



THE REST OF OUR LIVES

A NOVEL
DAN STONE

THE REST OF OUR LIVES

THE REST OF OUR LIVES

A NOVEL BY DAN STONE



LETHE PRESS
MAPLE SHADE, NJ

copyright © 2009 by Dan Stone. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, by any means, including mechanical, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the author.

This trade paperback edition published by
Lethe Press,
118 Heritage Ave,
Maple Shade, NJ 08052.

lethepressbooks.com lethepress@aol.com

Cover photos, digital art montage and design by Peter Grahame in collaboration with Dan Stone. Models for main characters, Chris Lucas and Rob Thalmann. Grahame's book, *Contemplations of the Heart, A Book of Male Spirit, Photography, Digital Imaging and Text*, can be previewed at www.ironic-horse.com

ISBN 1-59021-147-2 / 978-1-59021-147-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stone, Dan, 1959-

The rest of our lives : a novel / by Dan Stone.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-59021-147-2 (alk. paper)

1. Gay men—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3619.T65645R47 2009

813'.6—dc22

2009017482

For Serena

According to the shamans of the Northlands, the universe came into being through the wedding of fire and frost ... These energies met in the great void, and interacted with each other in a magnificent explosion. The void became charged with magickal potential, and patterns of manifestations began to appear in its midst. From the union of these two cosmic elements the universe evolved in all its complexity.

All phenomena are produced by the delicate equilibrium between fire and frost. Creation and destruction, night and day, order and chaos, the seasons and weather, the human spirit and body, are all regulated by the two polarized principles. Fire cannot exist without frost and vice-versa; although each element is inert in itself, when they blend the tapestry of existence is brought forth.

—From *The Rune Mysteries*, by
Nigel Jackson and Silver Ravenwolf

*Not less of love, but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the Future as well as the past.*

—T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

*If love is the answer, could you please
rephrase the question?*

—Lily Tomlin

PRELUDE : FIRE AND ICE

I first met Aidan approximately two thousand years ago, give or take a decade. I was the pretty wife of a Hebrew fisherman who claimed he was on the boat when Christ told an ornery Red Sea to calm itself. Aidan was a Roman soldier who spotted me scurrying away from a crucifixion (not *that* one) on my way to market in Galilee and who just had to have me.

In that respect, not much has changed in a couple of millennia. We carried on a rather torrid affair for several months. My husband was away on the boat more often than not, and Roman soldiers stationed in Galilee in those days tended to have a lot of downtime. I fell harder than a bag of shekels, but eventually Aidan was called back to Rome, leaving me heartbroken and three months pregnant with a new Roman citizen. I never heard from him again and I died giving birth to my little soldier. In all fairness, he didn't know about the baby when he left. Then, as now, I was inclined to keep a lot of things to myself.

Initially, neither Aidan nor I actually remembered any of this, or any of the other times our paths had crossed over the last two

thousand or so years. We got the story from Aidan's Aunt Lucinda, who specialized in past life readings and astral travel.

"You've been together many, many times" she said with her eyes closed, holding each of our hands during our first reading. "It's a relationship that's been repeating for centuries."

She opened her eyes and looked at me. "Are you the bottom?"

I stared blankly back at her and then at Aidan, whose jaw had dropped.

"Excuse me?"

"The pattern has been for him to pursue you and to take you, totally transforming your life, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. It's been the pattern, regardless of your respective genders. So the question would be how is that pattern playing out in this relationship in this lifetime?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure I'm not pregnant," I said.



"What are we supposed to do with this information?" I asked later as Aidan and I were taking a stroll through his neighborhood. The crabapple trees that lined the sidewalks on Calvert Street were in lush bloom that summer evening. He sent a warm breeze up through the branches, causing them to shudder and release a small snowfall of pink blossoms.

"I dunno," he said. "Change our pattern? Break our cycle so I don't keep having to pin you down and talk you into being my wench lifetime after lifetime?"

"Assuming that this conversation has any measurable basis in fact, how would you propose we do that?"

"Hmm." He scratched his head then slid his arm around my waist. "You wanna be the top?"

RUNNING AWAY: PART I

The first time that I saw Aidan in the current one of our many lifetimes, I ran like hell. Not because he was revolting or anything. I was so busy trying to not let him get a good look at me that I barely got a look at him anyway.

It was the day of DC's annual PrideFest and an unseasonably muggy morning even for mid-June in the District. By eleven-thirty, there were already so many primped and pumped, multicolored bare torsos and coiffed and sprayed drag queens packing the park and the sidewalks of Dupont Circle, it was difficult to distinguish the parade participants from the spectators or the partygoers from the politicians. I could feel sweat stains forming under the arms of my ill-chosen gray t-shirt as I snapped photos of some of the more interesting or unusual characters in the vicinity. I was hoping that I might sell the pictures to the *Blade* or to *Metro Weekly* since I'd already had some success freelancing for them on occasion.

"Take off that shirt if you're gonna make me famous, sweetie," said the six-foot-four "Lucy Ricardo" look-alike when she caught me aiming my camera at her. Since I doubted that particular photo

would find a large audience, it seemed safe to ignore the request. I never took off my shirt at these events, regardless of how many concave chests, rotund bellies or hairy backs were on hand to make me look better. It was just too much self-disclosure, even if keeping the shirt on meant sweating like a woman in labor.

I started walking with the march, sometimes near the front, sometimes dropping back if someone caught my eye. I was continually amazed by the power of the camera both to conceal the one behind it, rendering him largely invisible, and to reveal the one in front of it. In some ways, it had the same effect as a few beers or a joint—it made people more of what they were. If self-conscious, it made them shy, or made them conjure up a clown persona to overcompensate. If indifferent, it captured the glaze of boredom. If coquette, the flirtatious twinkle in the eye was always there, even under a nun's habit.

I scrupulously avoided snapping shots of dog-collared boys on leashes and all the tantalizing bare hineys gleaming in the mid-day sun (well, maybe I got one or two). I caught the mothers (it was always the mothers) marching in the PFLAG contingent with their children of various ethnicities and orientations—always a crowd pleaser. I got a DC city councilwoman who looked like Patti Labelle's more conservative sister, the Cherokee Cheerleaders in their loin cloths and full-feathered headdress, and the tank-topped, two-stepping DC Cowboys all wearing identical come-and-get-me grins during an impressively acrobatic line dance.

Somehow I ended up just behind the "I Love Lucy" float, complete with the aforementioned Mrs. Ricardo, a drop-dead gorgeous dead-ringer-for-Desi Arnaz, a real-life baby Little Ricky, and the Mertzes. That's when the trouble started. It must have been some kind of mechanical malfunction with the flatbed behind the pink pickup with the big hearts on the doors. In any case, the entire float lurched, then screeched to a halt, hurling Ricky, Fred, and Ethel forward, knocking the wide-eyed Lucy off her size fourteen slingbacks, and pitching a squealing Little Ricky over the side and out toward the crowd.

Acting out of sheer reflex, I let loose with a high-pitched, penetrating whistle, freezing everything in my line of vision, including Little Ricky, who was barely a foot or so from the pavement. As quickly as I was able to move, I picked the baby out of mid-air and placed him gently in the motionless, open arms of a matronly tourist whose face was already registering a look of total dismay. I guessed her to be from a small town, possibly in the Midwest. Maybe Kansas?

When the baby was safe, I looked around at the immobilized mob. I was feeling even more lightheaded from the effort than usual, but then I saw it. Movement. Unmistakable motion in the form of a man maybe a hundred or so yards away, but drawing nearer ... a man who somehow, for some unprecedented, unfathomable reason, escaped the freeze. Impossible, but there he was. And worse yet, he'd spotted me.

I panicked. *There weren't supposed to be any witnesses.* I freaked, immediately releasing the crowd, letting Lucy and the others resume their respective falls, and leaving Auntie Em from Kansas stunned to find a squirming infant in her arms. Then I ran like hell from the dark-haired anomaly who was clearly trying to get a better look at me.

The chase was on. Fortunately the disruption in the streets was large enough to block his path to me. I took advantage of the mayhem and escaped into the masses, eventually ducking out of the procession and sprinting up 16th Street toward home. Still feeling a little dizzy, I was at least four blocks away when I heard him calling after me, but not with my ears ... the voice was in my head.

"Come back here!" he said. *"Who are you?"* I felt a surge of warmth, like a mild electric current tingling from my scalp to my toes.

"Please!" The voice said. *"Please stop!"*

"What the hell!" I said out loud. Either he was communicating with me telepathically, or I was having a meltdown. Neither possibility was especially calming.

"Get out of my head!" I said, as several other heads turned toward me on the sidewalk. The voice and the tingling warmth followed me up 16th Street to the U Street intersection before it finally started to recede.

"My name is Aidan," was the last thing I heard him say.

COOL, COLM, AND COLLABORATED

Admittedly, someone who goes around freezing babies in mid-air and zapping a street throng into suspended animation might have reacted to a telepathic summons from an apparently extraordinary stranger with a bit more curiosity, if not composure.

"You wigged out," Aidan said to me sometime after we met again and were reflecting on our initial encounter. "You also ran like a girl."

I was tempted to argue the latter point but the first was indisputable. The one fact that I had come to take for granted about my inexplicable abilities was that no one else could see them or was immune to them. Nobody ever snapped out of a freeze and demanded to know how I did that. If I lowered the temperature in a room or made snowflakes just for the artistic outlet it provided, I did so discreetly, in the privacy of my own bizarre little world.

The isolation of living with such a secret was lonely but safe, and it allowed me to cling to the hopeful delusion that I was, well, delusional. If no one saw it but me, I could cling to the possibility

that it was all just a dream. No one could argue if they were frozen.

The mere fact of Aidan's existence, his unfrozen, obviously immune-to-my-powers presence blasted a gaping hole in my already fragile, defense-ridden belief system. If he'd actually seen me do it, I could no longer convincingly claim that I was imagining the whole thing. Damn him.

He tried contacting me for days after. I would hear his voice in my head, apparently whenever we were in some physical proximity to each other, and always with the same tingling warmth. Who was he? What was he? How was he able to call out to me that way from a distance? How was I able to hear him? If he could enter my thoughts, could he also hear them?

I was curious but terrified. For most of my life, I had fantasized—*prayed*—to meet someone like me, or even to know that there was someone else like me somewhere out there. I'd asked the question and had been met with silence for so many years, I'd finally stopped asking or wondering. I'd just concluded that I was Freak City, population one. I'd even grown relatively comfortable with the idea.

What if he was just another dream? What if I'd split off even further from reality and conjured up an antagonist for my wacko little drama? What if he were the devil my Aunt Belle always used to say was after me?

Rather than allowing myself to come totally unglued, I started imagining a cube of solid ice, three feet thick, all around me. Whenever I went out, as soon as I left my apartment, the ice cube went up, an invisible but impenetrable barrier around me. Nothing coming in. Nothing going out. And inside the cube—absolute, undiluted silence. Nothing moved. Silent as a snowdrift. His voice was gone.

Weeks passed, time enough for me to begin convincing myself that I had, in fact, imagined the whole thing, imagined him. It was early July before he appeared again, in the middle of one of Washington's hottest, most miserably humid summers in years—

which was to say, one of the most miserably humid summers ever experienced north of the equator. The atmosphere was oppressive and exhausting. Even the early morning air was so heavy and moist that my shirt would be soaked by the time I finished the fifteen-minute walk from my apartment to the Dupont Circle Metro on the way to work.

My job as assistant manager of Stacks and Snacks, a used and rare bookstore with a small coffee shop in Cleveland Park, was pretty mundane. The owner, Kermit O'Malley, was a wealthy, totally off the wall, gay Irishman who hired me as soon as he heard that my last name was "McKenna" and learned that I was a photographer. He was a collector, and he let me display some of my work on the walls at the store, insisting that I price them to sell. After working there almost a year, only three or four people had actually purchased anything, but it was still enough of a thrill to keep me shooting.

It was Kermit who set the stage for my second encounter with Aidan. One afternoon at work, he mentioned that he was having a small party at his house in Chevy Chase. He wanted me to come. I immediately started trying to get out of it. My car was in the shop, and the only way to get to Chevy Chase was by bus, which I hated. Besides that, parties made me self-conscious. As usual, Kermit ignored my protests.

"I'll call you a cab whenever you want to leave," he said. "There are people there I want you to meet."

"I don't have anything to wear to a party," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "Be there around eight."



It was a swampy, squishy hot evening. Even at eight o'clock the thick, mushy air seeped into my clothes and pores. I was wishing I could freeze myself as I walked to the Dupont Metro to catch the train to the bus stop at the Friendship Heights station. I did

manage to conjure up a cool breeze or two but they only made the humidity that much harder to take after they'd passed.

I'd tried for the rest of the afternoon to think of an excuse to call and say I couldn't make it. I hated gay parties especially because the pressure was particularly acute at such affairs to be witty or charming, or just a hottie. In spite of Kermit's frequent assertions to the contrary, I didn't see myself as someone with sufficient surpluses of wit or charm or hotness, and at parties, whatever quantity of any of those traits that I actually may have possessed, seemed to take cover behind my bump-on-a-log persona.

Even when I wasn't trying to disappear, I felt invisible. I was certainly off the radar screen for anyone scanning the room for someone conventionally charming or witty or hot. And anyone on whose screen I did manage to appear, generally proved to have a serious malfunction in their operating system, if not outright clinical issues.

"Are you a good glitch or a bad glitch?" I had started wondering anytime someone actually struck up a conversation with me.

At least I looked okay. I had opted for the lightest-weight cotton khakis in my closet and an ice blue polo that the twelve-year-old who sold it to me at Banana Republic said exactly matched my eyes.

"Oooh, baby." He grinned, suddenly looking what must have been his actual age.

I'd also chosen sandals, or rather, leather slides and had regretted it less than a block from my apartment. The trouble with slides is, they slide. And the combination of leather and my copiously perspiring feet was certain to strike a sour note should the slides slide off at any point during the evening.

By the time I got to Kermit's house, a miniature version of Scarlett O'Hara's Tara on a lush, wooded corner of Chevy Chase, I was in a singularly foul mood, and therefore even more delighted than I normally would've been to learn that the only place hotter and stickier than Kermit's plantation lawn and front porch was his living room.

"What happened to your air conditioning?" I said, forgoing the niceties when he answered the door.

"We're having a truly Southern soiree tonight," he said, wiping moisture from his mostly bald head. "Magnolias and mint juleps and lots of lascivious, sweaty men."

"What happened to your air conditioning?"

"Gave up the ghost about two hours ago," he said. His ample forehead was almost as big and shiny as the giant neon lifesaver sign at the Potomac Mills outlet mall.

"Come in and pretend to not wish you were dead," he said, dragging me by the hand. "Look my dears," he said to a room full of flushed, mostly unfamiliar faces when I entered the living room. "We now have Colm in our midst."

I knew the hokey introduction was coming, but I still winced. Yet another reason to hate parties: introductions and the inevitable conversation piece that was my first name. The resulting chat was as predictable as dryer lint and just as interesting. Not that I hated my name, I just hated that the first conversation I had with practically every person I met was about my name.

"It's Irish," I would say.

"You don't look Irish," someone would say.

"You don't look ignorant," I would think.

Thankfully, the assembly in Kermit's living room was so engaged in bitching about the heat that I barely got a nod.

"I'm melting, I'm melting," said one of the guys, channeling the Wicked Witch of the West. He was one of the few in the room whom I recognized as a friend of Kermit's. He hung around the bookstore a lot and asked who I was dating every time he saw me.

"Cold beer anyone?" Kermit said, heading off toward the kitchen.

"Can you just pour it on my head," asked the Wicked Witch.

There were no seats in the living room, so I followed Kermit into the kitchen to help with the drinks.

"Is someone coming to fix the air conditioning?" I asked.

"Are you going to form a sentence tonight that doesn't have the words 'air conditioning' in it?"

"It's pretty hot in here."

"It's Saturday night. No one is coming to fix the air conditioning."

I took a sip of one of the beers Kermit had opened. "You said there was someone here you wanted me to meet."

"He's a writer who's working on a book about spiritual Meccas and energy centers around the world. Places where miracles have been reported or where people claim to feel more ... spiritual. Anyway, he's looking for a photographer."

"Me?"

"No, Annie Leibowitz." Kermit downed nearly a third of an Amstel Light in one gulp. "He saw your photos from Rehoboth at the store. He liked them."

"I'd hardly call Rehoboth Beach a spiritual Mecca," I said.

"Depends on who you ask. I bet at least half the men in the living room have felt the earth move there. Besides smartass, Rehoboth was originally founded by Methodist missionaries. The point is, he wants to meet you."

"Where is he?" My feet were sweating.

"Not here yet." Kermit handed me a tray of assorted bottled beers. "Take these to the perspiring masses. I'll find you when he gets here."

"Ahh, Colm has returned with cold libations," the Wicked Witch exclaimed as I re-entered the living room. I tried not to grimace.

"How do you manage to stay so fresh in this swamp of a parlor?" he asked.

I was thinking that he wouldn't have found me quite so fresh if I kicked off my sweaty slides and plopped my feet in his lap. With my luck he'd be into that sort of thing.

"He's carrying about half your body weight, for one thing," said a distinguished looking African-American fellow I didn't recognize who was sitting next to him, winking at me.

"And carrying it quite well," said the Wicked Witch, unfazed by the jab. "Who are you dating these days?"

I decided I had to do something about the heat. Time for the Good Witch of the North to intervene. Kermit's party was the pits. Sweaty pits, to be exact. I rarely took action in situations like this. It was risky. The first time I deliberately tried stirring up a North wind indoors, the chandeliers started swaying, lights were blinking on and off, and frost formed on the window panes—the interior window panes—not to mention I'd nearly passed out from the exertion. Fortunately, everyone on that occasion had been drinking pitchers of margaritas. They decided it was an early Christmas party.

I'd refined my technique a bit since then. I knew how to keep it subtle. I started to whistle softly—no idea why, it was just something I did when I wanted to really cool things down. Unlike the shrill, single-note sound I sometimes made when I stopped time, this was always some particular, ethereal-sounding tune I couldn't remember where I'd heard initially. As I whistled, I thought to myself, "Think ice cubes, not icebergs." Focus on my breathing—the cool, slow exhale. I was attempting to refresh a house full of wilting queens, not trying to freeze dry a volcano.

It happened so slowly no one even noticed that they had stopped sweating. It felt like a cool breeze had meandered through the already open windows. I felt the moisture starting to dry on my arms and face, even as the standard lightheadedness ensued. Mission accomplished.

Good, I thought. *Much better*. The other guests were clearly feeling more comfortable. They were starting to relax and to smile. No one was the wiser.

"Catchy tune," said a voice behind me.

I jumped and squawked so violently that I bit my lip.

I could've sworn no one was standing anywhere near me, but he was close enough for me to smell ... something. Cologne? Shampoo? It smelled faintly spicy ... warm ... like cinnamon but not so sweet.

"You scared the hell out of me," I snapped.

"Sorry for sneaking up on you. I didn't want to interrupt." He was smiling. Actually, grinning. Like he knew something.

"You weren't interrupting," I said. "I was just standing here. I didn't realize anyone was there, that's all."

"Yes, you were pretty focused on what you were doing." Still with the grinning.

If he hadn't scared the crap out of me and then proceeded to smirk about it, I would've immediately been focusing on how attractive he was. He had dark hair that would've been black but for a glint of copper here and there. Coal black eyes. He was fair skinned, almost as pale as I, with a strong chin and generous mouth and blazing white teeth that were still flashing. There was something familiar about him, too.

"Thanks by the way," he said.

"For what?"

"For cooling things off. I was afraid this crowd might start stripping."

I stared at him, mute as a statue, my thoughts starting to spin.

"It's okay," he winked and moved a little closer to me. "Your secret's safe with me—although you're clearly expending way too much of your energy. Feeling a little dizzy, I bet?"

I must have looked like Bambi caught in high beams. A hundred and twelve questions were tumbling around in my brain, but the one I kept coming back to was where had I seen this guy before? I knew him. Somehow I knew that he knew me. But I had no idea how I knew him or how I knew that I knew him.

"I'll explain everything later," he said, as if he'd heard every word of my loopy self-talk. "Now please blink before you have a stroke."

"Oh you're here, and I see you've met already!" Kermit was coming out of the kitchen with another beverage tray. "Colm's the photographer whose work you were admiring at the store," he said to Black-eyed Boy. "This is the writer I wanted you to meet,"

he said to me. Then to both of us, "Aidan, this is Colm. Colm, this is Aidan."

Black-eyed Boy was silent but smiling. I was merely silent. *Aidan. Where had I heard that name?*

Kermit stood there, eyeing us both. "I know I'm old-fashioned," he said, "but it's customary where I come from to speak when spoken to."

Aidan laughed, apologized to Kermit, and held out his hand to me. "Pleased to finally meet you," he said.

"Likewise," I managed.

"Okay then," Kermit said. "Let's go water the plant life in the living room." He steered us both toward the thirsty throng. After what seemed like a couple of hours of mindless chit chat with the various wilting lilies, Aidan took my arm and we found Kermit on the patio out back, engaged in a debate about polyamory with the Wicked Witch of the West and the distinguished African-American fellow.

"Mind if I steal him away for coffee, so I can seduce him into working with me?" Aidan asked Kermit.

"Oh sure, seduce away. The pretty ones always leave early—and together," the Wicked Witch said, smirking.

"Just promise you'll remember who brought you together," Kermit said. Then, catching my still unglued expression, he asked Aidan, "What's the matter with him?"

"He's just blown away by the prospect of our collaboration," Aidan said.

"Well close your mouth, sweetie. We got enough flies buzzing around as it is. You boys run along. Leave us old farts here to drink ourselves into an even sweatier stupor. But I want to be at the front of the line at your first book signing and/or wedding reception!"

KARMIC CONUNDRUM

We hadn't said much in the car after leaving Kermit's except to agree to go for coffee at Cosi on Connecticut and R. We settled into one of the more private nooks with the overstuffed chairs near the front window.

"Caramel latte?" he said, before getting in line to order.

"That's my favorite. How did you know that?"

He winked. "Save my seat."

He brought back our drinks, and I watched him dump a packet of Equal into his decaf skim latte. He had strong, sculpted hands that he couldn't seem to hold still.

"Small world, huh?" he said.

I didn't answer.

"I can't actually read your mind," he said, "if that's what's worrying you. I can only hear the thoughts that you direct toward me. Same as you. We can't invade each other's privacy. I can only hear what you say to me in your head, just like you can hear my thoughts to you."

Could my life possibly get any weirder? *I can't hear your thoughts, you weirdo*, I thought.

"Yes it could, and yes you can." His mouth had not moved but I knew the sound of that voice in my head.

Then it hit me. Sweet Baby Jesus it was him—the freeze-proof guy I'd run away from in a panic at the Pride parade, the one who kept calling out to me for days after. "My name is Aidan ..."

"That would be me." He was smiling.

"Stop doing that!" I took a sip of my caramel latte and set it down, frowning.

"No good?" he asked.

"It's cold."

He reached over and held his palm briefly over the top of my cup. "Try it now."

There was steam rising. The coffee tasted like it had just been poured. I stared at him.

He shrugged. "You cool things down. I heat 'em up. So now do you want to tell me why you bolted at Pride that day and why you've been hiding from me ever since? Do you always go into seclusion when a hot man comes after you?"

"Somebody thinks pretty highly of himself," I thought.

"I heard that."

Clearly I needed to see someone about a prescription for Thorazine.

"You weren't supposed to see what you saw," I said. "I didn't know how I could possibly explain what happened, and I was thrown by the fact that someone was watching. I panicked. I'm not used to anyone catching me in the act of freezing a parade or beaming thoughts at me or microwaving my coffee with their hands." I noticed that he was stirring his latte with his index finger while I was talking.

"Okay, I get why you were caught off-guard. But I still don't understand why you ran. You must know other witches aren't affected by your freezes. You didn't even give me a chance to introduce myself, much less get to know you."

"Other witches?" I said, trying to decide which of his presumptions to tackle first.

He sat back in his chair, scrutinizing me with squinty black eyes.

"You are completely clueless, aren't you?" He shook his head, and I noticed again the copper lights in his hair. "Let me be the first to break the news, guy. You are an exceedingly attractive, articulate, intriguing, and altogether compelling fellow. You are clearly a rainbow flag waving, Banana Republic shopping, caramel latte sipping homosexual. And," he said, "besides being—I'm guessing—a five-foot ten, one-hundred-sixty-pound, natural blonde cutie, you are also a certified, North wind whistling, time-stopping witch!" He folded his arms and sat back in his chair, obviously quite pleased with himself.

"Don't try to tell me you didn't know. What else could it be?"

"Well as long as we're suspending disbelief, lots of possibilities come to mind. A visitor from another planet? A mutant?"

He balled up a napkin and threw it at me. "Yeah, that's it. We're the X-Men Who Love Men."

"That's weirder than Samantha and Serena?"

The black eyes rolled. "You are so gay."

He took a breath. "Look. Your mother died giving birth to you, am I right?"

I nodded, mute, mouth open.

"And weren't you raised by an aunt who's a wise woman and who was there to answer your questions about what was going on for you?"

"My aunt's a Baptist."

He sat back in his chair, obviously unprepared for that piece of news. "No, seriously." He made a face and scratched his head. "That can't be right. Somebody must've really screwed up."

"What do you mean?"

"Put the prescription in the wrong bottle ... loaded the wrong truck ... dunked your soul in the wrong gene pool when you came back this time."

"What do you mean, 'came back?'"

He raised his left eyebrow like it wasn't attached to the rest of his face. "Good Goddess, you don't know jack shit, do you?"

"He does those kink videos, right?"

Again with the eyebrow. He got up from his chair and gestured for me to do the same. "That's it. You're coming with me to see my Aunt Lucinda. You've got a lot of catching up to do." We were out the door and cruising up Connecticut Avenue before I could ask what an Aunt Lucinda was or why I would want to go see one.



Aunt Lucinda, as it turned out, was in fact Aidan's Aunt Lucinda, who lived in the ground floor and basement apartment of the house in upper Northwest that had been left to her by her deceased fifth husband.

"Divorced two, buried three," Aidan said. "Wouldn't be surprised if she offed number five herself."

Aidan occupied the upper two floors. There was a separate entrance to Aunt Lucinda's place in the back of the house. He knocked then opened the door with his own key. Her entryway and living room were decorated in multiple shades of plum and pink, with velvet or satin pillows scattered all over and candles flickering from every possible nook or cranny. An assortment of rocks and crystals glittered on every surface.

"It looks like the inside of Jeannie's bottle," I whispered to Aidan.

"Tell her. She'll love that," he said.

"She'll love what?" a dusky voice said from the shadows of the hallway.

"This is Colm, Aunt Lu. He thinks your place looks like the inside of Jeannie's bottle."

"Really? You get a kiss for that, hon," she said, pecking me on the cheek. She looked kind of like a cross between Rosemary Clooney and Cher. Figure and wardrobe by Rosie. Hair, makeup, and jewelry by Cher.

"He's the one, isn't he?" she said to Aidan.

"You can tell, huh?"

"Honey, the only thing that works better than my gaydar is my witch-o-meter. He rings both bells!"

"He kinda rings my bells, too," Aidan said.

"*HE is still in the room,*" I telepathed to Aidan.

"*Hey, you're getting the hang of that,*" Aidan beamed back.

"*Stop talking about me like I'm not here.*"

"*I want to kiss you 'til your lips bleed,*" he replied.

I felt a shot of electricity zing from my teeth to my toes. I glanced nervously over at Aunt Lucinda.

"*Don't worry, she can't hear us,*" Aidan said.

"Okay enough with the psychic flirtation," she said.

I turned redder than Aunt Lu's lipstick. "I thought you said she couldn't hear us!" I said out loud.

"I can't hear your thoughts, dear," she said. "But I'm very intuitive. And you're blushing like a virgin at the bedpost. Why don't you two sit down."

We sat across from her at a small round table in the living room. It was covered with rich, dark pink silk, and there was a single white candle burning.

"Let's see what we've got here," she said, closing her eyes and holding out her hands with her palms toward me.

"Mmmm ..." she sighed. "Pure sky blue ... the color of peace ... like your name. Sweet and perfectly still ... definitely a Pisces. Your energy is the color of your eyes ... the color of innocence ..." She reached her hands closer toward me across the table, and immediately her body began to tremble. She was shivering.

"Oh my!" she said through chattering teeth. "There's the ice! The power to freeze ... to stop time ... to cool and calm ... to make everything completely still ... so quiet—except for this oddly lovely tune—you can hear everything ... so powerful nothing can move until it's your choice ...

"Baby, you could stop the Titans in their tracks!" She opened her eyes. "Aidan, don't push this one too far or he might turn even you into a snow man!"

"Is she for real?" I queried Aidan.

"Just listen," he said.

She closed her eyes again and started shaking her head. "Your mother named you before you she passed. Sweet, lovely soul. She knew that by giving birth to you she would be completing and renewing the cycle of her lineage. It was her choice, as it always is, to make the sacrifice. She's very much with you, but who taught you?"

"I don't think I know what you mean," I said, making one of the understatements of the millennium.

"Your gifts, sweetie, your magic. Who taught you about who you are and what you can do? Didn't your aunt ... ?"

"His aunt's a Baptist," Aidan volunteered.

Aunt Lu looked at Aidan. Then at me. Then back at Aidan.

"No, seriously."

I nodded, pleased that I'd managed to knock them both off their assumptions with the same factoid.

"But this is unheard of," she said.

I glanced at Aidan. If his eyebrow had been arched any higher it would have been a cowlick.

Aunt Lu was shaking her head. "Talk about your karmic conundrums! I'm not sure I've ever seen anything in the books about this. *A Baptist?*"

I nodded again.

"Aidan, honey, fix Auntie a drink," she said.

FIRE AND ICE: RONDO

Before we left, Aunt Lu made Aidan promise to bring me back for an astrological reading and for a complimentary past life regression session.

"So, what did I tell you?" he said as he led me around from the back entrance of the house and upstairs to his apartment.

My head was spinning (figuratively speaking). Aunt Lu had affirmed Aidan's declaration that I was a witch ("Nobody says 'warlock' these days, and 'wizard' is too *Harry Potter*."), carrying on some kind of magical lineage, despite the "Baptist issue." More specifically, I was a natural born, "elemental witch ... able to invoke and, in some measure, control the element of water/ice ... to temporarily halt or freeze any selected motion within my line of vision, to create the absolute stillness of ice, the silence of snowfall, and to command the North Wind."

I knew that I could do most of that. I just didn't know that anyone else could know. Who knew?

"You know," she added, "It's part of your Celtic heritage. As I said, girls usually carry the lineage, but just like Aidan, you're

the only son of the oldest daughter of the seventh generation in your line. The old cycle ends with the mother who always passes shortly after the delivery, leaving the boy—and the birth of the new cycle—in the hands of surviving women—usually a sister who is responsible for protecting the child and teaching him the essential knowledge of the Craft.”

“What about him?” I’d asked, looking at Aidan.

“His element is fire,” Aunt Lu said. “Where you freeze, he burns. Where you create stillness, he creates motion and the warming of the South Wind. It’s really not as mysterious or even as uncommon as it sounds, dear. It’s just energy—the stuff that you and I and everyone and everything else is made of—coupled with intention. We all have access to it. We can all learn to work with it creatively and constructively. You and Aidan just happen to be particularly gifted in the ways that you are naturally able to use it. And with natural or elemental witches such as you two, it’s also deeply connected to who you are—to your emotions especially and to your distinct personality and the makeup of your character.”

I was sort of getting it. A little. “His mother died, too?”

“Yes,” she said. “His mother was my beloved, older sister.”

“*He’s still in the room,*” Aidan had telepathed, “*And while I hate to say I told you so ... Strike that. Actually I like to say I told you so.*”



Once inside his apartment, I had to sit before the room started spinning as fast as my head. When I was finally able to focus on my surroundings, I saw how impressive Aidan’s home was. It was spacious and filled with eclectic antiques and objets d’art that all looked incredibly exotic to me.

“I travel a lot,” he said, as I was taking it all in.

“For work?”

“That and because I have a lot of trouble staying in one place—or keeping still.”

“You never are, are you?”

"What?"

"Still," I said. "Some part of you is always shaking or tapping or drumming or fidgeting."

"Nervous energy," he said. "The price you pay for being a fireball. You on the other hand, seem to have exactly the opposite dilemma."

"Meaning what?"

He motioned for me to sit down beside him on the smaller of two sofas. "I guess I don't understand how you could keep all this to yourself all those years. I think I would've moved Mount Olympus to figure out who or what I was and to find somebody who could give me some answers."

"Obviously I'm not the one who makes things move," I said. "Silence seems to come pretty naturally to me."

He slid closer to me on the sofa. "What else comes naturally to you?" He grinned, and my shirt started to unbutton itself.

"I thought you said that we can't use magic on each other."

"We can't use it *against* each other," he said. "But we can use it to assist ..." He put his arm around me.

"Seems to me the rules have quite a few permutations."

"Just variations of the chief rule: to do no harm. And I promise I'm not going to harm you," he said as the last button slipped through the last eye.

"Certainly brings new meaning to the expression, 'being mentally undressed.'"

"For somebody who creates silence, you sure can blather on," he said as he gently but hungrily covered my mouth with his. I wasn't at all sure that I was ready for any of this. When I thought too hard about any of what I'd learned in the past few hours I felt like I might throw up. Maybe the trick was not to think. *Ready or not*, I was thinking, as we sunk down together into the sofa.



I'd heard other couples talk about fireworks the first time that they made love and always dismissed it as either retrospective romanticizing or drug-induced euphoria. Aidan proved me wrong.

Of course, I'd noticed how attractive he was, but I hadn't had time to pay a lot of attention to the attraction. There'd been too much other data to process in such a short time, and too many questions—until that first kiss.

We referred to that moment many times after as our Big Bang, and for more reasons than the obvious one. It felt to me like I had been hurled into an alternate universe, traveling at the speed of light but still noticing every detail. It was such a supernova of sensation that several times I thought I had blacked out, only to realize that I was just staring into the seemingly limitless cosmos of his eyes.

Was that his tongue literally causing a gentle burn at my every orifice? Was that my hand clutching a fistful of his thick, curly hair? Was my throat the source of those guttural growls? We were as tightly joined as I could imagine any two bodies ever being and yet we both seemed to be floating above the scene, watching ourselves. There were shooting stars, and a golden orb of a moon hovered so close it seemed to be throbbing. Still what I remembered long after weren't the real or imagined pyrotechnics but rather his warm hands and feet, his hot breath in my ear, his wet and insistent mouth, his fire that spread over my entire body. What I always remembered afterwards, that first night and each time that followed, was just him.

"Is it me or did we just warp to the far end of the solar system and back?" He was still breathing heavily, and the sheets under us and at our feet were twisted and damp.

"I think I'm wearing one of Saturn's rings." My throat was raw from the unprecedented noises I'd been making.

"Have you ever felt anything like ...?"

"Are you kidding me? I'm going to have to learn a new language just to describe it."

"Thank God," he said. "If you'd said something like, 'Yeah, it was nice' I think I would've imploded." He nestled closer to me, still breathing hard.

"Nice is not a word that applies to you in this context," I said.

He lifted his head abruptly off my chest. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" There was an unexpected urgency in the question and immediate tension in his face.

"No, of course not. I just meant that you are extremely ... energetic. I actually thought we were levitating there for a minute or two."

He smiled and relaxed. "I wasn't holding back with you. I didn't feel like I had to. You definitely held your own."

"Funny, that's not what I remember holding."

He pinched my nipple. "You've got a wicked smart mouth. But I think I've found an effective way to shut you up." He kissed me again and started to resume suggestive maneuvers.

"Aren't you sleepy?"

He laughed. "Sleepy is not a word that typically applies to me in any context. Spent, maybe. But never sleepy. I have trouble relaxing."

I'd noticed the entire time he was talking that his hand or his leg or his foot—something—was moving.

"Close your eyes," I said.

"What for?"

"Just close them."

He laid his head back on my chest, and I made my palm cool and pressed it gently to his warm, damp forehead. As I started to whistle softly, I adjusted my breathing to his and telepathed, "*Dim the lights, Fireboy. You can relax now.*"

"I think maybe we've started something here," he murmured, already fading. He was asleep in minutes.

I lay awake for at least another hour, my palm still on his forehead, wondering what it was that we'd started.

TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

“**T**he sex was amazing, wasn’t it?” Aunt Lu said as she was pouring coffee for us the next morning.

Aidan instantly lost his grip on the mug he was holding and I froze a stalactite of hot java just centimeters above his crotch.

“Jeezus, Auntie!” he said as he held a saucer from the table under the suspended brew, waiting for me to release it safely.

“Remind me to have you around when I’m doing the dishes, sweetie,” she said to me.

“Please tell me you couldn’t hear me—us—upstairs last night,” I said.

“Sweetie, I have sixty percent hearing loss in both ears. I can’t hear myself fart if I don’t have my gizmos in.”

“Classy,” Aidan said.

“I did your charts last night,” she continued. “More chemistry there than in my third husband’s medicine cabinet!”

“But you don’t know when or where I was born,” I said, knowing only enough about astrology to know that having the exact birth data was key.

"Eleven A.M. on March 11, 1975, in St. Clair, North Carolina?"

I blinked in disbelief.

"Lucky guess," she winked.

"You should see her at bingo," Aidan cracked, pouring himself another cup of coffee.

"Pisces with moon in Sagittarius and Gemini rising," she said, pointing at me. "Sag with moon in Pisces and Aries rising," she pointed at Aidan. "Plus, Mars is dancing with Venus in both charts. In other words, the Warrior God is making whoopee with his mistress, the Goddess of Love! I'm betting when you two get going, there is spontaneous astral projection!"

"Maybe this would be a good time to change the subject to something like... football," I said, blushing as red as the ruby on Aunt Lu's finger.

"It's the end of July, you 'mo," Aidan said.

"Oh. Well, how 'bout this weather we're having."

Aunt Lu rolled her eyes. "Kids these days. So uptight when it comes to talking about sex." She patted my hand. "Okay honey, if we aren't going to talk about sex, let's talk about karma. Not as much fun, but where you two are concerned, every bit as interesting!"

"I'm afraid to ask," I said.

"We were meant for each other, right?" Aidan squeezed my hand.

"Mars in each of your charts sits in the other's eighth house. And suns are conjunct each other's moons."

"Can we get closed captioning for the astrologically impaired?" Aidan said to Aunt Lu.

"The short version, sweetie darlings, is that this is a profoundly pivotal recurrence of a relationship that has come around quite a few times already. You've been down this blazing trail together before. For some reason, you are back for another go-round. Apparently there is more work to do. Another evolution of your connection to each other."

I was my usual mute, flabbergasted self.

Aidan smiled but had no comment for a change.

"The good news is that you've been given an amazing attraction to each other. There's a magnetic pull that neither of you can resist. And you light each other up. You reflect each other in a way that will teach you what you need to know ... if you let it."

If Aidan's face was any indication, she was right. He was beaming.



I was forty minutes late for work that afternoon.

"Somebody didn't go home last night!" Kermit sing-songed as I walked into the store.

"At the rate the beer cooler was emptying when we left, I'm surprised anybody made it out your door on their own two feet."

"Save the lame attempts at witty deflection," he said. "I called you last night around midnight and again this morning at 7:30, and I know that you are never up past midnight or out of bed before seven. So spill your guts."

"I have work to do."

"Like I pay you to actually sell books," he snorted. "Your job is to dress up the place—at which you normally succeed—and to provide vicarious thrills, at which you, frankly, suck. So I've taken matters into my own hands and introduced you to a dreamy writer to finally get a return on my investment. Was Aidan to die for or what?"

"You have no idea."

"I knew the two of you would click. I just had a feeling it was going to be spark city. Sometimes you can tell when two people are going to connect. I'm very intuitive about stuff like this."

Suddenly I had intuitives coming out of the woodwork.

"We had a good time," I said. "He's a very interesting guy."

"He'd have to be to keep you up past midnight. Obviously you went to his place?"

"Eventually," I said. "After we stopped by to meet his aunt."

"His aunt? Already introducing you to the family? Man, no need to light a fire under that boy!"

"No he's pretty much got that covered."

Kermit did his notoriously bad Groucho Marx imitation. "So this relationship is shaping up to be both business and pleasure?"

I stared blankly.

"Work and play?" he said.

Still staring blankly.

"Are you in there? The book, brainiac. The book you're going to work on together!"

Cripes. Not a single word or thought transmission had been exchanged about the alleged book since leaving Kermit's house the night before. I knew only what Kermit had told me. I didn't even know if Aidan was actually writing a book, much less interested in my collaborating with him. For all I knew it had just been an excuse to meet me.

"Right ... the book," I said, sounding increasingly fewer bricks short of a load.

"Pretty cool to get a business partner and a playmate all wrapped up in one bodacious Black Irish package," Kermit said.

"Pretty cool," I parroted.

"Well," he said, scanning my face for any sign of intelligent life. "Thanks as always for that mouth-watering update. Guess we should get busy here." He turned and walked away, muttering something about how I still sucked.



"So what I'm hearing is that you're worried about getting stuck in some sort of routine or rut in this new relationship with Aidan," Dr. Nike said, clicking her ballpoint pen with her notepad perched on her knee.

"Well, sort of."

She'd been looking at me and blinking in erratic stops and starts, like she was transmitting Morse code with her eyelids, as I

told her, in not so many words, what Aunt Lucinda had said about Aidan and me. She seemed either to be partially missing the point or simultaneously translating the more metaphysical aspects of my disclosure into terms that she could wrap her tiny arms around.

I was used to that. Dr. Nike was a “solution-focused, cognitive psychologist” and a professional life coach with a solid reputation and a no-nonsense approach that was short on long descents into the underworld of unconscious motivation and long on action strategies for constructive living, according to her website anyway. She’d garnered a fair amount of publicity a few years earlier by successfully petitioning for the right to use “Just do it!” on her business cards and letterhead.

She was part German and part Japanese, which I initially thought might be an incongruous combination. It gave her an intriguing look, like a petite, Teutonic samurai. Kermit referred to her as the steel lotus blossom. He was the one who had recommended her, saying that she was “exactly what you need to get your head out of your ass and move forward in your life.” That sounded like such a good opening line that I used it in our first session when she asked “What brought you here?” Actually my first response was, “A cab,” but her only reply to that was to start blinking and clicking her ballpoint pen.

I decided it couldn’t hurt to give her a try because the truth was, I was already feeling stuck, seemingly unable to make even one decision to get myself moving toward a better job, a relationship, maybe an actual life. My life seemed equally screwed up whether I was awake or asleep with my nights filled with persistent and always troubling dreams—usually about my mother, whose exit from this world at precisely the moment that I entered still left a void I didn’t know how to fill. I’d never even seen a picture of her. She appeared regularly in my dreams, but I never remembered her face. By any diagnostic criteria, I was a mess, never mind the pesky fact that I had the power to stop time.

Dr. Nike took me on for weekly sessions and included a free subscription to her daily e-mail affirmations. The work had

been going pretty well overall, given my ambivalence. She'd been extremely supportive of my decision to take some digital photography classes to bump up my skills a bit, although I still preferred the more hands-on darkroom methods, and even brought in several catalogs from colleges and technical schools in the DC area. Her approach to getting my head out of my ass was to frequently return to her power question, which was really just a slight inversion of her hard-won slogan: "What can you just do?" Simple and arguably effective.

I hadn't planned to tell her that I was a witch. Not that I could've told her that prior to meeting Aidan since I didn't exactly realize it myself. But after meeting Aidan it was becoming increasingly difficult not to talk about certain things. So I just blurted it out. The Morse code blinking and ballpoint pen clicking came to a screeching halt.

"Say what you mean," she said with a slightly rounder gaze and her thumb softly stroking the clicker on her pen.

"I can do things most people can't do..." I said. "Magical things."

"Hmm. For example?"

It was the first time I'd ever actually told anyone, the first time I'd heard myself say the words out loud. "I can sort of ... freeze things," I said. "Kind of like making time stand still." No response. "Like Piper on 'Charmed.'" Dr. Nike had gone so long without blinking, I thought maybe I'd accidentally frozen her in her chair.

"You remember 'Bewitched?'"

"I love that song," she said.

"No. The TV show. Remember how sometimes Darrin or some other mortal would be in the middle of saying or doing something and Samantha would snap her fingers and freeze them in mid-sentence? That's one of the things I can do," I explained, feeling every bit as much of a fruitcake as I sounded.

"Uh huh ..." she said finally, resuming the clicking and the blinking. I took some comfort in the fact that she hadn't yet phoned the psych ward. "So, do you twitch your nose?" She chuckled.

"Or maybe you can just show me what you mean? Give me an example."

I could feel the frown on my face. "I'm sorry. I don't like doing demos. It makes me uncomfortable—and a little dizzy."

I wasn't being coy. Whenever I tried to make something happen just for the hell of it, it never seemed to go as well as expected. Even when it worked, I always ended up feeling a little strained, like I was trying too hard to pass gas.

"You'll just have to take my word for it," I said.

Dr. Nike ran her hand through the spiky, blond-tipped hair that always made her look to me like somebody in an Asian boy band.

"Have you talked to anyone else about this?"

"No," I said. "No one but Aidan."

"And what was his reaction?"

I wondered which of Aidan's initial responses to me would sound the least delusional ... his telepathic summons that kept ringing in my mind so loudly after our first encounter... or his ability to conjure up a heat wave that inevitably made its way to my crotch ... Maybe I could just tell her how one of his favorite things to do was to mentally blow hot air into condoms until they turned into flying phalluses floating around the bedroom ...

I settled on, "Aidan pretty much accepts me as I am."

"Okay. What I'm hearing is that you've got a wonderfully vivid imagination, a rich inner life that you experience in a way that feels like time literally stands still—especially when you're with Aidan. It's the kind of imagination that can be used to create a magical life! All we have to do is tap into those inner resources and focus your intention on manifesting the life you dream of!"

I thought a minute or two about what she'd said and figured if that's what she had heard, then that's what we would go with. Sometimes it was better not to press the issue.

"I am going to recommend that your doctor write you a prescription for Xanax," she said as I was getting up to go.

After that, we didn't talk much more about magic. She seemed to have a perspective on it all that really worked for her, and I

was starting to reconcile myself to the fact that my 'skills' were not going to be something I could discuss casually at a cocktail party. Apparently there were two kinds of people in the world: Those who could not stop time ... and me. There was also Aidan, of course, but he too was in a category by himself.

Dr. Nike had an impressive way of reframing even the wildest stuff I would fling her way, such as my later disclosure that Aidan and I had first met in ancient Palestine, and casting it as a need for us to just "look at what might be preventing me from exploring deeper and more creative forms of intimacy." I couldn't help wondering what she would say about the astral sex.

"What's worked well for you in the past?" she always asked. "And what can you just do to remember what was good about it and take it to the next level while staying out of fantasy and in the here and now?"

I wasn't sure, but somewhere in that question I thought I heard her telling me to just get real.

"Why do you keep throwing what little money you make away on her?" Aidan asked after hearing about the Xanax prescription.

"She insists on making my life sound normal," I said. "How priceless is that?"

THE NEXT LEVEL

“I don’t know about this,” I said to Aidan when he told me that he had taken the liberty of scheduling a past lives consultation for us with Aunt Lu.

“It’ll be fun,” he said. “We can find out all the places we’ve done it over the centuries.”

“While that’s a richly compelling rationale, wouldn’t it be more fun to just go to Rehoboth for the weekend? Bet we haven’t done it there yet.”

“Tell you what. If we find out we’ve never had sex on the beach, I will drive us to Rehoboth that very night,” said the handsome dog with a bone.

“Why is this so important to you?”

“You need to embrace your heritage. And we should know what lessons we’re supposed to master together in this lifetime so we can move to the next level.”

“The next level? I don’t even like upgrading my computer.”

He punched my arm. “Watch this.” He made a tiny flame appear over one of his open palms, then blew a kiss in the direction of my crotch, producing an immediate erection. He would go on to win a lot of arguments that way.



By the time I awoke on Sunday morning, he had run five miles, showered, read the *New York Times*, and made breakfast, which he served to me in bed.

"Have you always been like this?" I asked as he floated a fresh strawberry up to my lips.

"What, be lavishly attentive to the cute boy in my bed?"

"That, and on speed," I said.

"I can't help it. Turbo charged metabolism."

"It makes me feel like a lump of Play-Do."

"I could work with that analogy." He kissed the tip of my nose. "You don't want to be like me. Trust me."

"I'm not sure I want to be like me, either."

He rolled his eyes. "Is self-esteem on your shrink's list of issues to 'just do?'"

"She not my *shrink*, she's my coach. And she can't just zap up some self-esteem for me. She's not a witch."

"Lucky you got me around then, huh?"

"Because you have enough for both of us?"

"I'll let that go unpunished for now. We've got stuff to do." He moved his hips over mine and lowered my boxer briefs.

"Such as?"

"A book to write, for one thing," he said as if we were resuming a discussion on the topic from only minutes ago. I'd started to think that the whole idea was a hoax.

"You were serious about that?"

"Hello? Kermit's party? I'm the writer who wanted to meet you ... to talk about working together ... Any of this ringing a bell?"

"You haven't mentioned it since he introduced us."

"We've been busy," he said, removing his own boxer briefs.

"Well don't you think we should get started? Maybe at least have a discussion about it?"

"I have an idea that I'm mulling over."

"Any chance of hearing it out loud?"

"Soon," he said.

I attempted poking around in his mind telepathically to see if I could coax something out.

"Nice try," he shrugged off my not-so-subtle mind probe.

"Bite me."

"Now you're talking!" he said, sliding my briefs the rest of the way over my ankles.

WINKING ABOUT IT

Aunt Lucinda telephoned a couple of days before Aidan and I were scheduled to meet with her for our past life review.

"Come see me," she said.

"Aidan's away doing an interview."

"Just you. Come see me. Don't say anything to Aidan."

A secret summons from the next of kin. *This can't be good.* I was still trying to decide how nervous I should be when I knocked on her door.

"Hello, my beauty!" she said, inviting me in. She was wearing a midnight blue muumuu and a lot of silver jewelry with golden flecked, dark blue stones.

"Lapis lazuli," she said, when she saw me eyeing them. "Great for spiritual balance and insight. Have some tea."

I sat on the semi-circular purple velvet divan, trying to get the inside of Jeannie's bottle out of my mind and trying not to fidget.

"There's no reason to be nervous." She smiled, lowering herself into the wide mahogany leather chair across from me. She lit the candle on the table beside her. "I just wanted to talk with you, and sometimes it's not easy to get a complete sentence in when Aidan's around." She giggled.

"I don't mind. I'm not that much of a talker."

"I know. You're much more of a listener."

That sounded like it might be a compliment, but I wasn't sure.

"It's a compliment," she said.

"You know, I'm still not convinced that you can't read my mind."

"Well, sometimes it's good to keep people guessing a little." She winked.

I asked what was it that she wanted to talk to me about.

"You and Aidan, of course," she said. "But mostly you. I generally adhere to a strict policy of non-interference in other people's lives, especially my nephew's. But I have some concerns."

So did I, but until now I'd at least had the luxury of believing I was the only one who did. Her reactions to me thus far had been so warm and welcoming that I'd just assumed she approved of my relationship with Aidan. I shifted a bit in my seat and told myself, again, not to fidget.

"I like him a lot," I offered. "I wouldn't ever want to cause him any trouble ..."

"No no no, sweetie!" she interrupted. "My concerns aren't for Aidan. They're for you."

I hadn't seen that one coming.

"Is there something about him I don't know that I should?" I braced myself for the impact of the other shoe dropping.

"I'm sure there's plenty, and most of it he'll tell you himself or you'll learn on your own."

I can only assume that I was looking as worried as I was feeling.

"Don't get the wrong idea," she continued. "My nephew is my joy. I helped raise him. I taught him nearly everything I know. I've looked after him ever since his mother passed. I watched him change from a screaming, squirming infant to a little boy with more energy than he could control to a young man with a heart as warm

as any fire that he can create. He has more talent and charm than most people possess in several lifetimes."

"I've certainly witnessed his talent—and his charm," I said.

"In spite of appearances, Aidan hasn't had an easy life. His heritage, his magic, who he loves ... all set him apart. He's been alone in a lot of ways his whole life. Just as you have."

I nodded.

"But he's also had some advantages you have not had. He had a family—me and others—who understood where he was coming from and who accepted him for who and what he is, without question. Around us at least, he could always be himself. It was all that we expected of him."

I felt a twinge of envy toward Aidan and his family for his freedom to be himself no matter who was watching. I envied his having even one person when he was growing up who saw him as he was and only loved him more for what they saw. I felt envy, and I felt a sadness I hadn't let myself feel in a very long time.

"So Aidan had the space and the freedom that he needed, for the most part," she continued, "to play, to learn, to experiment. To figure out who he was and what he wanted. Or at least, to think he'd figured it out. And," she said, "he inherited more money than the Queen of Sheba—who was a real bitch by the way ... but I digress."

I knew there had to be a point hiding somewhere in all this. I just sat there, waiting for the lightbulb.

"You're wondering what the bloody hell I'm trying to say here, aren't you?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Give me your hands, love," she said, taking mine in hers and closing her eyes. "For all that you have in common with Aidan, dear one, I sense a very different story. And a very sensitive spirit behind the ice curtain you've created to protect yourself. Aidan has had his entire life thus far to learn what he wants. And he comes wired to go after what he wants and what he believes is true. He

takes risks—some that cause him considerable anguish—but that’s part of his learning process.”

“I wish I were more like him,” I said. “I usually can’t even decide what I want for dinner.”

“You know everything you need to know, love. You just don’t know that you know it.”

I frowned. “If I don’t know that I know it, what good does it do to know it?”

She let go of my hands and for a minute I thought I might have stumped her.

“The less you focus on what you don’t know, the more you will realize what you do know. And the more you will see how much power you really have.”

“As what, a human air conditioner? The power to make popsicles doesn’t seem especially relevant to anything. What’s the value in making things stop?”

“You have more power—magical and otherwise—than you realize. I see it—and I can feel it. I’m sure Aidan does, too, on some level. But the question about its value ... that’s something you will have to keep asking yourself. No one else can give you the answer.”

“Now you’re sounding like my coach.”

She winked. “I haven’t told you to ‘just do it’ now, have I?”

I was trying to remember when I had told her about Dr. Nike, when she got up from her seat and pinched out the flame on the candle. “There’s plenty of time. But now you need to scoot. I have a Tarot reading in twenty minutes, and I need to clear the room. Come see me anytime, my beauty.”

My, I seem to come and go so quickly here, I thought to myself when I was standing outside her door. I realized that I still wasn’t sure exactly what the whole conversation about been about. Or maybe I knew but just didn’t know that I knew.

One thing I knew that I knew was that everybody and his aunt had been winking at me for as long as I could remember. Aunt Lucinda was only the most recent in a parade of folks who gave the

impression of knowing more about me than I knew about myself. As a kid, my Uncle Brady—the one who taught me to whistle—winked at me whenever I was scolded by Aunt Belle, which was often and usually for no apparent reason. Father Bernard at the Sisters of Serenity parish of St. Clair always winked at me whenever I went with my friend Wanda Sue and her family to mass (it was all about the choirboys). It was years later that I learned he'd been quickly and quietly transferred to a church in Tuscaloosa to escape a possible morals charge.

Once I froze Mrs. Beauregard, my eleventh grade music teacher—and the rest of the junior class choir—as she led us for the fourth time through a chorus of “We Are The World.” It may have been the first time it occurred to me to whistle as a way of conjuring a freeze—only on that occasion I was whistling the high tenor harmony on the second verse. Next thing I knew every eye in the eleventh grade chorus was literally glued to Mrs. Beauregard's face, all looking like something you'd see in a wax museum. I did it partly because she'd winked at me, not once but twice during the bridge, and partly because I was sick and tired of that song.

I never understood what message the winks were meant to convey. I was never less clear about the intent than the time that Chris Sizemore, the St. Clair High School quarterback, winked at me in the locker room after gym class. We were both juniors, but Chris already had the body of a lusciously athletic and virile twenty-two-year-old. I would sneak peeks at him every chance I got, and I would linger for as long as possible after gym class in order to be able to watch him walk away from me down the hall. It was poetry in motion.

“My body hurts,” he said after class one day, to no one in particular. But as he said it, he looked at me and winked. I had just stepped out of my gym shorts and my embarrassingly involuntary response was immediate, so I froze the locker room before he or anyone else could see my seventeen-year-old soldier saluting its commander. Chris was standing there in all his naked, sweaty, teenaged glory, and I allowed myself the lightheaded luxury of

moving close to him, letting my eyes wander over the lithe, tan expanse of his thigh and his tight tummy and the dark, heavy trophy between his legs. When I looked up at his face I was startled to see him still winking. I fought off the urge to gently kiss his parted lips, and then recognizing that this uninvited hero worship was not helping me lose my erection, I turned back to my locker and stepped into my jeans before letting that piece of sculpted perfection and the rest of the locker room lapse back into motion.

Aidan, ever the overachiever, had broken all records in the winking category.

"It's because you're so cute," he said, when I finally called him on it.

"It's unnerving. Besides, I'm not exactly going for 'cute.'"

"What is it you're going for?" He was blowing on a match, nonchalantly lighting and dousing it with alternate breaths.

"I don't know—respect? Or maybe just a straight answer?"

"What was the question?"

I had been trying again, unsuccessfully, to get him to talk to me about the book we were allegedly working on together. So far his only response had been a wink or a pat on the behind.

"I'm sorry for being so mysterious," he said. "We do need to talk about it and we will. But I wanted to wait until after we've done the past life review with Aunt Lu."

When I asked why, he said that there was a correlation between the past lives stuff and the idea that he had for the book.

"I'll tell you about it after we see how things go with her," he said.

"I'm still not even sure I want to do this. I have enough trouble coping with this life. Now I get to hear how I screwed up in previous incarnations?"

"What makes you so sure you screwed up before?"

"Have you met me?"

He rolled his eyes. "Did it ever occur to you that just maybe it wasn't you who fucked up before?"

I could honestly say that thought had not occurred to me even once. "I think it's going to be fascinating and romantic to hear our story unfold over the ages," he said. "We've obviously been together before. Now we're together again, just starting out on another adventure together with these awesome gifts and this amazing opportunity. How bad can it be?"

WITCH UPON A TIME

We showed up promptly at nine the next morning for our first boat ride back in time.

"Did you follow my instructions?" Aunt Lu asked.

"Yes ma'am. No processed foods or prescription drugs," Aidan said.

"Processed food interferes with time travel?" I asked.

"No, it's just bad for you," she said.

"I had a few Fritos with lunch," I confessed.

"We'll make allowances."

Damn.

"Are we sure we want to do this?" she said, looking at me.

"We're sure," Aidan said. "He's just a little nervous."

"You can end the session any time, sweetie," she said. "All you have to do is say 'Stop.'"

"You're good at that." Aidan winked then caught himself in the act. "Sorry." He feigned a non-blinking stare.

"So how does this work?" I asked.

Aunt Lucinda explained that she would guide us into a trance state, and once we were relaxed and ready, she would ask us to begin to remember our first and subsequent encounters with each

other. She said that we would essentially re-live parts of those lives, observing what had transpired as if we were experiencing it but not actually feeling it.

"You won't have any pain, but you will know if there is pain—or pleasure," she said. "You'll have the awareness but not the sensation, sort of like watching yourselves in old home movies."

"Will we understand what we're saying? Won't we be speaking in some other language?"

"You'll understand perfectly," she said. "And you will simply translate the thoughts and feelings you were having at that time into your own words as you would speak them in the present. Otherwise I would've had to learn about six dead languages by now."

"Guess you won't be singing me a love song in Latin," Aidan cracked.

"You promised me a trip to the beach if I went through with this," I telepathed to him.

"I'm already imagining myself rubbing sunscreen on your thighs," he responded, licking his lips.

"Let's get this party started," I said.

Aunt Lu instructed us to hold hands and not to let go. "Even if you need to stop, don't let go of each other's hands," she said. "You're traveling in time together, and it's important to maintain your connection. If you need to stop, just say so. Speak the words, but come back to here and now before breaking your link to each other."

"No dumping me in another century just because I left my dirty underwear on the floor," Aidan said as he took hold of my hands.

"Quiet now. Close your eyes," Aunt Lu said in a hushed voice. "Hold each other's hands lightly and begin to focus on your breathing. Just observe and pay attention to your breath as you inhale and exhale ..."

I felt the wave of warmth from Aidan's hands starting to flow through me as I always did when he touched me. I was conscious

of my thoughts: images coming and going with each breath ... and conscious of Aidan's thoughts coming and going ...

"Let your own and each other's thoughts pass like clouds floating across a clear blue sky," she said. "Stay with your own breathing ... and then slowly begin to hear and to feel each other breathing ... let everything else slowly start to fade away, then disappear, until there is only your breathing together ... slowly coming together, merging until it's only one breath between you ... until you can hear and feel yourselves breathing in perfect union ... joined together ... one breath ... one heartbeat ... one breath ..." Silence seemed to cover us like snow blanketing a city street, leaving only the muffled sound of a single heartbeat, the calming metronome of our breathing ... and Aunt Lu's voice, like a soft melody playing in another room.

"Now see yourselves walking hand in hand through a dark tunnel with a faint light in the distance. It's the only light you can see."

I felt Aidan beside me, and I could see the pinpoint of light far ahead of us, but we weren't moving. The light wasn't getting any closer.

"Move forward, darlings," Aunt Lu's voice urged. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Feel the cool and the warm breezes behind you, gently moving you forward toward the light. Let your magic carry you."

Aidan squeezed my hand and immediately the air in the room and in the tunnel began to circulate ... a north and a south wind blowing gently, creating hot and cold spots around us and behind us, lifting us up and floating us like a couple of feathers toward the light that was now getting larger and brighter.

"Approach the light, dear ones. See it growing brighter and getting closer and closer ... until you can see the portal at the end of the tunnel and the sunlight streaming toward you, beckoning you ... Now quiet the winds behind you ... allow your feet to touch the ground at the portal, then hand in hand, step through the portal into that world ... that time and place where you first met."

Another squeeze from Aidan's hand, and we stepped through the portal.

"Where are you, my dears?"

The scene before me was foreign-but it was also familiar. "Galilee," I said. "The hillside up from the road of sorrows at the site of the crucifixions. It's so horrible!"

"It's so hot!" Aidan said. "Jupiter and Juno, I'm sweatin' through my breastplate here! Hebrews call this the promised land?? It's hotter than Vulcan's workshop."

"Look around you," Aunt Lu said. "See what's happening. Take a moment to remember who you are. And now, wherever you are and whatever you're doing, turn and see each other for the very first time."

"Sweet Venus!" Aidan said with a lascivious smirk.

"Excuse me, sir?" I replied demurely.

"I want to get me some of that," he said.

I could feel the color rising in my face. "Forgive me, my lord, but if your words are directed toward me, please show some respect. Understand that I am a married woman, the devoted wife of the fisherman, Uzziah."

"Uzziah?"

"Uzzi for short."

"A fisherman, huh? And what is your name, wench?"

"I am Michal, my lord."

"Michal? What kind of name is that for such a sweet young thing?" he said. "And yet I find it strangely appealing."

"I should not be speaking with you this way, sir."

"Kind of flat-chested, but otherwise you are one fine looking Jew, Michal of Galilee. Do you know who I am?"

"You are a centurion under Herod's command, my lord. I can tell by your uniform."

"You like a guy in a uniform, do you?"

"Please, sir. I must insist that you not disrespect me this way."

"Which way would you prefer, little goddess? I am Gaius Varius, second in line for the Judean division of Caesar's army under Herod's command. Ever go out with a centurion?"

"Varius, sir?"

"Family name. Means 'versatile.'"

"Hm."

"So what are you doing here?"

"One of my cousins by marriage is up there," I said, nodding toward the hillside. "The cross on the left. I came to pay my respects."

"That has to hurt. What did he do?"

"He defiled his brother's wife, my lord."

"Ouch. He got the cross for that? Tough town."

"It's barbaric. Such cruelty among the children of God in the name of justice. It breaks my heart."

"Poor little thing. Can I give you a ride home?"

"Alright children," Aunt Lu's voice broke in. "I'm starting to get the picture. Go forward to your next meeting ... the next time the two of you are together in this time and space. Observe your surroundings. Where are you now? What's happening?"

The scene now was a small, dim and disheveled room. A soldier's quarters.

"Oh yeah, oh baby!" Aidan said, pulling my hand closer, pushing his fingers through mine.

"Oh sir, yes sir!" I breathed, my heart suddenly pounding in my chest.

"Oh Michal, baby spread those lovin' legs and bring your Roman daddy home!"

"Uh! Oh! Oh uh uh uh yes yes yes yes!!!" I cried. Sweat was beading on my upper lip and making both our palms slick.

"Oh my," Aunt Lu's voice again. "So much for not feeling the sensations." She dabbed a handkerchief to her forehead. "Let's just move along a little further, dears ..."

"Oh blessed Mars and Venus!" Aidan cried. Our previous selves seemed to like it just fine where they were.

"Moving along!" Aunt Lu said in a sterner tone of voice. "Go forward together ... to another day ... the last day ... the last time that you see each other. It's the moment of your final parting in this lifetime. Where are you my dears? What is transpiring between you now?"

My mood shifted immediately and dramatically. I felt tears welling up, and my hand was trembling, clinging tightly to Aidan's.

"Don't cry, my beauty," Aidan/Gaius said, catching a tear as it rolled off my cheek. "I'm a soldier of the Empire. I have to go where Caesar commands."

"I've betrayed my wedding vows. I have sinned in the eyes of God and engaged in forbidden bliss, committing unspeakable acts with you in my husband's bed. What's worse is I have given my heart to you, my lord, when it was pledged to another. I think perhaps you fail to see the significance of this. Will I ever see you again?"

"Sure you will, sweetness. And I'll bring you something real pretty. How about one of those silk scarves from the Orient? Or a bottle of that Egyptian perfume you like so much?"

"I require nothing else from you. You've already given me the greatest gift, my lord," I said, laying my hand gently on my belly.

"Say again?"

"Never mind, sir. Your duty calls. I will not have you distracted with thoughts of me as you go forth into battle. I will not be the cause of any harm to you."

"That's my funny faced, flat-chested gal with the sexy boy name," he said, patting my behind. "You behave while I'm gone. Stay away from horny Roman soldiers!" He winked. And with a peck on the lips, he was gone.

"That's your daddy, little one," I said, gently rubbing my stomach and letting the tears fall. "You're the child of a centurion. A brave, strong and handsome Roman centurion. My fear is that you may never know just how much your mommy loved that son of a ..."

We tarried in Palestine long enough to see that I never made it through the delivery, and that Gaius Varius never returned to learn of his heir. The fate of our love child remained unclear.

"You had my baby," Aidan said, when Aunt Lu brought us on the same North and South winds back to her living room and told us it was okay to let go of each other's hands.

"More precisely, I died having your baby," I said, as the winds slowly calmed in the room.

"That is so romantic!"

"I died having your baby," I said.

"But you loved me!"

"And you left me!" Clearly the prevailing impressions we had brought back with us differed considerably.

Aunt Lu gave us some chamomile tea and suggested that we wait a week or so before going back in time again.

"This is an intense journey, and it's only the first of many" she said. "Give yourselves a rest from it. Don't overanalyze it. Do something fun together to refocus on the present!"

"We could start working on the book," Aidan said, his energy crackling and his eyes flashing. "I know exactly where I want us to begin now."

I could've sworn I felt a contraction. "Or we could go to the beach," I said. "As was promised." He grinned and blew a warm kiss that tingled on my right cheek.

FIRE POWER

If there was one thing I was learning about Aidan it was that he was never at a loss for words or for an action plan. In general, he was simply a force to be reckoned with. For the most part I managed to stay low key about it, but in fact I was in awe of him. It wasn't just his good looks or his diamond bright mind or even the smoldering, sometimes volcanic sexuality, impressive as all of that was. What was so intimidating and compelling about him was his fire.

He took childlike delight in his magic, getting as big a kick as anyone out of the sparks he created. I never saw him manually turn on a light or a burner. He could move any object less than or equal to his own body weight with the warm wind of his thoughts and a mere glance from those flashing black eyes. More often than not he made magic a game, whether or not anyone else was playing.

I could walk into the kitchen and find him at the table simultaneously reading the paper and spinning plates—flying saucers hovering all around him. I would open the door to the shower and see the soap lathering him up on autopilot and a “Look, no hands!” grin on his face. He could give himself an apparently

satisfying massage with a compliant duckpin. Never mind what he could do with a dildo.

The fire wasn't limited to his magic. He burned through his days and nights, through nearly everything that he did, like he was on a deadline and there was a prize waiting, like he was always trying to set a new record. He'd graduated high school when he was barely seventeen. He finished his master's degree in English and cultural anthropology when he was twenty-three. By the time I met him, he'd published a couple of successful travel books and was producing a monthly column for *Traveler* magazine. He was a contributing editor for some anthropology journal and a freelance writer for several other recognizable magazines and newspapers.

Meanwhile, I had lumbered through school at an excruciatingly average pace, largely unnoticed, and shining only in the dark. The dark room, that is. It almost seemed as if I'd set out to learn as little as possible in the first nearly three decades of my life.

Even when he wasn't trying, Aidan taught me stuff. He got me wondering about things I'd never let myself wonder about before. He was so skilled and so aware of what he could do. For the most part (and as he'd immediately surmised), I didn't have a clue. But now that he was around, ready or not I had at least started looking for one.

He quickly made me aware of how much of my own energy I was expending to do magic—the reason for my consistent lightheadedness whenever I did anything more than a very minor freeze.

"It's a drop in your blood pressure," he explained. "With me it's the opposite—mine shoots up. I used to get killer headaches. But it's the same principle. You're using your own energy when instead you need to be making yourself into a conduit. Use the energy of the cosmos as your source and let that be the current you unleash through your magic."

He showed me how to take a few minutes before attempting anything major and first ground myself with Earth energy as well as open a channel to my cosmic source. He taught me to focus on

seeing and feeling myself as this clear conductor of pure energy flowing up through the soles of my feet and down through the crown of my head.

"Do it as you're starting to whistle," he said. "Make it your own ritual, let that sweet little tune of yours be a kind of meditation, a way of prepping yourself and opening your own channel."

I seemed to get it after only one or two practice attempts. When I pulled it off—whistling up a snow shower with noticeably less dizziness—Aidan was grinning his ten-mile-wide grin.

"What?"

"You really have no idea how attractive you are to me, do you?" he said. When I didn't answer, he continued, "Your being oblivious is part of the enigma. You can go from cute to stunning in a nanosecond and then disappear again—just like a moment that passes through the eye of your camera. And you know the coolest part?"

I shook my head.

"I'm one of the very few who can see it happening, at least right now."

Just by being around him, I started to feel a little better about myself, or at least to appreciate the idea of feeling better about myself. How could I not?



"Do you believe in karma?" I asked Dr. Nike. I figured with her being half Japanese, she was probably up to speed on the whole reincarnation issue.

"What is free will!" she blurted out like a Jeopardy contestant on uppers, learning forward so quickly that I thought she might tip over in her chair. "I believe in free will! We always have choices and it's what you do with your choices that really matters."

"Okayyy," I said. "But do you believe that we're destined to meet certain people in our lives and that we keep running into them over and over again until we somehow get it right with them?"

"We make our own destiny," she chirped. "We create our own reality. What you think becomes real, so you have to just think and do what will jazz and juice you up! Look in the mirror every day and say 'I have the power to manifest my dreams!'"

I was trying to determine whether she was suggesting that karma is real but need not limit us, or that it was just so much hooley.

"So, you don't think that Aidan and I could have some kind of unfinished business from a previous life that we need to figure out this time around?"

"Right question, wrong premise," she said, madly clicking her pen. "Are you going to sit and watch reruns or are you going to write, produce, and star in a new show? The past is past. Done." Then she said something in what sounded like German which I took to be the equivalent of "That's all, folks!"

"You like this guy, no?" she said.

"No. I mean, yes."

"What do you like about him?"

"Well, we have a lot in common ..."

"Such as?"

How can I put this into words, I wondered. "We have the same sort of background," I said. "We communicate really well ... sometimes without even speaking. We respect each other's ... strengths."

"Good sex?"

Clearly my sense of decorum belonged in a bygone era. "That, too."

"When's the last time you felt this way about someone?"

I thought a minute. "Including the waiter at the Duplex Diner and the cashier at Blockbuster? Never."

She sat back in her chair again. "You met somebody you like. He's got your attention. You have chemistry. You have questions. You have a shot at something. What do you want to just do about it?"

"Good question," I said.

"No kidding!"

"I don't remember if you ever really answered my question a while back," I ventured, "Do you believe in witches?"

She laughed. Guffawed, actually. "You are something else!" she said.

No kidding.

HUMPING THROUGH THE AGES

Subsequent regressions revealed a series of colorful and melodramatic past life encounters between Aidan and me. Our karmic history together was starting to read like a stack of formula romance novels. Same boy gets girl/boy, boy abandons girl/boy plot, but with different costumes and settings.

"Where are you now?" Aunt Lu would ask, after lulling us into another trance.

Our responses to that question included a monastery in what is now Galway in thirteenth century Ireland ... a Persian harem in eleventh century Shiraz during its peak as an economic and cultural center ... the royal palace in sixteenth century Stockholm ... I found myself the naïve young novitiate to Aidan's Irish monk, getting drilled in a lot more than the Scriptures ("Oh yes! Oh Father!"). I was the mistress to one of the King Gustavs of Sweden and mother of his illegitimate son—his only heir—until the Queen birthed a boy of her own and banished me and the bastard prince to a remote Scandinavian outpost where even the midnight sun didn't shine ("Oh yes! "Oh Your Majesty!"). I was the belly dancing harem girl to Aidan's Persian nobleman until he sold me for a turquoise mine and a couple of baby camels ("Oh yes! Oh Sheik!").

"Heavens to Hecate," Aunt Lu said after we'd racked up about a half dozen of these Harlequin incarnations. "Can you two be on the same planet together without humping each other witless?"

"Guess we're batting a thousand, eh, baby cakes?" Aidan said, squeezing my thigh under the table.

What I was noticing was that while we seemed to have no trouble burning up beds through the ages, we also seemed to be coming up with a big fat recurring zero when it came to happy endings.

"Is anybody else taking note of the fact that I'm not exactly coming out on top—no pun intended—in these previous lives? First I'm a Hebrew adulteress who's abandoned and left to die after birthing your Roman love child. After that I get my jiggling ass traded for a couple of camels ... then I'm some boy toy priestling who gets anointed by Father Posterior here. Then I get to raise yet another bastard spawn in Swedish Siberia? And another thing—why the hell am I always the woman? Doesn't anyone else see a pattern here?"

Silence prevailed around the table.

"One at a time, please," I said.

"They're valid questions, love." Aunt Lu offered. "But they're not for anyone but the two of you to determine. The meaning of this or any other life you live is yours to make and yours alone. Ultimately these are questions you will need to ask yourselves."

What I heard, essentially, was "Blah blah blah blah blah ... up to you." At least in my previously passive lives no one seemed to have a problem telling me what to do.

"Heyc we could always take turns being the top," Aidan said.



I was starting to think that there were excellent reasons why most people had no memory of their former incarnations. It was difficult enough to try to piece together the sketchy memories of the last thirty-odd years, much less pieces of the past two or three

thousand. I still wasn't sure what to do with this data. Aidan seemed to be on a quest to unearth our buried history, like an archeologist with obsessive-compulsive disorder, determined to keep digging until he was able to reconstruct an entire civilization. Why did it matter so much?

I didn't even know yet how to make heads or tails of the fact that I was a witch in this lifetime. I still had trouble even saying the word out loud (much less proudly), even though on some level I had known it was true for as long as I could remember. I wondered if maybe I wasn't supposed to remember who I was before, anymore than I was supposed to remember other things, such as my mother's face in the dreams where she regularly visited, haunting me with a song that I could never understand or recall, leaving me to wake up alone, missing someone I'd never known, and wondering what else I might be missing.

Admittedly, Aidan made the abnormal reality—the unreality—of it all more tangible and more palatable—even captivating. If he made it harder for me to continue my delusions about being delusional, he also introduced me to some of the undiscovered joy of a magical life, not to mention a magical romance.

True to his prototypical Sagittarian self, he loved to play. He was the kid who never left the candy store. From his example I started to learn, at least a little, how to suspend my own disbelief. He loaned me his ideas about a “spiritual” life being a playful life, about the unseen world being every bit if not more real than the seen world. He helped me learn to lighten up, and it was no small feat given that he had my formative years of Baptist dogma to contend with, not to mention my own compulsive need to try to make sense of a life that rarely made any sense to me at all.

It was hard to imagine anyone with a less informed, less formed concept of himself than I had before I met Aidan. All my ideas about magic were drawn either from sermons against it or sitcoms trivializing it. Trying to make comparisons or distinctions between what I saw Samantha do on the small screen and what I learned I was capable of doing in the locker room took more RAM

than my adolescent processor had been able to manage, and there hadn't been any New Age bookstores in St. Clair, North Carolina to stumble into for possible answers to my questions. Was I a demon, as my aunt often seemed to imply? Was I a comic book hero come to life?

Aidan expanded the options. He provided not only new data but a different perspective.

"I was taught that witches are of the devil, and that they'll have their place in Hell," I said to him once.

"Sounds like you've already had your place in Hell," he said. "Welcome to my heaven."

"But the stuff that I do is autonomic. Initially, anyway, it was more a reflex than an act of will. All I do is whistle. I don't mix potions. I don't cast spells."

"You could if you wanted to," he said and proceeded to show me how. He taught me how to follow the phases of the moon and the connection between symbol and intention: between the soothing scent of fresh lavender and a quiet mind, between the tingling of rosemary and clarity. The lessons were simple, but they opened a door. Aidan was an inspiring instructor, particularly when the class moved out of the herb garden.

A little mixing of science and magic made our bathroom into a meteorological laboratory. By simultaneously heating and cooling the air and water, we could create miniature thunderstorms in the shower, something that never failed to rev his engines. We discovered all sorts of creative and provocative uses of our powers. With just the right balance of relaxed concentration and imagination, I could fashion a hollow cube of ice on my tongue and envelope whatever part of him that he offered ... fingers. . toes ... nipples ...his ever-ready lightning rod ... wherever he wanted a jolt. He could put his mouth on me—anywhere—and instantly cause the blood to rush to my head—either one. Magic poppers he called it. His power to levitate proved pretty handy as well. Once we managed to do it with my butt hovering over him on the bed.

Sex with Aidan continued to be something out of this world, or at least, out of our bodies. Nearly every orgasm was the same explosion of sensation that we'd experienced the first time, propelling us onto some other plane, creating this visceral and sensory and spiritual climax that was beyond orgasm. Aidan said that it made sex on Ecstasy feel like a five-minute hand job by comparison

At least he had some points for comparison. I had no vocabulary sufficient for describing our experiences—or any reliable way to tell if what was happening between us was just too good to be true.

One thing I knew for sure was that I was becoming a fanatic about photographing him. Partly it was because the camera loved him. He could not take a bad picture. He was visually interesting and arresting, if not conventionally beautiful, from every angle and in any light. I continually snapped pictures of him—sometimes with, sometimes without his knowledge—in part because I continued to discover new perspectives on him ... new expressions ... new convergences of line and curve, light and shadow.

"These are his ankles," I said to Kermit at the store one day after bringing in my latest set. Kermit leafed quietly through the proofs.

"That's what they are alright," he said. "I don't believe I've ever seen anyone's ankles this close up, unless they were over my shoulders of course." He handed the proofs back to me. "You haven't shown these to anyone else, have you?"

"No."

"I think that's probably best. Not that they aren't compelling shots of a pair of ankles. But unless you're looking to carve a niche for yourself as a fetish photographer, I'd file these with the shots of all his other parts—after showing them all to me, of course."

I knew it was wacked. But I couldn't seem to get enough of Aidan on film. And the proliferation of poses was more than homage to his photogenic form. Maybe I thought that if I could capture the micro-revelations of his multiple parts, then I could also somehow capture the sum of them. Maybe if I took him apart

and then put him back together, zooming in, zooming out, I would come to see the causes of his effect on me. Maybe I thought I was helping myself see him more clearly.

Or maybe I was just a nutcase.

To his credit, Aidan was infinitely indulgent. He never complained or resisted when I asked him to hold a pose, never grimaced when the camera emerged again from its bag. He never seemed to see a picture I'd taken of him that he didn't like. Either he was supremely comfortable with himself, and with my photofilia, or he was as raging an egomaniac as I was a lunatic shutterbug. Either way, we just seemed to click—in this as in all the previous Kodak moments of our many lives.

FERRY MAGIC AND THE LOVERS SUITE

“I still can’t believe you’ve never been to P-town,” he said as we boarded the plane for Boston at Washington Reagan airport. We were embarking on my promised trip to the beach. The destination had been upgraded to Provincetown when Aidan learned that I had never been to the premier East Coast gay resort town.

“What kind of homo are you?”

“I’m not really sure,” I said.

“This will be a rite of passage for you, then.”

“I’ll settle for a nice vacation,” I said.

A very blond male flight attendant’s face lit up like Rockefeller Center at yuletide as we passed him on the way to our seats.

“Welcome aboard!” He grinned, fixing his hungry eyes on Aidan.

I had the aisle seat, and Aidan was next to me at the window. We were flying to Boston then taking the ferry to Provincetown, where Aidan had reserved a suite for us at the bed and breakfast owned by some friends he said he’d known for years.

"You'll love this place," he said. "Just off Commercial Street. Close to everything but still quiet and charming. Very cozy. Very romantic."

The plane was packed, and it seemed to take hours for everyone to get their bags in the overhead bins and their butts in their seats. The blond flight attendant stopped as he passed through the cabin and cooed to Aidan (I had apparently activated my invisible-to-flight-attendants force field), "My name is Chad. Let me know if there's anything I can do to make you more comfortable."

"You could start by bringing me a napkin to wipe off your drool," I said under my breath as he continued to the back of the cabin.

"Be nice," Aidan said.

The captain made the obligatory security announcement about all passengers being required to remain seated for thirty minutes after take-off from Reagan National. Then Chad positioned himself a row or two in front of us and proceeded to smile at Aidan throughout his aircraft safety demo.

"I'd say Chad is about sixty seconds away from having a popsicle between his legs," I said.

"You're just jealous because he's paying attention to me and not to you."

"You're not exactly discouraging him."

Aidan grinned and squeezed my leg. "I've never seen this side of you," he said. "It's pretty cute."

I told myself to stop being such a tightass. I was still a little nervous about the trip. We'd only been dating—albeit intensely—for a couple of months. Even though we had spent more nights together than apart, this would be the first time away from home, the first experience with total, twenty-four-hour-a-day togetherness for three days and nights. We may have had multiple previous lifetimes together, but what if he started to annoy the hell out of me in this one? Or vice versa? What if we ran out of things to say? What if I bored him silly?

"*You couldn't be boring if you tried.*" he telepathed.

I turned and saw him smiling at me indulgently.

"Get outta my head," I said, having forgotten again, that he could hear any of my thoughts directed toward him. He snickered and conspicuously took hold of my hand just as Chad passed by again, giving me (and Chad, I suspected), an instant erection.

"Okay, here's what I'm thinking for the book," he said, once we were at cruising altitude somewhere over Maryland.

"Book?" I feigned surprise. "You're thinking of writing a book?"

Up went the eyebrow. "You want to get slapped right here on the plane?"

"I'm sure it would give Chad a real charge."

"I told you that I wanted to let the idea simmer for a while. All great writers have a process."

"You've been simmering for months. Is it soup yet?"

"This is me ignoring you," he said. "I've been toying with this idea for another travel book. Something with a really romantic, exotic angle. When we started talking to Aunt Lu about our lives together, how we've known each other and been together in all these different times and places ... it hit me."

He scribbled something on the napkin next to his unopened bag of pretzels: "The Rest of Our Lives: A Romantic Voyage Through The Ages."

I looked at the napkin. Then I looked at Aidan.

"You want to write a reincarnation travelogue?"

"No more calls, we have a winner!" He slapped me on the shoulder. "I do the narrative, describing this epic romance that keeps repeating era after era, all around the world. And you, my talented picture-snapping paramour, you take the photographs!"

"Of what?" I said. "I wasn't packing my Minolta when we astral journeyed back to Palestine the other day."

"No, dumbass. The book will have pictures of each setting as it is today but that evoke the timeless qualities of those settings. You'll see and photograph each place now but with an eye for how it was, and you'll be able to find the shot that takes the reader back

in time with us." His eyes were flashing the way they always did when he was feeling passionately about something—which was pretty much all the time.

"Who besides witches with a lot of frequent flyer miles would buy such a book?" I asked.

"My publisher has already commissioned me to do a travel book with a strong spiritual spin, but they want some 'roads less travelled.' No ashrams or ruins or New Age tourist meccas. The romantic exotic, but less obvious locales are exactly what they've been pitching."

Despite my reservations and questions, I felt a surge of excitement. His? Mine? It was getting increasingly hard to tell the difference.

"You've thought a lot about all this, haven't you?" I said.

"I've been thinking about it nonstop."

"You could've told me."

"I'm telling you now," he said, glancing at Chad, who was once again moving toward us with his eyes fastened on my boyfriend.

"Excuse me for just a second," I said to Aidan. I closed my eyes, whistling under my breath and focusing my chilly intention on Chad. Within seconds, he stopped mid-stride, just as he reached our row. His face went pale, and his body visibly shuddered as he gasped and then hurried past us.

"What did you do to him?" Aidan said when Chad had made a beeline to the back of the plane.

"Not much," I shrugged. "I just gave him that bracing, fresh-from-a-dip-in-the-North-Atlantic feeling."

"You iced his undies," Aidan said.

"Assuming he's wearing any."



Despite gray skies and drizzle, the rest of the flight and the taxi to Boston Harbor were uneventful, but what was supposed to have been a pleasant ferry ride from the harbor to P-town turned into two and a half hours of terror on the high seas.

"Attention passengers!" The captain said after everyone was on the boat. "We have reports of rough water for this trip, so it's going to be a bumpy ride. That means that some of you are going to get sick. Please note: I did not say that some of you *might* get sick. I said that some of you are *going* to get sick. You have ten minutes to disembark. Stay aboard at your own risk!"

"There's a reassuring welcome if ever I heard one," I said as we parked ourselves in one of the booths in the dining area near the front of the boat. A very young, very preppy-looking fellow and his equally young and preppy-looking Asian-American companion—obviously boyfriends—were sitting in the next booth. They introduced themselves as Bryan and Ryan, respectively.

"Is he kidding??" Bryan said in our direction after the captain's warning.

"Don't worry," Aidan said smugly. "I've been on this boat a hundred times, and it's never really that bad."

"Cool," Ryan chirped as the boat pushed off from the dock. "I'm gonna get a beer."

By the time he returned and had downed about half of his Bud Light, it became clear to one and all that the captain had not, in fact, been joking. Not even twenty minutes out of the harbor, conditions at sea had gone downhill fast. Skies blackened. Rain pelted the windows. An initial bump or two quickly escalated into the wrath of Neptune.

"Holy Crap!" Bryan said as the ferry repeatedly bucked up out of the water like a mechanical bull and slammed back down, throwing us all around in our booths like a bunch of rag dolls.

"Try to keep your eyes fixed on the horizon!" Aidan yelled as we were knocked off our seats again and again. The problem with

the advice was that the horizon vanished each time the boat reared up over another swell then crashed back onto what felt more like concrete than water.

"Owwww!" I said, feeling the shock waves on my derriere. "Now I know how Dorothy must've felt when the house landed." The watery roller coaster ride continued mercilessly.

"Ugghhhh." Young Bryan held his head in his hands and groaned like a Russian widow. Young Ryan had already sunk down out of sight in their booth, and members of the crew were hastily bringing large plastic garbage bins around to anyone they saw with his or her head between their legs.

"What is this, *The Poseidon Adventure*?" I said, turning to look at Aidan. That's when I noticed that my ferry-wise boyfriend was turning an unbecoming shade of chartreuse.

"You're not getting sick!"

"I've never seen it like this before," he whined, looking like he could puke little green fireballs any second.

As I moved to put my arm around him, the boat lurched again, and I was thrown on top of him, landing face down in his lap. "This is ridiculous," I said, standing up and with a sharply commanding whistle, froze everyone in the passenger cabin except Aidan.

"What are you doing?" he moaned.

"Rescuing your ass. Hush so I can concentrate."

I held on to the edge of the table in our booth so as not to be pitched head first through the front cabin window. The doors at the rear of the boat were both open, which made it easier—and less conspicuous—for cold air to rush through. As I started whistling, softly this time, I remembered the technique Aidan had shown me for first grounding myself in Earth (or sea?) energy and then opening a channel to cosmic source energy.

I formed an image in my head of wet, northerly gales ... frosty air ... lots of moisture ... I focused like never before, and slowly Old Man Winter's cold clammy breath was blowing through the cabin. A light, brief snowstorm enveloped the boat—just long enough to cool the warm air and calm the waves of nausea rocking

the voyagers. Moments later when I snapped everyone back into motion, the temperature had dropped at least twenty degrees.

"Oh my God it's freezing in here!" someone said.

"What did we do, hit an iceberg?"

I settled back into the booth beside Aidan, across from our visibly shaken young shipmates.

"You okay, baby?" Bryan said, patting Ryan on the back as he slowly sat up in their booth with his teeth chattering.

The ride was still rocky, but the respite had effectively brought some relief to the retching masses as we lumbered along toward Provincetown.

"You're too much," Aidan said as his color slowly returned.

"You're welcome."



By the time we docked, surly skies and gale force winds had been replaced with turquoise, fluffy cotton and a feathery ocean breeze.

"Hey Glinda, we're in Oz!" Aidan said as he grabbed me and gave me a big open-mouthed kiss. Bryan and Ryan whistled appreciatively behind us for the public display of affection.

"I still can't believe Mr. Perpetual Motion got seasick," I said as we hauled our bags down the ramp and onto the pier.

"Bite me," he said.

I was immediately struck by the light and color and the mix of people and smells as we walked the long pier toward town. A chaos of weathered boatmen and buff circuit boys and drag queens and couples pushing strollers all crowded the funnel of Commercial Street, flowing like an amoeba around the occasional crawling car or bicycle. I could already feel the beginnings of sensory overload.

"This is nothing," Aidan said. "Wait until after midnight!"

We said goodbye to Bryan and Ryan, who headed off to their room at the Beacon House on Winthrop. After a good twenty minutes dodging bikes and strollers and hopscotching on and off

the street and sidewalk to the north end of town, we arrived at our hosts' door.

"The Tarot Inn?" I said.

Aidan just smiled.

"How was the ferry ride?" asked the well-built, forty-something man with a shaved head and two gold hoop earrings who greeted us at the door.

I snorted.

"Shuddup," Aidan said.

"Rough ride, eh?" The man said.

"We almost lost him." I nodded toward Aidan.

"Stuart, this is Smart Ass. Smart Ass, Stuart."

"Cute ass would've been my guess," Stuart said, winking at me.

"That too," Aidan said.

"Either way, I welcome your asses to our humble abode." He grabbed a couple of our bags and we followed him into a richly appointed but still cozy parlor. It had a familiar elegance and an eclectic look and feel. I realized that it reminded me somewhat of Aidan's apartment. Only at second glance did I begin to see the theme in the décor.

There was a lush painting over the fireplace that I gradually recognized as an image from the Tarot. I didn't know the symbols well enough to identify it specifically—I'd only seen Aidan's deck and the one Aunt Lu kept on her coffee table—but I knew the kneeling nude figure, androgynous in this painting, holding a cup in one hand, dipping into a pool of water with a golden star overhead.

"This is The Star parlor," Aidan said, noting my attention to the painting and then to the embroidered star throw pillows on the sofa and the star motif on the rug under the coffee table.

"It's beautiful."

"Every room has a theme from the Tarot," Aidan said. "Wait till you see."

"I'm afraid that we went a little overboard with it," Stuart said. "Angelo is always having to remind me that less is more—at least in terms of accessories."

"Angelo is Stuart's boyfriend," Aidan said. "Where is the Cuban bombshell?"

"He's with a client. He'll be back for dinner. So," Stuart said, draping a heavy, muscular arm over my shoulder, "I guess we don't have to worry about running out of ice while you're here, do we?"

I looked at Stuart blankly, then at Aidan, who was engaged in his usual grinning and winking.

"It's okay," Aidan said. "Stuart and Angelo are *family*."

I looked back at Stuart, still not getting it.

"Spell-casting, broom-straddling, Goddess-worshipping witches!" he said, slapping me on the back. "Although we aren't *savants* like you two. Some of us aren't quite so gifted, so we have to follow recipes."

"Aidan didn't tell me."

"You're among friends here, cute face," Stuart said, squeezing my shoulder. "Now I need to start acting like a host and show you to your room. You'll be in The Lovers suite as requested." He and Aidan exchanged meaningful glances.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Never mind," Aidan said.

"Don't try to be coy," Stuart said. "It doesn't suit you at all. Aidan always stays in The Magician room. This is the first time he's ever asked for The Lovers suite."

A sheepish smile rolled across Aidan's face.

"Okay, okay, let's go get settled in," he said.

The suite was dreamy, with a working fireplace in the sitting room, bay windows and several intriguing sculptures of male nudes intertwined in various poses. In the bedroom was a four-poster queen-sized canopy bed with another compelling painting from the Tarot on the wall over the headboard. The lovers in this depiction appeared to be male. It was difficult for me to take my

eyes off of it. There was an enormous antique bronze mirror directly across from the bed, which Aidan and I noted simultaneously. Wide French doors opened out onto a small, private deck with a spectacular view of the ocean.

"You must be paying through the nose for this," I said. "It's incredible."

"It is, isn't it? And not another word about the cost." He put his hands on my waist.

"I like to feel like I'm pulling my own weight."

"Fair enough. How about I charge you by the hour?" He pulled me on top of him onto the bed.

"Just because you've had your way with me in a half-dozen previous lifetimes doesn't mean I'm going to be your concubine forever," I said as I felt his warm hands under my shirt and my shorts unzipping themselves.

"Wanna bet?"

P-TOWN CHAPTER

After wrecking the meticulously-made bed in our room, we showered and dressed and went for a short walking tour of the North End. I was struck by what appeared to be such a comfortable coexistence of sturdy New England tradition and design with the colorful conveniences and diversions of a largely gay resort town. I took pictures of rainbow flags fluttering in the sea breeze and the well-groomed, fashionably chiseled non-natives in their tight shorts and muscle T's intermingling with young families, stern old timers, and Portuguese locals. An odd sense of history and endurance prevailed, as might be expected in such a remote community that had weathered centuries of punishing winters and that had so completely reinvented itself so many times.

"I've thought of buying a house here," Aidan said as we meandered, holding hands, along the narrow streets and alleys. He knew the town well, down to the minutest architectural details of the houses. He seemed to know something about everything. He would point my camera in the direction of an arresting archway or the just visible edges of a garden peeking out from behind a white picket fence.

"Why haven't you?" I asked.

"The winters. Nearly everything closes and there's a sense of isolation here. It gets lonely, even with friends around."

I snapped his picture as he spoke. His normally active, purposeful eyes were pensive. Almost wistful.

"If I bought a house, I'd want someone to be here with me."

I was considering my response to that when I smelled something in the air. Faint at first, but getting stronger. I asked Aidan what it was but he said he didn't smell anything.

"You can't smell that?" It was getting more potent by the second. "It smells like ... pot roast!" That was it. The unmistakable aroma of savory, slow cooking beef.

"Ahhh ..." Aidan smiled. "It's Stuart!"

"Come again?"

"Stuart. He's cooking pot roast for dinner."

"A pot roast that we can smell nine blocks away?"

"It's a sending spell," Aidan said.

"Oh, geez."

"He's letting us know that dinner's almost ready. My aunts used to do that when I was a kid and out playing in the neighborhood."

"Why doesn't he just shoot us a psychic telegram?"

"He's not like us," Aidan said. "He and Angelo are not hereditary witches. It's more a spiritual or philosophical, even political choice for them. You know—like some lesbians back in the late sixties and seventies."

"Ah."

"We should get back," he said. "Stuart's pot roast is not to be missed!"



It was quite a spread. Yankee pot roast with Stuart's secret seasoning, sliced paper-thin with new red potatoes, glazed carrots, butternut squash and fresh baked bread.

"Not exactly light summer fare, but obviously you two don't need to be watching your figures," Stuart said as he served generous portions on sturdy Wedgwood china.

"I don't mind watching their figures," said Angelo with a naughty grin as he reached over me to take his plate. Stuart's boyfriend was a noticeably younger Latino hunk with a butterscotch complexion, shoulder-length black hair and the whitest teeth I'd ever seen.

Aidan had filled me in that he was a massage therapist and erotic bodyworker who came from a family of Cuban Santeria practitioners, which of course, he had to explain. "Think of it as a quirky mixture of Catholicism and voodoo," he said. "Or imagine a cross between Ricky Martin and a witch doctor. He's also a sought-after interior designer and landscaper."

"No one else is joining the feast?" Aidan asked.

"Tonight is just family," Stuart said. "You can meet the other guests at breakfast."

"Or in the hot tub," Angelo said, winking at me.

"So this is your first visit to P-town?" Stuart asked. "What are your impressions so far?"

"It's a lot to take in. Quite a melting pot."

"Especially during high season," he said. "Less so after Labor Day, and you wouldn't recognize it in the winter. Although you might like it even more in some ways. We've been trying to talk Aidan into buying here, but he keeps holding off."

I was about to speak when I felt a warm hand slide insidiously over my left knee and onto my thigh. I immediately knew that it wasn't Aidan's. When I glanced at Angelo, he was (of course) winking at me. My reflexes took over, and suddenly our hosts were statues.

"What did you do that for?" Aidan said, noting Stuart's fork full of potatoes poised inches from his open mouth.

"Take a look under the table."

"Oh," Aidan said, when he saw Angelo's hand stuck to my thigh. "Frisky Ricardo's already feeling you up I see."

"You don't seem surprised."

"Nobody who knows him would be surprised."

"Not even his boyfriend?"

Aidan laughed. "Baby, you're lucky Stuart hasn't left paw prints all over your cute tush himself, if you get my drift."

"I think so," I said. "You've brought me to a sex club."

Aidan aimed a carrot at my forehead. "No, your High and Mightyness, but they do have an open relationship. It's what works for them."

"Is that what works for you?"

"Could we have this conversation when my friends aren't staring at us like gargoyles across the dinner table? They're good guys. And they're harmless. They'll flirt with you, but they'd never make a real move on you without your—or my—consent."

"Okay fine, so what do I do about this?" I said, nodding toward Angelo's hand on my leg.

"I'll take care of it," Aidan said. "Now could you kindly unglue them before Stuart's potatoes get cold?"

As Stuart's fork resumed its trajectory toward his mouth, I felt another squeeze from Angelo, then a mild but noticeably warm current popping from my leg to his hand.

"*Mierda!*" he yelped, jerking his hand away so abruptly he hit it on the edge of the table.

"Hands off the merchandise," Aidan said, grinning. "That's private property."

Stuart seemed to grasp the situation immediately and nearly spit lukewarm potatoes across the room from laughing so hard. Even Angelo seemed to get a huge kick out of the whole thing.

"My boyfriend isn't known for his restraint when he's sitting next to such a cutie," Stuart said. "I keep telling him that he's not doing much to shatter the stereotypes about lusty Latins."

Angelo grinned. "My people are proud of their passion!"

"If he starts to get on your nerves, just give him a good frosting."

"No harm done," I said.

"Easy for you to say," Angelo said, wiggling his still numb fingers.

"Aidan says you're a talented photographer," Stuart said, giving Angelo's freshly zapped fingers a kiss. "I'd love to see some of your work."

"We're doing a book together," Aidan announced. "His pictures, my words. A photo memoir of our past lives together."

"What a magical idea!" Stuart said. "Sounds extremely romantic."

"That's the intention," Aidan said, putting an arm over my shoulder. "Although I haven't quite sold him on the premise yet."

"I'm sure it's only a matter of time," Angelo said. "Aidan can be very persuasive."

"I don't know," Stuart said. "I have a feeling, Aidan, that you might have met your match in this comely—or should I say 'Colmly'—ice prince. So what kind of trouble will you two be getting into while you're here?"

"The light outside is amazing. I want to photograph everything," I said.

"I'll let you photograph everything," said Angelo, wiggling his eyebrows and nudging me with his elbows. "Hey!" he added, "You should take some photos of the Inn while you're here. We could use some quality shots of some of the improvements we've made around here—especially in the garden out back."

"I'm taking him to Race Point and out to the bogs. There are several galleries I want him to see," Aidan said. "We'll go over to the monument at some point. Maybe whale watching if we have time."

"You'll have to take him to the tea dance at least once," Stuart said.

"We should all go," Angelo said. "We haven't been dancing once all season."

"We may also host a small gathering while you're here," Stuart said. "You two would be a welcome addition to the group."

Something about the way he said “gathering” gave me the idea that Stuart wasn’t talking about a dinner party. I queried Aidan telepathically.

“A coven. P-town chapter,” he responded.

“Hm. We’ll see,” he said to Stuart, turning his attention to his pot roast.



“You were pretty noncommittal about Stuart’s invitation,” I said later as we were sitting on the deck outside our room, under a star-flecked, midnight blue sky. It reminded me of one of Aunt Lu’s lapis lazuli jewels.

“Eh. I’ve been to a few of them before,” he said. “I always end up feeling a bit on display.”

“How so?”

He reached for my feet and drew them up to rest on his lap. “They’re nice people, very devoted to their beliefs and practices, but they’re like Stuart and Angelo. Witches by choice or creed but not by birth—although Angelo’s family has supposedly been practicing Santeria in Cuba for centuries. Anyway, the coven members know about me, and they know that I’m not so devout or orthodox in my practice. I’ve tended to go my own way.”

“Imagine that.”

“Although ... you’d be fresh meat,” Aidan grinned. “All the attention would be focused on you.”

I had never been crazy about that metaphor in any context, much less with regard to a gathering of witches.

“It would also be quite revealing,” he added.

“How’s that?”

“The participants like to go sky clad.”

“Oh,” I said.

“You have no idea what that means do you?”

“Not a clue.”

"They get nekkid," he said. "Not that there's anything wrong with that. I have been known to take off my clothes for a variety of reasons and in a variety of situations."

"I can guess some of the reasons," I said. "Care to offer an estimate on the number of situations?"

He wiggled his eyebrows then shrugged.

"Is there anything you don't do to an extreme?"

His expression briefly changed. Too briefly to read.

"A few things. None of my relationships seem to last extremely long." He brought both my bare feet up to his lips and kissed the soles lightly. Tenderly.

"I guess there's still a lot about you that I don't know."

He sighed. "I'm no saint—to say the least. "And I'm not a prude. But I can be rather selfish."

"In what sense?"

He stood up, reached for my hand, and pulled me up so that I was facing him. "In the sense of wanting to keep your sky clad splendor all to myself." He put his arms around me and as a cool breeze blew off the ocean—with no help at all from me—I thought, *Good answer.*

THUNDERBOLT ON THE TOWER

The next morning the sun woke me early, a slice of warm, golden delicious light that slipped through our bedroom window. Aidan, usually up before God, was still sleeping. In that soft light, he seemed to literally glow. He looked more like an angel than a witch.

I took advantage of a rare opportunity to study him when he didn't know I was watching. He was facing me, with one bare arm warming my waist. The crumpled top sheet was draped provocatively over the compelling curve of his bare behind. If I hadn't known he was asleep I would've suspected that he'd arranged himself that way just for effect. But his wide mouth was slightly open, and I could hear the now faint, familiar half whistle/half snore that he made.

He was such a restless sleeper. He moved around constantly during the night and woke frequently. Usually it was me who awoke to find myself looking straight into his always-smiling eyes. But this morning, he was perfectly still. As peaceful looking as I had ever seen him.

I remembered Dr. Nike's advice to me the day before Aidan and I were leaving, to check in regularly with myself during our

time here together. "Just do a 'PMC' now and then," she'd said. A Peace of Mind Check. She'd told me to remember three questions: How am I feeling? What thoughts are behind that feeling? What choice can I make right now that will bring peace of mind?

I looked at Aidan's body beside me. His arm was lean and solid with surprisingly thick forearms and large hands. Our fingers were nearly the same length but I still felt small in his grasp. My eyes traced his fine lines ... his faintly freckled shoulder ... I could just barely feel the rise and fall of his firm belly at my side.

"What else would I need right now to have peace of mind?" I asked myself. As I leaned over to kiss him awake, I couldn't think of a single thing.



When he realized how late he'd slept he insisted we skip breakfast with the other Tarot Inn guests and see more of the town.

"We'll grab a couple of slices of breakfast pizza at Spiritus," he said. "Then we'll head over to the tower and then the beach for a while before the tea dance."

But even as we were ascending the cardio workout of a stone stairwell up to the top of Pilgrim Monument, the cloud masses were starting to assemble. They didn't look friendly.

"I don't suppose you could blow them back out to sea for a while," he said as we walked around to the top of the monument with a handful of other tourists casting nervous glances at the sky.

"Who am I, Zeus? What's wrong with your windmill?"

"Hmm. This could actually be very cool, watching the storm blow in from up here," he said.

"Cool as in deadly?"

"Cool as in watching the forces of nature flex their muscles and show us their power. Besides," he said, "thunderstorms get me hot."

Less adventurous tourists were already making their way down the stairs. I started to follow but Aidan pulled me back.

"Stay here with me," he said. "You can get some awesome pictures."

"We're going to get soaked and then fried. Streetlights will dim."

Lightning was already zigzagging out from cast iron cumulonimbus, and a wet wind was spitting in our faces. The drama in the sky and the gray mist starting to shroud the bay were too striking to resist. I pulled my shirt up over my head to protect the camera and started shooting, first just the weather rising and swirling and growling all around us. Then I caught sight of Aidan through the lens. His dark hair was blown back from his face, and his eyes were on fire, wild and determined as a cougar on the prowl.

I shot him from every angle, protecting my camera as best I could as the rain started to pelt and the thunder cracked around us, close enough to raise goose bumps and the hair on the back of my neck. When I refocused on Aidan he was staring right at me. He looked ... hungry.

"What?" I yelled, looking at him from around the camera, both of us now nearly soaked to the skin.

"Put it away," he said.

"What for?"

"I don't want you to drop it," he said, moving closer.

"I'm not going to drop it," I said, involuntarily taking a step back.

"You won't be able to hold onto it." Again moving closer to me, he reached for my camera, gently took it from my hand and slipped it safely into the padded inner pocket of my backpack, which he also slipped off my wet shoulder.

"There's no one else up here. You know what that means?"

"Death wishes are rarer than we suspected?" He was starting to spook me a little.

"It means we're alone and 250 feet above the nearest spectator." He took hold of the hem of his soaking wet t-shirt and peeled it up and over his head.

"You're not serious."

His response was a maniacal grin. He unbuttoned the khaki shorts clinging to his thighs, pushed them and his white Calvins to his feet and stepped out of them, naked and gleaming wet and wild-eyed, sporting his own powerfully erect thunderbolt.

There was no mistaking his intention.

"You're crazy," I said, as he reached for me.

"Crazed, maybe." He yanked my own drenched shirt over my head. "There's a difference."

"And what would the difference be?" I felt his hands again at my waist, unzipping my shorts and rolling them like twin condoms down my legs.

"You," he said, on his knees now. "The difference is you."

I don't know how to describe the rest of what happened up there. It was the first time I could remember feeling so nearly devoured by another person, the first time I had felt such extreme hunger and need coming at me, and from me ... to the point where I couldn't tell whose hunger or whose need was driving us ... pinning us to the stone wall at the top of that tower ... magnetizing and melting us together. I didn't know that anything could at once be so violent and so achingly tender.

For every push or shove there was a caress, for every pinch or bite, a sweet kiss. It was a wrestling match and a dance. There were a couple of moments when I could've sworn both our feet left the floor, and I couldn't tell which was the more powerful force—the lightning in the sky behind him or the lightning flashing in his eyes. I had no idea that another body could connect so completely and so perfectly to mine, or that it was possible for two people to arrive at the same awareness at the very same split second, like a single comet streaking across the sky, seen only by two pair of eyes, and to have those most seminal words form simultaneously and

appear unmistakably in two minds, transforming everything like the proverbial thunderbolt hitting the tower:

"I love you."



We finished just as the storm was starting to blow over and with just enough time to wring our soggy shirts and shorts and put them back on before anyone caught us.

"Hey, at least we don't need a shower," he said as we started down the stairs.

"I still might, after a 250-foot walk of shame."

By the time we wound down the steps of the monument and trudged in sloshy sandals back to the inn, the skies had partially cleared, and we'd at least dried off enough not to drip all over Stuart's antique rugs.

"Do we need to review the basic principle of coming in out of the rain?" Stuart said from the parlor as we tried to quietly let ourselves in and sneak up to our room.

"We got distracted," Aidan said, grinning like a milkman who just got lucky.

"Uh huh. Thunderstorms have a way of breaking my concentration, too. You two better get out of those wet clothes. I'll bring up some extra towels. By the way, tea dance is at four if you want to go with us. You have time for a nap."

The memory of the scene on top of the tower was still vivid in my mind, and we both seemed a little shy with each other as we undressed in our room.

"Pretty intense, huh?" Aidan said as he quickly hung up his damp clothes and slipped naked under the sheets. He seemed to be studying me.

I took my own wet shirt and shorts into the bathroom and draped them over the shower. When I walked naked back toward the bed he was still looking at me. There seemed to be a question in

his eyes, but he wasn't transmitting. He pulled back the sheet and patted the bed beside him.

As I snuggled in with him I remembered that moment on the tower and the flash of lightning that seemed to drive him into me so deeply, penetrating me physically and emotionally ... and the words that streaked across both our minds. I wondered what it meant. I had never heard or said or even thought those words with anyone else. I didn't even know that I felt them until that moment. It certainly hadn't occurred to me that he felt them. I wasn't even sure I believed in those words. Were they real? It had only been a thought. A telepathic transmission, not an utterance. A revelation, but not a declaration. I wondered, does it still count if the words "I love you" aren't said out loud?

Aidan moved beside me, shifted so that my head rested in the curve of his neck, close enough to feel his pulse. Bringing his arm around me he whispered in my ear, out loud, "It counts, baby."

BEWITCHED, BOTHERED, AND BEWILDERED

The knocking on our door jolted us both from a dead man's sleep.

"Tea dance starts in twenty minutes, *Mijas!*" Angelo yelled. "*Vamanos!*"

"Shit!" Aidan rocketed out of bed. "We conked out. Hurry up and get dressed!"

"Do I have to?" I was still feeling groggy and much preferring the idea of snuggling away the rest of the afternoon.

"The dance is a blast," Aidan said, blowing clothes around the room like dead leaves as he searched for a clean pair of underwear. "It's a P-town tradition. Hundreds of sweaty half-naked men dancing their asses off. It's not to be missed!"

Snuggle time was clearly over.

"So what do I wear to one of these things?"

"Wear what you'd normally wear to a tea dance or a circuit party." He was pulling on his tightest pair of jeans and a black tank top.

"Oh well that certainly simplifies the process. Let me just open up my clubwear carry-on."

He threw a pair of dirty underwear at me. Reluctantly I dragged my ass out of bed and rifled through my duffel bag until I found a pair of black jeans and the ice-blue muscle tee that Aidan had bought for me not long after we met.

"You can't possibly have too many things in that color," he'd said.

"Presentable?" I asked when I had dressed and smoothed over my bed head.

He looked me over. "Remind me not to let you out of my sight." Stuart and Angelo whistled and growled, respectively, as we came down the stairs. They were decked out in full Daddy/Boy regalia with Stuart in painted-on, faded levis and a leather vest and Angelo wearing only a pair of leather hot pants and boots with a studded leather collar.

"I say we have a four-way right on the dance floor," Angelo said as he eyed Aidan and me up one side and down the other.

Stuart smacked his boyfriend's behind. I had to admit it was a pretty smack-able behind.

"*Should I be scared?*" I telepathed to Aidan.

"*Not with me standing guard,*" he replied.



The Boatslip was already packed when we arrived. There was so much gleaming, half-naked, super-pumped and primed male flesh crammed into the place, one would think that the Cape had been crop-dusted with testosterone. Heads swiveled and the crowd parted as we followed Stuart, like Moses across the Red Sea, to the bar. He and Angelo seemed to know every master, slave, and spectator in the place, including the Viking bartender, whose face inflated like a balloon when he spied Aidan.

"Hey, stranger!" he said as Aidan bellied up to the bar.

"Hiya, Bjorn," Aidan leaned over to give the Norseman a peck on the lips.

"Bjorn?" I queried.

"*People in glass houses*, Colm," he replied, pointing out that I wasn't in the best position to scoff at uncommon first names.

Introductions were under way when we heard a youthful sounding "Hey guys!" over our shoulders. We all turned around and there was Bryan and Ryan from the ferry, in cutoffs and contrasting tank tops, both looking about fourteen and very tan. We hadn't run into them anywhere in town since we got off the roller coaster boat.

"Hi boys!" Aidan said. "You both look much better brown than green."

"Look who's talking," I said. "What've you two been up to since you got here?"

"Mostly hanging out at the beach," Bryan said. "And doing some sightseeing stuff. We thought we spotted you guys earlier when we were getting ready to go up to the monument, but then this wicked storm blew in and we had to run for cover. We never saw you around after that."

Aidan and I exchanged smiles and then he introduced the babes to Stuart and Angelo, who clearly did not discriminate on the basis of age when it came to flirting. Angelo already had an arm around Ryan and was saying something in Spanish to Bryan's perky pecs. No sooner had the boys been introduced than a trio of somewhat older fellows approached, one of them pinching Angelo's behind and another tweaking one of Stuart's exposed, enlarged nipples.

"Girls! You're here!" Stuart exclaimed. "We weren't sure you'd be able to come."

"Miss the Cosmos Cotillion?? Really, Endora!" one of them replied.

Judging by appearances, they were all roughly the same age as Stuart, and all three were wearing some variation of denim and leather. The tallest had a pentacle tattooed on his right bicep.

"Boys, allow me to introduce you," Stuart said, turning in Aidan's and my direction.

"Part of the P-town coven," Aidan telepathed.

"This one, you already know, of course." He put a hand on Aidan's shoulder, and all three held out their hands, which Aidan dutifully kissed.

"Now in keeping with our cheesy and politically-incorrect-for-pagans "Bewitched" allusions, Haggatha (Herb) , Enchantra (Eddie), and dear Aunt Clara (Carl) ... this ... is Samantha!"

"Dear God," I said to Aidan, as all eyes turned to me.

"Oh lighten up."

I took a breath. "Lovely to meet you." I threw in a quick curtsy.

"Oh my, he's spectacular!" Clara (a.k.a. Carl) sighed, putting a hand to his chest.

"Stunning!" Haggatha (Herb) proclaimed.

"A vision!" Enchantra (Eddie) added. "The two of them are like something out of a Greek myth."

"Norse myth to be exact," Herb said.

"How's that?" I looked at Aidan who just shrugged.

"Oh yes," Carl gushed. "The legend of fire and ice ... those two powerful forces of nature that come together, creating the explosion that brings about a new world ... a new consciousness. You must be aware of it!"

Aidan appeared to be scanning the place for the nearest exit, and I was my usual dumb mute self. I looked over and saw Bryan and Ryan, still in Angelo's clutches, watching the spectacle with uncomprehending stares on both their faces. The rest of the group followed my eyes and fixed on them as well.

"And who's this Uncle Arthur is playing with ... Tabitha and Adam?" Eddie cracked.

The boys just looked at each other.

"You two will be joining us at the gathering later tonight, won't you?" Herb asked Aidan.

"Please come," Carl said. "It would be such a delight to have you both there."

"I'm not sure," Aidan said, fidgeting a bit. "Tomorrow's our last full day here. I've planned a special evening for just the two of us."

"You have?" I said.

He shot me his "shut up" look.

"So romantic!" Carl said, his hand fluttering back to his chest again.

"Well, if you change your mind, dears, feel free to drop in. You're always welcome!" Herb said as everyone nodded.

"Anyone interested in shaking his groove thing?" Stuart grabbed Angelo's hand and pulled him toward the dance floor with Bryan and Ryan in tow. Aidan and I were starting to follow when a long sinewy arm reached around me out of nowhere and grabbed Aidan's hand, spinning him around almost a hundred and eighty degrees.

"Tasty Cakes!" A voice boomed behind me, and I turned to see the sinewy arm attached to a tall, swarthy man in a pirate shirt, open to the navel, with a dark buzz cut, dark beard, and dangerously dark eyes. He gripped Aidan's arm and pulled him in for a bear hug that lasted several seconds past appropriate.

"Damon!" Aidan said, trying to extricate himself from the pirate's clutches. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Besides carrying you off to my room and making you squeal like a girl?" he replied, tickling Aidan under his arms and actually eliciting a giggle. I had no idea that he was ticklish.

"*One can only hope that there's another reason,*" I telepathed to a disoriented Aidan.

"Oh, Colm!" he said, as if I were the one who'd just appeared. "This is Damon. Damon, Colm."

Not, "This is my boyfriend ... or this is my soulmate though the centuries ... or this is the little witch I'm currently shagging ..." Just, "This is Colm."

The pirate looked me over from teeth to toenails, sized me up, and dismissed me with a single glance.

"Pleasure," he said, turning his attention back to Aidan.

"I asked, what you're doing here," Aidan said.

"Back from Lisbon for a few weeks for business in Boston and New York," he said.

In less than five minutes he managed to finger Aidan's chin, his ears, his nipples, and his ass. All without a single rebuttal. I, on the other hand, seemed to have had a cloak of invisibility thrown over my shoulders again, and I was starting to feel the tiniest bit nauseated.

"I was hoping I would run into you here," Damon said. "And as sweet Lady Luck would have it—here you are!" At which point he picked up my boyfriend and threw him over his doublewide shoulder like a mail order bride.

"Mine again!" He bellowed, spinning a squawking Aidan around for all of the Boat slip to see, provoking cat calls and applause from an already rowdy and randy crowd. If I looked anywhere near as sick as I was starting to feel, it couldn't have been pretty. A slow burn was starting down deep in my gut, the acid quickly bubbling and starting to rise, just as the room started spinning.

"Oh hell!" I heard someone shout. Was it me? Was it Aidan? I couldn't tell. There was no time to figure it out. The acid was hurtling up from my stomach to my esophagus. I looked around in a panic, trying to find a sign or a door. I started walking, barely feeling my feet touch the floor, then hurrying toward the back of the bar, finally spotting the bathroom. I flung open the door and threw myself into the nearest stall, just as everything I'd been trying to take in came retching back out.



When I finished emptying the contents of my stomach, I picked myself up off the sticky bathroom floor, holding on to the edge of the toilet. What a grownup I am, I thought. Why didn't I just freeze the pirate's ass? Why didn't Aidan sing the shit out of his bushy eyebrows? Why didn't I just laugh it off and wait for him to stop giggling and explain to Damon who I was?

There were no answers written on the bathroom walls. I was feeling foolish and shaky, and I could hear the muffled thumping of the music outside that rushed in every time someone opened the bathroom door.

I decided that I needed a drink.

I splashed cold water on my face and rinsed out my mouth and headed for the bar. Aidan and the pirate were nowhere to be seen in the mob, and I didn't feel especially inclined to call out to him. He hadn't come looking for me, had he? Maybe the pirate carried the squealing witch off to his demon ship. I asked the Viking bartender for something sweet and strong. I swear to God he winked at me as he handed me the glass.

Standing alone at the bar, sucking on a couple of Old Fashioneds, my head finally started to clear. Two very attractive men walked past me and smiled. Friendly, admiring smiles. There was a song starting, something with actual lyrics. I'd heard it somewhere before but hadn't paid much attention, even though the voice singing it was a commanding one.

The words and the music, and the singer's steel-belted soprano voice ... all of it was starting to work for me. I felt an unprecedented pull from the dance floor as Bjorn the bartender handed me another glass.

"But I don't dance," I said to myself. Not well anyway. Aidan could dance. He turned into a Tasmanian Devil on the dance floor. I always looked like I was breaking in a new pair of shoes.

"You can dance," I heard another voice in my head say. "You just have to want to." I listened to the words:

I've been careful my whole life.
When I heard those words
I could almost see your shy, wide eyes
dawning with the revelation.

"You want to dance?" A voice right next to me interrupted the conversation that was taking place among my multiple personalities. It was coming from an adorable strawberry-blond boy with a cute, compact body.

"You look like you want to dance," he said, flashing a couple of killer dimples like twin lasers.

I could've said I wasn't there alone. I could've said that I was waiting for my boyfriend.

"Lead the way." I downed the rest of my drink as he grabbed my hand and carved a path for us through the gyrating masses.

We squeezed into a space on the floor barely big enough even for our respective tiny behinds.

*I could almost hear the man
who's waking up, rubbing sleep away
and seeing what he wants,
what's been missing.*

The strawberry-blond cutie started moving in front of me, at first just his legs, bending slightly at the knees and then swaying his slim hips and moving his arms ... and still flashing those dimples, looking me straight in the eye. My body started making the decisions. I closed my eyes and started listening, not just with my ears but with my cells ... feeling the floor throb beneath my feet ... feeling my dance partner's hands reach for my hips and start them moving ... start me moving. And whistling ...

*I remember how it felt to hold you,
how you clung to me with eager arms
and trembled with the questions
that you couldn't bring yourself to ask.*

I imagined a cool breeze starting to stir ... the North Wind beginning to blow through the place ... blowing away the pictures crowding my thoughts ... pictures from past lives ... pictures of Baptist frowns and small town bullies ... pictures of people I could never seem to please or figure out ... pictures of Aidan naked on a thunderstruck tower ... Aidan slung over a pirate's shoulder ... pictures of me with my head in a toilet.

In my mind's eye I started to see northern lights rising up from a dry ice fog and the cold wind blowing everything out of the way ... clearing everything but my body and the beat and the words to the song:

*I know that you've been wondering
for a long, long time,
learning to build houses
but never feeling quite at home,
wandering through a life that seemed
to take you further from the truth.*

How was I feeling? What was this feeling called? I couldn't think of a word. What's more I didn't care what it was called. I only knew that I didn't want it to end.

*There were questions that you couldn't ask
but your kiss was sure.
Your body knew without a doubt
and I could feel it, too ...
the beating of a stirring heart,
the stronger pulse and deeper breathing,
the look and feel and sound
of you rising ...
of you coming true.*

I was dancing like I'd never danced before. I didn't even know I knew how to dance like that ... with my eyes closed, losing

myself so completely in the music ... seeing those northern lights flashing as I whistled along with the music. I was dancing like my feet were in control of the rest of my body. I forgot everything and everyone except the music and the lights and the wind. It wasn't until I finally opened my eyes that I realized what I'd done.

The floor had cleared all around me, and everybody near me was watching as they danced knee deep in a thick cloud of dry ice, their faces and bare chests aglow in the glimmering aurora borealis that was swirling throughout the place. I'd unintentionally conjured up everything I'd been seeing in my mind.

My dimpled dance partner was still swaying nearby, his eyes and mouth opened wide. Everyone seemed to be watching and smiling ... and winking. I looked at the floor, hoping they'd all look away, too, hoping they'd forget what they'd seen. When I looked up again, I saw him.

Aidan.

He was standing near the bar, alone. What was that look in his eyes? I couldn't tell.

HEX ON THE BEACH

As I started walking off the dance floor, feeling slightly dizzy either from the magic and / or the Old Fashioneds, I thanked Jeremy (Dimples had volunteered his real name) and apologized for getting so carried away. I'd practically forgotten he was there.

"Dude, you were amazing!" He gave my arm a squeeze. "And you said you couldn't dance!"

I saw Aidan walking toward us.

"It was just a fluke, believe me. I never dance like that." I was still worrying about the lights and the fog conjured out of thin air, but no one seemed to be reacting or thinking anything of it.

"Never with me, anyway," Aidan said as he approached from behind Jeremy, overhearing our conversation. I still couldn't read the expression on his face, and he was transmitting nothing.

"Aidan, this is Jeremy. Jeremy, this is my boyfriend, Aidan."

"Oh." Jeremy looked slightly puzzled, then seemed to put the pieces together. "Nice to meet you." He extended his hand to Aidan and they shook. "He's really something else," he said to Aidan before giving my arm one last squeeze and excusing himself.

"No kidding," Aidan said, facing me.

I was feeling embarrassed, anxious, and even a little guilty. "I don't know what happened," I said. "The lights and the mist ... I was seeing it all in my head, but I had no idea it was materializing. I just sort of lost control."

"It was quite a show. But don't worry about it. Everyone just thought it was rigged or was too drunk or high to care. You didn't out yourself."

"I didn't see you," I said. "I didn't know where you were."

He took hold of my hand. "Let's get out of here."

Several guys whistled and nodded as Aidan led me off the floor, but before we could make it out the door, we were surrounded by Stuart and Angelo—who seemed to have attached Bryan and Ryan to each of his hips—and my three, newly adopted, leather 'aunties'.

"Looks like somebody's been holding out on us," Stuart said.

"On all of us," Aidan said, sounding slightly peevisish.

"*Mijo*, you were to die for out there," Angelo said as Bryan put his fingers to his lips and whistled.

"Just splendid, sweetie!" Herb exclaimed. "I only wish the rest of the circle had been here to see it!"

"I don't know what to say," I stammered. "I didn't mean to—"

"I know what to say!" Aidan cut in. "Back off witches! I'm taking the star of the show out for a walk on the beach."

He seemed perturbed to me, but no one else appeared to notice. I told myself I was just projecting. We said a rather quick good night to the group and headed outside. It had to have been after eleven. The clouds from earlier in the day had vanished. The sky was blue-black and blanketed with stars, and a full, silver dollar moon was shining. Aidan gripped my hand tightly. He was moving at quite a clip.

"Did you start a fire somewhere?"

"Huh?"

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Always," he said. "I thought you knew that by now."

We walked along silently for a few minutes. It was the warmest night we'd had since arriving.

"Are you angry with me?" I asked.

Aidan studied my face before answering. "Don't you think it would make more sense if I were the one asking you that question?"

I'd never had so much trouble reading him before.

"I don't know what I think right now."

"Is it okay with you to go for a walk on the beach? I should've asked first."

"Since when?" I spoke too quickly and regretted the sharp tone immediately. "It's fine," I said. "I'd like to go for a walk."

We were quiet the rest of the way. The closer we got to the beach, the more spectacular the sky became. Already the sound of the waves seemed to be calming us both. When we got to the dunes we took off our shoes and socks. I immediately noticed the texture of the sand. It was cool and coarse, grainier than the mid-Atlantic beaches I was accustomed to. It felt cleaner somehow, and it didn't stick to the soles of my feet the way sand on other beaches always did.

We walked, carrying our shoes, over the dunes to a spot fairly close to the shore where we could see the light from the low-hanging moon shimmering on the water. The sky and the ocean looked sewn together, seamless, like one gigantic, glittering black canvas.

"I'm sorry about Damon," Aidan said, breaking the long silence. "I never expected to see him here. It just took me off guard."

"Me too."

"We used to go out," he continued. "Off and on for a while. It got pretty intense." He stopped, and we stood staring out at the ocean.

"That's one word for him."

"Not just him. The relationship was ... volatile. Unhealthy. There was a kind of violence to it that I wasn't prepared for and didn't know how to process."

I felt a little bit of nausea creeping back into my gut. "Did he hurt you?"

Aidan looked up at me briefly. "Not the way you mean. It was my capacity for ... aggression ... that I wasn't prepared for. I sort of lost myself for a while. I didn't like who I started turning into, but it still took a lot to walk away. Not one of my better decisions."

"Walking away, or getting involved with him in the first place?"

No answer.

"Was it your decision to break up with him?" I asked.

"He moved to Portugal almost two years ago. There was no real opportunity for discussion—not that it would have made any difference. He just left. I decided not to follow."

"He seemed pretty happy to see you."

"Damon acts the same with me no matter what's been going on or how long it's been since we've seen each other. The dynamic between us never really changes—at least not the public one."

I was losing count of the number of questions he was raising—and we were skirting the issue. What I wanted to say was that I couldn't help noticing that Aidan hadn't exactly fought off the pirate's advances. He'd *giggled* when Damon had tickled him then slung him over his shoulder. I may as well have been a hat rack. But I didn't say any of that. I didn't say anything at all.

"When I finally got him off me, I was going to tell him who you were and that I was with you ... but you were gone."

"I had to go to the bathroom," I said.

"I looked around for you. I thought about calling out to you ... but I was a little embarrassed ... about Damon ... having him show up like that and being so thrown by his presence right in front of you ... and feeling like I'd fucked up."

He wasn't looking at me as he spoke. His head was down, his curly hair obscuring his eyes. And he was uncharacteristically still, almost as if he were afraid to move.

"Then I looked up and saw you out there, dancing like that ... with someone else. I didn't even recognize you at first."

"I still can't believe I did that," I said. "I was out of control. I don't even want to think about how it must have looked."

Aidan looked up at me, studying my face again in the moonlight. "You really don't get it, do you?" He was shaking his head. "I keep forgetting how authentically clueless you can be."

Not exactly the reassuring and loving words I was longing to hear. "Are you planning to fill me in on what it is I'm not getting this time or is this just a rehash of my general lack of self-awareness?"

Aidan took my face in his hands and stared straight into my eyes. "The magic you were doing out there wasn't the lights and the fog," he said. "That was incidental. Just special effects. I told you, most people were too dumb or too drugged to even notice, much less care."

"You," he said, squeezing my cheeks, "*You* were the magic out there. The way you looked. The way you moved. You cast a spell over everyone around you. I saw it. I felt it. Nobody could take his eyes off you. You were like another person out there."

As much as the words surprised me, I sort of knew he was right. I'd felt it too when I was out there, that I was someone else ... someone I didn't recognize or maybe someone I'd just forgotten. I couldn't explain it.

As Aidan continued touching my face and talking about how he'd felt as he watched me dancing with Jeremy, I started feeling peculiar ... unsettled, like I was somehow dissociating from the conversation, and from him. Almost as if I were observing it rather than participating in it. Aidan's voice seemed to grow remote, and as the sound of his voice receded I started hearing something—someone else. I heard another voice speaking to me, sometimes concurrently with Aidan, sometimes separately in the silence of his pauses.

I was definitely hearing two distinct voices, and then just as suddenly, I was seeing another man's face. It was the face of a very young man speaking along with Aidan. One minute it was Aidan's face and his voice, the next minute, it was this other person looking at me and talking to me.

"You have to understand," he was saying. "As much as I want to, I can't be with you. It's not possible for us ... not in this lifetime. Not in this world."

I heard only bits and pieces of what he was saying and saw only glimpses of his face and his dramatic, penetrating eyes that were looking at me with desperation and sorrow—and fear. I felt a wave of sadness wash over me as I tried to see this man's face more clearly. I felt like I was looking at a double exposure film. Aidan was saying something about wishing it had been him dancing with me earlier that night. The other face was saying goodbye, telling me that he couldn't see me again—ever.

I felt a tide of tears starting to swell and spill onto my cheeks. I heard myself say something in some language I didn't recognize, then everything faded to black. The next thing I knew my head was in Aidan's lap, and he was gently tapping my cheek and begging me to wake up. I opened my eyes and looked up to see an expression of sheer panic on his face.

"Sweet Jesus, what happened??" he said, hugging me close and kissing my cheeks and forehead and eyes and nose. "You scared the holy crap out of me," he said, still kissing on me.

"Easy, easy," I said. "Keep bouncing my head around like that and I might lose what little there is left in my stomach."

"Sorry." He gently pushed my hair off my forehead. "Are you able to sit up?"

The full moon was gleaming just over his shoulder, and I could hear the ocean in the distance. I'd forgotten where we were.

"I think so." I slowly lifted my head from his lap. He kept an arm around me as I managed to pull myself up beside him.

"What happened to you? I was talking. You got this weird look on your face and then you started to cry. Before I could even ask what was wrong you babbled something unintelligible in some foreign language, then you just folded."

I started massaging my temples, which were throbbing now, and I tried to remember what had happened before I passed out.

"You think maybe you're pregnant?" He started to rub my temples.

I swatted his hands away.

He snickered and hugged me again. "I'm sorry. I was really worried. What hit you?"

"I'm not sure. You were talking ... then I started hearing this other voice ... another guy's voice."

"What other guy?"

"I have no idea. But he was talking to me as you were talking. I could hear part of what each of you were saying ... but it was confusing ..."

"What was he saying?"

"I didn't get it all. Something about not being able to see me anymore. He was leaving ... or at least, saying goodbye. And I could see his face kind of switching out with yours ... I started to feel this wrenching sadness."

"What did he look like?" Aidan seemed to be getting more agitated by the minute.

"I don't remember exactly. Young. Dark eyes. Sad eyes. Dark hair that was rather long. He looked odd. Different. His face—and his clothing—looked like something from a very old photograph or painting. But there was also something familiar about him. I don't know who he was ... but I felt like I knew him."

A look of recognition flashed across Aidan's face. He grabbed my arms. "Oh man, this is incredible! Do you know what this means?"

"Don't throw back three Old Fashioneds after puking my guts out?"

He turned my shoulders so that I was facing him. "It means you're starting to spontaneously regress!"

"Why do I have the feeling you're not talking about a developmental lapse?"

He tightened his grip on my shoulders. "You must be starting to remember on your own. You're starting to have flashbacks of past

lives. I'm sure of it." He was looking at me like I'd just scratched off the winning number.

"And that's good news?"

"There must be something about this place ... maybe about us being here together, that triggered the memory."

"Are you saying that you think I was seeing you in a previous life talking to me in a previous life?"

Aidan squeezed the back of my neck and kissed me on the cheek. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"You did hear the part about him—you—whoever the hell he was, saying goodbye, right?"

"Yeah."

"So what I'm remembering, if your theory is correct, is yet another time in our epic history together when you apparently chose to walk out on me."

"Okay, that part's not so cool. But the point is that you're opening up, becoming more receptive. And we're getting firsthand information about who we've been before and what's happened between us. We're piecing together our past. And hey, apparently we can add the Cape to the list of locations we're including in the book. We could even use some of the pictures you've taken here. How 'bout that!"

I wasn't sure who was missing the point—him or me. Nor was I as thrilled as Aidan that I was seeing and hearing dead people—even if the ghosts turned out to be us. Inadvertently I had managed to get us pretty far off our initial topic. What about tonight, before the flashbacks? What about the conversation we'd been having about Damon? What about us, right here, right now?

"Wasn't there a discussion under way, before we were so rudely interrupted by a voice from the past, about you and me and old boyfriends and creating spectacles out on the dance floor?" I ventured.

"Forget about all that." He reached for my hand. "We're good. We've found a place where we've been together in another lifetime—all on our own. There's something magical about you

being here with me on this beach, under this moon. When we get home we'll follow up with Aunt Lu to see if we can find out more about who we were and what happened. But for now let's just enjoy it."

He let go of my hand and started stroking my thigh, heating up a surge of blood that clearly wasn't heading to my brain.

"Ever made love on a sand dune?" he whispered in my ear, then moved his mouth over my neck.

I wondered about a relationship where the past seemed as continually present as the present, where we could chase relentlessly after ghosts but sidestep the flesh and blood facts. Whose lives were we living?

"Not that I remember," I said, letting my questions wash away, one more time, in the ever swelling tide of him. As I felt his mouth—that deliciously warm vortex—engulfing me, I wondered if I would ever find the will to resist him in this or any other lifetime. But then, as always, I quickly stopped wondering or caring about anything but the sensation of his fire spreading from the root of him outward in every direction that my body could take. I twisted and turned with him. I tensed up and then relaxed into him as he moved over and into me. I lost all sense of any boundaries between us, any barriers I might try to erect or hold in place.

There was no part of me he didn't touch or taste or seem to devour. No part of him I didn't crave or reach for or receive. I noted, again, each flavor of him, each scent, each texture, as I felt his heartbeat throbbing somewhere deep inside me. I felt the shuddering, straining length of him filling me up, seemingly lifting me up off the soft, sandy shore and pinning me to mid air, pouring himself into me, hearing the crashing thunder of his breath like the ocean at my ear, feeling his sweat mingling with mine, tasting his salt—his saliva washing my mouth clean, his tears burning my eyes, his blaring trumpet of a voice ringing out through the velvety night, shouting for anyone and everyone living or dead to hear—that yes, dear sweet holy and profane father brother lover God, I was his.

When we were both spent, both heaving, our throats raw and bodies covered in clean sand and sweat, we curled into each other without a word between us and fell asleep under the stars.



I had mixed feelings about leaving the next day. Whatever else might have happened and however I might be feeling about it all, it had been the most romantic and magical weekend of my life. I'd come to feel oddly at home at the Tarot Inn and, admittedly, to feel some kind of mystical connection to the town, past and present. My life back in DC seemed pretty mundane by comparison. Or as mundane as it could be for a gay male witch in the process of reliving past lives with his gay witch boyfriend.

"Our first trip together," I thought to myself as I was packing. "At least in this lifetime. And we're still together. We're still a 'we' ... however outside the norm we were." I was going to miss P-town.

"*We'll be back,*" Aidan telepathed, coming out of the bathroom with his shaving kit. He gave me a quick hug before throwing the rest of his things in his bag.

Stuart and Angelo were waiting downstairs to say goodbye. Angelo gave me a wet kiss and a two-handed squeeze on the ass. "We want to see your cute face and hiney—preferably *bare* hiney—back here many times, *Mijo*." And I'd love for you to teach me how to conjure up a light show like the one you did at the tea dance!" He kept a hand on my rear until Aidan reached for his arm and pulled him in for a hug.

"Come with me to the kitchen." Stuart put an arm over my shoulder. "I have something for you. I'll bring him right back," he said to Aidan.

"I'll keep the other one distracted." Angelo smirked as I followed Stuart into the kitchen.

He opened a drawer in one of the cabinets, took out a small blue velvet bag, and handed it to me. Inside was something that

looked like a snow globe but was made out of quartz crystal with a carved pewter base. There was a miniature cloud of silver and gold flecks floating around inside.

"This is beautiful."

"It's a dream globe. I picked it up at this little shop in Salem ages ago. The witch who sold it to me said that it's supposed to show you what it is you really want."

"I wish I'd known about this before I dropped big wads of cash on life coaching," I said. "Why would you give it to me?"

"I always give first-time guests some kind of memento. Especially the ones I hope will return. I thought you might be able to use it at some point."

"Thank you," I said. "I love it. And I would definitely like to come back."

"You know, I saw that little scene with Aidan and Damon last night. Before you cut loose on the dance floor."

Him and every other queen in the house. I felt my embarrassment returning.

"I guess I shouldn't have let it get to me like it did," I said. "It's not like I caught them going at it in a back alley."

"Damon was something of a dark chapter in Aidan's life. It was a troubled relationship—one I'm pretty sure Aidan regrets."

"Sounds like you know at least as much about it as I do. Aidan didn't seem to want to talk about it at any length."

"We all have our vulnerabilities and blind spots. It's not so much a question about whether we get hurt ... it's more a question about when and how—and what we choose to do about it."

"Now you're sounding like my coach," I said. I fingered the smooth crystal orb in my hand. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Aidan and me ... do you think we're ... do you see us as a good match?"

He hesitated before responding. "Aidan looks happier than I've seen him look in a very long time. But the fact that you're asking the question sounds to me like you have some things to

figure out." He gently took the globe from my hand, placed it back in the velvet bag and then handed it to me.

"Don't use this until you're sure you are ready to know the answer." Then he wrapped both his brawny, tattooed arms around me for a long, warm hug.

THE DANCE IS OFF

The ferry ride back to Boston was as calm as the trip over had been wild. The ocean was tame as a pussycat under partly cloudy skies. Young Bryan and Ryan were on the boat with us again. They spotted us on the upper deck, and we exchanged phone numbers and promised to call when we were in New York or when they came to DC.

We were spared any further flight attendant flirtations on the shuttle back to Washington National. I dozed while Aidan scribbled notes to himself about our book on a legal pad. I started to ask at one point about the thoughts he was putting on paper but then changed my mind when I glanced over and saw the words: “past life on the Cape” underlined three times. I took the dream globe out of my backpack and watched the fairy dust swirling inside it whenever I moved it around. Aidan glanced up from his notes and held out his hand.

“Can I see?”

I placed the globe in his palm. “Stuart said it’s supposed to show me what I really want.”

“Have you tried it yet?”

“No.”

He moved his hand over the crystal and as he did, the silver and gold flecks started to form patterns in motion, like a glittering flock of miniscule birds flying in formation.

"I think that's cheating, but it looks pretty cool," I said.

"You should see me with an Etch-A-Sketch," he said, guiding the obediently shifting shapes with his magical finger.

"It was sweet of Stuart to give it to me."

"You made quite an impression," he said.

"I liked him a lot. And Angelo—once I got used to him. I can tell there's more to him than he presents. Thank you for taking me."

Aidan handed the globe back to me and kissed me on the cheek, oblivious to the glances from nearby passengers.

"He said I shouldn't use it until I'm sure I'm ready to see the answer."

"When do you think that will be?" Aidan said, as the view of the Potomac and the monuments appeared outside our window.

"Good question."



"These are incredible," Kermit said as he looked over some of the photos from the trip that I printed before going into work the next day. "I think these may be some of the best I've seen yet, and I've looked at nearly as many pictures of P-town as I have of Madonna and Princess Diana combined. You really captured something, especially the ones of Aidan, and the beach. These aren't pictures a first-time visitor would take. There's something knowledgeable about them ... nostalgic even."

"I did feel some kind of connection to the place."

"It shows. We need to put some of these up. I'll choose the ones I want and if you approve, we'll get them over to the frame shop."

I put the photos back in the manila envelope and laid them in Kermit's inbox.

"So," he said, "Are you going to tell me about the weekend or do I just have to look at the pretty pictures and make up my own stories as usual?"

"Hm. I'm not sure where to start."

"That would explain why you seldom do," he replied. "We've been over this a hundred times, sweetie. Start at the beginning, and don't leave out any of the dirty parts."

I dutifully described the trip in as much detail as I could without mentioning summoned Arctic winds and spontaneous northern lights or covens and past life regressions. I could tell the wheels were turning after Kermit heard about Aidan running into Damon at the tea dance.

"Chance encounters with old boyfriends can knock anyone off balance," he said.

"Literally, in this case."

"What if the situation had been reversed? What if it had been one of your old flames who showed up and tried to carry you off in front of Aidan?"

"That would necessitate my having an old flame."

"Sorry. Forgot who I was talking to. But for the sake of argument, let's pretend you actually had a life before Aidan that included an old lover who turned up at the worst possible time and who could still throw you over his shoulder like a caveman. What do you think Aidan would've done?"

It was hard to say. Aidan had never given the impression of being a particularly jealous guy. Not that I'd presented him with much in the way of opportunity. Secretly I liked to think that under the same circumstances he would've magically applied BenGay to the perpetrator's privates. There was something about the line of questioning that seemed to just skim the surface of my concerns.

"I don't know. He probably would have been amused by it or found some clever way to make his relationship to me apparent—anything but run retching to the nearest toilet."

Kermit squeezed the back of my neck and patted me on the back. "You certainly put your own spin on the notion of turning

green. But all's well that ends well, right? You kissed and had wild make-up sex on the beach at midnight under a full moon. How often does something like that happen?"

Depends on how many lifetimes you're counting, I thought.

"So now what? he asked. "Where do things stand with you two? A best-selling travel book and then a honeymoon book tour?"

I laughed in spite of myself. "You're always looking at the big happy picture, aren't you?"

"Damn right," he said. "And you're always sipping from the half-empty cup. Not too many of us get a smart, successful, handsome boyfriend and a fabulous career opportunity in one yummy package, my friend. Looks to me like you hit the jackpot. Question is, what're you going to do with the prize?"



Dr. Nike was poised with clicking pen, waiting to pounce on the same topic at our session that afternoon.

"Where's the gap?" she said, sitting across from me with her legs crossed and one munchkin-sized foot keeping time with her thumb on the pen. "By your own report you just had the most romantic weekend of your life, and yet there's some 'Oh-me-oh-my'ing' going on here. What's getting in the way of your joy? Where's the ouch?"

I couldn't help thinking that if this woman ever tired of coaching she could make a killing as a commercial copywriter.

"I didn't really think that I was 'Oh-me-oh-my'ing' exactly."

"The dance is off," she said. "The words are out of step with the feeling. You're saying positive things but you're not smiling. Your face and body are betraying you ... proving the contention to your lie ..."

I counted thirty-five clicks as she was talking.

"You think I'm lying about enjoying the weekend?"

"I just think I'm not getting the whole story."

Got me there, I thought.

"I wonder if perhaps you're feeling somehow caught between different worlds ... different lives. Perhaps there's just an uncomfortable tension right now between your old self—the you that you've been in the past—and the new you trying to emerge from its cocoon ... or between the safe but unsatisfying life you've lived in the past and the exciting but also frightening life that you're beginning to see as a possibility. What if this relationship is just forcing you to figure out who you really are and who you want to be?"

Fifty-nine clicks! I froze her just as she was about to hit sixty. The question was still glued on her face. I'd never stopped a session before. There must be some kind of karmic rule against this, I thought. But the questions, and the clicking, and the questions ... it was too much. I got up and started pacing around the room. How did she consistently manage to tap her tuning fork onto the truth, even when I was tube feeding her the facts? The woman was scary. Maybe she was actually a witch and was just yanking my chain—although her paralyzed face and form clearly begged to differ.

And as long as I was "Oh-me-oh-mying," why did everyone else: Aunt Lu ... Stuart ... Kermit ... even Aidan, always seem to know something I didn't know and seem to keep lobbing the same questions into my court. I wanted someone—anyone—to just tell me ... what? That I was in over my head? That I was out of my league with Aidan? That I wasn't ready for any of this?

I stopped in the middle of the room, Dr. Nike's inquisitive gaze still fixed on my empty chair.

I needed to snap out of it, but I wasn't sure how. "Just do it," I said out loud again, pacing in circles with my head down like a lunatic who'd lost a contact lens. "Easy for you to say!" I yelled into Dr. Nike's frozen face.

Then, somehow calmed by the histrionic outburst, I started back to my chair, stopped, went back over to her and gently slipped the pen from her fingers and dropped it on the other side of her desk before taking my seat.

"Those are good questions. I wish I knew the answers," I said, bringing her back to life.

"Yes, well ... we'll have to work on that," she said, closing her tiny hand around the air where her pen had been.

"That's odd," she said. "What happened to my pen?"

"Your pen?"

"My pen. It's gone." She uncrossed her legs and started looking around in her lap.

"Maybe you dropped it?"

"When? It was just in my hand seconds ago."

"I'm sure it's around here somewhere. Would you like me to help you look for it?" I asked, wondering when the Amtrak to hell would be pulling into the station for me.

"No, no." She frowned. "Never mind. Looks like we're out of time anyway. This hour really seemed to get away from me."

I got up to leave and handed her the usual check for my session.

"Try to remember," she said, picking up another pen from her desk, "sometimes the answers don't come until we're truly ready for them."

"So I've heard." The pen was clicking again even before I made it out the door.



When I got home there was an odd message from Aidan on my answering machine. He said that he had to go out of town for a quick, impromptu business trip for a story he was working on. He said that he would be back late on Friday and would probably be unable to call while he was gone.

"Aunt Lu's expecting us for dinner and another session when I get back," he said. "Bring the pictures from P-town. I'll miss you."

I wondered where he was going that he wouldn't be able to call. I didn't remember him mentioning any upcoming assignments out of town. It was the first night I'd spent alone in my apartment in

months, and I felt a little at loose ends. I found myself wondering what it was I used to do there every night before he came along.

Looking around, I realized how small and drab my place was in comparison to his. Anyone walking into Aidan's apartment would immediately have a sense of him as a traveler and adventurer, someone who'd explored and studied and read ... someone who'd been places and noticed things. Someone with a life. They would think that he was an accomplished, educated, cultured person with excellent if somewhat eclectic taste.

I surveyed the confines of my meager dwelling, sparsely furnished, littered with photos and magazines and photo equipment: "the home of an underachieving, IKEA surplus queen with a camera fetish," I thought. I decided to use the down time to tidy up the place. I gathered up and tossed out some of the older magazines stacked on the table and around the small sofa that barely fit in the nook in front of my lone window. I put the pictures from P-town in a labeled envelope and put the other loose photos in a folder to be filed or added to a scrapbook. Once again I chided myself for my lingering resistance to going strictly digital when obviously it was where photography was heading.

As I was looking under my bed for the bin where I kept unfiled proofs and prints I saw a cardboard box shoved way back toward the wall, smothered in dust bunnies. It was the box where I kept old pictures, clippings, cards, and souvenirs. Memories. I had to stretch out on the floor to retrieve it.

I blew off the top layer of dust. When was the last time I went through all this stuff? The contents were a mess. Loose papers, file folders, newspaper and magazine clippings, photographs ... There was a copy of my birth certificate and a few family photos, all of my aunt and uncle and cousin, and me. I saw no resemblance to any of them. Anyone looking at the photos would've wondered who the adopted kid was. My aunt wore the same tight-lipped smile in every picture.

There was a certificate on faded parchment paper—an award for memorizing and reciting all the books of the Bible. I wondered

if I could still name them: “Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel ... I and II Kings ...” Or was it I and II Chronicles, I and II Kings ... “Oh hell,” I said. “Like I’m ever going to need to get those right again.”

There was stuff from high school: a first-place ribbon for best photo in a school photography contest and a poem I’d written that was published in the school paper. I read it out loud and thought it was no wonder I’d taken up photography. I found several newspaper clippings with pictures of Chris Sizemore, the quarterback I’d frozen in the locker room so I could stare at him naked. Such a hottie. And he always seemed to notice me, unlike the other jocks who only made eye contact when they were looking for a target for the next wedgie. I wondered whatever happened to him.

I found my diplomas from high school and from the photojournalism program at Appalachian State. There were piles of discarded proofs from various class assignments. And a half empty bottle of lube. How did that get in here? Underneath it were several pages torn from a travel magazine.

The pictures looked familiar. They were mostly seascapes, beach scenes with expansive shots of sand dunes and sea grass and wide-angle views of a deserted shoreline. It took me a few minutes but I recognized them. They were pictures of P-town. When did I come across these, and why had I saved them? I couldn’t remember. Some of them were nearly identical to the photos I’d taken with Aidan during our stay. Like so much of what was in the box, they were mixed up, obviously filed away for remembrance; but like so much of my past, the connections eluded me. My memories were as disorderly as the memorabilia. My entire life was just a box of clutter, collecting dust under the bed.

I noted the important things that were missing. There were no pictures of my mother or father—Aunt Belle told me that they had all been lost in a fire that nearly destroyed the old house where Belle and my mother were raised. It was as if they’d never existed. There was also nothing in the box yet of Aidan and me. None of

the hundreds of pictures I'd taken of him or the ticket stubs from the movies or plays that we'd seen. None of the magic or romance he'd created in my life. I reached for my backpack and took out the dream globe that Stuart had given me and set it carefully on the floor in front of me, watching the glitter inside it shift and dance in a constant swirl, like my memories.

I was tired. Drowsy. As I lay back on the floor with the box still open beside me, I thought of Aidan again, wondering where he was and wishing I could hear his voice. I was thinking of calling him as I slowly sank into a deep, heavy sleep.



The vaguely familiar music was soft as a whisper at first, like someone playing in another room. As I listened closely, it grew clearer and stronger. I recognized the sound of the harp and the sweet, shimmering voice. The music always found me first, before she appeared. I opened a door that was suddenly in front of me, and she was there in her long, violet dress, strumming a golden harp. The room smelled of fresh cut lilacs.

There was something different this time. She hadn't seen me yet. Her eyes were focused elsewhere as she played and sang softly, and I realized that she was singing to someone else ... someone in the room who I couldn't see. I wanted her to look at me, to sing for me, to nod her head toward me as usual.

She didn't look my way. She continued playing and singing her song in a language I didn't understand—but the tune ... What was it about the tune? In the shadows of the room I could see a male figure. Someone was sitting there, listening to her. I moved quietly into the room and looked closely into the shadows to see his face.

It was Aidan.

He was sitting quietly, almost reverently, listening to her sing. They were both oblivious to me. My mother finished her song and motioned for him to come over to where she was sitting. I watched

him get up and move toward her outstretched hand, then kneel in front of her, like a young knight before a queen.

She reached down and gently touched his cheek, inviting him to look up at her. Smiling, she took something from beside her on the chair and handed it to him. It was a small antique wooden box. She spoke to him in the same language in which she'd been singing; he seemed to understand her. He stood up, kissed her hand, and then strolled right past me and out the door, with the box tucked under his arm.

I was left standing there, trying to decide whether to go after him, to ask him how he knew my mother and how was he able to understand what she said, and what was in the box she had just given him ... or to go to her, to sit at her feet and ask her to sing to me in words I could recognize. I wanted to stay with her, to ask her all the questions I had about why she'd left me, why she had to die ... why I was the way I was and why it was so unfathomable to me. I wanted to stay with her, but Aidan was leaving, carrying the box she'd given to him. If I was going to know what it was, I had to follow him ...



The phone was ringing. I woke up with the box of memorabilia still open beside me. I'd spent the night on the floor. My entire body was stiff as plywood and my neck felt like it had been locked into position as I reached for the cordless.

"Where were you?" Aidan said. "I called twice already and no one answered."

"Asleep. I guess I didn't hear the phone."

"Late night?"

"Restless night."

"You missed me, huh?"

"Actually, it sort of felt like you were right here with me."

"Good answer," he said. "I sure the hell missed you. I've gotten kind of used to that bare butt of yours backed up against me under the covers."

Would he ever lose his ability to make me blush? "Where are you?" I asked, rubbing my sore neck.

"On my way home. I'll be there in a few hours."

"Have you slept any?"

"I'll nap on the plane."

"So where were you and what were you doing that you couldn't call?"

"Some background research for a story I'm working on. I was pretty tied up the whole time."

"You're being a little mysterious."

"It's part of my charm," he said. "Hey, you haven't forgotten about dinner tonight with Aunt Lu, have you?"

I had forgotten. I also was already forgetting the dream, already having difficulty picturing my mother's face. I couldn't remember much of what had happened in it except that Aidan had been there, and that there was something I'd wanted to ask him. Also, something about the song ...

"Thanks for reminding me," I said.

"Maybe we could go out after. Maybe dancing? I keep remembering you on the dance floor at the Boatslip. I'd like to see some of those moves up close."

I wasn't at all sure that I was going to be in the mood to go dancing after catapulting through time again. I suspected I was more likely to feel like getting into a fetal position.

"Let's play it by ear," I said.

There was a silence on the other end. "Are you okay? You seem preoccupied."

"I'm fine. I just didn't sleep very well."

"Take a disco nap later," he said. "I'm probably going to try to get some more rest myself when I get in. I'll pick you up at 6:30."

When we hung up I realized how glad I was to hear his voice and at the same time, how anxious I was feeling. About what I

wasn't sure, but the butterflies in my stomach were begging for Xanax. Trying to get some more sleep seemed like a good idea.

SWEET HORNED GOD

Aunt Lu greeted us at the door that evening wearing an extreme new platinum blonde pageboy hairdo. Both our mouths dropped open.

"What the hell happened to you?" Aidan said.

"A past-life reading for an out-of-work hairdresser. She couldn't pay and wouldn't leave until I let her 'do something special' for me. It was supposed to just be highlights."

"You look very ... dramatic," I said.

"I look like a Peggy Lee impersonator. Roberto is coming tomorrow to do damage control. You two, on the other hand ... you look like Damon and Pythias ... or Apollo and Adonis! Look at you with those sun-kissed faces and that just-screwed-our-brains-out-all-weekend glow!"

"You should've been an epic poet, Auntie," Aidan said.

"I was, smart ass. I want to hear all about your trip but there's a bird in the oven that needs my attention. Pour yourselves a glass of wine and keep yourselves company for a few minutes until dinner's ready."

Without asking, Aidan poured a glass of Chardonnay and handed it to me. "So, Pythias," he said, "Am I ever going to get you to drink red wine?"

"We've been over that already."

"I know." He poured himself a glass of merlot. "You don't like room temperature beverages. You could always ice it. I wouldn't tell anyone."

He sat down beside me, putting his hand on my thigh. Instant warmth. "How're you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've seemed a little on edge since I picked you up."

"I'm fine."

He stroked the top of my thigh, trying to read my expression. "This still makes you uncomfortable, doesn't it?" Obviously he wasn't talking about his hand on my leg.

"What, the time travel?"

"All of it. The time travel. Witchcraft. The whole magic kingdom you're marrying into."

I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. I stared at his mouth as if there were some way to tell by looking, what words had just come out of it.

"What are you staring at?"

"I wasn't sure I heard you right."

"About what?"

"About my 'marrying' into this magic kingdom."

"You heard me."

"I didn't realize I had 'married into' anything."

"Maybe not technically. Not officially." He leaned close enough to press his forehead to mine. "Not yet."

"It's awfully quiet out there!" Aunt Lu called from the kitchen. "Are you two behaving?"

"We're fine. I'm just proposing to Colm!" Aidan said, clamping a hand over my mouth as I started to speak. "If you weren't on edge before, I bet you will be now," he smirked, removing his hand.

Aunt Lu appeared in the doorway wearing a queen-sized apron with "Kiss the Goddess" embroidered in huge letters and brandishing a butcher knife. She squinted at Aidan and me. "Don't mess with Auntie Lu when she's about to carve a bird."

"May I borrow that knife for a sec?" I said.

"Dinner's almost ready. Do I need to separate you two?"

"We couldn't bear to be separated, Auntie," Aidan said. "Not on the night of our betrothal."

She rolled her eyes and went back into the kitchen.

"Are you on drugs?" I said.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me onto his lap. "Is the idea that preposterous?"

"You can't possibly be expecting me to take you seriously."

"You take everything seriously, sweet face. Why make this the exception?" He was winking at me and smiling. He was always yanking my chain in one way or another, but something about this little scene was off his usual rhythm. It was just ... weird.

"Dinner is served!" Aunt Lu yelled.

I moved to get up, but Aidan pulled me back. "You know there's no getting away from me, don't you?" he murmured in my ear.

As I sat there on his lap, looking into those flashing black eyes, I knew that I was missing a cue. It was my chance to proclaim that I had no interest in trying to get away from him, that the idea would never even occur to me. That he was just as stuck with me as I was with him. He was sitting unusually still. I could feel him leaning in with his mind, trying to receive any message that I might be sending. We both seemed to be waiting for my reply.

"Are you planning to let me walk to the dinner table on my own or are we to be joined at the hip from this moment on?"

If he was disappointed with the response, he hid it masterfully. Without missing a beat, he raised us both off the sofa and with me hanging from his neck like a big papoose, he marched into the dining room, where Aunt Lu was standing at the table, once again rolling her eyes.



She'd prepared more of a banquet than a dinner. Shrimp cocktail, roasted chicken with rosemary new potatoes, asparagus, sliced garden tomatoes, corn on the cob, fresh-baked bread.

"Jeez Louise," Aidan said when he saw the spread.

"Hope you're hungry." She refreshed our wine glasses—Aidan's red, my white.

"This looks like Thanksgiving," I said, reaching for a slice of the warm bread.

"Aunt Lu doesn't do anything small scale."

"Runs in the family," she said. "Now tell me all about P-town, and don't worry about talking with your mouths full."

Aidan inhaled a couple of the new potatoes and started his account of the trip, deliberately flashing the contents of his wide-open mouth.

"Haven't you figured out a way to freeze him yet?" she said to me as she threw her napkin at him.

"Even if I had, I'd want to save it for a less revolting moment."

"As long as we're discussing 'him' in the third person," Aidan said, "It should be obvious by now that 'he' is impervious to insults as well as freezes."

"Please eat and continue," she said. "Just try not to spit in my direction."

Aidan took a smaller bite and resumed his detailed account of our weekend in P-town. He described the hurricane ferry ride out of Boston harbor and my intervention, making me sound like Jesus calming the Sea of Galilee. He conspicuously omitted the description of himself sitting with his head between his legs, but I let it pass.

When Aunt Lu heard Aidan's description of how I'd conjured up a nor'easter inside the boat to counter the effects of the rough seas, she asked, "Have you ever done anything like that before?"

I shrugged. "Nothing quite that dramatic. I've never been on a ferry coaster before."

"If he hadn't taken over, everybody on board would've been puking their guts out the entire trip," Aidan said.

"That's a powerful release of energy, dear. Was it stressful for you?" Aunt Lu asked.

"Surprisingly, not that much. I guess Aidan's lessons about becoming a conductor for cosmic energy instead of using my own for magic have been paying off."

She looked at me and nodded. As Aidan continued his account of the trip it became obvious that she knew about Stuart and Angelo and the Tarot Inn. She smiled approvingly when Aidan told her that we stayed in the Lovers suite.

"Such a magical place they've created there," she said. "I'll bet they went apeshit over the two of you."

"Samantha here got most of the attention," Aidan said. "She was quite the belle of the ball."

Aunt Lu looked at me again, quizzically, then recognition flashed across her face. She laughed out loud and slapped her hand down on the table so hard it knocked her wine glass over. I caught the splash just before it bled all over her electric blue muumuu.

"Damn, sweetie," she said as Aidan grabbed a large bowl from the kitchen to catch the spill when I released it. "You could sure the hell save me a fortune on dry cleaning!"

"Wait until you've seen him taking over a dance floor," Aidan said as he collected the wine spill and took it into the kitchen.

"If I know my nephew, I'm sure he wasn't exactly playing the wallflower."

"Well, I wasn't the one conjuring up cold fronts on ferries or an aurora borealis at the Boatslip," he snorted as he sat down again at the table.

Another questioning look from Aunt Lu.

"You should have seen him out there," Aidan said. "Talk about lighting up the room!"

"Details!" she said.

"I sort of ... lost control," I explained. "I got caught up in the music. I just kind of let my mind go off ... I was imagining a night sky, lit up ... I forgot where I was."

"Picture an Arctic meteor shower," Aidan said.

"Oh my. Do the two of you always create that sort of spectacle together when you take to the dance floor?"

Aidan and I exchanged glances.

"Actually that was strictly Frosty's show. Fire boy was watching from the sidelines for once."

"You were dancing alone?" she asked.

I looked again at Aidan. "*Help me out here, please,*" I telepathed.

He cleared his throat. "If you must know, my enchanting paramour was snatched up by a very cute mortal and lured on to the dance floor while I was fending off the unexpected and unwelcome advances of a previous suitor."

Aunt Lu's expression slowly shifted from a confused frown to a contemptuous scowl. "Not that demon again," she snarled.

"You never quite nailed the pronunciation, Auntie. His name is Damon."

"I know how to pronounce it," she snapped. "I've cursed it enough! I should've figured that sonuvabitch would show up. He always had the damndest knack for materializing wherever you happened to be."

"We're getting just a bit off topic, and I can practically hear your arteries constricting," Aidan said. "The point is, I was temporarily distracted and it was during that time that my boyfriend made his debut as Dancing Queen of the Witches."

"You met him, then," she said to me.

"Briefly. Our interaction was rather limited. He was pretty focused on Aidan."

I'd never seen such a rapid and distinct progression of disapproval and disgust play across someone's face. She actually glared at Aidan and started to say something but then seemed to think better of it. "Okay," she continued, after an uncomfortable

few moments of silence, "So there was one hugely unfortunate black plague of a damper on the otherwise magical festivities. But the weekend didn't end there ..."

"I took a lot of pictures," I said.

"Oh! Did you bring them? I've been hoping to see your work."

I retrieved the envelope full of prints I'd brought. They were details of P-town, seascapes, and the occasional tourist of interest. There were shots of Stuart in his kitchen and Angelo with his hand on Aidan's ass. It was only one of many shots of Aidan. As she looked carefully at the photos I was actually a little embarrassed by my obvious photo infatuation with him.

"As you can see, I don't get a minute's peace," he said.

Aunt Lu was quiet as she continued looking at the pictures.

"I like to get him when he's not looking or when he doesn't even know I'm there."

More silence.

"He has so many distinctive angles ..."

She finally put down the prints and shook her head. "And I thought I already knew all that was magical about you," she said to me.

I wasn't sure what she meant.

"You didn't tell me about this," she said to Aidan.

"Believe it or not, sometimes I let him speak for himself."

Aunt Lu took my hand. "I've known this one (nodding toward Aidan) since his first red-faced screams. I've watched every single day, week, month, year, and decade of his life register on his face for almost thirty years. But if I hadn't known it was him, I'm not sure I would have recognized him in some of these pictures," she said, picking up a couple of the photos again.

"That's just because I never really looked that good a day in my life," Aidan said.

She shook her head. "That's not it. You don't show this face," she said, handing him a rare, pensive pose. "You let people think they've seen all there is to see of you, but this one (nodding toward

me), he truly sees you. Or at least his camera does." She neatly stacked the photos and gave them back to me. "If I were you" (to Aidan), "I'd watch out whenever he starts to realize it."

Aidan shot me one of his looks that was too transient to read.

"Okay, tea in the living room," she said, starting to clear the dishes. "Then I want to hear about what happened on the beach."

When we were comfortably re-situated, sipping tea from Aunt Lu's delicate porcelain, Aidan started to tell her about what happened when we were together on the beach that last night in P-town. He'd barely finished a couple of sentences when she held up one of her glittering, multi-ringed hands.

"No love. I would prefer to hear this from your charming Charmed One."

"It's okay, I said. "Aidan's a much better storyteller."

"That is most definitely one of his gifts. But what I want to hear about didn't happen to Aidan. It happened to you."

Thus instructed, I took a breath and described the beach that night ... the quiet sky and the calm ocean that we were sharing as we discussed what had happened at the Boatslip ... the appearance of Damon ... my reaction ... the spectacle on the dance floor ... I told her how in the middle of the conversation I had started to see—and hear—double. One minute, Aidan's face and voice, and the next minute, the face and voice of a young man I didn't know, but who was familiar to me.

"You could hear what he was saying?" she asked.

"Some of it."

"What was it you heard?"

"He was upset. Anguished. He was saying that we couldn't be together anymore, no matter how much he wanted us to be, that it wasn't possible. He seemed to be saying goodbye."

"How did you respond?"

"By scaring the holy crap out of me," Aidan interrupted.

Both of Aunt Lu's eyebrows shot up. "What happened, dear?"

"All I remember is feeling like I was going to cry. Overwhelming sorrow. The next thing I knew, I was waking up with my head in Aidan's lap."

"He let out this sob, babbled something in another language, then crumpled like a piece of paper," Aidan said. "I thought he'd had a stroke or something."

"Sweet Goddess!" she said. "What do you make of it?"

"Time to up the Thorazine dosage?"

Aunt Lu smiled.

"I think it's obvious what happened," Aidan said. "He had some sort of spontaneous flashback. A past life memory. Something about the beach there, or our being there together, triggered his memory. Don't you think?"

"Possibly," she said, twisting one of the half dozen rings on her fingers. "Has anything like that ever happened before?" I shook my head.

"That's why I think we need to do the regression," Aidan said. "If this memory is so powerful that it occurred spontaneously when we were together there, it *must* be important."

"There's no denying that something's been going on with you, Colm," she said. "Your magic seems to be intensifying, or it's possible you are just becoming more comfortable with it. And the work we've been doing has also heightened your sensitivity. Once the door to the past has been opened, it can take some time to learn to control what comes through it."

"So, how does one go about locking it again?"

She smiled softly. "Awareness can be a bitch, love. I'm afraid it's an irreversible process. You can choose to ignore it, but you can't choose not to have it."

"You're talking about this like it's an incurable disease or a birth defect," Aidan said, with an impatient edge to his voice. "Why can't we see it for the amazing opportunity that it is?"

In fact I understood very well that it was a rare chance to learn about and possibly benefit from the past. What I didn't understand was why it seemed to matter so much more to him than anything

going on in the present. I was conscious of Aunt Lu watching us both and listening. She seemed to choose her words with particular care when she said, "This is Colm's decision. It would be best not to proceed unless he feels comfortable with it."

Aidan's eyes brightened. "What if I promise to make it worth your while later?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

"Precious Pan's pipes," Aunt Lu said. "Does that ploy actually work for you?"

He shrugged. "Enough to make it worth a shot."

Once again I was smack dab in the middle of my least favorite task: making a decision. Sometimes I wondered if maybe it wasn't so awful being a fundamentalist believer who could pretty much look up the approved choice in a book. So far, every friggin' oracle or psychic I'd come across left the field of possibilities way too open to my own conclusions. I hated that.

Aunt Lu was sitting as quietly as a butterfly on a rose bush.

Aidan was searching my face for signs of acquiescence. "*Please?*" he telepathed.

"On one condition. I need to know that I can end it anytime I want, without upsetting anyone," I said, with my eyes fixed on Aidan.

"That goes without saying, dear. It's always your choice—either of you—to say when to stop."

"Condition noted and accepted," Aidan said.

LIGHTNING STICK AND HARDLY CHRISTIAN

We followed our standard ritual. Aunt Lu lit a white candle in the center of the table. A gentle, sandalwood incense was floating in the background. The routine had become so second nature we didn't wait for her instructions before taking each other's hands. Soft breezes from the North and South immediately began to stir inside the room as we steadied our breathing, causing the candle to flicker and throw shadows on the ceiling and walls.

"I'm not certain that you even need me for this anymore," she said, "but let us begin the journey back. Remember not to let go of each other's hands until you're back in the here and now." She raised her hands and spoke the invocation:

*Earth and Air and Fire and Ice
Magick winds with wise advice
Return this love to where it's been
And make the past alive again ...*

Immediately Aidan and I were floating with the winds behind us toward the soft, approaching light. The journey seemed to take no time at all. Aunt Lu's voice gently urged us on, all the way back to our earlier meeting in Massachusetts, circa 1700...

The beach was remarkably unchanged. It was the same clean sweep of beige sand with the same brilliant green waves of grass and glittering sapphire sea. But I wasn't looking at the ocean or the beach. I was intently focused on the intricate sand village currently under construction when two small, bare feet stepped into my line of vision.

"Can I help?" A voice said over my shoulder. When I looked up toward the intrusion I could barely see his face for the glare from the sun.

"Can I help?" he asked again.

"I work alone."

He stepped around so that I could see his disappointed frown and fair skin and the clothes that marked him as a child of the visitors from across the ocean who had recently arrived in the land of my fathers. "I won't mess it up. I promise. Please?"

It occurred to me that some of the construction I was planning would be easier with an assistant.

"Okay. But you have to do exactly what I tell you to do."

With that he crouched beside me and followed my instructions in obedient silence through to completion of my grand design.

"This is a work of art," he pronounced with a satisfied smile when we finished the project by filling our man-made riverbed with seawater. "You're quite talented."

"Look we made it just in time," I said. "The tide's coming in."

"Oh no!" He stood up and moved in front of the village as if to stand guard. "Not yet, we just finished!"

"Don't be silly," I said. "It's all part of the process. It's nature's way."

"What if I don't like nature's way?"

"You don't have much say in the matter, do you?"

He eyed me suspiciously. "You're awfully calm for someone whose handiwork is about to be washed into oblivion."

Such articulate tykes we were. The tide was edging closer and closer to the village.

"What would be the point of prolonging the inevitable?"

"Having more time to enjoy it, of course."

I shrugged. "Well if it means that much to you." I stood up and faced the fast approaching tide.

"What are you doing?"

"Postponing the inevitable and prolonging your enjoyment."

I raised my arms to the North and South as I'd been taught. Then closing my eyes I spoke the words:

*Goddess of the boundless deep
Mighty winds that blow
Give us moments more to keep
Let time and tide move soft and slow.*

"Saint Peter, Paul, and Mary!" he said. "What manner of sorcery is this?"

Aunt Lu's voice broke into our vision. "What? What is it, children, what's happening?"

"The waves, they're barely moving now. You've slowed down the ocean! Like Moses commanding the Red Sea!"

"Well, not exactly," I said.

"Heavens to Hecate," Aunt Lu said to me. "You're a witch in this lifetime, dear one."

"My family are the keepers of the wisdom of the old ones in our tribe," I clarified.

"Who are you my child?"

"I am Howqwierami. In your language, it means 'Lightning Stick.' You may call me 'Stick' for short."

"What kind of name is 'Stick?'" Aidan said.

"A Nauset name passed down to me by my grandmother after my grandfather died."

"And your name, my son?" Aunt Lu asked Aidan.

"I am Winthrop Hardly Christian, III, son of the Reverend Winthrop Hardly Christian, II," Aidan said. "But everyone calls me 'Winnie.'"

"Winnie?" I snorted. "Sounds like something you would name a bear cub."

"So, my young Lightning Stick and Winnie Hardly Christian, how old are you?"

"Ten," we said in unison.

"And has the spellbound ocean finally claimed your lovely castle?"

"There she goes," Aidan/Winnie said woefully.

"All right then," Aunt Lu said. "And here we go as well ... forward in time ... continuing on this journey together, to what comes next. To where the two of you come together for whatever destiny your souls have chosen ... forward into time and space ..."

More wind. Switch to a dimly lit hayloft, and then, "Ouch! That hurts! It's poking me!"

"Shhh, they'll hear us!"

"Who, the cows? There's no one else around."

"Cows hear more than you might think."

"Just shut up and show me that lightning stick, you Nauset devil."

"Mmmmmmmmm ..."

"Ohhhhhhhh!"

Mine and Aidan's fingers were intertwined, our palms were sweating and our thighs were pressed tightly together under the table.

"Yeaahhhh Baby!!!"

"Sweet Persephone's pomegranate!" Aunt Lu interrupted again. "You two have got to be the horniest soul mates to traipse through the last two millennia!"

"Uhhhhhhh!"

"Now that's what I call a magic stick!"

"Rub it harder and watch it catch fire!"

"Enough!!" Aunt Lu said. "I believe that Act Two's theme has been clearly identified. Let's come down from the hayloft." She spoke another incantation:

*With passing time and gentlest force
Illuminate this friendship's course!*

Cold wind this time. Freezing cold.

Aidan started to shiver. I felt goose bumps rising on his hands.

"You're just confusing me," he said.

"You're trembling. Let me start a fire."

"No, someone might see us. I can't be seen with you."

"Then why have you been coming to me almost every day for these last ten years? Why do we find every possible way to be together and do together things that no one has ever shown us—things we learned with each other? Why is there not a single hour of any day that you are not in my thoughts or that I am not wanting you beside me? Why are you with me here—now?"

"Stop it. I've explained it to you dozens of times. Why can't you face the facts? If we don't stop this, our souls will be damned to Hell forever."

Aunt Lu inquired, "How old are you now? What is the nature of this trouble between you?"

"I am seventeen," Winthrop Hardly Christian, III, replied, "a child of the one and only sovereign Jehovah God and a disciple of our Lord Jesus. All I've ever wanted was to serve God just like my father."

"Are you sure that's all you've ever wanted?" I said.

"This is impossible," Aidan/Winnie said. "You're a heathen sorcerer. If my father and the church elders knew that I loved—kept company with—a savage, a heathen—and worse—they would put me in chains and throw me on the first ship back to England. And

only God knows what they would do to you!" He was speaking every truth, except his own.

"You love me."

"Stop it!"

"And I've loved you since that day on the beach when I slowed the tide for you. We love in spite of every reason not to. And no matter what your father or the elders of your tribe may say, love is not born of evil, and such love could never be damned."

Tears were rolling down Aidan's cheek. "You don't understand," he said. "This has to end—for both our sakes." I felt his confusion and despair. All we could do was cling to each other.

"All right, children," Aunt Lu said. The conflict in this lifetime is becoming clearer. We must go forward once again ..."

*Let blow the Northern and Southern wind
reveal this fated friendship's end.*

This time as the winds stirred and moved us forward I could feel something pulling at our clasped hands, as if trying to pry us apart. I felt Aidan tighten his grip.

"Come together again my dears, to the time and place of your final meeting, to the end of your association in this lifetime. See together what has been ... so must it be."

We were there again, on the beach where we'd met as children all those years before, and where we'd been again only a week or so ago in our current lifetime. There was an immediate, sweet familiarity. We knew this place so well. And there was the same sadness, waves of it already starting to wash over us like the chilly seawater rushing toward our feet.

Aidan/Winnie's face was dark with emotion. He wouldn't look me in the eye.

"This isn't good news," I said.

"Breathe, darlings," Aunt Lu said. "What's gone before cannot hurt you in the here and now. Just observe."

Aidan's expression was remote but purposeful. "I have to go," he announced. "My father is sending me to London to continue my studies and to begin preparing for the ministry. I'm expected to return with a wife."

I already knew that everything I would say from this point on was meaningless. I could feel the inevitable ending as cold as the Atlantic, but it didn't silence me.

"He can't force you to do this."

Still he refused to look at me.

"You can fight him. I can help you."

We were both standing now in the frigid water, both of us feeling the sand sliding away beneath our feet. We were both sinking.

"Look at me!" My voice rolled and popped like a clap of thunder.

Aidan raised his eyes. They were wide and opaque with grief. "My father is not forcing me."

I felt the sharp edge of his words sink in. I could've sworn he had drawn blood. In that instant I saw every face Aidan had worn through the ages and I re-lived every time he had said goodbye and walked away. I saw in those dark, anguished eyes every parting and every struggle leading up to it, every clash of desires and will, every hope and disappointment, every eager rush into each other's arms and every act of abandonment. In my heart, I felt each wound I had suffered privately for him or that we had suffered together—including the torturous, fiery fate that I saw awaiting me in the not too distant future of that lifetime, after he had been sent an ocean away. For any and all of my alleged sins—for my sorcery and my supposed seduction of him, I would be punished.

Suddenly I had the sensation of spinning through time, like I was on some kind of runaway carousel. I saw all our faces from each lifetime and all the places we'd been together whirling past me, every detail re-appearing then blurring out of sight ... the magic ... the mystery ... the history ... the inevitable, recurring heartbreak.

I saw that magic had been a part of us before, as well as skyrocketing passion. They were all things we'd had before. He'd had me before, and it hadn't been enough. With all those choices ... all those epic opportunities ... I hadn't been enough. It was all too much.

"Stop this!" I let go of Aidan's hand, and we catapulted back into the present, into Aunt Lu's candlelit living room, like two punctured, hot air balloons crashing onto cement.

"What the hell was that? What's the matter with you?" Aidan bellowed, out of breath, like he'd been running through time to try to catch up with me.

"I want to stop!" I was close to hyperventilating myself.

"Well, you could've just said so without pulling the plug. I feel like I'm still waiting for some of my parts to catch up with me!"

Aunt Lu reached over to take my hand and with a worried look, asked, "Are you all right? Can I get you some water?"

All I wanted was to get out of there. Immediately. I was breathing hard and my head hurt. "Thank you, no." I asked Aidan if we could leave.

"Don't you think we should at least talk about what happened?" he said.

"I'd rather not right now."

"But ..."

"Aidan," Aunt Lu interrupted. "We can discuss all this later. He should get some rest."

Aidan shook his head, impatient with us both. "I'm obviously outvoted here. We can talk more in the morning. Let's go upstairs, and I will put you to bed."

"No," I said. "I think I need to go home. To my place."

He frowned and started to speak, then seemed to change his mind. His expression was blank. "To your place it is then."

Aunt Lu walked over and gave me a long, tight hug and said, "I know the revelations of the past can seem overwhelming, love. But remember, your past is not your destiny. Give yourself some

time and don't lose sight of what's here now—and your power to decide.”

I briefly let myself feel the comfort in her arms, then pulled away. “I’m ready to go,” I said.



The ten-minute ride back to my apartment seemed to take an hour. Aidan was clearly uncomfortable with my silence and tried to fill the space between us with chatter, telling me that I would feel better in the morning. He was earnestly reassuring me, promising that everything would be okay and that if I wanted, we could give the whole past lives business a rest. I was barely listening.

Finally, he just laid his ever-warm hand on mine and remained quiet. I forced myself not to pull away. When we stopped in front of my building I could see a question in his eyes. His hand was still on mine.

“I think I’d like to be by myself tonight,” I said.

He nodded, but still held on to my hand. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I think so.”

He picked up my hand and turned it over in his, studying it like he’d never seen it before. “I worry sometimes, you know.” He traced the lines in my palm with his finger.

I was starting to feel the pressure behind my eyes, the throbbing of an intensifying headache. And worse, there were tears on the way. I needed him to leave.

I pulled away after a quick hug and a peck on the lips and I hurried from his car.

“I love you,” His thought hung in the air behind me like a low cloud just rolling in. I glanced up at the sky before stepping into my building. It looked like rain.

THE WITCH, THE COWARD, AND THE FOOL

With the help of a couple of sleeping pills I found at the bottom of a box under my bathroom sink, I slipped into a coma for eleven hours straight. When I was finally forced out of bed to deal with a near-bursting bladder, I noticed that the empty side of my bed was completely unmussed.

In the bathroom I splashed cold water on my face, and when I looked in the mirror, I was relieved to see only my own familiar, if somewhat haggard, face staring back. No Galilean Jewess. No harem girl. No shaman boy on his way to being roasted like Joan of Arc.

I had showered and shaved and made a pot of coffee before I noticed the light flashing on my answering machine. I'd slept through four messages from Aidan.

"Just calling to check in. I hope you're getting some rest. I'll try back later," said the first message.

Number two: "By the way, it just occurred to me that I didn't get to take you dancing last night, not that we were really up for it.

But I still want a chance to see some of those moves of yours—with me. Maybe tonight? I'll talk to you later."

Number three: "Is this thing on? You can't possibly still be sleeping. Don't make me come tickle you."

Number four: "Call me or die."

I dialed his number.

"I was just about to head over and burn down your door," he said.

"I'm glad I could spare us both the trouble."

"You've been asleep all this time?"

"I took drugs. Never even heard the phone. Sorry if I worried you."

A brief silence, then he said, "I missed you last night."

I'd missed him, too, but I pulled back on the words before they were spoken, or otherwise transmitted. "I was just really wiped out, and I was getting a headache. It was better for me to be here."

"From my perspective, it is never better for you to be there. Did you get the message about going dancing? Want to shake your groove thing for me tonight? We could do a late dinner when I get back from my interview in Baltimore."

A thought was forming. One I wasn't ready to acknowledge. Or maybe it was a feeling. It seemed to be coming more from my gut. Either way, I pushed it back. Not yet.

"I don't know. I still have a bit of a headache. Let's talk about it later and see how I feel."

"You're still wiggled out, aren't you?"

"Maybe. A little. I'm not sure."

"Not sure of what?"

He was pushing, like always. I felt the words taking form ... starting to move forward in my mind. I forced them back into the shadows again, out of range.

"Let's talk later, okay?"

He sighed heavily. "You know where to find me."

Instantly the thought that had been forming morphed into a full-grown decision, clear and unmistakable. I hung up the phone with a nauseating realization.

"I'm going to leave," I said out loud to my empty apartment with a surprisingly steady voice. I noticed that my nerves seemed peculiarly calm. Then just as quickly, the acid in my suddenly cramping stomach started hurtling toward my esophagus. I stumbled into the bathroom and lost all there had been of my short-lived composure.

When I was able to hold up my head again and had rinsed out my mouth, I realized that I needed a plan. I had no idea how to go about this. Obviously I would have to numb myself and keep my stomach empty for the foreseeable future but beyond that, I didn't have a clue. I thought of calling Dr. Nike but I feared she might try to talk me out of it. My resolve was only as steady as my stomach. A few clicks of her pen, and I could easily find myself in a fetal position on her floor, begging her to call Aidan to come and get me.

But shouldn't I discuss this with someone? Get some feedback? I thought of Kermit. I could already hear the conversation we would have.

"I'm breaking up with Aidan."

"Are you on drugs or do you just need to be?"

"It's just not going to work."

"He's the best thing that ever happened to you."

"I know."

"He's crazy about you."

"I know."

"You couldn't get this to make any sense if your entire Twilight Zone of a life depended on it."

"I know."

Dammit. Why didn't I have more friends? How could I possibly explain this to anyone? Aidan was the only person in my life who even knew who I was, the only person I'd ever met who came

close to 'getting' me. Aidan had known me for centuries. I couldn't explain this to myself. Talking about it to anyone was useless.

"Just do it," I said to myself, noting the absence of conviction in my voice.

I tried to imagine myself having the conversation with Aidan that I knew he deserved. I tried to imagine myself calmly explaining to him why we should not be together anymore. I imagined listing the reasons on a piece of paper and then watching him set fire to it with a single, dismissive glance. I tried to say out loud the words that I wanted him to hear, hoping that they would sound confident and true.

Ultimately, my cowardly second nature prevailed. I got out a piece of paper and on it I wrote:

"I wish I could believe that I can make this work. But all I can feel is the fear that I have never been enough for you and never will. I can't stand the thought of you leaving again, and our history makes that look inevitable. I guess even a witch can be a coward and a fool. I just know I can't go down this road again. In this lifetime as in so many others, you — we — deserve better. Maybe next time. I'm so sorry. I do love you."

I threw some clothes and my camera—and on an impulse, the dream globe Stuart had given me—in a bag. Remembering Aidan's interview in Baltimore that afternoon, I drove to his house and slipped the folded piece of paper under his front door. When I stood up and turned around to leave, I was suddenly nose-to-nose with Aunt Lu. We both squealed.

"Give an old lady a coronary why don't you?" she said as she put her plump hand over her heart.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think anyone was around."

"Obviously," she said. "Why do I have the feeling that wasn't a love letter you just slipped under my nephew's door?"

I tried like hell to conjure up a convincing lie. Then I tried like hell to come up with any lie. Finally I just shook my head and looked down at my feet.

"Are you sure about what you're doing, love?"

"I'm sure I don't have any idea what I'm doing," I said. "This is all more than I know how to handle."

"And you think you can handle it better by going away?"

"If history's any indication, I'll be by myself soon enough if I stay."

"As I said before, the past is not your destiny, dear one. Not for either of you."

"Have you also told Aidan that? Have you seen or heard anything from him that wasn't focused on who we used to be? He's obsessed."

She studied me quietly for a moment.

"Come downstairs with me before you leave. Just for a moment."

I hesitated.

"Please. It won't take five minutes. And I won't try to stop you from leaving."

I followed her down and around the building to her apartment. Inside, she went straight to her bedroom and immediately returned, carrying a carved wooden box. It looked familiar.

"I want you to take this with you. Aidan asked me to keep it for him. He was waiting for the right time to give it to you."

"What is it?"

"Just take it," she said. "I think you'll understand when you open it."

I started to say that I needed another mystery like I needed a pentagram tattooed on my snow-white ass, but I just took the box and tucked it under my arm.

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know that either," I said. "I just need some time to myself."

"Is there anything at all that I can do to help?"

I shook my head, and she reached out and pulled me in for a hug.

"Take care of him," I said as I turned to leave.

She nodded. "Take care of you."

RUNNING AWAY: PART II

I put the box in my duffel bag in the back of my car and started driving, feeling dazed and direction-less.

"You're an idiot," I said to the pale, expressionless face looking back from the rear view mirror.

"You're an idiot," Kermit affirmed when I called him on my cell phone to explain why I needed some time off from the bookstore. "Where are you?"

"Somewhere on Rock Creek Parkway."

"Get off the parkway and get your ass to my house," he ordered.

"You'll just try to change my mind."

"Only after I've slapped you silly."

"You've never worked a help line before, have you?"

"This is crazy," he said. "What do you think you're going to gain by taking off like this?"

I didn't have an answer.

"You do realize that he's the best thing that's ever happened to you and probably the best thing that ever will."

The ubiquitous tears were forming behind my eyes and in the back of my throat. "I'm starting to lose my signal," I lied. "I need to go."

"Dammit, Colm." I heard the exasperation in his voice soften slightly. "Call me later, please. Let me know you're okay."

I promised I would and snapped the phone shut. I'd completely stopped paying attention to where I was going. When I refocused on my surroundings I saw that I was in a stream of traffic flowing off Rock Creek Parkway toward the Memorial Bridge into Virginia. Apparently I was headed south. I picked up my phone again and punched in the number for Dr. Nike's office to cancel my appointment for the next afternoon.

"This is Dr. Nike, counseling and coaching you to just do the life of your dreams!" she answered.

Crap. She never answered her own office phone. Where the hell was her receptionist?

"Uh ... hi... Dr. Nike... it's Colm McKenna." I stuttered, trying to make up a quick, credible excuse for the cancellation. "I wasn't expecting you to answer your phone."

"Ah. My favorite coachee! What can I just do for you today?"

"I need to cancel my appointment for tomorrow. Something's come up, and I'm going away for a while."

There was a brief silence on her end. I could've sworn I heard her pen clicking.

"Going away for a while? It sounds like you aren't sure when you'll be back."

"Not really."

"What's happened? You don't sound like yourself."

"I'm on my cell phone," I said.

"Nice try. Tell me what's going on. What's got you on the run?"

Couldn't a guy go away for a few days without alerting the men in white coats? "It's nothing," I said. "I just need to be by myself for a while. To think."

"We've been down that road before. Remember the Overthink Underpass?"

"Yes, I know. It just leaves me stuck in the middle lane of the Beat Myself Up Beltway."

"It's not too late to make a U-ie. Take the nearest exit back to the Feeling Freeway!"

I seriously contemplated rolling down my window and pitching my phone into the Potomac. "Thanks but I feel that I really need to just cruise for a while on the Take Me Home Country Road."

"Huh?"

"Forget it. The battery on my phone is going dead," I fibbed again. "I will call to re-schedule when I get back in town."

Her pen was clicking so fast and furiously it sounded like she was leading a tap dancing class in her office. "Get back on the Feeling Freeway!" I heard as I snapped the phone shut again.

I'd managed to blow off my boyfriend, his kindly psychic aunt, my boss and best friend, and my mental health practitioner all in just over an hour. I was on a roll, feeling perversely proud of the action I'd taken. Okay, so maybe they were all stupid actions, but still. Mr. Sit-on-His-Ass-and-Watch-the-World-Go-By had just gotten in his car and taken off. Little Miss Time Stopper was on the move.

I felt strangely ... what was the word? Free. I was a witch on the fly. Okay, so maybe I was riding an '89 Toyota instead of a Nimbus, but I was still weaving in and out of three lanes of Muggles like a wizard on a mission. I could go anywhere. Do anything I wanted. I could disappear ... change my name ... assume a new identity ... and only a handful of people would even notice, much less care,

My euphoria was short-lived as I sank into the full realization that I could disappear ... change my name, ... drop off the face of the Earth ... and only a handful of people would even notice, much less care. So, freedom sucks, too. Who knew?

By this time I was south of the Beltway, somewhere on I-95 between Springfield and Dale City. It had started to rain, and traffic was even more of a bitch than usual. I'd been in the car at

least an hour and a half and gone maybe twenty miles. I started wondering again about Aidan and the note I'd left. I let myself imagine, briefly, his finding the paper under his door ... his always sunny expression darkening as he read it ... I tried to feel what I thought he might feel. I wondered if I would be able to feel him from a distance.

I realized that my phone had not rung. He must not be home yet. He still didn't know. For an instant I thought of turning around and flying back to his house, retrieving the paper before he could see it. I could reverse this if I wanted to. I could freeze traffic along the interstate to make better time. I could call Aunt Lu to tell her to go get the note before he got home. I saw the first exit for Fredericksburg ahead and eased into the right lane. I was reaching for the turn signal when the phone rang.

I checked the caller ID. Aidan. I almost ran off the road. He'd seen the note. My heart was pounding. I felt like a teenager caught running away from home. My phone was still ringing. Why hadn't it kicked over to voice mail?

I shut it off.

There was no way on God's green Earth that I could handle a conversation with him right now. I would hear his voice in my head, and it would send the blood rushing to my face. I felt sweat already forming under my arms, and I suddenly realized I needed a bathroom—in a hurry. I saw a sign for a rest stop ahead and pulled off.

There were two other people in the men's room, one at the sink in a shirt and tie, looking pale and nervous, like an accountant trying to get away with something, and the other at the urinal, who looked like he might have a big rig parked outside. Both of them eyed me as I came in.

I moved to the urinal farthest away from the trucker and no sooner had I unzipped when I saw him out of the corner of my eye, step back from his bowl. When I glanced over I saw his hefty member was at full salute, and that clearly he was inviting both the CPA and me to express our appreciation in some way.

I rolled my eyes and threw up my free hand to freeze the action. Just what I needed: stumbling into a loop from a bad porn flick. Only after zipping up and turning around did I see a heretofore undetected and also frozen fellow in dress khakis, peering out through the large crack in the door of his stall, with his pants around his ankles and his veiny rifle raised and ready to fire.

"Mother of God," I said, splashing some cold water on my face and snapping the trio out of suspended animation as I left, leaving them to wonder if I'd disappeared into thin air or just been a figment of their horny imaginations. I got back in the car and switched on my phone. There were messages waiting. I still wasn't ready to hear Aidan's voice, so I switched it off again and continued south on I-95. I was riding on autopilot. I barely noticed that I was passing through Richmond. I barely noticed anything at all until I started to see the signs for Rocky Mount. I was approaching the North Carolina state line

It hadn't occurred to me until that moment that I was going home. It never occurred to me to go back to St. Clair—not since Uncle Brady's funeral. A trap door opened and the memories dropped in. Brady had been the only member of my family who ever seemed to pay any attention to me, much less show me any grace. At his funeral I remembered how he would sometimes slip into my room with a pack of Hostess Twinkies under his shirt when my aunt had sent me to bed without supper, how he taught me to whistle, and how he used to sneak cigarettes to smoke out behind his tool shed. Once I'd frozen Aunt Belle as she was about to turn the corner and catch him ... just long enough for him to finish his smoke and head the other way before either of them saw the other.

"I didn't know your mama well," he said to me once after taking a few swigs from the flask he carried in his coat pocket. "She kept to herself a lot after your daddy was killed in 'Nam, and your aunt didn't want us hanging around her much. But she was a beauty. She didn't seem to belong here. Maybe that's why she

checked out so soon." He'd looked up at me when he spoke of her, like he was seeing her again.

"It's not that your Aunt Belle didn't love her," he said. "She just didn't know how to take her. She did the best she could."

At his funeral, after he'd dropped dead of a heart attack right on the floor of the church during Sunday morning communion, I felt like the outsider I'd always been. No one seemed to notice I was there except for my cousin Bailey, who I'd catch staring at me every so often like he was wishing it was me in the pine box instead of his daddy. It had been a godawful, hot and muggy, mosquito-infested day. Not even a hint of a breeze. I remembered the sweat running down the small of my back and all the way down my crack.

Aunt Belle sat motionless in front of the coffin, her face barely visible behind a black veil and her hands clutching a handkerchief, while Pastor Willoughby droned on about how he was certain that in Uncle Brady's final, gasping moments, he had made his heart right with the Lord, just in time for an angel to swoop down and snatch his soul out of the Evil One's clutches.

I'd started to feel like I might drop dead myself from the heat and the humid stares of my relatives, so I froze the gravesite and whistled up a cooling breeze off the nearby Atlantic. Then I'd walked over to Uncle Brady's casket.

"You were the only one here who ever talked to me like you cared if I answered," I said. "Thank you for not being quite so much holier than me." Just as I'd laid my hand on the top of the coffin, I'd heard a noise, like a match being struck, and then the smell of tobacco burning. I look around at the funeral party, all still frozen in their chairs ... Pastor Willoughby still holding a Bible in one hand and pointing toward heaven with the other.

There was movement in the corner of my eye, and then the sound of a slow, satisfied exhale. I turned to see Uncle Brady just outside the burial tent, leaning against one of the posts, taking a long draw on his cigarette. He looked good, way better than he'd looked in the casket back at the church in his three-piece pinstripe suit and what looked like tangerine base on his gaunt cheeks. He

was smiling the same sly smile I'd seen whenever he managed to pull one over on Aunt Belle. He'd looked straight at me, winked, then walked over to the box that held his remains, flicked his cigarette butt into the gaping hole that was about to become his final resting place, and disappeared in a faint blue shimmer.

I peered into the hole where he'd flicked his cigarette but there was no sign of it. Purely on a whim I leaned over Aunt Belle, lifted her veil and kissed her lightly on the cheek. Then in one of my more inspired moments, I stepped quickly over to Cousin Bailey, deftly unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, letting them fall around his skinny ankles, and when I was close enough to my car to be certain of a clean getaway, I unfroze the grieving assemblage. I hadn't seen or heard from any of them since.

BOYS TO MEN

The clock on the dashboard read 10:15 when I saw the exit for St. Clair. It was getting late, and I realized that I had no plan and no place to go now that I found myself back on home turf. I saw the sign for the Motel 6 and decided it was as good an idea as any.

There was nobody around except for a young guy behind the front desk who looked like he might be repeating the twelfth grade for the second or third time. He had shaggy, dark blond hair, rings through his eyebrow and both ears, and a tattoo of the Superman logo on his skinny bicep. He spoke with a drawl so thick and slurred I thought I was going to have to resort to using a memo pad to get directions to my room.

I finally paid and got the key and declined his ever so tempting offer to come by to smoke some weed when he got off work. I found the room and closed and locked the door behind me and pulled the curtains tight. The room was stale and drab. I was almost surprised to see the ash tray had been emptied and that the sheets were, as far as I could tell, freshly laundered. I thought of Aidan's warm, comfortably elegant apartment that always smelled faintly of cinnamon and his queen-sized bed with its six hundred-

thread count Egyptian cotton sheets and down comforter and the fireplace always alive and beckoning.

A blade of remorse stabbed at my gut. I still hadn't listened to his voice mail messages. When I switched on my phone, there were five messages waiting—one from Kermit, the rest from Aidan. I listened to Kermit's first, asking me to please call and tell him how I was doing, and letting me know that Aidan had called him to ask if he knew where I was. I took a deep breath and played Aidan's messages.

Number one: "I just got your note. Where are you? Please call me as soon as you get this."

Number two: "Colm, I'm going crazy here. I'm worried about you. What are you doing? Please, I need to talk to you."

Number three: "I saw Aunt Lu. Would you just come home or at least tell me where you are? I know we can work this all out if you'll just talk to me. Call me—please!"

Number four: "I just want to hear your voice, okay? Call me. I don't care how late. I love you, baby." I imagined that he sounded like he was crying.

I replayed each message over and over, punishing myself until I was nearly numb except for the burn of acid in my stomach and the too familiar bubbling of bile up through my esophagus. I ran into the bathroom and stuck my head in the toilet yet again and not one half minute too soon. I couldn't help thinking that I would have made a fine bulimic.

Even as I was wiping my face and rinsing out my mouth, Aidan's voice was back in my head ... Aidan sounding scared ... vulnerable ... desperate. I still couldn't talk to him. I speed dialed Kermit's number. It rang once then, thankfully, switched to voice mail. I left the briefest possible message, saying that I was just going to be out of town for a while. I said I was okay, that I would check in again. I asked him to let Aidan know that I was all right and that I was sorry but I couldn't handle talking to him right now.

Part of me knew that I was behaving like a soap opera diva. It had all the makings of a '40s melodrama—but for the witchcraft,

the reincarnation, and the fact that we were homosexuals. Part of me knew I was erring on the side of hysteria. Maybe that was even part of the reason for leaving the way I did. Maybe I was just tired of playing to type. If I'd been cast in this same role through the ages, as a love-me-and-leave-me doormat to Aidan's perennially charming rogue with a knack for abandonment, then maybe this was my clumsy way of trying to rewrite the script. I had to break this cycle. And I had to come to terms with what to do with the freak show of a life I'd inherited.

I could have talked myself into believing that it made sense to just walk away—except for feeling his absence so acutely. I felt the loss of equilibrium and of the comforting and invigorating counterbalance of him. In the bathroom mirror I saw the face of a frightened and lonely boy—and in all likelihood, a fool.

I got in the shower and turned up the heat, letting steam fill the small bathroom. Without thinking I automatically began the magic play with the water that Aidan had shown me. I lowered the temperature steadily, cooling the spray slowly in increments, until it was a refreshing mist, then just as slowly allowing it to warm again, repeating the cycle in a kind of meditation that always seemed to simultaneously stimulate and relax me. Once again I felt its soothing effect on my tired muscles, until I realized that this was the first time I'd played the game by myself.

I wondered how long it would take before I could think of him without feeling like I'd been punched in the gut. "Promise you'll never run from me again," he'd whispered in bed one night after he'd made love to me, not long after my initial, panicked flight from him at the Pride parade. He'd gripped my hand like a child. Had I promised? I couldn't remember. I felt the tears stinging my cheeks again. But that was the whole point. I wasn't supposed to be the one who left. Why had he sounded so scared? What must he be feeling now?

I needed to stop this. I needed sleep. I shut off the water, towed off and got into bed, wondering what I was going to do in the morning. Part of me prayed that I would wake up and discover

that it was all just one of my notoriously bad dreams. I should've known better than to trust sleep as an escape.

As soon as the curtain opened in my dream, I was back in that room with Aidan and my mother. She was singing to him—that infernally familiar song—and handing him the carved wooden box. That box again. They seemed so comfortable with each other, like Aidan was part of the family. There was an intimacy there, a shared knowledge. Something had transpired between them. She was gentle with him, and he was uncharacteristically deferential. He seemed awed by her.

I wanted to interrupt them, but I was invisible in the dream. I wanted to be with them, to hear what they were saying, to understand the words to her song, as Aidan seemed to. I wanted them both to see me and to invite me closer. They both looked so beautiful. I ached to be with them, and I couldn't understand how I could be so near to them and yet feel so superfluous. I was the only connection between them. Why couldn't I let them know that I was there?

Aidan kissed her hand as he took the box from her. She touched his cheek softly with her other hand, and then they both turned and began walking in different directions, away from me. I wanted to follow them both. Again, I couldn't decide which way to go, whom to follow. I was frozen. All I could do was stand there watching them disappear, praying for either of them to turn around and to see me ... to wait for me. I woke up with the melody she'd been singing still on my mind. There was a jolt of recognition. For the first time, I remembered the tune—it was a version of the tune that I always whistled as I conjured cold weather magic. Is that where I heard it? Had I been remembering her song from my dreams all these years and not realizing it?

I was distracted by the clock on the nightstand reading 11:11 a.m. According to the sudden, insistent rumbling in my stomach, it was past time to have something to eat. I hadn't had any food since leaving DC, so I showered again, dressed, headed to the front desk,

and was surprised to see the boy from the night before still at his station, looking like a real-life Shaggy, minus Scooby-Doo.

"Are you chained to that stool?"

"Oh man," he drawled. "Graveyard shift never showed up. I'm so outta here in an hour."

"Can you book me for another night before you take off?"

"You got it, dude." He reached for the keyboard to pull up my credit card info. "How long you gonna be in town?"

"I don't know. Taking it a day at a time."

"That's cool. You want a room closer to the pool?"

"I'm good, thanks."

"You need extra towels or anything?"

I said no thanks. As I was turning to leave he mentioned that he would be back on duty later that night. "You like to party?" he said, stroking his dark blond, barely there goatee.

It took me a minute or two to catch his tone and the curious expression in those pale green eyes. Was Shaggy coming on to me? I dismissed the idea immediately. This was St. Clair, North Carolina. Skinny teenagers with tattoos working in cheap motels didn't make passes at gay guys nearly twice their age—they chased them down with baseball bats and beat them until they were brain dead. He probably just thought he could pilfer cash for his next drug run. He was still looking at me with a question in his eyes.

"I could crash in your room and then we could have some fun later," he said, dumping the cat out of the bag. Not only was he a homo—or at least, indiscriminate—he was also a ballsy little bugger. Did I look that easy? Or that desperate?

My first impulse was to get the hell out of there and find a room someplace where somebody's grandma manned the check-in counter. Then it slowly dawned on me that I was, in fact, a grown man—not to mention a witch—thinking of running away from the advances of a skinny, backwoods teenager. If I couldn't handle myself in this situation, I was in bigger trouble than I'd realized. I politely thanked the boy for his flattering interest in me but said

I would be out most of the day and evening and would be pretty tired when I returned.

"That's cool," he said. "If you change your mind just ring the desk. Ask for Hank."

I caught just the briefest hint in his green eyes of something ... vulnerable. A look of rejection or embarrassment? Whatever it was, it triggered a tide of feeling, and memories of a time when I was a skinny, backwoods teenager too afraid to ever dare approach a stranger with an invitation ... too afraid to let any living soul glimpse the truth about myself. I felt a surge of something else for young Hank. Something akin to admiration. Respect. He wasn't looking me in the eye anymore.

"Hey," I said, on a sudden impulse. "If you're around when I get back, maybe we'll grab a burger or something."

The smile that stretched across his thin face transformed him. I saw the makings of a clear-skinned, bright-eyed, even good-looking boy. What harm could it do to sit and talk to the kid? Besides, I told myself, I could always freeze him and make a run for it if he got frisky.

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

My stomach was still growling. I remembered that Ethel Mae's Diner was on the same highway as the motel, just a couple of miles away from town and the beach. When I parked the car and walked in, the smell of coffee and fried eggs and bacon was nearly orgasmic. The place was practically empty except for a state trooper in a booth eating a heaping plate of biscuits and gravy and an elderly man reading a newspaper at the counter. The woman I vaguely remembered as Ethel Mae was pouring him a cup of coffee.

"You want some coffee, darlin'?" Another woman's voice said over my shoulder as soon as I settled into a booth a comfortable distance away from the trooper.

"Yes ma'am, thank you," I said, lapsing back into the Southern schoolboy of my youth.

"My name's Virginny," she said. "I'll be taking care of you."

"Virginny?"

"I know," she rolled her eyes. "My daddy was from Richmond," she said. "He always loved that damn song, 'Carry Me Back To Old Virginny.' Makes me sound like somebody's mammy but what the hell." She was a black woman with twinkling eyes and hennaed

hair who could've been anywhere from forty to sixty years old. "I'll be back in a minute to take your order," she said after filling my coffee cup.

After searching in vain for anything on the menu that wasn't three parts lard, butter, or sugar, I asked for the ham and eggs special with grits when she returned.

"You want gravy or homemade peach preserves with your biscuits, hon?" she asked.

"Both. And bring some Draino on the side for my arteries."

Virginny stared at me for a second or two, then she let loose with a belly laugh that nearly rattled the flatware. She punched me on the shoulder and snorted, "You just made me laugh for the first time all morning, sugar." Then she narrowed her eyes a bit. "You from around here? You look familiar."

"A long time ago. Just visiting."

"Can't have been too long ago. You're just a boy, and I know I've seen that baby face somewhere before. You have kin here?"

I explained my connection to Uncle Brady and Aunt Belle—the Donovans—and to my mother's family, the McKennas.

"Oh my sweet Lord Jesus!" she said, throwing both hands up in the air, then grabbing my face and squeezing my cheeks in one of her big oven mitts for hands. "You're Miss Julia's little boy!"

I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck. She knew my mother.

"Lord honey, you're all grown up into a fine looking young fellow. Just look at you! But you've still got that sweet face like your mama."

"How did you know her?" I said, feeling and hearing the catch in the back of my throat.

"Honey, I was your grandmama's housekeeper when I was not much more than a baby myself. Wasn't too much older than your mama, God rest her soul. One of the sweetest, prettiest little things God ever sent down to this mean old world. There was just something magic about that one, like nobody else I'd ever seen in this neck of the woods. Although I saw pictures of your

grandmamma when she was a girl, and she had that same light about her." She took my face in her hands again.

"You got it too, angel face. And those same crystal blue eyes."

After cupping my face in her hands long enough to fry several eggs, she seemed to snap out of her reminiscing and to realize that she hadn't taken my order back to the kitchen. She hurried off and only minutes later returned with my ham and eggs and grits and big-as-saucers buttermilk biscuits, along with a bowl of sausage gravy and a jar of peach preserves.

"This looks great," I said as she set the food in front of me and refilled my coffee cup.

"It'll put a little meat on those bones. You're just as skinny as your mama was, too. Course your grandmamma was like that. Miss Belle's the one got the thighs and hips enough for all of 'em. People used to call her 'Butter Belle' behind her back." She reached up and gently smacked herself on the cheek. "There I go shooting off my big mouth and with poor Miss Belle in the shape she's in. I guess you're here to look in on her?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. "What, is something wrong with Aunt Belle?"

Her eyes widened and she made a slight gasp. "Lord Honey, you don't know? Nobody here called to tell you?" She put her hand on my shoulder. "Sugar, Miss Belle had a couple of strokes about three months ago. She's over at her boy's place. Can't really do for herself anymore. They weren't sure she was even going to pull through."

Of course no one had bothered to call me. I'd heard about Uncle Brady from my cousin's wife only forty-eight hours before the funeral. I thanked Virginny for the news and for breakfast. My appetite had flown. I just picked at all the food in front of me. At the counter, after I paid, I stopped her, "Would it be okay if I came by again or called to talk more about my mother?"

"Come by anytime, darlin'. I own the place so you'll pretty much always find me here."

"You own the diner? But isn't that Ethel Mae I saw when I came in?"

"That's Ethel Mae, all right. I bought her out," Virginny laughed. "We've been friends since we both got old enough to swing a spatula. But she was tired of running the place. She just likes hanging around here and chatting up all the regulars—and making sure I don't change things up too much!"

I gave her a quick hug. "Do I really look like her—my mother?"

A smile spread softly across the wide expanse of her face. "Honey, if you put on a dress and grew out that pretty blonde hair, no one could tell you apart!" Then she winked at me.

I quickly shook off that uninvited image and headed out the door. I got in my car and started driving toward town. Now what? Just when I thought my head was at or near the point of exploding from everything going on inside it, some piece of new information seemed to cram itself into my cranium. Clearly any hope I'd had of returning to my roots as a respite from the chaos of my life back in DC was shot to hell.

I was missing Aidan like an amputated limb, questioning everything I was doing, wanting to hear his voice and feel his fire thawing all the cold corners of my heart. And now this news about Aunt Belle, delivered in a roadside diner—by someone who remembered my mother, no less.

I'd put Aunt Belle and the rest of the family I'd forsaken completely, out of my mind for so long. I'd never been able to figure out how I felt about this woman who raised me by default, who never seemed to have a clue or to care who I was, who never even seemed to want me in the room. What was I supposed to feel now that she was sick—or worse? "What was I supposed to 'just do' now?" I wondered aloud to an absent Dr. Nike.



I turned on my cell phone and found two new messages from Aidan. In the first he said that Kermit had let him know that he'd heard from me. He pleaded with me again to call him or to just come home. In the second message, he told me that he wasn't going to stop calling until he spoke to me, and that he wasn't going to leave me alone or give up on us no matter where I went or how long I stayed away.

"We're meant to be together, baby," he said. I turned off the phone again before the message had finished. I didn't know much, but I knew that I couldn't simply turn around and go home. Not an option. There was a reason I'd run away and there had to be a reason I was here, even if I still had no hell of a clue what it was.

I thought about the dream globe Stuart had given me in P-town packed away in my duffel bag. "It will show you your heart's desire," he said, "but only when you're truly ready to see."

I started to slow the car down, to look for a place to pull over. Then I recognized the small white frame building with the steeple just ahead. It was the First Baptist Church—my Aunt Belle and Uncle Brady's church, where I sat in Sunday School until I was old enough to freeze the room and sneak out, leaving everyone to wonder whether I'd been snatched by Satan or raptured by Jesus, leaving their self-righteous asses behind. The church had a cemetery beside it where my uncle and my grandmother and many other Donovans and McKennas had been laid to rest. Everyone in the family who'd passed in the last hundred years or so was here except for my mother, who had left instructions with my grandmother to be cremated. Or so my Uncle Brady had confided to me once after a long visit with Jack Daniels. Aunt Belle had always refused to discuss it.

I forgot about the globe and pulled over to park in the small gravel parking lot in front of the church. Everything looked the same. In fact, nothing much about St. Clair seemed to have

changed. I noticed how picturesque the church was and reached for my camera as I got out of the car.

The gravel crunched beneath my feet, and a light salty breeze stirred, reminding me how close I was to the ocean. Funny how I could grow up smelling that damp salt air and not realize how much I'd missed it until I was back here. I'd been to the shore in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and, more recently, to New England, but the smell was different here. Maybe because the air was warmer. Maybe it was just the familiar, peculiar stink of home.

I took a few pictures of the church, alabaster white against a nearly violet sky. I thought of going inside but instead wandered over to the cemetery. I found the marker for Uncle Brady and wished I'd thought of coming here earlier so I could have brought flowers. My cousin Bailey's wife, Arlene, had told me that Aunt Belle always made sure there were fresh white roses on his grave, but there were none here. She was too ill for that now. I looked around and saw my grandmother's marker nearby, also barren.

There were a couple of majestic magnolia trees on the edge of the cemetery, both in radiant full bloom. I looked to see if anybody was around and when I saw the coast was clear, I whistled up a north wind strong enough to blow a shower of the pearly blossoms over onto the grave sites, carpeting both my grandmother's and Uncle Brady's plots. Immediately I realized that I'd forgotten to follow Aidan's instructions about using cosmic energy rather than my own for the magic. I felt the familiar dizziness.

"Nice touch, kiddo," said a woman's throaty voice over my left shoulder.

I jumped and screeched like I'd just sat on a pitchfork and turned to see a woman behind me with steel gray hair pulled tight into a bun who was grinning so broadly I could see gold fillings flashing in the mid-day sun. I hadn't seen that face since I was three years old, except in a couple of pictures.

"Grammy!"

"Hello, boy," she said in a dusky, tobacco-cured voice that sounded like she had some dirt on you. "Bet you weren't expecting to see this old battle-axe hanging around here, were you?"

At this stage of the game, encountering a ghost in a cemetery was probably one of the more normal paranormal phenomena I'd wandered into. "You look just like your pictures," I said when my heart stopped skipping beats.

"I know, dammit. You'd think the weather in Bliss would've done something about this leathery complexion." She winked. "Actually, we just sorta look however you remember, so we don't completely scare the bejeezus out of you. Even witches can be jumpy around ghosts."

Even witches? Apparently the word was out on both sides of the great divide. "So you knew—know—about me."

"I knew about you before there was a you. And I've been watching you ever since you took your first whiff of briny air."

Not watching constantly, I hoped.

"We're proud of you, boy."

Obviously she'd mistaken me for someone more successful. "Who is 'we'?"

"Everyone. Me. Your mama. You're carrying on a long tradition. She wants you to know that she approves of the fine young man you've become."

I couldn't help thinking that the dead in question must have been watching over someone who only looked like me. And that those observers still among the living would probably beg to differ. "If she wants me to know this, why doesn't she tell me herself? Why can't I see her?"

"You do see her. Practically every night in your dreams. She's been there with you since you were born."

"I never remember her from my dreams," I protested. "I never remember her face or anything she says. I've never even seen a picture of her. Aunt Belle said they were all destroyed."

"Don't be so sure that what you think you know is all there is to know. Question your assumptions, boy. And if you want to see your mother's face, all you have to do is look in a mirror."

Again with the questioning assumptions rhetoric. How much did I have to whine to get anyone, living or dead, to understand that I wanted to see what they saw? I wanted the frame of reference of remembering her face when I looked at mine. I wanted to see her in my face, but all I ever saw when I looked in the mirror was my own scared, clueless mug.

Grammy picked up an armful of the white magnolia blossoms that I'd shaken loose from the trees. "Graveyards are for birds and squirrels, boy. And ghosts, of course. Find your answers among the living. Talk to the ones who are still living and loving you." Ironic advice coming from the dead, I thought.

"I'm sorry to intrude ..." A man's voice interrupted. I hadn't seen or heard anyone approaching from the church. The necktie and the Bible that the gentleman was carrying suggested he was either a clergyman or a dangerously zealous parishioner. He looked my age, maybe younger.

"I just wondered if there was any way I could be helpful to you," he said, sincerely as a choirboy. He had an attractive, fresh-scrubbed face and friendly gray eyes. I'd seen a lot of that look on a trip to Chicago once. Clear-skinned, corn-fed, cute-as-a-bug boys that made you just want to lick them like an ice cream cone.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," Grammy cracked over my shoulder.

I felt the blood start its mad rush to my face and neck.

"Are you okay?" he asked, leaning over a bit to face me.

I was still staring.

"Blink once for 'yes' if you still can," Grammy snorted.

"Stop that!" I said.

He took a step back, obviously startled. "I'm sorry."

"No, no. I'm sorry. I didn't mean you."

He frowned, confused, then his expression softened into a smile. "Talking to ghosts?"

I looked over at Grammy, who was now sitting on her headstone and knitting what looked like the start of a sweater. She looked up at the young minister, then at me, and shrugged.

"I find a lot of folks here having conversations with their loved ones who've passed," he said. "I guess it helps them feel closer to them, or gives them a chance to say things they weren't able to say while they were still with us."

"Maybe they come here to find answers," I suggested.

He took his Bible out from under his arm. "There's no one here to answer those questions. The answers have to come from a higher place." He pointed toward the sky, and Grammy and I both looked up in the direction of his finger. When I glanced over at her again, she rolled her eyes and went back to her knitting.

The young stranger shook my hand and introduced himself as Pastor Marcus B. Merriweather. While I was trying to digest that unlikely bit of information he went on to say that he'd come to First Baptist only nine months ago when Pastor Willoughby retired.

"Who are you visiting?" he asked.

"I was chatting with my grandmother, Amelia McKenna," I said, as Grammy looked up from her knitting, waving a needle in our direction.

"Ah yes, the McKennas. Quite a few of your folks are here. Did you used to attend the church?"

"When I was a kid. My aunt and uncle, Belle and Brady Donovan, used to drag—bring—me here every Sunday."

"Of course," he nodded. Your uncle passed before I came here, but I do know your aunt. Mrs. Donovan has been a faithful member for many years I believe, until she took ill. I assume you're here visiting her?"

I hesitated. Grammy was watching me with one eyebrow raised.

"What?" I said, glancing over at the pastor and putting him on pause.

"You seem to be having some trouble answering his question."

"If you've been watching me all these years, then you know by now that having answers to questions isn't exactly one of my strong points."

"Belle is sick."

"I know. Your former housekeeper, Virginy, told me the minute I got into town."

"Bless her heart. I loved that girl like she was my own. Best housekeeper I ever had, too ..."

"And apparently the only one around here willing to let me know what's happening with my own family."

"You learn what you need to know when you need to know it, boy."

"They could have called," I said, sounding every bit the petulant child I felt like at that moment.

Grammy walked over to stand between the immobilized minister and me. "You going to run away from this, too?"

Obviously she knew that I hadn't come to town just to blow a few magnolia blossoms onto her gravesite.

"I must be quite a disappointment to all my dearly departed."

"You obviously weren't listening to me before. It's true you are being a damn fool about love, although I can't deny that you get it honest. All the McKenna witches have had a knack for not knowing a good thing while they had it. But there's more going on here than that boy you think you've left behind. Your questions brought you here. Now the question is, are you going to let yourself hear the answers?"

Grammy winked at me again, then gathered her knitting and started to walk off toward the magnolia trees.

"Wait, where are you going? How can I hear the answers if you won't stay and talk to me?"

"Unfreeze the poor pastor. If you leave him like that much longer you're going to need an oil can," she said over her shoulder. "Then go see your Aunt Belle." And with that she disappeared into a sudden gust of magnolia blossoms.

She was right about the preacher. Another minute or two in suspended animation and he'd have birds landing on his shoulders. I snapped him out of it.

"I'm sorry, I needed to say goodbye to my grandmother. What were you saying?"

"Uh ... er ... I was just asking if you were in town visiting your aunt," he stammered.

"Looks that way. I've just been given strict orders from the top."

"You mean ..." He pointed to the sky.

"My grandmother," I said, nodding.

He frowned again. I knew that clueless look well.

"When a dead witch tells you to do something it's best not to argue," I said. I realized I was succumbing to the temptation to yank his chain.

He blinked a few times, tucked his Bible back under his arm, and said, "I guess angels can appear in many forms."

Talk about your worlds colliding. I had to give the guy points for poise under pretty weird circumstances. "I should get going," I said.

He reached out to shake my hand. "I'll say a prayer for your aunt," he said. "And for you."

FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

As I got back in the car I kept hearing Grammy's words in my head, about my being a fool about love and about the McKenna witches having a knack for not knowing a good thing when they had it ... about "that boy you think you've left behind ..." I found myself wondering what tricks Aidan would have played on the young preacher. I wished he'd been here to meet my grandmother. I was tempted to see if he'd called again. I was tempted to call him myself. If I was a queen, ambivalence was surely my domain.

It was only a ten-minute drive from the church to Cousin Bailey's house, but I wasn't ready to face the music just yet. Instead I turned off the highway toward the beach, to my own private piece of North Carolina.

St. Clair's public beaches were poor, drab cousins to the spiffier, more developed resort towns to the north or south. Vacationers and developers alike had largely overlooked or ignored it for its relative lack of any real character. Only locals and the occasional wanderer spent any real time on St. Clair's ramshackle boardwalk, with its run-down hot dog stands and obsolete arcade.

Only a half-mile or more south of the main public beach, however, was a quiet strip of unspoiled shoreline that had somehow gone unnoticed. Maybe it was the lack of a direct access road, or the slightly rocky edge to the south that created something of a natural barrier to anyone strolling up the coast from the tourist traps to the south. Whatever the reason, it had remained a secluded spot that I'd managed to have mostly to myself all through high school and on any trip back since I'd left.

I'd discovered it by accident when I was sixteen or seventeen. Uncle Brady and Aunt Belle had taken Bailey and me to the beach for a family picnic. When they'd all stuffed themselves into a stupor on fried chicken and potato salad and Aunt Belle's buttermilk biscuits, I wandered off and started walking north along the shoreline. When I got to the rocks I thought I heard music coming from the other side of the barrier, so I started climbing over the first ledge, nearly slipping and cracking open my skull several times in the process, until I discovered what looked like a trail of sorts, winding down from the rocks and curving around to sandier and safer ground. I followed the sound of the music, which was still faint. I wasn't even sure if I was really hearing anything over the surf, which was especially strong there.

Only when I'd cleared the rocks and could actually see the surprise of the secluded stretch of beach, did I trust my ears. The music was real. A soft, haunting melody was playing, something that sounded like a flute, or some kind of pipe. I followed the sound around another bend or two and down the beach a ways, then I realized it was coming from behind another scattering of rocks and boulders further back from the water.

The music grew clearer and stronger as I walked toward the rocks. I practically tripped over the piper before I saw him sitting with his back to me, leaning against one of the larger rocks. He looked to be roughly my age, give or take a year, with longish wavy dark hair that he kept tucking behind his ear as the wind blew it around his face. He was bigger than me—not as skinny—with

long lean legs that were crossed out in front of him in the sand. He looked up at me like he wasn't the least bit surprised to see me.

"Get a good look?"

I turned at least fifty shades of red and backed away from him, nearly falling over my own feet. "I'm sorry. I just ... heard the music. I didn't mean to ..."

"Chill out man. Just jazzin' you. Welcome to my fortress of solitude. Pull up some sand," he said, drawing up his long legs and sitting up Indian style.

"I didn't know Superboy played the flute." I pretended to be droll.

"It's an Irish whistle," he said, as if anybody would know that.

"Oh."

"I forged it with my heat vision." He winked.

I couldn't seem to stop staring at him. He couldn't have been a local. I would've spotted him long ago. When I realized he was staring back and smiling I started to wonder if I was hallucinating. Nobody that cute would have given me the time of day in real life.

But then he flicked sand up at me and laughed and motioned for me to sit next to him.

"Get down here."

I sat tentatively beside him. He chuckled again and repositioned himself with his legs stretched out in the sand, close enough to mine for me to feel the fine hair on his calves. If it was a psychotic episode it was the jim-dandiest I'd ever had.

"You can only share my fortress of solitude if you swear not to tell another living soul about it."

I couldn't tell if his tone was mock solemnity or the real thing, but I swore anyway.

"Shake on it," he said, holding out his hand.

When I gave him my hand he held onto it, staring me straight in the eye, and I felt every meager hair in every one of

my adolescent follicles stand on end as I got my first direct jolt of human electricity.

His face relaxed into a wide grin as he finally let go of my hand. "Any requests?"

I shook my head. "Anything," I croaked.

He started to play again. It was another wistful melody similar to the one before. It was so softly plaintive that even though he was sitting right beside me, the sound seemed far away. I closed my eyes and focused on the sweetness of the music, and the warmth of his skin ever so slightly pressed against mine ... and then ever so gradually the light but seismic touch of his hand on my thigh, followed by his other hand and his arm sliding like a snake around my waist.

I was increasingly certain that I was hallucinating. How could I be hearing the music if both his hands were on me? And how could he be blowing on the pipe I was hearing if his mouth was moving over my bare chest?

"It's in here," he murmured, pressing his soft lips to my breastbone. "The music is beating where your blood flows ... wherever there's a pulse ... like here"(kissing my neck) "... and here"(cupping his hand over my crotch).

I opened my eyes long enough to look into his own smiling, sea-green ones as he took my face in his hands and covered my mouth with his. Then I closed my eyes again and just let the song play on and on and on...

The only thing that wasn't surprising was waking up in the sand and finding him gone. How fitting that my first sexual experience with anything other than my hand was only a dream. It was peculiar, though, that I didn't remember removing my trunks, and I had to wonder how I'd managed to ejaculate onto my own cheek.

I never got Dream Boy's name, but the hallucination remained vivid enough for me to remember the taste of salt on his skin and pressure from his feet as he'd pushed mine down into the sand. As I quickly got dressed, I wondered how long I'd been lying there

bare ass on the beach and whether I should worry that I might have future episodes of unconsciously pleasuring myself in public places. Like I didn't already have enough to fret about.

I never saw Dream Boy again—in wakefulness or in slumber—not once in all the hundreds of times that I'd returned to that spot on the beach. Standing there now, I could almost hear the melody he'd played. So much of my life before and after that had seemed like a dream. I wondered if I were to lie down again on the sand, whether I would fall asleep and then awaken to realize that none of it was real ... that Aidan and Aunt Lu and all those past lives and all the magic and wonder and worry, were all just illusions.

In the middle of my typically self-absorbed reverie, I heard a woman's voice, clear as a wind chime: "Go see your Aunt Belle."

"Grammy?" I looked around to see if my ghostly grandmother had followed me from the graveyard. But it hadn't sounded like her voice. I waited to see if I would hear it again or if someone else was going to appear.

"Who said that?" I asked out loud, but the only response was a seagull squawking near the water's edge. Regardless of whether another spook had spoken or I was just hearing the usual voices in my head, I knew that I needed to go, and that I was stalling.

At best I had intensely mixed feelings toward the woman who'd raised me, who'd been the only real kin I'd ever known, but who had never really felt like family to me. Now that she was ill, possibly even dying, what was I supposed to say to her? How did I know if she would even want to see me?

All I really wanted at that moment was to sit there on the beach and wait for a better dream to roll in with the tide, one that didn't come with so many questions. I sat for a while letting my thoughts drift off toward the clouds over the water. Without even realizing what I was doing, I saw my big toe tracing a shape in the sand ... a curved line that slowly became the outline of a heart ... and inside the heart, the letters "C + A".

The sound of seagulls squawking again startled me, and when I looked up there were two of them perched on a rock just behind

me, observing me and shrieking in obvious derision (to a delusional paranoid). "Oh shuddup," I said as I got up, knocked the sand off my behind and walked back to my car.

FOR WHOM THE BELLE TOLD

I saw Cousin Bailey's Ford pickup in the driveway of the nondescript, two-story house that he'd bought on the outskirts of town. I'd hoped that he wouldn't be home. When the doorbell didn't work, I had to knock several times before he showed up in baggy shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt, looking ten years older than his age and holding a half-empty beer bottle in his hand.

He didn't even seem to know me at first, and when recognition finally crawled like a slug across his face, he greeted me with: "What the hell are you doing here?"

Immediately I wished that I had a spell for turning a man into a hog, and just as quickly I recognized how redundant that would have been. "I'm here to see Aunt Belle, Bailey. May I come in?"

We stepped inside, and I smelled the beer on him as I entered. The living room was full of oversized, early American furniture, and I remembered that Bailey's wife, Arlene, worked at the Ethan Allen store on the other side of town. She also had her real estate license, and she sold Avon to help supplement the sporadic income from Bailey's drywall business.

He seemed to have inherited all Aunt Belle's and Uncle Brady's least attractive attributes. He had Belle's chubby face, large

pores, and sour disposition. He had Uncle Brady's skinny legs, receding hairline, and a tendency to overindulge himself. When he wasn't getting on my last nerve I'd actually felt sorry for him on occasion.

"What do you want?" he said, letting out a belch that would've made Homer Simpson proud. Always the charmer.

"I didn't expect you to be home," I said.

"Nurse has the day off, and Arlene's working, so I'm stuck here with Mama." He was still standing at the door as if my departure was imminent.

"Okay if I sit down?"

He shrugged and plopped down in a La Z Boy the size of a Volkswagen.

"How is she doing?"

"We feed her. We change her. And she may say ten words a day, most of which no one can make any sense of. She's just great. Who told you she was sick?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wish you had let me know. I would have come sooner."

His bug eyes narrowed, and he took another swig of beer. "You ain't answering the question. Who told you?"

"What difference does it make? Obviously, I didn't find out from any of you."

He half chuckled, half snorted. Uncle Brady had always called him Wilbur when he made that sound, after the pig in *Charlotte's Web*.

"Her *family* all knew about it when it happened," he said. "So what are you up to? First, you send your faggot friend snooping down here and then you show up ..."

I was starting to wonder how many beers Bailey had thrown back before my arrival. "What friend?" I said. "What are you talking about?"

He snorted again and downed the rest of the bottle in one gulp. "Yea, right. If you're thinking you can just show up here and try to sneak into her will right before she keels over, you got another

think comin’.” (Aunt Belle had a will??) He stuck out both of his chins and opened his ferret eyes wide, making a huge vein pop out at his temple as a trickle of Miller Lite ran down his chubby cheek.

So much for family reunions.

“Bailey, Bailey, Bailey,” I said. “Remember how Aunt Belle used to tell you not to make that face because it might freeze that way?”

His eyebrows shot up as I flicked my fingers at him like I would a gnat, fulfilling Aunt Belle’s prophecy.

“Why was I talking to you?” I left him frozen in his chair and went looking for her room. I found it upstairs at the end of the hall next to what I assumed was Bailey and Arlene’s bedroom. The door was half closed. I knocked softly, and when there was no response, I slowly pushed open the bedroom door.

Her bed was directly across from the door, away from the window and her head was turned so that I couldn’t see her face. I walked quietly to the side of her bed. She appeared to be sleeping. I was startled by how frail she looked. She’d always been an ample, sturdy woman. She had clearly lost a lot of weight, and the thick, rich chestnut hair that had been her most attractive feature was thin and graying at the roots.

I reached out and laid my hand gently on hers. She stirred slightly and slowly turned her head toward me. Her light blue eyes opened wide when she saw me, and I was stunned by the realization—for the first time in my life—that we had the same eyes. She had mine and my mother’s eyes. How was it possible that I had never seen that before?

She opened her mouth to speak, but the only sound she could make was a labored stutter: “C-C-O-O-H ...” It sounded like she was trying to say my name. I squeezed her hand and she squeezed back, surprising me with the strength of her grip. My hand was cool on hers.

“I’m sorry you’re sick,” I said. “I wish I’d known sooner.”

She shook her head slightly. "B-a-iley," she said with great effort.

"Uh ... he's downstairs. Do you need me to get him?"

She shook her head again.

"I wasn't sure if I should come."

"G-g-l-a-a-d," she said, squeezing my hand again.

"I wish there was something I could do to help you." She was visibly perspiring, and she seemed to be trying very hard to communicate with me. I hadn't anticipated this. I'd half expected her to use whatever strength she had left to spit in my direction. I certainly wasn't expecting her to lift my hand off the bed and move it to her forehead, which was also exceedingly warm, almost feverish.

"H-e-l-l-p-p," she said in an almost childlike voice, her eyes welling up.

I hesitated, unsure how to respond.

She squeezed my hand again as it lay on her damp forehead. "C-c-o-o-o-l-l," she said, moving my hand from her forehead and placing it lightly over her mouth. She closed her eyes and I felt a sudden, dizzying drop in my blood pressure, and the sensation of nearly numbing cold shooting simultaneously from my scalp and my feet and flowing through my hand. The windows in her room blew open and an Arctic wind blasted into the room, knocking over a vase filled with fresh yellow roses on the dresser and scattering the few get-well cards that were on the nightstand next to her bed.

My hand felt literally frozen to the lower part of her face, and I could feel her skin temperature falling. It all happened so fast and so completely outside my control that I thought maybe some sort of freak nor'easter had blown in off the Atlantic. Either that or it was an escalation of my long and winding psychotic break.

Just as quickly as it started, the sensation subsided, and the winds calmed, although the chill in the room remained. I was so dizzy I had to steady myself with a hand on the side of her bed. Aunt Belle opened her eyes wide, and I saw immediately that

there was a new light in them. She fixed a much more focused and brighter, ice-blue gaze on me. She glanced down at my hand, still covering her mouth, then back up at my face. I slowly took my hand away.

"Much better," she sighed, with restored power and precision in her speech.

I just stared as she sat up in her bed, with full use of her upper body. "What just happened here?"

"Colm Wyatt Mckenna," she said in a familiar but mock-scolding voice, "Surely by now you know magic when you see it."

I continued to stare at her and to wait for the room to stop spinning.

"What, would you rather I started praising Jesus?" She rolled her eyes. "You gave me healing energy, boy. I know that you know you can do that. Do you need to sit down?"

Actually I did not know that I could do that, but more pressing questions were before me. "When—how did you know that I can do that?" I stammered.

"Never mind—this is only a temporary relief for me. It's just to give me a chance to speak to you before I go, and if I can, to help you. We're all trying to help you."

I was dumb. And mute.

"You've seen your grandmother, haven't you? And Brady?"

I nodded.

"I knew they were hanging around you, too. I've had more ghosts in this room in the last few months than you can shake a broomstick at."

This hallucination was getting more surreal by the minute. "But you don't believe in any of this," I said. "I didn't think you even knew I was ..."

"Special?" she said. "I may have been a bitch, son, but I wasn't a fool. And even if I had been that ignorant before, I've been getting such an ear-full from my mama and your mama since I got laid up here ..."

"My mother? You've seen her, too?" I was beginning to feel more than a little ambushed, like I was in the middle of some sort of an intervention only in this case, the concerned parties all happened to be dead—or dying. I was down to my last few assumptions.

"I don't understand. How is it you know about my being 'special', and how can you talk about it so casually?" The questions were tumbling around in my head in no particular order.

"What about all the things you said when I was growing up? What about church, and God punishing the wicked and the perverted? What about everything you kept trying to force me to believe—and all those years when I felt like I was some kind of demon or alien or at best, a nut case?"

She threw up her hands and then shrugged. "Well, I'm not saying I didn't take things to the extreme now and then or that I didn't do my fair share of trying to forget what little bit I actually knew. Listen, child, I know this is a shock. I don't blame you for being upset. But don't take on my mistakes. Suspend your own disbelief or at least, try to see the shades of gray in what might look like a black and white picture. You must know by now that nothing's ever quite as simple as it first appears.

Maybe I was the one having the stroke.

She reached over with surprising speed and ease and picked up the glass of water on her nightstand. "Think fast, Sonny Boy!" She hurled it toward the window.

"Hey!" Instinctively I froze the glass and the mini-wave of water in mid-air.

She cackled like a goose. "See? I couldn't teach you how to be what you are. I didn't inherit those gifts. Your mama carried the lineage. For the longest time I resented her for it. And then I resented her—and your grandmama—for leaving me to take care of you when they were both gone. What did I know? I didn't have your mama's looks or her disposition or her magic. When your Grammy died there was no one else left to take care of you but this big-boned, wish-I-could've-been born-again country girl."

"You always seemed pretty sure of yourself to me."

"You saw what I wanted you to see and heard what I wanted you to hear. When nothing was left of my family but you, I panicked. I needed something to hold onto myself. Jesus was as good a choice as any. Worked hard at making a go of it, too, but the other sides of any story have a way of catching up with us. You were pretty hard to fit into the King James version."

I grabbed a basin off the bureau and took the glass out of the air, letting the water fall into the bowl. Too many questions were still wrestling for my attention. I just picked one. "Couldn't you have at least tried a little harder—or made it a little easier?"

"When I saw that you had your mama's gift, and that you were ... different in other ways ... What was I going to do with you? In the long run there was only one thing I could really give you."

I sat down in the chair beside her bed. "What was that?"

"A reason to leave. Looking back on it all now, the best I can figure is it was my job to get you out of here so you could find other people like you—or at least people who could help you. I'm not saying I had this all worked out back then. When you're stuck in a bed and the only thing that still operates are your bowels and what's left of your brain, you have a lot more time to consider your actions and the reasons behind them. Plus I've had your mama and grandmama and others who've been more than willing to help shed some light on the subject."

I struggled to process what she was saying, wondering how much more there could be to a person's life than what they had always seen and believed. "So the plan was to make me miserable enough to run away?"

She shook her head. "Wish I could take credit for that kind of foresight, but it was probably more like a hard luck story with a surprise ending. You planning to make it a happy one?" My own ice-blue eyes twinkled back at me.

"So I wasn't just some big mistake? My being born here, growing up here and being the way I am ... it wasn't some kind of cruel karmic joke?"

"It does have a certain irony to it. But no, child. God doesn't make mistakes. I made more than my share, and not just with you. But I'm about to be history. The question now is, what about you?"

There it was again—the question that was always being thrown back at me, showing up like a billboard at every other mile marker, the recurring refrain being sung by the chorus of the living and the dead.

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

She shrugged again. "When you keep hearing the same thing over and over, chances are good that you weren't listening the first time. And if your life keeps going around in circles, maybe it's because you're keeping your eyes closed too tight on the merry-go-round."

"You don't know the half of it," I said. "This ride's been going on for ..."

"Lifetimes?"

I nodded, silenced again.

"So now you've decided to jump ship. How's that working for you so far?"

My turn to shrug. "I just keep ending up right back where I started."

"Are you sure that's how it is?" she asked. "What if you took a picture of yourself? If you froze your own life right now and looked at it with your photographer's eye, would it really look the same as it always has? What if you used your magic on you?" She took a deep breath, and I saw that her hands were trembling slightly. I asked if she was all right.

She shook her head. "There isn't much time left to talk. The spell's wearing off."

"Is there anything else I can do?" I started to get up, but she motioned for me to sit.

She lay back against her pillow, and I could see her strength beginning to fade. "Question your assumptions about merry-go-

rounds, son. They're just circles with music and color and magic—reminders that what's really important is to just enjoy the ride."

She took another deep, more labored breath. "Do you remember your Uncle Brady and me taking you and Bailey to the state fair in Wilmington when you were a boy?"

I thought a minute. "I remember how pissed you were at Uncle Brady for sneaking a piece of Beulah Caldwell's apple pie after she beat you for the blue ribbon."

"Never mind that," she snapped. "You remember how you kept freezing the guy who ran the carousel so you could stay on it longer?"

"You saw that?"

"I saw a lot you thought I never saw. The point is you've always had the power to make happen what you want to have happen. You've got the power to stop time—like your mama had to see the big picture for what it is, like those photos you love to take. You know all about holding still. The part you haven't quite figured out yet is how to let it all go again." She started coughing and perspiration was forming on her forehead.

"Please. Tell me something else I can do for you."

"I could use some ice," she said.

I took the water left in her glass and blew gently around the rim until the contents solidified into bite-sized crystals.

"Your mama is so proud of you." She smiled as she put some of the ice chips in her mouth, then studied my face. "You haven't opened the box yet, have you?"

I looked around to see what box she was referring to.

"Didn't your young man—the one you're running away from—didn't he give you a wooden box?"

I remembered the box Aunt Lu had given me, still unopened in the duffel bag in my car. I hadn't thought of it since I left D.C.

"His aunt gave me a box from him before I left town. It's in the car. How do you know about that? And who told you about him, much less that I'm running away from him?"

"So you haven't opened it then. No wonder you still can't tell your ass from the moon," she said. "If I weren't about to lapse back into a coma I'd tell you to get your clueless behind out to your car and see what you've got that you don't even know is there."

The clueless thing was beyond getting old; I felt like an understudy in a play about my own life, with a script that I hadn't read yet. There I was on stage and everyone but me had learned their lines.

"Aunt Belle, would you just please tell me what this is all about? What's in the box? And how do you know about Aidan?"

She took another deep breath and eased down further on the bed, still holding the glass of ice in her hand. She chuckled. "Aidan? I'd forgotten his name. Did you know that it means 'fire' or 'fiery one?' I looked it up after he left. How perfect is that? Fire and ice!"

She was starting to cough now. "Your friend—Aidan—he was here. He came to see me just a short time ago—right before this last stroke. I could still form complete sentences then."

I remembered Aidan's business trip to North Carolina. He'd been out of touch for a couple of days, and unusually tight-lipped about the trip when he got home. Aidan. I remembered Bailey's crack about my "faggot friend".

"He was here," I said. "Here with you?"

"Handsome fellow. Bit of a hothead. You should've heard him threaten to teach poor Bailey the real meaning of the expression 'rug burn' when Bailey tried to prevent him from seeing me." She let out a cackle that quickly degenerated into a cough.

I was trying to imagine Aidan in this house, actually interacting with Bailey or Belle. "That doesn't make any sense. Why would he come here and not tell me he'd been—or that you were sick?" The room was getting warmer. I could feel the temperature rising, and I could see Aunt Belle growing weaker by the moment.

In increasingly halting, labored speech, she explained that she had made Aidan swear not to tell me, that he had come to see her to try to find information ... stories ... pictures ... anything he

could find out about my mother. She said he had spent hours at the public library going through old newspapers and public records trying to locate information about the family, and talking to anyone who might have known and remembered Julia McKenna.

"He was looking for something that would help you remember her."

I shook my head, part of me still not believing all I was hearing and part of me knowing it was exactly the sort of thing he would do.

"I asked him why he would go to this much trouble to find out about some woman who died practically before he was born? Do you know what he said? He said it was because there was a piece of your heart missing. And as long as there was a piece of your heart missing, then there was a piece of his missing, too."

The tears were back, burning again behind my eyes, as the temperature in the room continued to rise steadily. Aunt Belle's face was covered with a light film of perspiration. She spoke now with obvious effort.

"I gave him the box but only after making him swear on yours and his mama's grave not to tell you that I was ill." She was coughing and struggling now to breathe. "I didn't want you coming back here only out of some sense of obligation or pity ..."

I started to interrupt, but she motioned for me to be quiet. "It had to be your choice to come back," she said. "Even if you didn't know why you were choosing it."

I dampened a washcloth near her bed and pressed it to her forehead, watching her fade rapidly.

"You won't see me again like this. And thank God for that because this bed-ridden business is for the birds. When you leave here ... when you're ready, open the box. What you need to know is in there. What you need to know of her, and what you need to know of him."

She reached for my hand, giving it a much softer squeeze, just as a warm, humid wind blew through the room, and she sank back against her pillow, immobilized as she had been when I arrived,

and barely able to speak. Only her eyes remained bright and alert. She was still breathing, but the magic had expired. All I could do now was sit beside her on the bed, lay my head on her shoulder and let the tears go, wishing I'd come sooner.

I wanted to stay with her, to let her know that I would be there for as long as she needed me, but she shifted slightly beneath me, as if trying to get me to move. When I looked up at her she said, "G-g-o!" then she winked at me and said, "I'll b-b-e-e s-s-e-e-iin-y-y-o-u-u."

I shook my head and kissed her lightly on the cheek just as I heard a piercing shriek from downstairs. "Oh crap!" I said. "Arlene must be home. And I left Bailey in a deep freeze!"

Aunt Belle made a sound that could've passed for a giggle. I stood up to leave, touched my hand to the cloth on her forehead to cool it again. "Godspeed, Auntie," I said, and hurried downstairs.

By the time I got to the living room, my cousin's poor wife had fainted dead away on the couch next to where Bailey still sat frozen like a trailer park Buddha, with his mouth open and the beer bottle in his hand. I tried to think of some way to snap them both out of it without creating more hysteria. I had nothing against Arlene. She'd always seemed like a decent, hard working if slightly histrionic woman who deserved a lot better than she got. But I didn't have the energy to creatively finesse my way out of this absurd scene.

I checked to make sure she was breathing normally and not swallowing her tongue or anything. Then I stepped to the front door and just as I closed it behind me to run to my car, I whistled Bailey back to life. Let him deal with it.

I got back in the car and started driving. My head was buzzing. Every corner I turned seemed to present me with news about how very little I knew about myself and the people close to me. "If your life keeps going around in circles, maybe it's because you're keeping your eyes closed on the merry-go-round." Aunt Belle had said.

Everyone I knew—living and dead—kept hammering that point home to me. I wondered how I was supposed to see what

choices to make when it seemed like they'd always been made for me? How much choice did I have in a life that just seemed to keep happening to me? My mother's death, my magical legacy, my sexual orientation, my aunt's approach to raising a child she didn't know how to reach out to ... my recycled relationships with Aidan ... How many of my choices had figured into all that?

"When you leave here ... when you're ready, open the box," I heard Aunt Belle's words again in my head. "What you need to know is there ... what you need to know of her ... what you need to know of him."

I had enough of an IQ to know that anybody else on the planet would have braked to a screeching halt and climbed into the back seat to see what was in that damn box. The fact that I was still hesitating had to say something important about how truly twisted my wires were. I remembered something Dr. Nike had said to me once.

"Sometimes fog can be a comfortable place—ask anyone in San Francisco or London. You get used to what you can't see. It makes the world seem less than it is. When there's less on the horizon, the choices are easier. It can be jolting when the mist finally dissolves."

I could still hear the cadence of pen clicks that had accompanied that soliloquy. Part of me knew and part of me still wondered what I would see when the fog cleared. I wondered if, when I finally opened that box, I would find myself out of excuses.

DREAMS COME TRUE WHEN THE FULL MOON'S BLUE

When I had parked in the hotel parking lot and opened the door to my room, I saw a folded piece of paper on the floor. There was a note scribbled on the inside:

"Dude, call me when you get in. Doesn't matter how late. Let's hang out." It was signed, "Hank".

There was a phone number at the top and bottom of the page. I'd forgotten all about the audaciously horny teenager at the front desk. I looked at my watch. It was almost seven, and my stomach was rumbling. I thought about the wooden box still waiting in the car. "When you're ready," Aunt Belle said. Was I even in the same area code as ready? Would I ever be? I picked up the phone and dialed the number on Hank's note. He picked up on the first ring.

"This is the guy in Room 11," I said. "You know a place close by where I can get some decent seafood?"

I regretted my decision the minute he parked his behind across from me in the booth at MaryLee's By The Sea. He'd obviously just showered. His damp, longish, dark blond hair was tucked back

behind his ears and the nervous, fresh-scrubbed grin on his face was almost enough to make me want to burn rubber out of there.

"Dude, this is awesome. Shocked the shit outta me when you called." He looked like a scared little boy and a dirty old man all at once.

"I don't like eating dinner alone."

He nodded. "I hear that. Lots of things are better with company." He winked.

Sweet Jesus, I thought, picking up a menu. "So what's good here?"

"Best crab legs in town. Soft shell's in season too. And the bartender makes a wicked Hurricane," he nudged my leg under the table with his knee, and then left his knee pressed against mine. I shifted in my seat enough to discreetly break off the contact.

"Yeah? How much was his bail for serving alcohol to minors?"

When we'd ordered crab legs, a Hurricane for me, and a Dr. Pepper for him, he lit up a cigarette.

"Where you from?" he asked, blowing a perfect smoke ring over my head.

"I live in D.C. But I'm from here originally."

"No shit! So you made it outta here, you lucky stud." He held up the hand that wasn't holding a cigarette, and I realized that he was waiting for a high five. I smacked his outstretched hand quickly and a little clumsily. I'd never been able to pull that off.

"If I ever get out of here I am so not coming back."

"Yea, that's what I said when I left, too."

I lobbed a few get-acquainted questions at the boy. I learned that he would be eighteen—and a high school senior—in a couple of weeks. He told me that his uncle was the general manager of the Motel 6 where he was working part time to save some money for college—a school as far away from St. Clair as he could get into. He also told me that his mother had died minutes after he was born and that his grandmother had raised him ...

After fielding my questions, he put out his cigarette and looked me over like he was trying to guess whether I wore boxers or briefs. "So what the hell got you back here again?"

"Family," I said. "My aunt had a couple of strokes. Probably not going to be around too much longer."

"Bummer. Sorry man. No wonder you seem kinda ..." He didn't finish his sentence.

"What?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. Kinda ... blue." His eyes twinkled. "Blue like those sexy eyes of yours."

I had to laugh. This kid was a hustler budding on the vine—or for all I knew, already in full bloom. I wondered what sort of life would generate that kind of chutzpah at such a young age. I actually envied him. Under any other circumstances—and if more lenient laws prevailed—I might have even let myself feel something other than envy.

Before I could think of anything to say, Hank reached for my hand across the table, right there in MaryLee's By The Sea, in redneck-infested St. Clair. I pulled back instinctively. He raised a ringed eyebrow and a slightly wounded look flashed briefly in his eyes.

"Relax, dude, no one's looking," he said, reaching again for my hands. He'd removed his flip-flops, and ever so softly he placed one of his bare feet over mine under the table. Holding my hands firmly he closed his eyes and started rocking back and forth slightly in his seat. I glanced around to see if anyone had noticed the sudden intimacy.

"What are you doing?"

"Shhh," he said. "Just be quiet a minute." His eyes were still closed, and he was still rocking gently with his hands and feet touching mine. Despite the multiple reasons I had not to, I was starting to feel a little aroused. I sat perfectly still, thinking of dead puppies or anything else to keep from having the reaction I was having.

Suddenly he opened his eyes wide and sat back in the booth, but continued holding on to my hands. "Oh crap," he said, sounding slightly annoyed. "You got a dude back home. I should've figured." He was shaking his head like it was just the worst damn luck.

I started to ask what the hell he was up to, but he silenced me again. He was looking at me now. Or rather, he seemed to be looking through me. "He's looking for you, you know. Wiggled out over it, too." He frowned slightly. "Is he in town, too?"

All I could manage was to shake my head no.

"Huh. His energy ... it's getting stronger. Like he's somewhere nearby."

By this time I should have been beyond being surprised by anything or anyone—or so one would think. "What's going on here?" I demanded, increasingly sure that I already knew the answer. "How do you know this stuff?"

He let go of my hand, briefly, when the food was placed in front of us, then reached for me again. "I'm a freak, okay? I see stuff—wild stuff sometimes—especially when I touch someone. Usually it's stuff I don't want to see ... like you having a lovesick hottie on your tail. Guess I'm not gettin' lucky tonight, huh?"

My suspicions were all but confirmed. I was getting hit on by a teenage witch. "What else do you see?"

He sighed and slipped back into a semi-trance. "Man you got some weird shit goin' on." He closed his eyes. "There's a woman ... someone really close to you. Beautiful, classy woman—she looks like you. She's watching over you, trying to help you ... I don't get this," he said.

"What?"

"She's saying something ... about a box. She wants you to open the box. Does that make any sense to you?"

I was thinking maybe this would be a good time to take up smoking.

He opened his eyes again. "She's helping him, too."

"Him?"

"Hot stuff. The guy who's coming after you." He cocked his ringed eyebrow again. "You're on the run, aren't you?"

I looked down at the food on our plates that neither of us had touched. I felt his foot slide back over mine under the table.

"Want a buddy for the road?" He grinned, but his voice wasn't so cocky now.

Something about this young, absurdly ballsy but still vulnerable boy got to me. He flipped a switch. I heard years of my own desperate uncertainty ringing in that simple, plaintive question. I saw a kind of courage in his eyes that I'd always wanted to feel. I remembered the boy I'd been at his age, feeling helplessly alone with these apparent truths about myself that made absolutely no sense ... dreaming of someone who would come and take me away, but unable to see who I was really waiting for.

In the last thirty-six hours, I'd heard the same message from a parade of souls, living and dead, over and over. But now, as I was sitting across from this boy who was trying so fearlessly to find his own way out of here, now I was finally feeling ready.

"Let go of my hand," I said.

The wounded look flashed again in his eyes.

"Just for a minute," I said softly.

When he released my hand I held it up in front of him, in position for another high-five. There was confusion in his eyes. I kept my hand up, waiting for him to respond, and a smile dawned on his face. As he reached up and slapped my hand in the air, I froze everything and everyone around us. MaryLee's *By The Sea* was on ice, motionless as fresh cod in a cooler. Hank's smile froze, then turned to shock, and he jumped up and out of the booth.

"Holy Mother!" he said, looking like a bug about to be pinned to paper.

"Just as I thought."

He stared at me, uncomprehending, scared shitless.

"See buddy? I'm a freak, too. Although it seems that most freaks of our sort prefer the term, 'witch'."

He stood there, blinking furiously, the wheels spinning behind his eyes. "You're shitting me, right?"

"Look around, grasshoppa. Does it look like I'm shitting you?"

He scanned the immobilized dining room at MaryLee's By The Sea. Then slowly he sat down across from me again, still blinking like Jeannie on uppers. "How did you do that?"

I shrugged. "How do you 'see stuff'? Why do you have blond hair and killer green eyes? Why do you like boys? It's who you are. It's who 'we' are."

"I'm no freakin' witch, dude," he said, false bravado flaring along with his cute, quivering nostrils.

"Witches don't freeze, dude. You see anything else moving in here besides you and me?"

He looked around again. Looked back at me. Looked around again. "Are they still alive?" he asked timidly, as though he was suddenly uncertain about his own fate.

I laughed, remembering that I'd wondered the same thing the first time it happened. I'd wondered if I was a murderer. A demon who sucked the life out of people and left them as frozen zombies.

"They're not dead. And you don't have to be afraid. I just wanted you to know about me, and to know about yourself ... to know you're not the only one who is ... special."

He seemed to relax, if only a little. "That's why I was seeing all that strange shit around you." He shook his head, still looking a little unhinged. I wondered if I'd made a serious mistake. I practically saw pinwheels spinning behind his eyes.

"I didn't know you were—different that way. I thought maybe you were ... maybe you'd ..."

"What?" I said.

He looked back down at the table. "I just thought maybe you'd like me."

At that moment, it took every ounce of restraint I had to keep from jumping over to his side of the booth and wrapping my arms around him. I took his hand again.

"I think you're the cutest little witch in all St. Clair," I said.

A fat cat grin finally broke through all the frown lines. He looked around again at the statues populating MaryLee's By The Sea. "How long will they stay like that?"

I let go of his hand and held mine up in the air again, inviting him to give me one more high-five. When our hands smacked together, the restaurant was back in business.

"Damn!" he said.

Our dinners were getting cold, so we both tried to focus on attacking the crab legs and downing our now watery drinks. When we'd finished eating and I was paying the check, Hank said, "I guess you won't be taking me with you on the road, will you?" He was smiling but I heard the hopeful tone in his voice.

"You want me to get arrested? I don't even know where I'd take you if I could. Besides, I have stuff to do ... and I'm ..."

"Taken."

I frowned.

"You don't even know how taken you are," he said, sounding resigned and much older than his years. "It's cool. I won't make an ass of myself. But would it be okay if maybe I called you sometime, just to talk?"

I asked our waitress for a pen and then took Hank's hand and wrote my cell phone number on his palm. "Now you have another use for that hand."

"I actually use the other one," he said, smirking and making the universal hand signal for whacking off.

"I have your number, too. If I don't hear from you, you'll be hearing from me."

His smile dropped softly, like petals falling off a rose. "Don't say that if you don't mean it, okay? You don't owe me nothing."

Wrong, I thought. I once again reached for his hand. "Does your second sight work on command?"

Puzzlement.

"Can you tune into someone whenever you want to?"

"Oh. Usually."

"Hold my hand then. Open your mind's eye ... look ahead a little into the future and what do you see? Did I mean it when I said you'd hear from me?"

He closed his eyes. Only two or three minutes passed. When he opened them again, he smiled and let go of my hand. "Whoa, dude! Wait'll you see what we—"

I held up my hand. "Please—spare me the details."

He grinned. "I'll be hearing from you."



In the parking lot outside MaryLee's By The Sea, we both noticed the full moon, silvery blue in the night sky.

"Dreams come true when the full moon's blue," Hank said in a sing-song drawl.

I raised an eyebrow in his direction.

"My granny says that all the time," he said, lighting another cigarette. "So ... you got other magic tricks besides that freezing thing—which is rocking awesome by the way."

I licked my index finger and held it up, then puckered up and whistled a cool breeze moving toward him, just enough to douse the fire in his Marlboro light.

"Dang," he said. "You would be one cool dude to hang out with." No pun was intended.

I could tell he was stalling, reluctant for us to go our separate ways. But it was time to say goodbye to Hank. I wanted to get back to the beach while the moon was still bright. I glanced around again to make sure we weren't under surveillance, then I gave him a hug and a peck on the cheek and reminded him to write down my number before washing his hands.

"Already memorized it," he grinned again.

He followed me out of the parking lot in his weathered little Ford pickup until I turned off on the road to the beach. Hank honked his horn and flashed his headlights as he drove off in the

other direction. I had the feeling I'd just signed unofficial adoption papers.

"Stay cool, Sabrina," I said out loud as I watched his lights fade in the rear view mirror.

FIRE AND ICE: REPRISE

I parked the car and took the wooden box out of the duffel bag in my backseat and put it into my backpack. I grabbed an old blanket out of the trunk. As I was walking toward the beach I remembered that the dream globe Stuart had given me in P-town was also in the duffel bag. I traced my steps back to the car and put it in the backpack with the box and blanket, and a flashlight from the glove compartment.

The moon was still extraordinarily bright. It transformed the pale stretch of sand and black pearl of an ocean into a tranquil, luminescent dreamscape. I wished I'd brought the camera with me. I walked along the shore toward my private spot beyond the rocks that cordoned off the public beach. All I could hear was the gentle tide and the voices I'd been carrying around with me all day.

At some point in my walk I noticed that my mood had shifted, becoming nearly as calm and agreeable as the ocean. Most of the confusion and anxiety I'd been feeling seemed to have faded, floating off as softly as a sea breeze. I found a place on the secluded beach where the moonlight fell unobstructed. It was bright enough to see clearly even without the flashlight in my backpack. I took the

long-avoided wooden box out of my bag and held it lightly in my hands, tracing the delicate carving on the lid with my fingers.

All this fuss from men and ghosts over a box. I felt a bit like Pandora, but in my case the only message from the gods seemed to be a familiar "Just do it." In some strange way I realized that it didn't even seem to matter so much now what was in it. Or maybe on some level, I was feeling like I already knew.

"Okay, Grammy, Aunt Belle ... and anyone else peeking out from behind the veil ... I'm going in."

The box was lined with dark velvet. In the moonlight I couldn't tell if it was purple or blue or black. There was a much smaller, plainer box inside. I opened it and found a deck of Tarot cards. I recognized many of the images. They were similar to those scattered throughout Stuart and Angelo's inn in P-town. Next to the cards, wrapped in a piece of embroidered silk, was an antique pocket watch. There was an inscription on the inside of the case, but I couldn't make it out. I switched on the flashlight and was able to read: "With my beloved, time stands still."

I dug a little deeper and underneath the box of cards and the watch was a large, thick envelope tied with ribbon. On the front of the envelope my name was written in a very feminine looking script. I carefully untied the ribbon, and as I did, a thin piece of folded note paper fell out of the package. When I opened the note I immediately recognized Aunt Belle's sprawling handwriting:

"Dear Nephew. I should have given this to you long ago. Please forgive me for this and my many other mistakes. And please know that love is all around you and always will be."

Aunt Belle. I felt a breeze stir as I thought of her, raising the hair on the back of my neck as if she'd just stepped out of the shadows and was looking over my shoulder. I took a deep breath and broke the seal on the envelope. The first thing I saw were the pictures. Old faded photographs. They were dark, even in the brilliant moonlight and with the flashlight, but I knew immediately—they were pictures of my mother.

There were photos of her as a girl and a young woman ... beautiful with pale blonde hair, a soft but wistful smile, and clear, searching eyes. My eyes. It was true what everyone said about the resemblance. In fact it was my face looking back at me in every photograph, even the ones of her as a young girl: the same serious, uncertain expression I always saw in the mirror, but on her it looked sweet and innocent.

There were pictures of her with Grammy, and with Aunt Belle when she was also much younger. I was surprised to see that in her youth, Aunt Belle had been almost pretty, with rich dark hair falling in thick waves and curls around her shoulders and a vivid smile. In the photo of them together, they had their arms around each other and they were both laughing. I had never imagined that they might have had happy times together.

"All you need to know of her ... all you need to know of him ... you will find inside the box," Aunt Belle had said. I looked at the pictures of my mother and I saw that she looked happy in them. Her face always bore the same look of serenity, whether she was smiling or laughing, or just looking earnestly beautiful. When I was finally able to take my eyes off of them, I saw there was a smaller envelope inside the first. It held a letter, handwritten in the same lovely, delicate script. I turned the flashlight on the page and started to read:

My darling Colm,

If you are reading this, it means that I have long departed. The greatest sorrow of my life is leaving you just as your life in this time and space is beginning, and if I had the power to change this destiny I surely would. Since I cannot, all that I am able to do is pour my love for you into this letter and pray that you will find your way to knowing that I have never truly left you, that I am with you always, and that your happiness is my greatest hope.

I know that you will learn, in time, what you need to know of me and of our legacy. You will learn that you are blessed, gifted

in so many ways, and above all else, loved as dearly as any child could ever be loved.

I leave you the few things of value that are mine to give: the cards that have served me well in understanding better some of the mysteries of my life and the watch I gave to your father when he was still with me. By this time you will know the magic you possess, the power that you have to command the elements of your nature and to make time stand still. Let the watch remind you that however great your gift may be, it is there above all to teach you that time stops for you in order to see things as they are, and to give you the vision that you need to set it back in motion, to let it take you where it will.

Since I cannot be a physical presence in your life, I will instead inhabit the world you dream of, to whatever extent you will allow. I will forever be just a heartbeat away—a song whispered in your ear, present anytime you close your eyes and available to you whenever you are able to trust yourself enough to see or hear me. Since I cannot gather you in my arms I will send others who can hold and comfort you, and teach you what you need to know. I will do all that I can to see to it that love finds you. I will send to you one who understands your heart and treasures you, but in this as in all other opportunities, the choices will be yours.

In this lifetime, my beloved son, no matter what you learn, no matter what you embrace or resist about the past, no matter how you fear its grip on you, the choices will be yours, to say yes or no, to stay or run away, to stop time or to let it carry you to joy beyond your fondest dreams.

Whatever you choose, I will be here waiting for you, watching, helping when I can, hoping for the magical fulfillment of your every dream and desire, and always loving you with all my heart.

I held the letter in my hands, my fingers tracing her handwriting, feeling her words to me. In that instant I remembered every dream

I'd had about her, seeing her face clearly in each one, knowing now that those dreams had been real, that all of it—everything I'd questioned and doubted all those years—had been real. I could see her now in those dreams as clearly as in the photos I was holding in my hands. I could hear her voice and that lilting, magical song she sang, and I knew that I would always be able to see and hear her. I would never forget her face or the sound of her voice again.

I reluctantly folded the letter to put it back in the envelope and saw that there was another photo that I had overlooked. It was another picture of her, but this time with a young man in a military uniform. He was dark haired, intense and dangerously handsome. Neither of them was looking at the camera. Their eyes were on each other, and his arm was draped protectively over her shoulder. Anyone looking at that picture could see the love on their faces. I knew with crystalline certainty that I was looking at a picture of my mother with my father.

He wasn't a large man, but he looked strong, athletic and alert ... and familiar. The more closely I studied his picture, the more familiar he seemed ... his slightly curly, shining black hair ... the dark, smiling eyes. Then it hit me. This magnetically attractive man with his arm around my mother, reminded me of Aidan. They could've been brothers.

This realization, that at any other time would most certainly have crept me out, was surprisingly not creepy—or even surprising. It almost made sense to me that I would be drawn to what had charmed her, that I would look for what she had looked for, and love some version of what she had loved.

The more striking revelation was that I was finally acknowledging to myself what I had tried so hard to resist. It was there now, as clear as my father's face, as undeniable as my mother's smitten ice-blue eyes. I had thought it before. I had felt it and wondered about it and transmitted it telepathically even if I'd never said it out loud. Now I could simply know it. I was completely, irrevocably, and undeniably in love with Aidan. To run away from

it or from him was to run away from myself. Somewhere a spirit chorus joined their collective voices in a hallelujah-like “Duh!”

It was the most completely peaceful, obvious-to-everyone-but-me epiphany I’d ever had. I felt woozy and profoundly content, and a little sleepy. Maybe it was the Hurricane I’d gulped down at MaryLee’s By The Sea before saying goodbye to Hank. Maybe it was the accumulated visitations and revelations of the last forty-eight hours. I took the dream globe from Stuart out of my backpack and cradled it in my hands.

“It will show you your fondest dream,” he had said, “but only when you’re ready to see.”

I was ready. Before I passed out again on the beach I wanted to see that electrically handsome face, the face of the miraculous man who’d found the missing pieces of my past and given them back to me, who’d helped make it possible for me to finally see myself. I wanted him there with me. I held the globe up to the moonlight, feeling my long, unhinged, uncertain, unhappy past washing out with the silvery tide, and I said out loud, as if I’d always known it was what I was supposed to say at that moment,

*As shining and pure as this moon on this sea,
let the dream that my heart most desires, come to me.*

The warm breeze that suddenly swelled and swirled around me was no surprise. Nor was the image of Aidan’s gleaming, grinning face in the globe. It was exactly what I expected—the only vision that seemed possible. It sent a familiar wave of tingling warmth from my scalp to my bare toes. His clear, unmistakable and audible voice over my shoulder, however, nearly made me wet myself.

“Be careful what you ask for,” he said.

The globe practically jumped out of my hand and landed on the sand near my feet. I turned to see him standing behind me, glowing in the moonlight like some descended god. I blinked hard. Granted, things were changing fast, but last time I checked, I didn’t have the power to teleport someone across time and space.

I blinked hard again and rubbed my eyes. He was still there—apparently in the flesh. “How did you find me?”

“You have to ask?” He reached for my hand and pulled me to my feet. “This planet—hell, this galaxy—is not big enough to hide you from me. Not in this lifetime or any other.”

I felt the heat from his hand radiating up my arm. I was happier to see him than I even knew I could be. As I noticed the joy rising and the sheer beauty of his face in that light I wondered, was this finally it? Was I finally willing to trust what I’d written off before as a temporary illusion or a mistake or something simply too wonderful to be real? Could I put my cluttered and curious past—our past—into some perspective that worked? Could he? A lingering, nagging gnat of doubt buzzed around in my unfailingly stubborn head.

“I’m not the one who’s always run away before,” I said. “What happens if you decide that you prefer another place ... another planet or another plane—or another person? What happens to us if you leave again?”

He took my face in his hands. “The idea of another person isn’t even worthy of a response. Another place? Then I take you with me—I don’t leave without you,” he said. “Don’t you get that the reason I’ve been so relentlessly crazy over who and what and where we’ve been is so that I can do everything in my power to make sure I don’t lose you ever again? From now on, no one runs away. Can we at least promise that?”

The moonlight was on his face, and I was surprised to see a couple of tears on his cheek. I touched them gently with my finger, and two tiny, perfectly tear-shaped diamonds fell into my hand. He looked at the glittering jewels in my palm—one now an icy blue, the other a fiery orange and yellow—and then that magical, dare-you-not-to-love-me, kiss-me-you-fool grin flashed across his face. In a single motion he picked me up off the sand. My arms circled his neck and my legs wrapped around his waist.

“Now all we need are the matching bands,” he said.

“What, are you proposing again?”

"Hey Mister, you're the one who just gave me a diamond," he kissed me long and hard.

I kissed him back then pulled away briefly. "Two conditions," I said.

"Name them."

"I share the byline in the book—not just a photo credit. And at least every now and then ... I get to be the top."

Suddenly we seemed to be rising ... floating up as light as his laughter over the silvery sand, the moon and stars dancing around us. I felt my body responding to his the way it had been responding for ages ... fire and ice meeting in mid-air, past, present, and future exploding like a meteor shower in us and around us. All that marvelous magic that I'd been so reluctant to believe in, Aidan's and mine, was right there with us. Right back where it belonged. And I knew that this was all mine for the choosing. I could choose him for the rest of our lives.

Am I dreaming? I wondered as I looked into those eternally enchanting, irresistibly wild black eyes.

"Like only you can." He winked.

—End—

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Stone is an author, poet, life coach, and college instructor whose fiction, poetry and essays have appeared in *Focus on the Fabulous: Colorado GLBT Voices*, *Charmed Lives: Gay Spirit in Storytelling*, *White Crane Journal*, *A&U Magazine*, *Astropoetica*, *Mostly Maine*, *Bay Windows*, *Chiron Review*, *Queer Poets Journal*, *Gents*, *Badboys*, and *Barbarians*, *New Gay Male Poetry*, and *Rebel Yell: Stories by Contemporary Southern Gay Authors*. He lives in Denver, CO, where he is working on his second novel, a collection of poems, and a children's book. He can be reached via his website: www.firstadream.com.

