was clear... and he suspected she'd glimpsed him in the mirror earlier, as well. If he'd still had a heart, the thought would have made his pulse quicken. She could *see* him. Only in reflections, but even that was unusual.

If she could perceive him, perhaps he might be able to speak to her... not just in her dreams, but in her waking life. Perhaps, for the first time in centuries, he would have real contact with another person.

* * *

Linda returned to her apartment at eight o'clock, yawned and hung up her jacket. It had been a long day. She stretched, trying to ease the stiffness in her muscles. "I need a better job," she muttered. She had a college education -- just a BA in English, but still, she hadn't gone to school to be a receptionist at an accounting firm. She kept telling herself it was just to pay the bills until she found something better, but she'd been stuck behind that desk for half a year now.

It was still raining outside, and her clothes were drenched, despite her umbrella. She needed a hot dinner and a hot bath, in that order. Then maybe she'd read in bed for a while.

Nowadays, it seemed, that was all she ever did. Work, come home, read or watch TV for a few hours, and go to bed. She'd always imagined that living in the city would be exciting. She'd pictured herself going to theatres and museums, going out for a drink with friends after work, staying out all night. Since she'd moved to New York, however, her social life had shrunk to nothing. She felt like a mouse running on a wheel, stuck in place... and meanwhile, her twenties were slipping away from her.

Linda dropped her wet clothes in the laundry hamper and slipped into her white terrycloth robe. She froze. The hairs on the back of her neck rose.

She was being watched.

Her skin prickled. She felt someone's gaze on her, like a physical pressure. Her eyes searched the bedroom. She held her breath and listened, but heard nothing, not the softest creak of a footstep or the faintest breath. At last, she let out her breath in a whoosh. *There's that paranoia again* , she thought. What was with her lately?

Just in case, she gave her apartment a quick search, checking in the bedroom closet, the shower stall and behind the couch, but of course, she found nothing.

She walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge and found a plastic container of egg salad. She opened it and wrinkled her nose as a foul smell wafted out. She scraped the yellowish mixture into the trash and investigated her cupboards. Ramen, pasta, instant macaroni and cheese. Ugh. She needed something with nutrients, something that didn't come out of a cardboard box. She considered going to the grocery store for some bread and lunch meat, but the thought of facing that icy rain again was too much. *Ramen it*

is , she thought, and filled a saucepan with water. She heated it over the stove.

As she ate, the back of her neck tingled. She knew beyond a rational doubt that she was alone -- there was no place for an intruder to hide in this tiny apartment -- yet the feeling of being watched would not go away. She pulled her blinds and curtains shut and rubbed her arms. They were covered with goose-bumps.

Linda rinsed out her bowl, walked back into the living room and looked around again. A reflection flitted across the glass face of the wall clock. She gave a start.

Linda turned in a slow circle. Her heart seemed to be lodged just beneath her jaw. "Hello?" she called out. Her tongue darted out to wet her dry lips. She wondered briefly if she should call the police. But what would she tell them? That there was someone in her apartment? She knew there wasn't. "Get a grip," she muttered. She was exhausted, that was all. She just needed to take a nice, relaxing bath, have some tea, and...

Someone touched her shoulder.

Linda shrieked. She whirled around, but there was no one. "What's going on?" she called, her voice rising. "Who's there?"

For a moment, she heard nothing but the frantic pounding of her own heart. Then a voice spoke. "Don't be afraid."

Linda pressed both hands to her mouth to stifle another shriek. Her eyes searched the room, but still, she saw nothing unusual.

"I won't hurt you," said the voice. It was faint, muffled, as if she were hearing it through a thick wall, but she knew she wasn't imagining it. She *recognized* that voice. It was the voice from her dreams, deep and husky, firm as iron... but that was impossible, wasn't it?

Linda backed away, though there was nothing to back away from. She bumped against the wall, and stopped, panting like a cornered rabbit. "Who are you?"

"My name is Gregory." There was an odd echo to that faint voice, as if it were coming from the end of a long tunnel... yet at the same time, it seemed very close. Impossibly, it seemed to come from the center of her own head.

Panic bubbled up inside her, tightening her chest and throat, so she could barely breathe. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to compose herself. "This isn't real," she murmured. "I'm hearing things."

"No, Linda. I am real. You must believe me. You are the only one who can hear my voice."

Linda swallowed, hard. Her knees felt like water. "What's going on? Why can't I see you? Where *are* you?"

"I am a spirit, trapped between worlds."

She felt a presence very close to her. Insubstantial, invisible as it was, that presence emanated power. She felt it moving around her body and over her skin like currents of warm air. Every hair stood on end.

Her tongue crept out to wet her lips again. "Why are you here?"

"I need you," said Gregory. Yes, that voice was definitely inside her head. It was so strange, hearing another person's voice in her mind. So... intimate. "Please," he said. "Do not shut me out."

A strange feeling washed over Linda. There was a very real, very human urgency in that voice, bordering on desperation. She couldn't ignore it. No matter how scared she was, she couldn't turn away from someone who needed help. "Why me?" she asked. Her voice sounded very small, very soft. "There's nothing special about me."

"You can hear me. You have no idea how long I've hungered to hear a human voice speaking to me. I have tried everything to contact the world of the living, but to no avail. Until now."

"What can I do?"

"Help me remember what it is to be alive. Let me feel what you feel. Open yourself to me."

"Open*what*?"

"Your mind. Your heart. Let me in."

Linda's heart pounded. "I'll try." She took a deep breath and relaxed her guard. She tried to imagine herself becoming as open as possible. She visualized the barriers that separated her mind from others', imagined those barriers parting like curtains, forming an opening, a pathway. Her eyes slipped shut. She hoped she wasn't doing something stupid. She had no idea whether this man -- if he even *was* a man -- was trustworthy, and here she was, making herself completely vulnerable to him.

At first she felt nothing. Then there was a slight tingle at the nape of her neck.

Linda gasped. Her eyes flew open as a warm, invisible force moved through her. Every nerve ending tingled as something reached inside her and coiled around her beating heart like a velvet chain. A tingling heat brushed the inside of her belly, setting loose a swarm of butterflies. She trembled, and her nipples stiffened, poking against the thin terrycloth robe. Her pussy plumped and moistened. The urge to touch herself was almost irresistible. "What are you doing?" she asked. Her voice shook slightly. She had no idea what was going on, but it felt incredible.

"You can't imagine how much I've missed this." Gregory's voice rumbled in her mind, filling the air around her, touching her skin like a physical caress. "I feel your heart beating, the hot blood moving within your veins. I feel the air caressing your skin."

Linda's skin tingled. She ran her hands over herself, panting. She couldn't help it. Her fingertips massaged her aching, tender nipples. She slipped a hand beneath her robe and between her thighs, pressed a finger against her aching clit and rubbed. She heard Gregory moan, deep in her mind, and knew he felt everything she felt. She could still feel the heat of his presence touching places inside her that no one had ever touched. She leaned against the wall for support. Her knees wobbled and gave out. She sank to the floor, chest heaving, back against the wall, thighs parted.

"I need you," Gregory said, his voice hoarse and rough.

She moaned, head lolling to one side, as another wave of pleasure rolled through her. She was aware of the warmth and life in her own body, aware of her pumping heart, breathing lungs and running blood, in a

way she had never been before. Every sensation was heightened, sharp.

Wetness tickled her folds. Her thighs spread wider, and her robe slipped open, exposing her breasts and everything else. She closed her eyes and whimpered, a desperate, animal sound, deep in her throat.

Something brushed against her inner thigh, a feather-soft touch, then trailed over the bare, smooth lips of her pussy. A finger slid into her, and her eyes snapped open. The finger was long and thick, definitely a man's. She looked down. There was nothing there, just empty space between her thighs, yet she could feel a man's finger in her body, solid and warm. It moved inside her, rubbing slowly back and forth, a delicious friction.

A part of her wanted to protest, to shove him out of her head, or whatever you did with a ghost that was getting too friendly. This was, without a doubt, the most bizarre experience of her life. Her mind whirled, and her breath came in tiny, quick, frantic gasps. Yet it felt so incredibly *good*. She had never been so wet, so turned on. Every nerve ending in her body had become hypersensitive, tuned in to sensations she'd never noticed. Even the rough scrape of the carpet beneath her ass, the cool plaster behind her back, was somehow erotic... and there was that invisible finger inside her, pressing against that sensitive spot deep in her pussy. Her feet pushed against the carpet and her hands bunched into fists, nails pressing into her palms.

"Do you want this?" a rough voice whispered in her ear.

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh God. Please."

"Say it."

"I want you!"

His finger withdrew, and the walls of her pussy stretched as something huge and hot pushed into her. Her fingers dug into the carpet, and she moaned, head tilting back. She knew it wasn't real, that this *couldn't* be real, but she didn't care. She pushed back, grinding her hips against the air, taking the invisible cock deeper into her body. She felt hands on her tits, squeezing. Warm, thick thumbs pressed into her flesh. She looked down, and for an instant she *saw* the impressions of those thumbs, deep dimples on the smooth, white skin of her breasts, saw them circle her nipples, so tight and hard they were almost painful. Heat spread outward from them, through her breasts, over her skin. The hard, thick cock pushed into her again, and again.

I'm hallucinating, thought some far-off, dim corner of her mind. It was the only rational explanation. But she didn't care.

Linda closed her eyes and raised her hands. They touched something solid and warm. Hair tickled her fingertips. She ran her hands over a man's broad chest, over powerful shoulders. She touched the thick, soft hair on his head, ran her fingers through it. She opened her eyes, but still, she could see no one there.

He thrust harder and faster into her body, hips slamming against hers. Her body moved against his, rising and falling to meet his thrusts in an instinctive dance. She closed her eyes again and tangled her fingers in his sweat-damp hair. She felt the sharp, sweet sting of orgasm, and cried out, her fingers tightening on his hair. He thrust again and again as she rode the wave of her climax. His body stiffened atop hers as he came into her. She went limp, panting. And then, abruptly, his physical presence was gone. She could no longer feel him on top of her, inside her... though she could feel thick wetness trickling down her thighs, and her pussy was pleasantly sore. She looked around the room, listened for his voice. "Hello? Gregory?"

Are you still there?"

"Yes." The voice in her head was breathless. "I did not mean to be so rough with you. Forgive me. But after so many years without pleasure... to feel *that* again... it overwhelmed me. I lost control."

"It's okay," she said. "I'm not hurt. A little sore, maybe, but if you want to know the truth, that felt incredible." Slowly, she stood. Her legs were shaky, but they held. "This is all kind of sudden, though. I don't normally have casual sex with strange men... or strange ghosts, for that matter." She let out a shaky laugh.

"Are you all right?"

She leaned back against the wall. "I think so. I'm just really confused. Half of me thinks this is real, the other half thinks I should make an appointment with a psychiatrist... or maybe get a CAT scan." She hesitated. "This is so weird. Not only do I not know your last name, or anything about you, I don't even know what you look like."

"Yes, you do. You saw me in your dreams."

"Yeah, but that's not really the same." She hesitated. "What *are* you, Gregory? Are you a ghost? A spirit? Is there even a difference?"

He sighed. "What I am is... a long story."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere tonight." She walked into the bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed. "You may as well tell me everything."

"I must admit, I didn't expect you to take my visit so well."

"I guess I'm still waiting for it to sink in. But the truth is, I've been a little lonely lately. I'm just happy to talk to someone again. I moved to the city about six months ago when I started my new job, but I still haven't made any real friends. I guess I've always been a little shy, but it's different in college, when you see the same people every day. You have more chances to meet people with similar interests. Here I'm always surrounded by strangers... except at work, and no one there will give me the time of day. Believe it or not, you're the first person I've had a real conversation with in weeks."

"It doesn't bother you, having me inside your mind?"

"I don't know. I'm still getting used to it, I guess. Can you hear my thoughts?"

"Yes. In fact, you don't have to speak aloud at all to communicate with me. You can just think whatever you want to say."

She flopped down on the bed. "It feels more natural to talk out loud." Linda chewed her lower lip. "I know this is the only way you can speak to me, but I've got things inside my head I don't necessarily want a stranger to see. Just try not to eavesdrop too much, if you can help it."

"I will try."

"Thanks." She twirled a lock of hair around one finger, then forced herself to drop her hand to one side. She'd tried everything to break herself of that silly, girlish habit, but she still reverted back to it when she

was nervous. "So how did this happen to you? How did you become... like this?"

"When I was a man, I dabbled in the forbidden arts."

"Meaning what?"

"Sorcery."

"As in magic? Come on. There's no such thing."

"I, too, once believed that. Even in my time, sorcery was dying, its secrets known only to a select few. But I met an old man who knew the arts, and he taught them to me, for a price. The power was intoxicating. I'd always been an ambitious man, but once I discovered the secret of magic, my ambitions grew beyond measure. I believed that with my newfound abilities, I could become a god, punish evildoers and reward the good."

She frowned. "That's pretty arrogant."

He chuckled, a bitter, painful sound. "Arrogant? Yes. Pride is man's oldest and greatest sin, after all, the one most likely to lead him along the path to damnation. In the end, such pride always makes a fool of man and leaves him broken and humbled, but somehow I managed to blind myself to that oldest truth. I thought I could cheat death. The old man told me of a spell which would give me immortality, but he refused to teach it to me. He said the spell must be learned for oneself. For years, I searched and labored, and at last, I discovered the secret... but I did not properly understand the spell. No living thing can escape death, so the magic transformed me into a bodiless spirit. Now I can never die, but I am not truly alive, either. I am trapped between worlds forever, a wandering soul, cut off from my fellow man."

A chill ran through Linda. She tried to imagine what it must have been like, but she couldn't. "That's awful," she said, very quietly. "How long have you been stuck like this?"

"Five hundred and fifty-seven years."

"Then that would mean..." Her eyes widened. "You were alive sometime during the 1400s."

"That's right. I lived in England, at the time. I was a baron." He sighed. "How faraway that time seems, now. Like a dream. Sometimes, I think that life must have belonged to someone else."

She rolled onto her side. "That's so long ago, I can't even imagine it. What was it like? What sort of life did you live?"

"It shames me to think of it now. I enjoyed a position of privilege in a time when most people knew nothing but misery and backbreaking labor, but still, I was not content. I wanted more. Even in my boyhood, I was consumed with the desire for power. I first learned of the forbidden arts when I was fifteen, and soon became obsessed. I was disgusted with the state of the world, the injustice and suffering around me. I wanted to change things, to create a better world, where people were all equal... and of course, I would be the ruler of that new world. Somehow, I never saw the irony in that. Not until it was too late."

Linda's eyes moved around the empty room, searching for a point to focus on. It was hard to have a conversation with someone you couldn't see. She found herself looking into the mirror as she replied. "I don't think you were a bad person, Gregory. I mean, you said yourself that you wanted to make things

better. It wasn't all about the power. Even if you made some mistakes, I can understand why you felt that way. Sometimes I watch the news and I feel horrified and disgusted at all the hatred and ugliness in the world, and I find myself wishing that I had the power to change things. It's a very human feeling."

"Perhaps."

She stretched out on the bed, on her stomach. "So when did you leave England?"

"I came to America in the 1920s, as a spirit. I had heard people speak of a young woman here who could supposedly communicate with the world beyond, but it was a false hope. She was a fraud, as most of her kind are."

"So in all that time, you've never been able to speak to anyone, or touch anyone?"

"No one. Until you. I have searched long and hard, over the years, for someone who could hear my voice. A few others have caught glimpses of me in reflections, or felt my presence, but nothing more."

Linda's brow furrowed. "Why me? Why am I the only one who can hear you? There's nothing special about me. I'm not a psychic or a medium."

"Aren't you? You never have flashes of insight that you can't seem to explain? You have never heard voices from the beyond?"

She paused and pressed a finger to her lower lip, thinking. "Well, I used to see and hear a lot of strange things. But that was a long time ago. I was just a child. As I got older, people told me the things I saw weren't real, so I ignored them, and eventually they went away. Since then, I've convinced myself that I was hallucinating, but now I wonder. And I guess sometimes my hunches do turn out to be right. But then, lots of people get hunches."

"These 'strange things' you saw as a child, what were they? Were they benevolent, or cruel?"

"Some of them were friendly. There was a little girl I used to play with when I was five or six. She said her name was Christina. She was my best friend... except she didn't really exist. No one else could see or hear her. I think my parents just assumed I had an imaginary friend, like a lot of kids my age. Sometimes she looked like a girl, with blonde hair and a little blue dress, and sometimes she was just a sort of soft, white light, but she always made me feel safe and happy." She paused. "There were others. Some were very scary. There were these dark, man-like shapes without faces that just followed me around and seemed to stare at me. And sometimes, I would hear voices whispering to me when I lay in bed at night. I could never quite understand what they were saying, but it seemed important. Like they wanted help, except I didn't know what to do for them. Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore. I said, 'Go away, all of you. Just go away.' And weirdly enough, they did. I was about nine or ten at the time, and after that, I stopped seeing and hearing things." She shivered. "It's been a long time since I've even thought about this."

"You are a seer, as I first thought," said Gregory.

"A seer? Oh, no. I can't see the future or anything."

"No one can see the future with certainty. But perhaps with training, you could see into worlds beyond this one, or send your soul from your body. Had you been born in another time, in another place, perhaps you would have been sent to a wise woman to learn control of your gift."

“Or maybe I would have been burned at the stake,” she murmured. “That happened in your time, didn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I had to be cautious when I learned the arts, knowing what might happen to me if the wrong people found out what I was doing.”

Linda rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. “I’m still trying to wrap my head around the idea that I’m talking to a five-hundred-year-old ghost -- spirit, whatever.”

He chuckled. “Either works, I suppose.”

“Is there any way for you to come back to life?”

“I doubt it. Fate has handed me my punishment. I sought too much power. I trespassed in the realm of God, and now, for that, I am forbidden to pass through the gates into the world beyond.”

“Okay, so you made some mistakes. But after half a millennium, I think you’ve learned your lesson.”

“Even so, if there is any way to escape my sentence, I have not found it. And I’ve had a long time to look. I think I have no choice but to resign myself to my fate.”

His voice was so calm, yet it held a deep, profound sadness. It was almost unbearable. She shook her head. “I can’t accept that. There *must* be a way. Thinking of you stuck like this forever... it just... breaks my heart.”

Linda felt a light touch on her cheek, warm breath on her ear. “Please,” said Gregory, “do not trouble yourself over my fate. I never meant to cause you distress.” An invisible hand smoothed her hair.

The gesture was so unexpectedly tender, she felt tears welling in her eyes. “I wish I could help you,” she whispered.

“You have already helped me.” His voice was like a caress, deep and soft. “You have helped me remember what it is to feel, to be human. That is a more precious gift than you can imagine.” His hand stroked her hair again. “The hour has grown late. Sleep.”

Linda forced a tiny smile. “Sleep? With a ghost in my room?”

“I will leave for the night, if you wish.”

“No, I didn’t mean it that way. You can stay. I just... it’s so much to think about. I never really believed in ghosts, or spirits, or magic. Not since I became an adult, anyway. But I have no choice but to accept that you’re real. Either that, or accept that I’m going crazy. Hell, maybe I am.”

“Do you really believe that?”

She hesitated. “No. I guess I don’t.” She muffled a yawn with one hand and realized she was exhausted. Her curiosity and fascination had kept her from feeling it, until this point, but now her eyelids seemed to be made of stone. Holding them open took all her willpower. “I guess I really *should* try to get some sleep.” Her head sank to the pillow.

“Sleep well, Linda.”

She'd thought it would be impossible to sleep with Gregory there, but she felt oddly safe in his presence. She could imagine his huge body in bed, next to hers, could feel the intimate touch of his thoughts inside her mind. She closed her eyes. *If only there was something I could do*, she thought. *If only I could talk to the person who taught him the spell, and find out how to reverse it. If only ...*

Chapter Three

Linda opened her eyes and stared down at her own body. It lay in bed, eyes closed, chest rising and falling with each breath. She floated upward like a balloon, through the ceiling, into the cold, clear night. She rose above the city, above the skyscrapers, into the black, star-scattered dome above.

What was going on?

She looked down at herself. Her body was soft and translucent, wreathed in milky light, and a glowing, silver cord ran down from her navel, to her apartment building far below. The sight of that cord made her feel somehow safer, made her certain that she could return if she wanted. She looked up at the sky, and a white light blossomed above her. She floated toward it, into it, and the world disappeared.

Linda stood on soft, mist-covered ground. The mist hid her feet, swirled around her legs. The unseen ground beneath it was spongy and slightly giving. She took a few, tentative steps. It felt almost like walking on a cloud, or what she'd imagined a cloud would feel like, as a child, before she learned clouds were just water vapor.

Linda shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. Goose-bumps rose on her arms. She was dressed only in her flimsy, white cotton nightgown, and her feet were bare. The silver cord still trailed from her navel, vanishing into the mist below. With her mind, she felt carefully along its length and followed it down to its end. A glimpse of her sleeping body flashed through her mind, and her anxiety faded a little.

“Hello?” she called. “Anyone here?”

The silence swallowed her question.

She looked around. The mist-covered field stretched in every direction, flat and empty, no trees or rocks for miles. Overhead arched the clearest night sky she'd ever seen, blue-black, edged with purple, and covered with a thick spray of glittering stars. She felt profoundly alone in this vast, silent, empty place. Fear slipped into her heart like a sliver of ice.

She began to walk, hugging herself for warmth. Ahead, she saw something tall and bright, rising out of the mist.

Linda quickened her pace. She drew closer, but still, she couldn't see what the object was. She broke into a run... then stopped and stared in awe.

A pair of open, shining white gates rose out of the mist. There was nothing around them, nothing to hold them up. They stood alone, glowing with a soft, pearly radiance, like moonlight, their surface carved with hundreds of tiny, intricate shapes -- letters, maybe, but in no language she recognized. A long stream of misty, indistinct figures passed through them. They looked like people, but they were pale, soft and translucent. She stared, bewildered. The line went on for as far as she could see, fading into the misty distance, moving in a steady drift. The figures didn't even glance at her. As they passed through the gates, into the clear, soft light on the other side, they seemed to dissolve into nothing.

"Move along," said a raspy voice. "Don't hold up the line."

Her eyes followed the voice to its source. A dark form stood beside the gates, leaning on a cane. Its back was hunched, its body wrapped in folds of heavy, black cloth, its face hidden by a hood. The figure's hands -- the only part of it she could see -- were long, brown, thin and withered, more like the hands of a mummy than a living person. She peered into the shadows within the hood, trying to see its face, but there seemed to be nothing there, just a solid, formless darkness.

The man's head turned toward her. The hairs on the back of her neck rose. For a moment, she wanted to turn and run as far and as fast as she could, but she suppressed the urge. The man -- if *it was* a man -- hadn't done anything threatening. He just stood there, leaning on his cane, and looked at her. She couldn't see his eyes, but she could feel the weight of his gaze.

"Hello," she said. Her voice sounded very small in the vast silence. Her heart knocked against her chest. "Who are you?"

"I am the Guardian of the Gates," said a flat, empty voice. "I monitor the passage of souls between the world of the living and the world of the dead." He glanced at the line of misty forms again. A smaller form had stopped and was looking around, faceless head swiveling back and forth, as if in bewilderment. "Move along!" said the Guardian, and waved a hand. "This isn't a sight-seeing tour."

The ghostly form scampered through the gates.

"But what am *I* doing here?" said Linda. "Am I... dead?"

"Of course not. You've still got your cord, don't you?" He pointed at the silver string trailing from her navel. "You've just left your body."

"But why?"

"Why are you asking me? You're the one who came here. You must want something."

"The last thing I remember is falling asleep in bed. That must mean... is this a dream?"

"It is. And it isn't."

Linda frowned. "I don't understand."

The man shrugged.

“Just tell me, am I asleep right now?”

“Your body sleeps.”

Well, okay then. It was a dream. Yet in spite of that, she knew somehow that this was just as real as anything in her waking life. Oh, this was confusing. Linda shook her head, dismissing the question. She could try to puzzle it out later. “I guess as long as I’m here, I may as well ask you some questions. You said you’re the Guardian of the Gates, and the gates lead to the world of the dead?”

“Correct,” the Guardian replied in its dead voice. The voice was like the whisper of dry autumn leaves in the wind, like the stale, cold air inside a tomb.

The sound of it made her skin crawl, as if she were covered with ants, but she continued. “There’s a man I know. His name is Gregory.”

“I know of him. The fool who sought immortality.” He chuckled, a hollow sound like stones rattling down an empty well. “He trained for years with a shaman, teaching his soul to fly from his body and return... then he came here, to me, and demanded the secret to cheating death. Demanded! Like an impudent child, puffed up with pride and self-importance. ‘And why should I tell you?’ I said, ‘when I could strike you dead on the spot? Why should I share with you the secret that has eluded philosophers and kings since the dawn of time?’ ‘Because,’ he replied, ‘I am Gregory, the greatest sorcerer on Earth. One day I will be a god, and when that day comes, I will remember that you helped me. If you don’t tell me, I’ll just find out some other way.’” The Guardian chuckled again. He glanced at the procession of spirits and waved along a few stragglers. “Keep going. Yes, right through the gates.” He sighed. “You’d think they’d be able to figure it out. Anyway... yes, Gregory. No doubt he regrets his grand ambitions now.”

“So he angered you, and you punished him by turning him into a spirit?” asked Linda.

“I wasn’t angry. On the contrary, I was delighted. You see, my job here is rather dull. I value amusement more than anything, and he was the most amusing man I had met for some time. So I gave him the spell to make him immortal.”

“You knew what would happen to him.”

“Of course I knew. But I gave him exactly what he asked for, did I not? Now, he will never die. It isn’t my fault if immortality wasn’t what he expected.”

Linda took a deep breath. Anger flared in her, but she ignored it. Anger would not help her right now. “Is there any way he can be brought back to life? Or if that’s not possible, can he at least pass through the gates into death and have some peace? Hasn’t he suffered enough?”

“Why should I care? He was a power-hungry fool.”

“I know he used to be arrogant, but he’s changed. He regrets his mistakes. Isn’t there a way?”

The Guardian tilted his head. “There is one.”

Her heart leapt. “What is it?”

“For another to trade places with him, to become a wandering spirit in his place. If that were to happen, he would return to the world of the living at the same age he left it, and when he died, he would pass through the gates like any other soul.”

“But...” Linda bit her lower lip. “Who would be willing to do such a thing?”

“No one, of course, which is why he’s still trapped in the spirit realm... and always will be. Humans are selfish creatures. You!” He pointed at someone. “Don’t hold up the line.”

“Maybe a lot of people are selfish, but not everyone,” said Linda.

“Bah. I’ve watched humankind for thousands of years. There are some who pretend to be good and kind, but it’s only because they believe they’ll be rewarded somehow, either in life or the afterlife. There’s not a single person on Earth who would sacrifice his soul for another man.”

Linda frowned, but sensed it would be pointless to argue. “There’s no other way to save him, then?”

“That is the only way,” said the Guardian.

She clenched her fists. “You did this to him. Can’t you just undo it?”

“I did nothing to him. I merely told him the spell. He did this to himself. I am only a gatekeeper. I have no desire to reward or punish mortals. I don’t see why I should trouble myself with the fate of one insignificant man. Now, if that’s all, why don’t you go back to Earth and leave me to my duties? I’ve got a lot of souls to move. You! Stop gawping at the scenery. There are a lot of people behind you.” He paused, then looked at Linda. “Are you still here? What are you waiting for?”

“I...”

The ground dropped out from Linda, and she plunged into blackness.

She woke with a gasp, heart galloping.

She was in her bedroom again, surrounded by the familiar off-white walls, the messy stacks of books on her dresser and floor. She looked across the room at the mirror on her wall. Her own pale, frightened face stared back at her. Tendrils of dark hair clung to her brow and cheek.

Linda exhaled and flopped back to the bed. She closed her eyes and pressed her fingertips against her eyelids. “Gregory?” she said. “Are you there?”

Silence.

“Gregory?” she called. “Please answer me.” Still no response.

How much of that had been a dream? How much had been real?

Maybe it had all been a dream. Maybe she’d never spoken to a man named Gregory. The memories seemed crisp and real in her mind, not fuzzy and vague like dream-memories, but still, what was easier to believe? That she’d had an unusually weird and vivid dream, or that she’d actually been fucked by a bodiless spirit?

She got out of bed and walked up to the mirror. Her teeth pressed into her lower lip as she searched the reflection. She saw nothing. *Of course not*, she thought, and sighed. Because there was no such thing as ghosts.

Disappointment weighed heavy on her heart. Her throat tightened, and she brushed away a tear with the back of one hand. Why was she so upset?

Because now you're alone again, she thought. However strange and scary last night had been, it had also been exhilarating -- not just because of the sex, but because for a brief while, someone had eased the ache of loneliness in her heart. She hadn't realized just how desperately lonely she'd become, how badly she needed companionship. She felt Gregory's absence like a blade.

Another tear slipped down her cheek. Exasperated with herself, she wiped it away and glanced at the clock. Her alarm would go off in about fifteen minutes, anyway. She may as well start getting ready for work.

She tugged a comb through her tangled dark hair and winced as the comb's teeth hit a snarl. Once she'd gotten her hair more or less tamed, she showered and put on a white blouse and a pair of dark slacks. She applied a bit of pink lipstick in the bathroom and paused, looking around. She thought she'd heard a voice say her name. "Gregory?" she called.

At first she felt nothing. Then a tingling sensation spread over her skin and through her body. Something warm moved through her, brushed against her very heart. She gasped as the now-familiar heat of Gregory's presence filled her body. Her nipples tightened to hard, puckered buds, and goose-bumps rose on her arms and legs.

"You called me?" The deep voice seemed to echo inside her head.

"Oh God," she murmured. "It was real. It was all real."

"Pardon?"

"I thought I might have dreamt you." She wet her lips. "I didn't invite you in that time. But I can feel you inside my head... in my body. I thought I had to invite you in."

"Only the first time."

"So you can go in and out at will now? I wish you'd told me that before."

"Would it have changed your mind? Would you have denied me entrance, if you'd known?"

She paused. "I don't know," she admitted. She toyed with her tube of lipstick, turning it over nervously in her fingers. "But you can probably understand why the idea makes me a little nervous. Will you promise not to come inside my mind unless I call you?"

"Very well."

He'd made that promise a little too easily. She wondered if she could trust it -- but then, what choice did she have? It wasn't like she could stop him. The thought made her heartbeat quicken.

"Are you afraid of me?" asked that deep voice. It rumbled in the center of her head, the marrow of her

bones.

“A little,” she murmured.

“Believe me, I would not harm you, Linda.” His voice caressed her name. The sound sent a rush of heat to her sex, made parts of her tighten and tingle.

She wondered about her own reaction to him. It wasn't like her to get so hot and bothered over a man she barely knew. Was it just that she hadn't had sex in so long? Or was it the strange intimacy of having his mind inside hers that heightened every sensation, made the connection so much more intense?

She paused. It seemed there was something she ought to tell him, something she'd dreamt about, but she could no longer remember the details. A hazy image of a mist-covered field and white gates flitted through her mind, then was gone. The more she concentrated, the further away it slipped. She sighed and gave up. How important could it be, anyway? It was only a dream. “Anyway, I have to go to work now,” she said.

“When will you return?”

“Around five.”

“I will be waiting.”

The way he said it made her shiver. She felt him moving through her body and mind, winding around and through her. And then he was gone.

Chapter Four

She rode the subway to work, as usual. The seats were hard and uncomfortable and the car was crowded with commuters talking loudly on cell phones and jostling each other, reminding her why she disliked public transportation... but she couldn't afford a car, and in the city, where parking spaces were more precious than gold, it just made more sense to use the subway.

She got off at her stop and walked down the sidewalk to the blocky, brick building on the corner. The words SMITH & BLEEKER were stenciled on the glass doors in front. As she approached the doors, her pace slowed, and each step seemed to take more effort than the one before it. It seemed as though the very air had thickened, resisting her, though she knew it was just her own reluctance.

Every day at Smith & Bleeker's accounting firm seemed longer than the one before it. Every day, she told herself that she wouldn't be a receptionist for much longer, that this was just a survival job until she found something better. She'd been telling herself that for months.

After eight long, dull hours, she punched out and walked straight to the library. She spent an hour hunting

through the “occult” section, looking for books on ghosts and spirits. She found only a few volumes, none of them especially promising. One was about alleged haunted houses across the U.S. She skimmed through a few chapters, mostly local legends and anecdotes about encounters with ghosts, but nothing remotely helpful. Another book, called *Ghost Hunters*, detailed the travels of a group of “paranormal experts” who visited haunted locations. Still nothing that might help Gregory. The only one that looked remotely useful was called *Spiritual Connections: The Dead and the Living*, and was by a woman who claimed to be a medium. Linda checked it out and took the subway home. She sat, holding the thick, tattered book tucked under one arm as the train rolled through cement tunnels beneath the city.

A large, bearded man in a hooded gray sweatshirt approached her. “Hey,” he said, and leaned closer. His breath smelled stale. “What’s your name, baby?”

Linda hesitated. “Kristen.”

“Kristen, what a pretty name.”

She looked away, hoping he’d get the hint.

“You doing anything tonight, Kristen? You want to get a drink?”

Linda kept her eyes averted. Men bothering her on the subway was nothing new. Just one of the hassles of public transportation. Still, it always caught her off guard. Her stomach tightened to a nervous ball. “I’m sorry, I don’t feel like talking right now,” she said, as calmly as she could. “Please leave me alone.”

His face darkened. “Oh, really. Too good to talk to the likes of me?”

Should she have said something else? Maybe told him she had a boyfriend, or that she was a lesbian? She looked around. There were only a few other people on the subway. A man had his face buried in a newspaper a few seats away and seemed to be making an effort not to look at her.

Damn it. She knew she should just tell the guy to fuck off, but her nerve had deserted her. She felt cornered.

“Come on, stop looking so nervous. I’m not a fucking nut job,” said the man. “Jesus, can’t a man just ask a woman out? Just a few drinks, then maybe, you know, we’ll see how it goes. What do you say?”

A cool, tingling sensation swept over Linda’s skin. When she opened her mouth, the voice that emerged was cold and commanding, totally unlike her normal tone. “How many times must you hear ‘no’ before you understand? What sort of man keeps harassing a woman after she’s made her disinterest clear? Have you no sense of chivalry at all?” The words sprang from her mouth of their own accord. She felt her eyes narrow. “I will say it once more. Get away. Now.”

The man backed away. “Okay, okay, sorry,” he muttered. He retreated to the far end of the subway car and stood clutching the pole, his wide eyes still focused on her.

What just happened, wondered Linda. She’d never spoken to a stranger like that before. She usually just kept stalling politely until she could escape the situation. Goose-bumps rose on her arms and breasts. She shivered and crossed her arms over her chest.

Gregory’s voice spoke in her mind. “Are you all right?”

"I... yes, I'm fine," she whispered. "Where did you come from?"

"I have been watching you."

"All day?"

"Of course."

"Great, I have a supernatural stalker," she murmured.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing." Her eyes darted back and forth to see if anyone was looking at her. She probably sounded like a crazy person, muttering to herself. "Listen, Gregory... I don't mind you visiting me in my apartment, but you can't just follow me around everywhere."

"Why not?"

"Because... never mind. We shouldn't be talking now. We can talk when we get back, okay?"

"If you wish."

The train stopped, and she got out, the book clutched against her side. Gregory was silent as she walked home, but she knew he was there, walking alongside her, or hovering nearby. She could feel the tingle of his presence, alternately warm and cool, on her skin.

* * *

Once she was safely inside her apartment with the door locked behind her, Linda crossed her arms and looked around. It was hard to talk to someone when you couldn't look him in the eye. She wished she at least had a vague idea of where he was standing. "Okay, Gregory. We need to establish a few rules. You can't follow me everywhere."

"It's a good thing I *was* there. Otherwise you'd still be fending off that toad's advances."

"I knew it. That was you, wasn't it? You hijacked control of my voice to tell him off. And that's another thing. It's really freaky to hear someone else talking through *your* mouth, especially when you don't know what's going on. Please don't do that again." She sighed. "Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful. But I'm a big girl. I've been looking after myself for a while, and that's not the first time someone's bothered me on the train. I can deal with it."

"You shouldn't have to."

She smiled. "That's very chivalrous, but things have changed since the 1400s, you know. I don't expect a big man to sweep me off my feet and fight all my battles for me."

"You were frightened when he approached you. How could I stand by and do nothing?"

A flush rose into her cheeks. "I wasn't afraid," she said, but it was a lie, and both of them knew it. She set her purse on the coffee table and undid the clips in her hair, letting it tumble down around her shoulders. She combed out the tangles with her fingers.

“What is that book you have?”

“Oh. This?” She glanced at the book, still tucked under one arm, and set it on the coffee table. “I was just curious. I mean, now that I know there’s such a thing as ghosts, I thought I should learn more about them.” She opened the book to the table of contents. “Of course, I don’t know whether the things in this book are true or not. A lot of people pretend to be psychics or mediums for attention, or to make money.” Her eyes skimmed down the list of chapters.

“Will you read it now?”

“Maybe a little.”

“I will leave you alone, then.”

She hesitated. There was a hint of coldness in his voice, and she wondered if she’d offended him.

“Gregory? Are you angry?”

He was silent a moment, then sighed. “It is a difficult thing when the one person who can see and hear you is uneasy with your presence.”

“Oh, Gregory, please don’t take it that way. It’s not that I don’t like having you around. I’m just not used to interacting with someone I can’t see all the time. A part of me still feels like I’m going nuts, and I don’t quite know how to deal with it.”

Another moment of silence. When he spoke again, his voice was gentle. “It’s a little strange for me, as well. It has been centuries since I have spoken to another person, after all. I am out of practice.”

She smiled. “I’m a little out of practice, myself. Since moving here, it seems like I’ve been alone all the time. Even when I’m around other people, I feel alone.” She paused. “I grew up in a small town where everyone knew each other. Now, I’m far away from my family, my friends, everything familiar. Being in the city, surrounded by all these big buildings, all these strangers... it makes me feel small, sometimes. Insignificant.”

“You are far from insignificant, Linda.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“Do you wish to read now?”

She glanced down at the book. “Oh... right.” She sat down at the kitchen table and opened it again. After a half hour of reading, however, she sighed and closed it.

“Not what you wanted, is it?”

“Not really. I got my hopes up when I saw a chapter about how this woman helped a little girl’s ghost get to the afterlife, but she makes it sound like spirits have a choice, that they can move between worlds at will and only stay on Earth because they have regrets, or can’t accept that they’re dead. That doesn’t sound like your situation.”

“No. Strictly speaking, I’m not even dead, but I’ve often thought that might be preferable.”

“Don’t say that. You can’t give up hope. Just because you haven’t found a way to return to life doesn’t mean it’s impossible.”

“I’ve been this way so long, I’ve almost forgotten how to hope.”

“I’ll just have to keep reminding you, then.”

She felt his presence moving within her, brushing against her very heart. “I am very lucky to have found you, my Linda.”

My Linda. The words reverberated in her soul. She felt warmth creeping into her cheeks. The endearments *should* have felt inappropriate -- after all, they’d only just met the other day -- but somehow it felt right, and that sense of rightness scared her a little. This was all moving way too fast.

Linda’s stomach growled. She pressed a hand over it. “I should have something to eat,” she murmured, and stood.

She dug through her cabinets, but there was little in the way of food. Cereal, ramen noodles, some eggs in the refrigerator and a few TV dinners in the freezer. She broke a few eggs into a bowl, stirred them with a whisk, and set a saucepan on the stove. She could feel Gregory’s curiosity, sense him watching her movements. “What are you making?” he asked.

“Scrambled eggs.” She turned the stovetop on low and dropped a pat of butter into the pan to melt. A few minutes later, she carried a plate of steaming scrambled eggs to the table and took a bite.

Gregory sighed with pleasure in her mind.

She swallowed a mouthful of eggs. “Gregory?”

“It has been many centuries since I have tasted food. I had almost forgotten what it was like. This is wonderful.”

Linda felt a smile tugging at her lips. “I’m glad you like them.” She took another bite and swallowed.

“Slow down,” said Gregory. “I want to savor this.”

She laughed. “Is this going to become a recurring thing?” she said, but she took her time with the next bite, sliding the eggs into her mouth, then closing her eyes and chewing slowly. She tasted the butter she’d cooked the eggs in, the salt she’d added, savored the texture of the eggs themselves sliding across her tongue.

Gregory moaned in her mind.

She swallowed and grinned. “I think you’re enjoying this more than you did the sex. I didn’t know I was that good a cook.”

“The sex was better. But this is close,” said Gregory, so seriously that she laughed again.

She finished the eggs and washed them down with a glass of milk.

“So cool. So sweet,” Gregory said, and let out another heartfelt sigh of pleasure.

She licked her lips. “I wish I had some of my mom’s chocolate chip cookies. If you enjoyed plain old scrambled eggs this much, you’d probably have an orgasm over those.”

“You think so?”

“It’s possible.” She was still smiling. She felt more light-hearted than she had in weeks. “What do you say to a hot bath? I bet you haven’t had one of those for a long time, either.”

“I would love that.”

Linda walked into the bathroom and shut the door. She started to take off her blouse, then hesitated, feeling shy. She supposed it was silly, considering that they’d already had sex -- in a sense -- but still, she blushed as she slipped her blouse off and undid the clasps of her bra. As her bra dropped to the floor, her nipples hardened in the cool air. She felt Gregory’s lust flare to life inside her, hot as a torch. Her fingers trembled slightly as she took off her slacks. She stood there a moment in just her panties, staring at her reflection in the mirror, knowing that Gregory was looking, too, through her eyes. She took a deep breath and took off her panties, too. She shivered as cool air touched her naked pussy.

“You are getting wet again,” said Gregory, his voice like the purr of a huge cat. “I feel it.” There was a very male satisfaction in that voice. She could almost see the accompanying grin.

“Don’t get any ideas. I want to take a bath before we do anything else. I’ve been in my work clothes all day.” She turned on the bathwater and let it run until it was hot. She filled the tub, stepped in, and sank into the steaming water with a sigh. “That feels good. Nothing better than a hot bath after a long day’s work.” She rested her head against the tub’s rim and closed her eyes.

“Even when I was alive, hot baths were a rare treat,” said Gregory. “We did not have running water. This modern era is filled with marvels. It amazes me how many people are restless and discontent, in spite of these luxuries. The more they have, the less content they are.”

“Yeah,” said Linda. “That does seem to be the case, doesn’t it? I probably don’t appreciate the little things as much as I should, either.” She leaned back and stretched one leg up, letting the water drip from her toes. With a bar of lavender scented soap, she worked up a lather and rubbed it under her arms, over her neck and breasts. She felt Gregory’s lust burn hotter as her fingers circled her tight, slippery nipples. “Relax,” she said, “I’m going to be in here a while longer.”

“Wicked temptress. You know how that affects me.”

Linda grinned. She soaked for a little while longer, then drained the water and showered briefly to rinse herself off. She stepped out of the tub and wrapped a thick terrycloth towel around herself. She rubbed her hair dry, then slipped into a robe.

“Ah,” Gregory sighed softly. “The satisfaction of being freshly clean. Another thing I had forgotten about.”

Linda’s heart glowed. It made her happy to share these simple pleasures with him. She felt his enjoyment, a warmth deep in her chest. Still, she ached for more. She didn’t just want to hear his voice. She wanted to look him in the eye, wanted to touch him.

Linda bit her lower lip. "Gregory, will you appear in a reflection, like you did before? You can do that, can't you?"

"Yes, though it's a strain."

"Just for a minute or two. Please?"

"Very well. I will appear in your bedroom mirror."

She felt him slip out of her, like mist moving through her skin. She walked into the bedroom and stared into the mirror. At first, she saw nothing. Then mist flowed over the mirror's surface. It shimmered, a white glow which slowly resolved itself into a human form.

Gregory stood there, huge and imposing. A chill ran down Linda's spine. He looked exactly as he had in her dream. He wore the same old-fashioned clothes, the same long-sleeved, tunic-length, black silk shirt and trousers. His hair was jet-black and thick, tied tightly back, his skin darkened from the sun, his jaw rough with stubble, and his eyes...

She stared into them, hypnotized. His eyes were like black ice, cold and penetrating. But deep beneath the surface was something warm, something human and hungry. They were simultaneously the most expressive and the most inscrutable eyes she had ever seen. They pierced her very core. Her eyes moved a little lower and lingered on his broad, sensual mouth, framed by the shadow of a beard. She remembered the pressure of that mouth on hers, the heat of his tongue, the scrape of whiskers against her skin.

Linda placed a hand against the mirror. Gregory placed his own huge hand against it, so that their hands appeared to be touching through the mirror's surface. She could almost feel the heat of his skin. Almost. They were separated by the thinnest of surfaces, and yet they were worlds apart, unable to truly touch. Even when he was inside her mind, they weren't truly touching. It was a different kind of intimacy, just as powerful, but not the same as the primal contact of skin to skin. Tears welled in Linda's eyes -- tears for him, trapped forever in this gray half-life, alone and adrift, and tears for herself, because she wanted him so badly, in so many ways, but she couldn't have him... not really. Not in the way she needed. She stared into his eyes, aching. She wanted to run her hands over him, feel the roughness of his bearded jaw beneath her fingertips, trail her fingers through that thick hair, rest her cheek against his broad chest and feel the steady beat of his heart. She wanted to feel his arms around her. It had been too long since she'd lain next to a man. She'd always told herself she didn't miss it, that life was so much easier without men and sex to complicate things, but being here now, so close and yet so far from this man... this man whom she desired so much...

Linda sank to her knees, overwhelmed by the sudden intensity of her feelings. She pressed her fingers to her trembling lips. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

What was wrong with her? Why did she suddenly feel as though her heart was splitting in half? "Gregory," she whispered. "I... I want to help you. I want it so much. Please... is there nothing I can do?"

His dark eyes gazed down at her, and they were filled with heartrending pain. Then his image dissipated into mist. She felt him flow into her once more, a rush of warm wind, a tiny tingle at the base of her neck. "You have already done more for me than you can know," he said. His deep voice was gentle. "Simply being within your body, feeling the beat of your heart and the rush of blood through your veins, is a great joy. After centuries of nothing, I feel warmth and pleasure again, through you."

“But I’m mortal, Gregory. Once I die, you’ll be alone again.”

“That may be true, but I will have the memory of you to warm me for all eternity.”

Another tear spilled down her cheek. “Is there nothing else I can do for you?”

“Let me make love to you.”

A tiny chill ran down her spine. Heat spread through her body. She undid the sash of her robe and let it slip to the floor. She stood, naked, and stared at herself in the mirror.

“You are beautiful,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” she whispered back.

“Close your eyes.”

She obeyed. A moment later, she felt a gentle pressure on her lips, a scratch of stubble against her chin. She tasted the heat and wetness of his tongue, felt hands on either side of her face, the palms broad and rough against her cheeks. Her eyes opened, but of course, there was no one there. “How do you do that?” she asked. Her heart pounded, and her knees trembled. “Are you really touching me, or is it all in my head?”

“If I feel it, and you feel it, then it is real.” She felt the warmth of his breath against her lips. Then he kissed her again, deeply. His tongue was inside her mouth, and his hands were on her breasts. His thumbs circled her hard, tingling nipples. His mouth trailed kisses down her neck, over her collarbones, then closed over one nipple and sucked. She felt the gentle press of teeth. His hand glided down, over her stomach. Hot fingers delved between her thighs.

She gasped.

“So wet,” he breathed. His fingers plundered the hot silk of her folds, pressed deep into her body. “So warm.”

“Gregory,” she breathed. “Oh, God.” Her head spun. He was just a voice in her head, just a force, a presence, yet her whole being burned for him. She wanted to cling to him, to bury her fingers in his hair, to kiss and touch him, but there was nothing to touch. He could give her pleasure, but she could give him nothing in return.

“Believe me,” he whispered, his voice deep and rough, “you give me pleasure.”

She felt his hands on her body, guiding her across the room, toward the bed. His hot mouth pressed against her breast again, and she felt a weight pushing down on her, pushing her to the bed. She sprawled across the soft sheets and arched upward, into his touch.

He trailed burning kisses over her heaving, sweat-damp breasts, her stomach, her thighs. His tongue traced the cleft of her pussy, swirled around her clit. *You aren’t really feeling this*, her brain told her. *It’s not real*. But her body replied, *Yes, it is*.

His fingers plunged into her again, two, then three. His hot, skilled tongue continued to lave her clit as he

worked his fingers in and out of her pussy. Thick, sticky cream coated her thighs.

“Gregory, please!” she cried.

“Please what?” She couldn’t see him, but she could sense his smile, knowing and very male.

She quivered as he pushed his thick fingers into her. “I want you inside me. *Ineed* it.”

His fingers withdrew. He slid into her, huge and hard. He filled the aching need inside her. She clutched at the sheets and gasped. He pounded into her, again and again, and each thrust brought his cock against that sensitive spot deep inside her. Stars burst across the backs of her eyes each time he hit it. She heard her own voice crying out his name. Her toes curled, clenched the sheets, and her teeth pressed into her lower lip as he brought her closer and closer to the edge.

“Gregory!” she screamed as she came. Light exploded through her vision, blinding her, as if a bomb had gone off inside her head. She went limp, trembling and panting. She touched the sticky heat between her thighs.

The wild energy of Gregory’s desire, so thick in the room a moment ago, had subsided to a quiet stillness, and she knew he had shared her orgasm. She reached out instinctively, wanting to pull him close, feel his warmth and life, but of course there was nothing there. A tight, bittersweet knot lodged itself in her throat.

“What is wrong?” he whispered hoarsely.

“Nothing... nothing.” She wiped tears away.

“Tell me, Linda.” It was a command, soft and tender, but a command nonetheless, like iron wrapped in velvet.

She smiled. There was some of his old arrogance left, after all. But her smile faltered quickly. “I just wish...” She trailed off, trying to think of how to explain it. “I can feel you inside me. In my mind. And it’s a good feeling, but I want to feel you outside of me, too, on my skin.” She sighed. “That sounds really superficial. But that’s how I feel. I want to be able to hold you, kiss you... not just *feel* it, but actually do it.”

“I miss having a body, as well. But this is enough. This is all I need, right now.”

Warmth flowed into her at his words. But the knot of pain was still there, embedded deep in her heart. “Gregory? What did it feel like, when you first became a spirit?”

A moment of silence passed. “Why do you wish to know?”

“I’m just curious.”

“There is no reason for you to know it.”

“Please. I want to understand.”

Another silence, longer than the first. “When I spoke the last words of the spell that would grant me immortality, a tingling heat filled me. I was elated. I thought I was becoming a god. It seemed I could feel

every particle of my body strengthening, transforming me into a perfect being, immune to disease and impervious to injury. It shames me to think of how obsessed I was with becoming immortal, because I understand now that it was fear that drove me -- fear of death, of human frailty. I welcomed anything that would protect me from my own mortality.

"There was pain, but at first, I didn't mind. I accepted it as the price of becoming a god. But then..." He paused. "The pain grew worse with each passing moment. It was a deep, hot, sickening pain, and it consumed my entire being. I felt as though my skin were being peeled slowly from my body. I looked down and saw my flesh disappearing, being eaten away, as if by acid. Skin, muscle, blood, bone... it was all disintegrating. I screamed. And when it was over, there was nothing. No pain, no sensation at all. In spite of this, I believed I was still alive, for I could see my body, now seemingly whole and untouched. I stood and wandered the halls of my home until I found a servant. I tried to speak to him, but he walked past me as if I wasn't there. When I tried to grab his arm, my fingers passed through him as if they were made of smoke. Only then did I realize what I had done to myself.

"As the full implications of my mistake sunk in, a cold horror gripped me. The knowledge of what I had done to myself, the sickening dread, was worse than any pain I'd ever felt. It seemed I could hear mocking laughter in my head, and I knew it was the one who had taught me the spell. He had tricked me... or rather, I had tricked myself. And I would suffer the consequences for all eternity."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Do not dwell on it. I should not have told you at all."

"But..."

"Sleep," he said. His voice was gentle. "You are weary."

"It's not that late," she murmured, but she realized he was right. She was exhausted. Her eyelids fluttered and grew heavy, then slipped shut.

Chapter Five

Linda looked around at the field of white mist, the starry sky. "I'm back," she whispered. She looked down and saw the silver cord trailing from her navel. Then she raised her eyes. The open, shining gates stood ahead of her, with the Guardian in front of them, bent and cloaked, leaning on his cane. He watched the long parade of misty, human shapes walk through the doorway and dissolve into the light.

He raised his head, and Linda felt his gaze on her. "You again? What do you want, now?"

"I don't even know how I got here."

"Are you really so ignorant of your own power? You are among the scarce handful of humans who can

enter this realm, and you're telling me you did it unconsciously?"

"I... I don't know." She remembered Gregory telling her she was a seer. She hadn't believed him. What if she really did have some power? "I guess I must have."

"Never mind," said the Guardian. "If there's nothing you want, then go away. If there *is* something you want, let's hear it."

"I want Gregory to be alive again."

He sighed. "This again? I already told you, there's only one way to do that. If you truly want to save him, then trade places with him."

"But then..." She swallowed, hard. "Then I'll be trapped forever as a spirit. It's a fate worse than death, isn't it?"

"Some think so."

"Is it really the only way?"

"Yes. As I've said." The Guardian's voice was flat, cold, empty of pity. "Are you really considering it?"

She lowered her eyes. She was trembling. "If I don't do it, then no one will. I'm the only hope he has. Who knows if he'll ever find another person he can communicate with. If I don't help him..." Tears welled in her eyes.

"You barely know him," said the Guardian, "and yet, you are willing to give up everything for him? You would sacrifice your own life to save a man damned by his own arrogance? What makes you think he even deserves to be saved?"

She raised her eyes and glared through her tears at the Guardian. "Everyone deserves a second chance. What's the point of a punishment that drags on for all eternity? When he's inside my mind, I feel his pain, and it's terrible. He's the loneliest person I've ever met. To be so alone, so cut off from everything that makes life worth living... I can't imagine living with that sort of pain for a day, let alone five hundred years. Whatever sort of man he used to be, he's a good person now, a kind person. He'd do the same for me, I know it."

"If he's really such a good man, he wouldn't ask you to do this for him."

"He didn't. *I want* to do this for him."

A few dead souls had stopped and were staring at her. "Move along!" snapped the Guardian. He waved them through the gates, then turned to face Linda again. "If you're serious about this, then simply return to Earth and speak the words, 'I offer myself for you, Gregory,' and the transition will happen."

"Really? That's all?"

"You must mean it with all your heart... so if you're going to do it, do it soon. If you wait, doubt will creep into your heart. Fear will hold you back, and your window of opportunity will vanish. Do you still wish to trade places with him?"

Linda pressed a hand to her chest. Even outside her body, she was still connected to it. She could feel her heart beating, felt the warmth of blood in her veins, the air in her lungs, a thousand little sensations that she'd always taken for granted, because they were so constant... but how she'd miss them, if they were gone! She thought about the satisfaction of sinking into a hot bath, or nestling beneath cool sheets in the summer. She thought about the joy of warm sun on her face and wind in her hair, the smell of cinnamon or her mom's chocolate chip cookies, the taste of coffee, the comfort of a friend's hug. She thought about never experiencing any of those things again, being trapped forever in a bodiless existence, watching life as if it were a movie, unable to participate, left only with the bittersweet memory of all she had lost. She thought about Gregory, who had lived like that for a time beyond the scope of her imagination. "Yes," she said, her voice choked.

"You surprise me," said the Guardian. "May I ask why?"

She wet her lips. "Because otherwise I would never be able to face myself. I would be aware every moment that he was suffering and that I could have stopped it, if I chose, but I chose not to. And because I love him." She spoke the words without thinking, but as soon as she said them, she knew they were true. She hadn't known Gregory very long, but in that short time they had shared an intimacy that went beyond the flesh. She had never felt so strongly about another person.

"I see," said the Guardian. His voice was flat, unreadable. "Very well, then. You have made your choice."

The stars faded, the gates faded, and she spun away into blackness.

Gregory was still inside Linda's mind when she drifted off to sleep. He saw dreams, disjointed, vague images and feelings. Then he felt her slip away. Puzzled, he moved out of her body and looked down at her sleeping face.

She was still dreaming. There was a tiny furrow between her brows, and her large eyes moved restlessly beneath the lids. But at the same time, she was suddenly far away. If he hadn't known better, he would have said her soul had left her body, but of course that was impossible. Wasn't it?

No, he thought. Not impossible. When he'd first studied magic, so many centuries ago, Gregory had visited shamans and Tibetan monks who could command their souls to leave their bodies for short periods of time... but it took years, sometimes decades, of intensive study and discipline. He himself had trained night and day for five years before mastering the technique. Linda had never studied anything of the sort, he was sure. Could it be that somehow, she'd done through instinct what countless others had spent their lives trying to learn? Was she really that strong?

His essence flowed back into her. Her mind was dark, empty. It was like standing in a tomb. He searched for her soul, the spark of her consciousness, but could not find it. Then, slowly, he felt her thoughts stirring to life around him -- felt them swirling around him like currents, like a thousand tiny feathers tickling and brushing his soul. As she woke, her consciousness sharpened and brightened into a single point, and her eyes opened.

Her heart was beating quickly.

"Linda," he said, "are you all right?"

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine,” she said, but he could feel a strange mixture of emotions within her -- fear, compassion, and a strange, resigned sadness. It was the last that worried him the most.

“For a moment, I was afraid I had lost you.”

“What do you mean? I was just asleep.”

“You were more than simply asleep. Your soul had fled your body.”

“It had?”

“Yes. Where did you learn how to do that? To send your soul out and call it back?”

“I never learned. Are you sure?”

“I am sure. Where did you go? What happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing happened.”

“Tell me the truth.”

She sat up. Her normally active mind had fallen strangely silent, as though she were suppressing her thoughts, deliberately keeping her brain clear and empty. “Gregory,” she said at last, very quietly, “you’ve been a prisoner in this half-life for so long. It isn’t fair. I... there’s a way I can help you, but...”

A chill gripped his heart. He could feel the fear in her heart, but he couldn’t understand it. “What are you talking about? Tell me. Now.”

Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked, and one spilled down her cheek. “I offer myself for you, Gregory,” she said.

A tingling heat swept through Gregory’s being. He gasped. Something inside him lurched once, twice. His heart? He raised his hands to his face and curled his fingers. He felt them move, felt muscle and bone... and for the first time in centuries, his heart pounded. He looked at Linda and saw her fading away, fading to nothing. “No!” he screamed, his voice raw with terror. “Dear God,*no* !”

Linda smiled sadly as she disappeared.

Chapter Six

For a moment, she saw Gregory on his knees, weeping, clutching the bed sheets. Then something pulled her upward, through the ceiling, into the sky. There was a flash of white light.

Once again, she stood before the Guardian of the Gates. She looked down at her body. She could still *see* it, though it was hazy, indistinct, more like the memory of a body than the real thing. She turned her pale, transparent hands this way and that. She clenched them, but felt nothing. She concentrated, trying to feel the familiar, steady thump of her heartbeat, but it was gone. She no longer had a heart. For the first time, the full impact of what she had done slammed into her, and she sank to her knees.

The Guardian stared at her, silent, his face lost in shadows.

"I never even said goodbye," she whispered. "There were so many people I should have said goodbye to. So many things I should have done first."

"If you had done that," said the Guardian, "you would have changed your mind. Once you really stopped to think about what you would be losing, you wouldn't have had the courage."

Linda pressed a hand to her mouth, and it was like touching smoke to smoke. She wanted to cry, to sob in despair for her loss, but no tears came. Of course. Only living bodies could produce tears. She couldn't even cry.

Her heart ached. She thought of the look of horror in Gregory's eyes when he saw her fading. He had known she would feel like this. He hadn't wanted to subject her to this pain. She wailed aloud, but even that tortured cry sounded thin and insubstantial.

"Do you regret your choice?" said the Guardian.

"No," Linda whispered. "I wanted to help him. But it hurts so much, knowing I can never go back to my life." She stared at the misty ground. She felt a soul-deep weariness, an exhaustion that was more than physical... and it occurred to her that she could never *truly* rest, never sleep again. There would be no relief from the endless emptiness of her existence.

"It's been a long time since a mortal has managed to surprise me," said the Guardian. "I didn't think you would really do it. And even if you did, I thought, surely you would realize at once the terrible choice you'd made and beg me to reverse it."

"I could never ask you to reverse it, even if it were within your power. I made my choice. But... I already feel so lonely. So empty. To think that it will be like this forever..." Her voice quivered.

The Guardian was silent for a long moment. Then he approached. One thin, withered hand lightly touched her shoulder.

Linda looked up, shocked at the tenderness of the gesture.

"I was a man once," he said. "Like your Gregory, I sought too much power, and was punished for my arrogance -- sentenced to remain here for all time, neither alive nor dead. I watch the spirits of mortals pass through the gates to their rest, but I can never join them." He raised a hand and stared at it. The hand was little more than a collection of bones covered by a paper-thin layer of withered, brown skin. "For me, there is no hope of becoming human again. Too many thousands of years have gone by. I can only hope that one day, I will atone for my crimes, and the heavens will allow my spirit to go to its rest."

Linda could only stare, caught between compassion and bewilderment. The Guardian seemed suddenly very old, and very sad. "I'm sorry," she said.

"You shame me with your kindness," he said, and the cold rasp of his voice was gentle. "You remind me that humanity is more than greed and power-hunger. You are not like me, or him. You do not deserve this fate. An innocent like you should not be condemned to an eternity in exile."

"Thank you," she whispered. She forced a slight smile. "I guess it's too late though, isn't it?"

"Not quite. There is one way for you to return to life."

Linda's breath caught in her throat. "What is it?"

"Another must trade places with you."

"I won't ask Gregory. He'd do it -- I know he would. But I won't ask him."

"Not Gregory," said the Guardian. "I'm speaking of myself. It will be a relief to shed this ancient body, and I can do my job just as easily without it. It's not a very important job anyway, truth be told. The souls of the dead would find their way to the afterlife, even without me." A heavy sigh drifted from his hood. "For countless eons, I have observed the foolishness and arrogance of humans, and have delighted in turning it against them. I had forgotten what it was like, to encounter simple human goodness."

Linda gazed into the darkness of the Guardian's hood, hardly daring to believe what she was hearing. "You mean..." She looked at the hand on her shoulder. It had begun to dissolve, to break apart into tiny, glowing particles that drifted upward and vanished. The hood slipped down. She had a brief glimpse of a thin, ancient face, ravaged by time, and tiny, clouded eyes staring out from deep wrinkles... and then that, too, faded into nothing. The empty cloak drifted to the ground.

There was a jolt, a shock of sensation. The world spun around her. She fell down, down...

Linda woke with a splitting headache. She groaned and raised a hand to her head.

Warm, solid arms surrounded and lifted her. A strong hand smoothed her hair back from her brow. She opened her eyes a crack and peered through her lashes to see a man's face staring down at her. His jaw was rough with stubble, and beneath his straight, black brows, his dark eyes were wild, blazing with life. "Gregory?" she murmured through numb lips. She blinked, trying to clear her vision. "What..." She sat up and put a hand against his chest, steadying herself. She realized he was naked. Then she looked down at herself and saw that she was, too, and they were both on her bedroom floor. Heat rose into her cheeks. "What's going on?"

"Are you all right?" His voice was low, fierce, filled with urgency and heat. She'd heard that voice many times before, in her head, but this was the first time she'd heard it with her ears.

"I... I think so." She stared into his eyes. They were so hot and intense that she wondered if he was angry at her.

"Thank God," he whispered hoarsely, and pulled her tight against his chest.

Linda's mind whirled. She couldn't remember clearly what had happened, but she remembered a deep, piercing sadness, and an even deeper love, a bittersweet feeling so powerful that it permeated her whole being. She placed a hand against Gregory's broad, solid chest and felt his heart beating hard and fast

against her palm. "Gregory, you're alive! You're not a spirit anymore! But --" The memories slammed into her. She pushed away from him and ran her hands over her own skin. Her body was still there.

But it couldn't be! She *remembered* the sensation of fading away, slipping into emptiness as her molecules began to break apart. And then... something else had happened, but she could no longer recall what.

She stared at her hands and clenched them into fists. She savored the sensation of her bones and muscles moving, her nails pressing into her palms. "I'm alive! We're both alive! How is this possible?"

"I don't know. But I thank God." He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her lips. "Oh, Linda. I could never have lived with myself if you had sacrificed yourself for me. Can't you see?" His hands pushed her hair back, cradled her face. "You are precious to me." His mouth pressed against hers, and his scent, warm and male and *alive*, filled her nostrils. He kissed her until she was dizzy, then pulled her tight against his chest.

Linda hugged him back, still dazed with shock. "But how?" she whispered.

An image of a sad, ancient face flashed through her mind. "I never got the chance to thank him," she murmured.

"Who?"

She blinked. "I... I don't know. For a moment, I remembered something, but now it's gone."

"It doesn't matter." Gregory stood and helped her to her feet. He held her hands tight in his. He looked just as he had in her dream, but even bigger, his shoulders broader, his presence filling the room, his dark eyes brilliant. He stared at her, his gaze intent, hungry.

Linda took a deep breath, trying to gather her scattered thoughts. "Right, you need some clothes. I can go buy some." She turned and looked around for her own clothes, but he caught her arm.

"Clothes can wait," he said. He gently gripped her chin. His thumb touched the corner of her mouth, traced the silky fullness of her lower lip.

Pleasure fluttered in her lower belly, but she shook her head. "We have a lot of things to figure out," she said. "You don't have any official identity, or... or money, or a driver's license, or a place to live. Well, you can stay here for as long as you need, but we have to figure out what to do as far as..."

"Later," he said, and kissed her again. His tongue filled her mouth. His large hands encircled her wrists.

She went limp against him, giving in to the heat of his touch.

He pulled her down onto the bed with him. His hands roamed over her body. Broad, rough palms slid up her thighs, her sides, onto her breasts. His fingers molded her nipples to stiff, aching peaks. His mouth slid over her throat and pressed against her racing pulse. One hand covered her plump mound and rubbed, the heel of his hand grinding against her clit. Linda gasped for breath. His touch melted her.

She tangled her fingers in his thick hair, relishing the warmth and realness of it. She slid her palms over his shoulders, his broad, powerful back. He was firm and solid, his skin like living velvet sheathing iron-hard muscle. Oh, flesh was so wonderful. You really didn't appreciate it until you'd lost it. She

squeezed his strong, rounded ass, then cupped his balls, feeling their weight and fullness in her hand. He groaned, low in his throat. His long, thick cock was fully erect. The bulbous head was flushed a deep reddish purple. She traced the underside of his cock with one finger, and the huge organ jerked up and down.

She licked her lips. "I want to taste you," she whispered.

Need flashed in his eyes. He slid forward until his cock and balls dangled over her face, the round head of his organ just inches from her eyes. Linda's heart pounded as she lifted her head. She let her lips brush the tip of his cock, very lightly. Her tongue teased the slit, tasted the salty heat. He groaned, deep in his throat. She wrapped her lips around his organ. It filled her mouth.

"Yes." His voice was a hoarse whisper.

She slid her lips up and down the length of him. Her tongue swirled around the head. He was so big she couldn't take all of him into her mouth. She wrapped one hand around the base of his thick cock. The other cupped his round, dark balls, and her fingertips slid over their surface.

Panting, he pulled out of her mouth. She gave him a questioning look. He smiled. "If you keep that up, I'm going to come. This is the first time I've been with a woman in the flesh for over five hundred years. I don't want it to be over just yet." His hands slid over her body, his callused palms gentle on her smooth skin. He kissed the tender spot just below her jaw, where her pulse thudded, then the delicate hollow between her collarbones. He kissed the swell of her right breast, sucked her hard nipple into his mouth. She felt the scrape of his teeth, then he moved lower, spreading her thighs wide.

With his thumbs, he separated the lips of her pussy, then bowed his head to trace her wet furrow with the tip of his tongue. She gasped. Heat rushed to her clit. It swelled, and his tongue laved it relentlessly, making her nerve endings dance and crackle with pleasure. Two fingers delved into her. They moved back and forth inside her, a slow, sensual rhythm, then carefully stretched the walls of her sex. Linda's toes curled. Her fingers dug into the bed sheets. Her hips arched upward, pushing against his fingers. She wanted more.

"Are you ready?" he said.

"Yes!" she gasped. "Gregory, please!"

He withdrew his fingers and positioned himself over her body. His dark eyes burned into hers. "I love you." The words were a rough whisper. They sent a shock of emotion through her.

Before she could respond, the head of his cock pressed against her opening, and he slid into her. She felt the walls of her pussy stretch to accommodate him as he pushed deeper, until he was sheathed to the balls in her body. He pulled back and pushed forward again, then again, thrusting his hips against hers. Linda clutched his shoulders, panting. Another thrust brought her over the edge, and stars burst across her vision. She screamed with pleasure, then went limp, her body drenched with sweat. A sweet, deep, pleasurable ache spread outward from her pussy as he thrust again and came with a hoarse cry. He lay down atop her, his huge body covering hers, his heartbeat thundering. She touched his cheek, ran her fingers along his stubble-scratchy jaw, and stared deep into his dark eyes. "I love you, Linda," he said again. One big hand tangled in her hair, winding the thick locks around his fingers. "You brought me back from that dark half-life. You gave me warmth and light. You saved me."

She felt hot tears welling in her eyes. "I love you too, Gregory."

He kissed her, softly, tenderly. She lay a hand over his heart and felt the strong, steady beat against her palm. They lay together, tangled in the sweat-damp sheets, and he held her as she'd longed to be held.

"Will you stay with me?" she asked softly.

He kissed her forehead. "Always."

She pressed herself closer to him, savoring the heat of his skin, the hardness of his muscles, the steady rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. A relaxed, dreamy bliss stole over her. She felt buoyant, drunk with pleasure, with love. "It's good to be alive," she murmured drowsily. "Isn't it?"

His hand smoothed her hair. "The most wonderful thing in the world."

Epilogue

Six Months Later

"Hi, Mom." Linda hugged her mother and grinned.

Her mother kissed her on both cheeks, then released her and stood at arm's length, her hands on Linda's shoulders. "So, where is the young man I've been hearing so much about?"

Linda smiled, eyes sparkling. "Right here."

Her mother looked up. A huge form stepped forward. The man before her wore a snug, white tee and a pair of worn jeans, but even so, he looked as if he had strolled off the cover of a romance novel. His shoulders and chest were broad, his short hair thick and dark. Good Lord, she thought. Linda had told her that he was "a looker," but that didn't begin to cover it. His powerful frame, ruggedly handsome features and penetrating, fierce dark eyes made him seem somehow out of place in the quiet suburban neighborhood, as if he belonged to another, more savage time. But when he spoke, his deep voice was calm and polite. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Green." He shook her hand, and his grip was firm, but gentle.

"I... yes, well, I'm pleased to meet you too, Greg." She realized she was blushing, like a schoolgirl. "Come in, please."

He strode into the house and looked around. "You have a beautiful home."

"Thank you." She watched him. There was something *sodifferent* about him. It wasn't just his appearance. Even standing still, he seemed somehow more vibrantly alive than anyone she'd ever seen. His presence filled the room in a way that went beyond physical size. She cleared her throat. "Are you hungry? I made some chocolate chip cookies earlier today."

"I would love to try them." One corner of his mouth lifted in a tiny smile. "Linda tells me they're wonderful."

* * *

Shortly after, they sat around the kitchen table, drinking coffee and talking. Linda's stomach was a tight, nervous ball, but Gregory answered all of her mother's questions smoothly.

It had taken some time and a lot of research to fabricate a modern identity for him, but all things considered, it hadn't been nearly as hard as she imagined. He now had a social security number and a driver's license and was working for a construction company. But no matter how many official documents they forged or how many modern possessions he acquired, there would always be something not modern about him, something that made people stop and stare.

"Tell me," said her mother, leaning forward, "where did you and Linda meet?"

"In an internet chat room," he said with a perfectly straight face.

She blinked. "Really?"

He nodded.

Linda had to hide a grin behind one hand. "That's right, we fell in love before we even met each other face to face. Pretty crazy, huh?"

Her mother chuckled. "This certainly is an unusual time we're living in."

"I think it's a wonderful time," said Gregory. "But then, anytime is wonderful if you know how to make the most out of it."

"That's very wise."

Beneath the table, Linda reached over and squeezed his knee. He laid a hand over hers.

She doubted she'd ever be able to tell her mother, or anyone else, the real story of how they had met. No one would ever believe it. Even now, she sometimes woke up and wondered if it had been a dream, or if she'd imagined the whole strange experience. Then she'd roll over and touch the solid warmth of Gregory's body and know that, impossible as it seemed, it really had happened. They had been given the gift -- the incredible, precious gift -- of a lifetime together.

As she thought about it, a wave of gratitude and love swept over her. Tears welled in her eyes.

"Linda?" Gregory leaned close. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She smiled and blinked away her tears. "Wonderful, actually." She stared into his dark eyes and sent a silent thanks to the unknown power that had given her life back to her.

For a moment, she felt something on the edge of her consciousness, a touch of warmth, as if that power had heard and responded... but it was gone so quickly, she couldn't be sure.

Amanda Steiger

Amanda Steiger has lived in the Midwest her whole life, though she enjoys regular visits to other galaxies and dimensions in her mind. She enjoys cold weather, daydreaming, supernatural romance, and anime. She lives with her family and one very spoiled little dog. You can contact her at sekuiro@comcast.net.