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*Last
Prophecy*

*Jennie
Andrus*

The Beginnings Anthology

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2932 Ross Clark Circle, #384
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Beginnings: The Last Prophecy

Jennie Andrus

Dedication

For mum, fellow lover of all things moose.
And with thanks to Kim Knox and Pollyanna Williamson for the moose T-
shirt ideas.

Chapter One

With trembling fingers, I picked up the portable phone and greeted the man who planned to kill me on Halloween. Despite the shaky hands, I wasn't freaking out. Much. I'd already known what was coming before the calls started up.

My crazy sister predicted it.

I cradled the phone against my face and listened to the rapid, gasping breaths. "Are you just about done?" I asked, my voice as bland and bored as I could make it while my heart raced out of control.

His breath rasped with excitement and a tremor of fear rippled over my body from head to toe. "What do you want, asshole?"

"You know what I want." The voice was cold, unnatural. Not human. Obviously some kind of electronic device made it seem that way but knowing that didn't make it any less creepy.

"You're crazy." Insulting a madman probably wasn't smart, but I'd figured out that sarcasm and sniping just rolled off him.

"I like your nightgown. Very—patriotic."

My heart leapt up to my throat as I looked down at the battered jersey I wore—Canadian Olympic hockey jersey. Oh God!

"Why can't you just leave me alone?" I cried, all trace of boredom vanishing from my voice. Could he really see me? Was it a bluff? My gaze darted to every cover, to the heavily curtained windows. I wanted to puke.

“You know I can’t do that. I need you. I need your power.”

“I don’t have any fucking power! I’ve told you that.”

“Don’t lie to me, Lottie. I know things now, just like Maddy knew things because I took her power when I bathed in her blood. Just like I’ll bathe in your blood. You can’t escape from me. I’ll always know how to find you now.”

Nausea rolled in my stomach and tears trailed down my cheeks. “You’re crazy.” If he’d been there at that moment I’d have killed him, no regrets, for the glee in his voice when he spoke of her.

“You said that about your sister, too.” He paused and I heard his breathing increase to harsh panting. “You will be mine, Lottie.”



It was crazy of me to be packing a bag and booking a flight out of the province because of some nonsense my sister had spouted at me.

Normally I’m not a coward. I’ve been in my share of fights. How could I not with a baby sister who everyone referred to as “Mad” Maddy? Yeah, I figured she was a bit of a crackpot, but I wasn’t going to let others call her that. That was my job and I broke quite a few noses in my youth to keep it my exclusive right.

And now, thanks to a madman, I’d never have the chance to tease her again. Tears threatened to spill free as I remembered our last night together.

Two weeks ago she’d dragged me out to dinner to meet the latest in a long string of freakazoid boyfriends. Trust me, most of them actually believed they were living in the world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. But I went, and imagine my surprise to find Maddy with a guy who

looked...normal. No black cape, no filed-down incisors, not a single extra hole in his face.

Will had looked like he'd stepped right out of the nearest office building. Seeing my sister with a guy whose hair was neatly trimmed, wearing a clean shirt and—oh my God!—tie, I honestly thought I'd gone into a coma. It had to be some kind of trick.

Through dinner Will spoke with surprising eloquence on a range of topics but not once did conversation turn to anything supernatural. He didn't invite me to join a "Spiritual Love Raising"—a.k.a. an orgy.

For the first time in my life I actually enjoyed an evening with my kooky sister.

Then she'd gone into psycho-mode and blew the whole thing by making one of her crazy-assed prophecies.

*He will follow you in darkness with murder in his mind
On Halloween he will take his chance to steal your power
In searching for sanctuary, you will find love,
To save yourself, accept the moose and accept yourself.*

The truth of it is I never doubted my sister had some kind of gift. She'd been right too many times. *A chicken will lead you to treasure*, she'd told our mother, and sure enough, mom had found her wedding ring under the fridge while picking up the frozen chicken that had fallen from the freezer. I wish I'd had the chance to say that to Maddy—I wish I'd told her, just once, that I believed in her.

I'd teased her almost all our lives, and not once had I given her my support. It wasn't that I never took her seriously, because I did. The problem had always been that her predictions were just so unbelievable.

I tossed a sweater into my backpack and let the guilt burn in my stomach for every time I'd wished for a normal sister.

Then again, I wasn't exactly normal either, but it would take some pretty nasty torture to get me to admit it out loud.

If only Maddy had had a vision about herself, because that night, after we had dinner, she'd been murdered.

Will had dropped her off and gone home because he had an early morning meeting. Two hours later, a neighbor noticed Maddy's apartment door open and peeked in. Thank God for nosy neighbors. The police said it looked like a ritualistic sacrifice, then made comments about not being surprised. Maddy had tried to help them on a few cases, so they knew all about her—uniqueness.

When the calls began, I naturally called the police who, naturally speculated that perhaps craziness ran in the family. The cop who'd made the remark left my apartment with a broken nose and we danced around formal charges for a few days. After that there were mutters about mental hospitals and straitjackets so I figured it would be smarter to deal with the situation on my own.

No, I'm not normally a coward, but I was scared enough to run. Maddy said I had to accept a moose if I wanted to survive, and the chances of one running around Kensington Market, or anywhere in Toronto for that matter, were pretty low. There were only three days to Halloween and I didn't want to take any chances. I was pretty happy living, thank you very much.

Besides, the whole nightgown thing freaked me out way past my breaking point.

My parents had owned a cottage in Newfoundland. When they died it came to Maddy and I and somehow we never got around putting it up for sale. It would be easier to go north, to Muskoka or something, but I

wanted more distance. I'd always hated going east, not because I didn't like the place. Newfoundland is beautiful, the town itself charming and full of the friendly people. The problem lay in the town's name—Dildo, Newfoundland. I'd always wanted to be a normal kid; instead I was the kid with weird parents, a loony sister and a cottage in Dildo.

So, with mixed feelings, I packed some necessities, booked a flight and was just on my way out the door when the phone rang.

It was only five, not anywhere near dark yet. I doubted it could be *him*. Still, my heart thudded painfully at the sound.

"Hello?"

"Lottie? Hi. It's Will."

I groaned inwardly, but said, "Hi, Will. What's up?"

"I was wondering if you wanted to get together for drinks tonight."

I should have known. It had been two days since he'd called, wanting me to hold his hand while he cried into a martini. "I'm really sorry, but this isn't a good time. I—"

"Lottie, I really need to talk to someone." I gritted my teeth and resisted the urge to bang my head against the wall. "I miss her, you know? Maddy was everything to me and I just don't think I can go on without her."

I wish I could say I'm the kind of person who could tell him to bugger off. He'd known her a few weeks and I'd known her my whole life. He wanted pity from me when I'd just lost the last of my family? Instead, I fell back on a lifetime of not rocking the boat, and said, "Will, I know you cared for my sister, but she wouldn't want you to do this to yourself."

"Please, Lottie, just one drink?"

My eyes rolled back in annoyance. "I'm on my way to the airport. I'm running late as it is. I'm really sorry."

He laughed, a barking, forced kind of laugh. “The airport? Please tell me you aren’t taking Maddy’s prediction seriously. I mean, I loved your sister, but you can’t possibly believe someone is going to kill you on Halloween.”

“Of course not,” I lied.

“Then where are you going?”

I hesitated. “Just away for some quiet. I need some time to mourn my sister.” At least that was the truth.

“Oh, of course.” His tone changed, became distant and cold. “Well, okay then, maybe we can get together when you get back.”

“Definitely. We can have lunch.” I hung up the phone and rolled my eyes. Dear God, who knew a man could be so much like a nagging mother? Sheesh. If there were a choice between a strong and competent vampire wannabe and Will, I’d take the vamp any day.

I took one last look around my apartment and stepped out, locking the door behind me. Prophecy or no prophecy, I’d find a way to get out of this situation, with or without the moose. And the man my sister had predicted? Well, I decided to reserve judgment on that for now.

Chapter Two

By the time the plane landed in St. John's, my eyes were gritty and sore. At some point I must have fallen asleep, because there was a crusty kind of feeling on my cheek where I'd drooled on myself.

Despite all that, I felt great. It's an unbelievable feeling to know you can walk somewhere without feeling you're about to get a knife in the back.

With a bounce in my step I found the car rental kiosk and flirted with the gray-haired man behind the counter. After signing away most of the remaining credit on my Visa, I bought a map and a bag of necessities (chips, pop and a paperback novel) and headed out to pick up my vehicle.

Cool fall air blew around me when I stepped out the doors into the night. I drew in a deep breath and imagined I could taste the tang of the sea over the airport smells of oil and tarmac. The blue, knee-length sweater I wore billowed in the breeze. I stood there just outside the door, simply breathing, for a good ten minutes.

It wasn't until I was in the dimly lit parkade that I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I stopped, spun around and saw nothing but the shadows cast by parked sedans and minivans.

"You're being stupid," I whispered to myself. There was no way he could have followed me here. I hadn't told anyone where I was going, mostly because there wasn't anyone to tell. My parents had died in a car

crash two years ago. All the friends I'd had at the hospital were the kind of friends you talked to at work, but didn't invite out for drinks after shift. Hell, I doubted any of them even noticed I'd quit two weeks ago. Being a trauma nurse didn't offer much time to contemplate the whereabouts of your co-workers.

Still the feeling would not go away. My skin itched. *Probably a janitor*, I told myself, and forced my legs to keep moving.

I found my car, a putrid green hatchback that made me question the wisdom of asking for the cheapest car on the lot. With a wince I unlocked the door and threw my lumpy backpack into the backseat. Green was so not my color.

The airport was about ten kilometers from St. John's, but I wasn't heading into the city anyway. The cottage was in a small town on the southern coast, about an hour and a half away. Actually it wasn't a cottage at all, in the way we think of them in Ontario. It wasn't on a lake, or any waterfront for that matter, just a small house with a view of the ocean (if you squinted through the trees while standing on the roof) that my parents had bought because real estate was so cheap there.

Two weeks of restless sleep, followed by a late flight, didn't exactly make me into the most competent of drivers. After forty-five minutes, I'd hit the shoulder about ten times and spilled half my pop in my lap. I was crashing, long past the point where a cup of coffee would help—even if there were any Tim Horton's out in the middle of nowhere. The car didn't come equipped with a radio of course, so I made do by sticking my head out the window like a golden retriever.

By the time I hit the outskirts of Dildo, I was holding one eye open with my left hand and driving with my right. Even snickering about the name of my destination wasn't helping me stay awake, which is really saying something. I know it's immature of me. Dildos are the pegs used

to brace oars to a dory for rowing, but I was too tired to be thinking like an adult.

Maddy would be giggling right now. She'd always thought it was cool that we had a cottage here, and she told *everybody* all about it every chance she got. The only thing that kept our vacations here from falling into the realms of hell was that we were never here long enough for people to realize what a screwed up family we were.

As my eyes started to blur with exhaustion, I made a pact with whichever deity would listen—let me survive until November first and I'd never make another crack about Dildo again.

And that was when the moose stepped onto the highway.

“Son of a—” I swerved the car, aiming for the ditch. It would be just my luck to kill the damned moose that I was supposed to accept if I wanted to live. I'm pretty sure I was still giggling about how absurd that thought was, when I hit the tree and slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter Three

Warm callus-roughened hands slipped up my body. The smell of forest and warm spices drifted across my face. My skin tingled and I arched my back, hungry for more. Large fingers skimmed the lower curve of one breast, slid higher to cup me.

When those hands tweaked my nipples I realized I wasn't dreaming.

Warm brown eyes peered down at me and I shrieked, then drew back and popped the guy in the nose.

"Bugger me!" The man stumbled back, raising his hands to his face, and I realized he was huge. Not obese, but one of those tall and burly guys who could give the hulk a run for his money.

I scrambled up, realized I'd been laying on what could possibly be the ugliest couch in the known universe, and looked around for the door.

"What the hell d'ya do that for?"

"You were feeling me up!"

"I was checking for injuries. There's blood on your shirt."

I looked down and winced. A large stain spread across the white shirt and the inside of my sweater—my favorite sweater. My head snapped back up. "And you thought you'd pinch my nipples to see if they squirted?"

In the odd light cast from three hideous lamps, I watched his cheeks turn red, and he sighed dramatically—melodramatically. "It was an accident. You've got great breasts by the way." The boyish grin that split

his face was so unexpected I couldn't help but giggle. Okay, so there was a slim chance this guy was my stalker, but I wouldn't have bet money on it. He was too boyishly charming, despite being in his late twenties. I'd always thought stalkers were supposed to be nondescript, though I have to admit I'm not an expert. This was my first experience with one.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Perry Sullivan. I pulled you from your car and brought you to my home."

I looked around the room and cringed. It was like some sort of bad hippie flashback—orange shag carpet and brown and orange paisley wallpaper for God's sake.

"No offense, but this room is beyond ugly." The minute the words were out I slapped my hand to my mouth. "Shit, I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me."

He laughed. "Don't be sorry. Everyone in town tells me the same thing. I'm told I'm perverse and lack taste, but I prefer to think I'm unique."

Unique? He was a huge bear of a man dressed in black jeans and a white T-shirt bearing the slogan "Of Moose and Men". His hair was a little too long, his chin had more than a five o'clock shadow but less than a beard and he was standing barefoot in a house that looked like a drug-induced hallucination. Unique would be a good description. I would have said comfortably eccentric and sexy as hell. Not out loud though. I'd already made one blunder.

"Well, thanks for getting me out of the car. How bad was the damage?"

"You'll need a new radiator, and the front end is a little crunched, but it could have been worse." His eyes dropped to the drying blood on my shirt. "Are you sure you aren't hurt?"

The truth was, I probably had been bleeding. I said before that I wasn't exactly normal, and this was the reason why. I heal freakishly fast and I can heal other people, too. When I worked in the ER I used the gift to help people who, by rights, should have died. Just a touch, just enough to keep them alive so the doctors could succeed. I'd always been careful about it, never doing more than necessary so people didn't ask questions.

Normally I could bluff my way out of situations like this, but Perry, Mr. Good Samaritan had already felt me up and knew I didn't have any visible injuries. I bit my lip. "Um, I had a bloody nose just before I crashed."

I'm a horrible liar, and when I panic it gets even worse. That whopper sounded pathetically obvious, almost cartoonishly obvious. If I'd had a nosebleed, there'd be dried blood on my face and my hands. I snuck a quick look and saw nothing on my fingers but a slight brown streak from the pop I'd spilled earlier.

His eyebrows rose. I waited for him to say something but he just shrugged and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Well, then." He rocked back on his heels. "Is there someone you'd like to call? I'm guessing you're visiting out here? If you tell me it's a man, you'll break my heart." He winked at me, and grinned crookedly, reminding me of Harrison Ford.

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't stop the surge of warmth from swirling in my stomach at his playful flirting. "I'm heading to my parents' cottage. It's on Chime Street."

Perry laughed. "Well then, darlin', it looks like we're neighbors."

"Neighbors?"

"Yep, there's only one house on this street owned by tourists and it's right next door." He looked pretty pleased about the news. "Which sister are you? I bet you're the crazy one right?"

Lovely. A glimmer of memory ticked my brain and I groaned. Perry Sullivan, object of my youthful fantasies until Maddy had stepped in and done her psychic act. Only two people out here knew about Maddy's visions. Figured I'd find one of them right away. Like an elastic band that had been slowly stretching for weeks, my temper finally reached the breaking point.

"No, that was my sister, and she wasn't crazy, she was different. I'd think you, of all people would appreciate that Mr. Unique. Now if you don't mind, I have to go get some sleep so I can find the damned moose that's supposed to save my life!"

He just stared at me for a minute, his left eyebrow raised and his mouth slack, before he shook his head. "Oh right, well, my mistake then. You're obviously not crazy at all."

The sarcasm in his voice was like a bucket of cold water dumped over my head. I hated it when I lost it like that. It had been a long time since I'd lost my temper, but I suppose I deserved to let off a little steam. I dropped heavily onto the couch behind me and sighed.

"Sorry. Maybe I am going a little nuts. I've had a crappy couple weeks."

"It's Lottie right? Want to talk about it?"

Did I? I looked up into Perry's soft brown eyes and felt the strangest urge to jump into his arms and tell him all my problems.

"My sister was killed two weeks ago."

He cursed and I saw his cheeks turn pink beneath the dark stubble. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said what I did."

"It's okay. You couldn't have known. Besides, it's not like I haven't heard worse."

“I remember when she told my father she’d had a vision about me driving Lisa Mullens out to that hotel in St. Johns. Blew all my well-made plans and I never even got out of town.”

I frowned. “I remember that. Your dad got really mad. Weren’t you twenty-two or something?” I’d always found that weird. My parents had been pretty lenient when it came to sex so Maddy and I had thought it strange that our neighbor’s father showed up to ream him for getting it on with a girl. Obviously things were vastly different in Newfoundland.

“Something like that.”

“You could have just told your dad to mind his own business.”

His eyebrows drew together in a frown. “I could have, but he was right. It was stupid and dangerous.”

My confusion must have shown, because he shrugged and looked away. “According to your sister, I would have gotten Lisa pregnant if we’d gone.”

Okay, that made a bit more sense. Still, it was weird for his father to go all ape-shit over it when he couldn’t possibly have known Maddy really could predict the future like that. The man had been out of his mind with anger and I could recall him making threats that involved the use of a sharp knife against his son’s privates.

“How did your sister die?” His voice was soft and inviting. Tears pricked my eyes and I had to bite my lip to keep them from spilling out.

“I—I don’t think I can talk about it.” Something told me if I told him one thing my mouth would just keep on spilling the details of the last two weeks. My head pounded. I knew there were things I should probably do, like call the rental agency and report that I’d crashed the car, but I was too tired to think. All I wanted was a bed. Everything else could wait until tomorrow.

Chapter Four

It hadn't occurred to me there would be no power in the house. My parents had hired a woman to come in and clean before our trips out, but I hadn't thought to do the same. Thick cobwebs reflected the glow of Perry's flashlight. I also hadn't thought to call the electric company to have the power turned back on.

No power, no water, no heat. Lovely.

What furniture there was looked dull with layers of dust. The thought of cleaning all this brought a hard lump to my stomach. Thank God my mother hadn't been into knick-knacks and dust collectors. The furniture had all come from garage sales so it was an eclectic collection of old-lady cast-offs and cottage-style pine.

I shuddered and tossed my bag onto the couch, raising a cloud of dust into the gloomy light cast by Perry's flashlight.

"You sure you want to stay here? I have a king-size bed you could share."

I rolled my eyes and stepped forward, determined to ignore the swirl of heat his words sent through my stomach. "Do you always come on to women like this?"

"Only the pretty ones. Seriously, you can't stay here tonight, it's gross."

That was certainly true, but I wasn't going to hop into bed with a stranger to avoid dust bunnies. I had enough on my mind without

tossing in an affair with a sexy neighbor. *But Maddy did say you'd find love.* I snorted at the nagging little voice. *Love doesn't mean getting busy with the first guy who makes a pass.*

And now I was talking to myself. Lovely.

"I'll be fine. It's not as bad as camping."

He sighed and handed me the flashlight. "I'll come check on you in the morning. I'll call about getting your power hooked up too, and pick you up some groceries."

"You don't have to do that."

He tipped my chin up with one finger and grinned crookedly. "It's all part of the rescue package."

"And what do you normally charge for hero services?" Whoa! Was that my voice sounding all breathless and soft? Was I flirting?

"That's negotiable. We'll discuss terms when you're not ready to collapse onto the floor."

He leaned down and pressed his lips softly to mine. While I was still struggling to catch my breath, he turned and left. I thought I heard him curse as he let himself out the door, but I couldn't be sure. I was too busy trying not to collapse onto the floor.



At first I didn't know where I was, or why I was waking up in the middle of the night. The dregs of a dream drifted away, leaving me with tingly skin and a longing for a slightly scruffy man with eyes like melted chocolate. Weird.

Then I breathed in the stale scent of the linens under me, sneezed violently and it all came back.

I was in Newfoundland.

With a groan, I rolled over and pressed the light on my watch. It took me a minute to realize I'd slept straight through the day and into the following night.

It was the night before Halloween. Well technically it was early Halloween morning here, but back in Ontario it was still just a bit before D-day.

My heart thumped rapidly against my ribs. For the first time I wondered what the heck I'd been thinking. Running away wasn't going to solve my problems. Sure maybe the killer wouldn't find me in time for Halloween. Did that mean he'd give up? No. The minute I returned to Toronto he'd be after me again.

All I'd done was delay the inevitable.

But Maddy was never wrong. If she said he'd get me on Halloween, he'd get me on Halloween. Had I given myself a year's respite or was I deluding myself about being safe here? My head was starting to spin with possibilities, consequences and outcomes, which, when I forced myself to push it aside, didn't make sense. None of her predictions had ever been complicated. It was just "this is going to happen" then it happened.

I was probably over-thinking the whole thing.

I crawled out from the dingy blanket and ran my fingers through my hair. Gross. The amount of dust collected there made each strand feel about an inch thick. I could feel my pores clogging up and there was that strange tickly feeling on my back like I had spiders skittering around under my shirt.

To my surprise, the bathroom light came on when I flicked the switch. With a mental note to thank Perry when I saw him again, I turned on the shower and watched, fascinated, as the avocado green tub swirled with brown. More than dirt washed down the drain. Little bugs scrambled for safety, but in the end lost the war against the battering

water. I felt a little guilty about it. I had no problem with bugs as long as they weren't in my house. I'm one of those people who usually scoops up spiders and takes them outside rather than squishing them with a magazine.

Half an hour later I was clean, still dripping wet and wandering around the house naked because I'd realized too late there would be no clean towels.

True to his word, Perry had come in while I'd slept and stocked the fridge. His choices offered an interesting insight to the man. Yogurt, fresh fruit and no-fat milk. Yeesh. There were eggs, the omega-3 kind that were more expensive but promised added health benefits, a bag of baby carrots, some broccoli and green peppers. A white brick-like thing caught my eye. Tofu? Dear God, my big burly neighbor was a vegetarian? Worse, there was not a single bite of chocolate to be found.

Well, nobody was perfect.

A floorboard creaked softly and I froze, my naked butt still hanging out of the refrigerator, and beautifully backlit by the little light that hadn't worked last time we'd been here.

"Perry?" I whispered.

No answer.

Letting the door shut quietly I moved to the front door. Locked. How had Perry gotten in with the food?

Another creak, unmistakably a footstep this time. Blood pounded in my ears. The stalker had found me.

I ran.

The screen door flew open with a screech of stiff hinges and banged against the wooden frame like a gunshot in the night. The old deck boards bounced beneath my feet as I thundered across them. At the base of the steps I skidded to a halt.

Under the light of a half-moon, I saw it standing on the lawn. Silver light played over its body, making the massive rack shine like ebony. Overgrown grass caressed its gangly legs.

Holy crap it was big! I mean I know people call them the giants of the forest, but until you're only feet away from one, you just don't appreciate how true that statement really is. Up until now I'd been sure that expecting a moose to save me was foolish. Now, seeing one up close, I could imagine the oddly beautiful creature doing anything. Like Superman and Lassie all rolled into one.

Well if it was suppose to protect me, it could start now. I sprinted across the lawn and ducked behind its bulk. Maybe ducking wasn't necessary since it was tall enough to hide a pro basketball player, but I was going on instinct. Hugging to its side I drew in ragged breaths and waited for my heart rate to slow.

A spicy scent drifted through the cloud of panic fogging my brain. Huh. I'd always thought moose would smell musty, like stagnant water and rotting leaves.

Now, maybe sprinting towards a moose in the dark while completely naked wasn't the smartest thing I'd ever done. In hindsight I'd have to say it ranked up there with some of my dumbest ideas, but I trusted my sister. If she was watching this from wherever it is you go when you die, I hoped she took it as a sign that I really did respect her visions. Then again she was probably laughing her halo off.

The moose regarded me with appalled shock, as if it didn't know what to make of this pale creature clinging to his side. Craning his neck further, he pressed his round nose against my shoulder and I had the feeling I was being sniffed. When its nose brushed against my breast I nudged it away. When that nose went a little further south I gave it an annoyed slap.

“Mind your manners.”

With a snort, the animal blew warm, misty breath over my stomach and then moved off into the trees towards Perry’s house.

“Well that’s just great,” I muttered. What the heck was I supposed to do now? Stand out here naked or go back into the house and confront a psycho killer? Not the best options. And darn it, why didn’t I pack a bathrobe? At least I wouldn’t be out here naked and freezing my—

“Are you out of your flippin’ mind?”

Turning, I saw Perry stomping out of the forest. I groaned and considered trying to hide in the tall grass, but I’d never been a coward. I crossed my arms under my breasts and turned to greet my neighbor. “Hi, how’s it going?” I called cheerfully, hoping my voice sounded casual, like I walked around naked in the moonlight on a regular basis. I watched Perry’s face contort as he worked through his anger and shock. Actually it would have been funny if I hadn’t been about to die of embarrassment.

“Don’t you know that moose are dangerous animals? How could you just run up to one like that?”

I winced. “I um, have a way with animals.”

He threw his hands up into the air. “And everyone thought your sister was crazy! You got a death wish, lady?”

Now would be the perfect time to explain that I was actually trying to get myself out of a death sentence, but I didn’t know if he’d believe me. At this exact moment I didn’t think my credibility was too high.

I was starting to shiver, and was feeling pretty foolish now that I had time to think about what I’d done. Having someone else point out my stupidity didn’t help.

He hesitated a second then shrugged out of his flannel shirt and helped me into it. His hands were warm against my arms. Amused, I watched his hands tremble as he tried to do up the buttons. Finally he

looked up at me and ground out something that sounded like “Bugger it” before he kissed me.

His arms drew me in tight and I realized just how strong this man was. Desire licked through my stomach, my breasts began to tingle and I felt a surge of something shoot straight to my loins. I finally understood what real hunger was.

It was like drowning, or jumping out of a plane. It was like nothing I’d ever experienced in my life. The daring dreams from my youth had nothing on the reality of this man’s lips on mine.

His hands slipped inside the half-buttoned shirt, hot as flames on my chilled flesh, and just that simple touch on my waist made everything in my body flip over. He didn’t push, didn’t demand anything, but that simple kiss felt like a branding, a claiming. Dear God!

After a few minutes he shuddered and carefully set me away from him. He drew in a ragged breath and ran his fingers through his hair. My gaze was drawn to his shirt where a moose in a tuxedo stood with a martini in one hoof while pointing a gun with the other. Along the bottom of the graphic it read “The Moose Who Loved Me”.

Something clicked in my brain. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to trust an actual moose. This was the second shirt I’d seen Perry wear that showed a moose on it. Could Maddy’s prediction have been less literal than usual? If that was true then I’d done something very, very stupid tonight.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have attacked you like that. I don’t know what it is about you, Lottie.”

“Maybe you have a thing for crazy women,” I commented, still reeling from the combined shock of Perry’s kiss and the realization that he may be the key to my survival.

“I don’t think you’re crazy. You scared the hell out of me and I didn’t deal with it very well.” As he spoke he dropped his forehead gently

against mine and closed his eyes. My heart melted. I loved that forehead-to-forehead thing.

“Oh, I’d have to argue with you there.” I grinned.

An animal-like growl came from his throat and he closed the distance between us again, but to my disappointment, he simply pulled me into his arms. “Christ, I need to get a grip before I throw you to the ground and have my way with you a dozen times.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I squeaked against his chest. His laugh rumbled out, making both our bodies tremble.

“You’re a fine one, Lottie MacElwain, but it’s too dangerous. Go inside and put on some clothes.”

“I can’t go inside. There’s someone in there.”

His head came up. “What?”

“You don’t think I ran out here naked on purpose did you? I got out of the shower and heard footsteps.”

His eyes hardened, grew more intense. “Stay behind me.”

A little confused about the sudden change in him, I followed, though I didn’t expect we’d find anything. Half the town could have tromped into the house bearing welcome-to-the-neighborhood casseroles and I wouldn’t have noticed. The intruder would be long gone.

There was nobody in the house. Surprise! We searched every room and found nothing but dust and cobwebs.

“Could have been a mouse,” he suggested when we were back in the kitchen scrambling eggs and making toast for a very early breakfast. We’d had to scrub the counters and wash all the dishes. Thankfully, Perry had included dish soap in his grocery shopping.

“It wasn’t a mouse,” I grumped, slopping milk into the bowl of eggs. “Maybe it was you. How’d you get in here with the food, anyway?”

His head whipped around so fast I heard a soft snap. “I wasn’t sneaking around in your house, and I picked the lock when I came with the groceries. You might want to replace the knob. It was pathetically easy to get in here.”

I hadn’t really thought it was him. He’d have made more noise, as big as he was. “What were you doing wandering around outside in the middle of the night?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

The conversation paused for a moment while Perry cooked the eggs and I buttered toast.

“It could have been kids. I’ve caught a few of them sneaking in here at nights. It’d be easy for them to get in with that lock,” he commented, waving the spatula towards the door.

Great, teenagers had been using my parents’ cottage as a love shack. “Maybe.”

I bit my lip. Should I tell him about the stalker? If I was right about Perry being the “moose” in Maddy’s prophecy, it could be important.

I couldn’t do it. He already thought I was a few sandwiches short of a picnic and I didn’t want to scare him away. Stupid pride. I could almost hear Maddy giving me grief over it—or maybe I just read too many romance novels. The heroine always ends up in trouble when she hides things from the hero.

A few minutes later we were sitting at the newly scrubbed table, drinking coffee and looking at each other through lowered lashes.

While I ate I ran through the words of Maddy’s prophecy in my mind. I’d run to sanctuary—check. I’d nearly been killed by a moose on the highway, and then been foolish enough to run towards one, but at least I’d found a moose. I’d found a guy who turned my legs to jelly with one kiss so I was probably well on my way to fulfilling that love bit. Actually,

watching the muscles bunch under Perry's T-shirt had me well on my way to sweeping everything off the table and—scratch that. Time to think about sex when all this stalker mess was cleared up.

Maybe coming to Newfoundland hadn't been a mistake.

"Do you have plans for tonight?" Perry's question drew me from my musing. I remembered it was Halloween. Did I have plans?

"No, not really."

"There's a party at the hall. Some folks will be in costume, but it's not required."

I hesitated. Could I go to a party when there was a maniac out to kill me? Did I really want to sit in this house and wait for him to get me?

"Sure, that sounds like fun."

"Great. I'd pick you up, but I'm supposed to be there to set up."

"That's okay, it's not too far to walk." He must have heard the tremor in my voice because his eyes swung to mine and I could see he had questions. The warmth left his eyes and for a second his expression grew hard. I held my breath and waited, knowing if he asked outright I'd tell him everything.

Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, he remained silent.

Chapter Five

I spent the day scrubbing and washing. Part of me wondered why the heck I bothered when I could be dead by midnight anyway.

The chipper, optimistic side shoved that part of me out of the way and chose to concentrate on happier thoughts—like Perry Sullivan.

I knew nothing about the man other than he seemed to be a health-food junkie, had appalling taste in decor and seemed to rejoice in his status as “weird”. As someone who’d spent her whole life trying to be as normal as possible, this fact should have set off alarm bells. Instead it felt comforting. He might possibly be the only man who would accept my own freakish secret.

And the guy was seriously hot and could kiss my pants off.

Dusk was closing in, casting long shadows across my lawn. I shuddered. The hair on the back of my neck prickled. Somewhere, in those deepening shadows, a maniac waited.

I no longer had any doubts that he’d followed me east. Maddy had never been wrong. He was here and, sometime in the next few hours, he’d make his move. I didn’t know if I’d made a mistake, not telling Perry everything. Trusting a guy I’d only known for a few days (I couldn’t count the times Maddy and I watched him mowing his lawn when we’d been teenagers) wasn’t easy and trusting in a wild animal was even harder. Why couldn’t Maddy have made things simple, just once?

Why hadn't she seen her own death? Maybe she had. Maybe she'd just not been able to see a way out for herself the way she had for me.

The only thing to do was let things play out, and pray that I hadn't bungled my only hope of surviving.

With that depressing thought ringing in my head, I grabbed my purse and headed for the door. The night air chilled the panic-sweat on my forehead.

Children in costumes were beginning to haunt the streets. From every front step, glowing eyes watched from orange faces. I'd never been good at carving pumpkins, and in the city it wasn't the same anyway, so I hadn't bothered in years. Now I wished I had a few to carve up.

Maddy had always made the best pumpkins. When we were kids, half the neighborhood would come to our house just to see what she'd done. Mine had always looked like the victim of a horrible car crash, but our parents had insisted we each do at least one.

It wasn't far to the hall, but the distance seemed impossible when every few seconds I swore I heard footsteps behind me. Each time I turned to look over my shoulder I saw only a darkening street, and pint-sized ghosts, firemen and princesses.

When I reached the end of the Chime, I had two options—take the long and well-lit way down a populated street or duck down the alley behind the pub and get there in half the time.

I've seen enough horror movies to know you never go down a dark alley alone when there's a killer on the loose. The thing was, that alley was pretty short, and there were a lot of people on the other end of it. How bad could it be?

My mind made up, I ducked off the sidewalk and behind the dumpster. The air smelled of stale beer and grease, reminding me of my own days as a waitress during college. It's amazing how the smell of

frying food can cling to hair, skin and clothes. If only perfume lasted that long.

A loud clang behind me jerked my heart up to my throat. I spun around and saw the dumpster blocking the back of the lane.

Well crud. I turned and ran harder than I've ever run in my entire life. My high-school gym teacher would have been proud. When I burst out onto the well-lit street I stopped and looked around. I'd more than half-expected this end of the alley to be blocked as well, so I was shocked to find myself surrounded by giggling ghosts, firemen and princesses all of whom were pointing at the scaredy-cat grownup.

Nothing like the taunting of adolescents to send your ego plummeting.

With my dignity in tatters, I walked away, letting their laughter fade into the distance.

Fiddle music drifted out the doors of the hall, a large wooden building used for everything from weddings to poker night. I grinned and quickened my step. The lights were dim and the air sharp with the scents of cinnamon and burning candles. Only a few people stood in the room and of those, only three were in costume. A shepherdess, a leprechaun and a moose.

I laughed. Even if his size hadn't given him away, I'd have known it was Perry behind that fake fur. I don't know why, but somehow I knew it was so like him to dress up. Back home you hardly ever saw a grown man get into the Halloween spirit, unless you counted some of Maddy's ex-boyfriends, but to them, every day was Halloween. I wondered if any of them would be dressed in normal clothes tonight, leaving off their black leather pants and silk capes.

The moose had spotted me and I could feel the goofy grin on my face as he headed my way.

“Nice costume.”

His laugh was muffled, but I could see his eyes twinkling through the moose’s mouth. “How’d you know it was me?”

“Lucky guess.” A shriek pierced the air and I jumped. My heart thudded erratically as I looked behind me.

“Just one of the trick or treaters.” Perry’s gaze held mine for several long seconds. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Another pathetically obvious lie.

“You’re hiding something, and you’re scared.”

“I had a bit of a scare on the way here. Just some kids playing tricks. It’s nothing.”

Again he studied me, and it was impossible to read his expression in the shadows of the stuffed moose nose. When he leaned forward and whispered, “After the party we’ll talk,” I knew he didn’t believe me. Not that I blamed him. I was a really rotten liar. What’s more, for those seconds when his gaze had bored into mine, he’d again seemed like a completely different person than the playful charmer I knew. It reminded me of something, I just couldn’t figure out what.

A short man with fake vampire teeth came up and slapped Perry lightly on the back. “Thith the girl you menthoned?”

Perry sighed and turned to the man. “Take out the teeth, Minkey. You’re spitting all over the place.”

The man grinned and spit the plastic teeth into his hand. He looked to be in his forties, with thinning blond hair and mischievous blue eyes. Other than the teeth he wore jeans and a flannel shirt. Either the teeth were the extent of his costume or he was portraying a very different kind of vampire than you normally read about.

“Sorry about that. I think they’re meant for kids. Been a bitch to keep them in place. Now, is this little lady the one who plowed that really ugly car into a tree?”

I sighed. “Yeah, that’s me. It’s a rental. On the other hand, I managed to miss the moose so it could have been worse.”

Minkey’s eyes popped, and he cast a curious glance up at Perry.

“Uh, right, could have been worse.” He looked distinctly uncomfortable and clicked the plastic teeth together. “Glad to hear it was a rental, otherwise I’d have wondered if you had horrible taste like the big guy here. Nobody in their right mind would buy a car that color,” Minkey joked. “I’ll have it right as rain in a few days, don’t you worry.”

“Minkey’s the best mechanic in the county,” Perry added.

It occurred to me that I’d forgotten to deal with the car thing. I frowned. “I should have called the rental agency about the accident, shouldn’t I have? Don’t they usually deal with stuff like this?”

“Already done. Don’t worry.”

I looked at Perry and blinked. “You called them?”

“Well sure he did. As first officer on the scene, it’s his job to take care of details.”

First officer? “You’re a cop?” A chill ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the breeze blowing in the door. Cops were dangerous.

“Well shit, Perry. You didn’t tell her what you do for a living?”

“It hasn’t come up. Would you excuse us, Mink?” Without waiting for an answer, Perry guided me away to the bar. A lump had formed in my throat.

Perry was a cop. The thought kept bouncing around in my brain like a pinball. I’d told him Maddy had been killed. I knew it would be easy for him to get information about the case from the police in Toronto, and if he had talked to the metro police, had they told him I was crazy? Hell, if

he'd talked to the right cop he'd have heard more than that. Technically I'd assaulted an officer, though in my defense he'd been a jerk. The charges had been dropped, but still.

He shoved a beer into my hands and studied me through the mouth hole in his mask. "You got a problem with the police I should know about?"

"Of course not." My response was a little too quick and forceful. His eyes narrowed.

"Look, Lottie, I know something's up. Tonight we'll talk and you're going to tell me everything."

I nodded and took a sip of my beer to avoid meeting his eyes. Maybe I should have told him earlier. Trust the moose. As he led me away to meet the other partygoers, I wondered if maybe I'd screwed up, and if that were true, I wouldn't be around to tell Perry anything.

Chapter Six

In the next hour the room swelled with people. A long table had appeared near the bar, and with each new guest more treats were added until it threatened to collapse under the weight. I'd met more people than I could keep track of, and I'd noted more than one woman giving me dirty looks because Perry hadn't left my side once.

I wasn't sure what to make of Perry tonight. One minute he was looking at me as if he'd like to toss me over his shoulder and carry me off to his cave, and the next he looked at me with something resembling regret..

Maybe he hadn't looked into the events in Ontario. I had the feeling he thought I was on the run from the law, instead of some imaginary stalker, which is what he'd have been told if he'd called Toronto. It wasn't so much anything he said, just a feeling that he was struggling with something.

"And who is this young lady?" An older man stepped up beside us. My first impression was of a bear, but he lacked the predatory features one would associate with that animal. The man was huge, and I realized he must be Perry's father. I vaguely recognized him from the past and he hadn't changed much—a stern-looking man with close-cut brown hair just graying at the temples.

“Lottie, this is my dad, Dave Sullivan. Dad, this is Lottie MacElwain. I’m sure you remember her and her family. They own the cottage next door to me and spent summers here a while back.”

The man’s eyebrows rose. “Is that so?” His brown eyes settled on my face for a long minute then shifted to study his son’s. “Perhaps she’d give us a minute to talk. I’ve a question to ask of you.”

I nodded and watched them walk away to the bar. Bodies drifted in and out of my field of view, keeping me from seeing what was going on. I shrugged and turned to look around the room. Somehow I’d forgotten how friendly and welcoming people were here.

As I watched a group of balding men do a jig I let my mind wander. Maddy would have loved this. A lump formed in my throat at the thought of never seeing her again. There are always regrets when someone dies. I wish I’d spent more time, wish I’d told them, wish I’d repaid that money—the list went on.

I’d been near enough grieving families at work to know how it worked, and to know that when the loved one was taken from them violently, purposefully, the need for revenge and justice overwhelmed grief until those responsible were punished.

In my own panic I’d never gotten to that stage, but now, watching these happy people celebrating, it struck me how much that bastard had stolen from her, and from me.

Cold fury washed over me, and in its wake came the need to act. As soon as Perry returned I’d tell him everything, and together we’d see this murdering prick strung up by his balls.

My determination slipped when Perry rejoined me. His face was grim, his eyes bright with anger. His hand enveloped mine in a grip so firm and possessive I nearly jerked free from shock.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing, just an argument with my father.”

I frowned. I didn't want to be nosy and ask what they'd argued about, nor did I want to rush right into my own confession, thereby saying his problems were insignificant next to mine. Technically it was true. Raving lunatic versus meddling father. No real contest there. Still, I couldn't just say that.

So I waited, deciding I'd give him a few minutes to cool down before I dumped all my troubles at his feet.

“Not long now, Lottie.” The voice was a whisper, barely audible.

I jumped and frowned up into Perry's face. “What did you say?”

“I didn't say anything.” I realized Perry had been talking to someone whose name I couldn't remember. Twisting my lips in confusion I looked over my shoulder. Nobody stood close enough to have whispered in my ear.

Great, now I was hearing voices.

A few minutes later I felt warm breath on my neck and a soft voice say “You will be mine, Lottie.”

I spun around, jerking out of Perry's one-armed embrace. There was nobody there.

I squealed as hands clamped onto my shoulders. “What's wrong?” Perry asked, turning me around and tilting my chin up with one finger.

My heart, which had taken a trip down to my feet, thundered back into its customary place. “Um, nothing. Claustrophobic. I think I need some air.”

I don't think he believed me, but I didn't care. *He* was here, somewhere in this room, and all I knew was that I had to get out.

Without a word, Perry guided me through the crowd towards the door. My shoulder blades itched and all the hair on my body stood on end.

“Oh good, there you are, Perry!” Minkey sprinted over to block our way. “Marcus went and got himself snookered again. He’s threatening to beat Lenny with a candy apple if Lenny won’t give him back his keys. Oh, and Lester said some fax came through for you from Toronto”

Perry cursed. “I’ll take care of it.” He looked down at me and frowned, then kissed me on the forehead and said, “I’ll be out in five.” He turned and followed the mechanic back into the mob.

Alone, I stood on the threshold trying to decide what to do. If I stayed inside there was a good chance the stalker wouldn’t make a move because of the crowd, but if I could get away, maybe hide somewhere, then when Perry came out we could talk. If the fax was about me, I really didn’t want to be standing beside him when he read about me being a nut job.

Hiding sounded good.

The streets were deserted. Trick or treating was done for another year and tomorrow there would be hundreds of kids with stomachaches, unless they had parents like mine. Every year my sister and I had to take all our candy down to the women’s shelter. We were never allowed sweets, which could explain why I pretty much lived on junk as an adult.

A Kit-Kat would really calm my nerves right now.

Unfortunately there were no kids around to steal candy from so I kept walking, deciding that if I could get a good hiding spot where I could watch the door, I’d be able to see the stalker come out and *BAM!* I’d have him.

I chose a rusty Ford pickup parked across the street and hunkered down in the shadows under the lowered tailgate to wait. A young couple came out of the curling club, holding hands and giggling over a shared secret. Probably going off to have their own private party. I squelched the spurt of envy and kept my eyes on the door.

Ten minutes later my butt tingled and my legs ached. Nobody else had come out. I wondered if Perry was still dealing with the drunk guy or if some other crisis had come up. Maybe he'd decided not to bother with me after reading that fax.

Crud, I'd really messed this up.

"Happy Halloween, Lottie." The voice was cold and flat. Every drop of blood in my body plummeted to my toes as I scrambled to my feet.

In the shadows, only a foot behind where I'd crouched, stood my sister's killer. He wore all black, from his boots to the hood on his billowing cloak. The hood hid his face, all but a sliver of pale cheek.

He looked like death.

I should have run. I should have kicked him in the balls. Instead I stood there, frozen with fear, like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

He moved, one pale hand appearing from the folds of the cloak, breaking the spell. I spun around and slammed into the lowered tailgate of the pickup.

A strong arm wrapped around my waist, and cold fingers closed over my mouth. I tried to scream, tried to bite, but he only tightened his grip around me, driving the air from my lungs.

Dropping like a stone did no good since he dragged me away just as easily. The guy wasn't big but he was strong.

"You're so predictable, Lottie. You did exactly what your sister said, running away like that. You didn't think you could escape me did you?"

I didn't answer since his hand was still clamped over my mouth. He dragged me towards the trees, and I had to close my eyes when low hanging branches slapped against my cheeks.

He tripped, whether over his cloak or something on the ground I didn't know. I landed hard on the ground and scrambled to my feet, desperate to get away. I tried to scream but no sound came out.

A hand clamped down on my shoulder and at the same time I stumbled over a root or a rock. With my arms flailing wildly I fell forward and bashed my head on a tree.

As blackness overtook me I had enough time to realize I was completely and utterly screwed.

Chapter Seven

I awoke to the sound of cold, eerie laughter. I was tied to something flat like a table or a rock. Shivers wracked my body and I realized I was naked. Frantic, I jerked at my bindings but there was no give. A moan escaped my throat and I heard the crunch of footsteps on dead leaves.

He loomed over me, his face in shadow with only a halo of moonlight circling his head.

Still, I recognized him.

“Will?”

“Surprise.”

Tell me about it. Will was my stalker? Will had murdered Maddy, mutilating her body and bathing in her blood? It was like imagining Barney or Bullwinkle as killers.

“Why?” I realized I really wanted to know. More than that I had to know. What made this guy, who had average-Joe written all over him, into a psycho?

“Power. Did you know Maddy was so careful to keep up the appearance that she was normal around me? Ironic, isn’t it, that she handed me the proof of her power to save you, when I’d just about given her up as a fraud? If she’d stayed quiet, she’d be alive and you wouldn’t be here.”

My mom would have said it was destiny, but I wasn’t about to argue with him about it.

“Will, you can’t honestly believe you can steal power. It’s insane.”

“Oh but it’s not. My mother was a powerful witch, but to her disappointment I showed no signs of having her gifts. I learned quite by accident that my abilities lay elsewhere. I can have every power, every magical skill. That is my magic.”

“But you have to kill to get it.”

He shrugged. “I enjoyed your sister. She was a wild thing in the sack and she didn’t beg or plead when she died. She was strong and the power she fed me was like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

Great. Maddy had been brave and strong during her murder. No way was I going to break down and turn into a blubbering baby.

“But it was always you I wanted, Lottie. Your ability to regenerate will make me all but invincible. Of course I’ll need to test the limitations of this power—on you naturally.” An unholy gleam lit his eyes and I knew then that more than stealing my powers, what Will wanted was the chance to torture someone who could heal within seconds, someone who would enable him to prolong his fun.

The knife he pulled from somewhere in the cloak caught the moonlight, flashing silver fire in my eyes.

The hell with that.

The instant the blade pierced my flesh, a sharp stab to the kidney, I screamed. The second bite of steel sliced across my upper thigh, and blood sprayed over my stomach and legs.

Will stepped back and waited, his face alight with glee.

Slowly the pain eased as the wounds closed themselves. It would take a few hours for the pink scars to disappear, but I was in no danger from the wounds.

That didn’t mean I was going to keep letting him cut me.

I screamed. "Perry!" A swift jab of the knife pierced a lung, cutting off my plea for help. Blood clogged my throat, left me gagging and choking.

"Scream for me again, Lottie." Will's face was close to mine, his breath harsh against my cheek. His gaze bore into mine and I knew he was enjoying the gleam of panic in my eyes.

I spat in his face, watched the spittle and blood spatter on his pale cheeks. He reared back, snarling and swiping at his face.

"You shouldn't have done that." Clutching the knife high over his head he sneered and brought it down, once to shoulder, stomach, groin.

Panic gripped me. I couldn't survive this, couldn't have this many wounds and regenerate them all. Again and again the blade sank into my flesh.

Black spots flicked before my eyes. My body felt light, like it was floating.

"Perry!" I called again, knowing my voice was weak. There was no way he could hear me, but I knew I had to trust him to find me. Somehow.

Something crashed to my right. The ground shook.

My vision wavered, both from waning energy and the splatter of blood in my eyes. I blinked, determined to remain conscious. The gleam of silver flashed, like a dozen knives coming from the shadows.

Will screamed and I saw his body fly through the air, hovering over mine before he was flung away. A sickening crunch split the night, the wet popping of bone breaking.

"Hell and damnation, Perry, leave some for the rest of us." I recognized the voice, and when Minkey emerged from the shadows I wanted to cry with relief. Perry had come.

Tears glinted in my eyes but I blinked them back, desperately looking for him.

Instead I saw a moose. His massive chest heaved, steam puffed from his nostrils with each ragged breath. His rack glistened with blood.

Trust the moose. Christ.

“Here now, little lady, don’t try and move.” It was Perry’s father. I realized then that the clearing was full of people but still I couldn’t find Perry. What if he hadn’t come? But Minkey had spoken to him. Adrenaline and blood loss were making me dizzy, confused. Where was Perry?

“Get me loose. I have to find him. I have to explain.”

Dave frowned. “You need to lie still until the ambulance gets here.”

“Christ, she’s never going to survive this.” Minkey swore and I heard others mutter in agreement.

“You have to cut me loose.”

“Perry, you have to get a hold of yourself and tell her to lie still.”

Why couldn’t I find him? He was here, so why couldn’t I see him?

“Jumpin’ Jesus on a pogo stick! Will you look at that.”

Suddenly a dozen men were crossing themselves. Dave stared at my body with rapt fascination. “What in the name of God is going on?” The question came out on a gasp of horrified breath.

“I’m a freak okay? Can you untie me now?” See, only extreme torture would get me to reveal my secret. Besides, now that my body was replacing the lost blood, my strength was returning. The last thing I wanted was to be lying here, naked, while a bunch of men ogled me like I was some sort of circus sideshow exhibit. Within seconds I was free and helped up by Minkey and Perry’s dad. Someone slipped a jacket over my shoulders.

“Where’s Perry?”

Nobody answered, instead they spent a good minute looking at each other, stuffing their hands in their pockets and I swear one of them

started to innocently whistle. I'd have laughed if the situation weren't so serious.

The moose stepped forward, pushing through the circle of men around me. Dave stepped in front of me to block its path, but the moose simply nudged him out of the way with one swipe of its head.

"Don't do it," he warned.

Before I could ask whom he was talking to, the air around the moose shimmered and the massive animal was gone. In its place stood a man dressed in fake fur.

"Perry?" I asked. Then I fainted.

Chapter Eight

I woke to the sound of two men arguing. Someone was a meddling old fool and someone was an irresponsible idiot.

I opened my eyes and frowned at the tall ceiling filled with orange and black balloons.

“You might want to wake up and join this conversation.”

I sat up and realized I was in the curling club, on a really uncomfortable couch. Minkey sat on the armrest, and it was him who had whispered in my ear.

“What’s going on?” My voice drew Perry and his father’s gaze. In an instant Perry was there, pulling me tight against his chest.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked a minute later when he finally released me enough to look me over.

“I’m fine.” I realized half the town was still there. Mortified, I looked down at myself, suddenly remembering that I’d been naked, and saw I was wearing Perry’s moose costume.

Then I remembered what I’d seen. My gaze flew to his and he winced. A few coughs broke the awkward silence.

I looked away and bit my lip, trying to think of something to say. “So I guess we’re both a little different, eh?”

He grinned but I could see the wariness in his eyes. “Are you okay with that?”

Was I? I realized with a start that it didn't bother me at all. I thought about how hard I'd worked to have a normal life, away from strange powers. Was that really what I wanted? Maybe it had more to do with being accepted. The reason I'd resented Maddy wasn't because she was different, but because nobody accepted her for it, and by default, they treated me the same way.

The truth was I missed the bizarre existence I'd had as a kid. Weird, I know. Most people move out and miss their mother's cooking; I missed being able to be myself around people who didn't judge me. Huh. Who'd have thought?

"I guess normal is pretty boring. I'm okay with it if you are."

His grin grew and I was pulled back into his arms again. He bent his head and I stretched up to receive his kiss only to be dragged away before our lips could touch.

"No! I refuse to allow this. It's too dangerous." Mr. Sullivan's eyes were dark with rage. His grip dug into my upper arms and would have left bruises on anyone else. What was with this guy and his screwed-up views of relationships?

"Sir, he's kissed me before and I survived it just fine." Apparently that was the wrong thing to say. Dave's shoulders snapped back, his eyes narrowed dangerously and he looked like he might jump on his son and throttle the hell out of him.

"Dad, that's enough."

"I won't let you go through what I did with your mother."

"She's not going to die," Perry insisted, pulling me back against his side. I moved to stand partially behind him to avoid being tugged around. I'd had enough of that for one night.

"Of course I'm not. Why would you say that?"

“Because every one of our people who’ve taken fully human mates has watched his woman die in childbirth,” Dave yelled.

Ouch. I wanted to tell him he was jumping way ahead of himself, but obviously this was a touchy subject. “Mr. Sullivan, I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.”

“Christ, Dave, the girl was stabbed about thirty times tonight and she’s right as rain. If she can survive that, she can handle birthin’ one of you moose men,” Minkey commented.

“Dad, I know you feel the line should end, but I’ve never agreed with you.”

Minkey nodded. “Never did agree with you keeping the boy from having a family.”

Okay, this was getting out of hand. “Mr. Sullivan, I’m sure you remember my sister and her—special gift. She foresaw this, and my sister is never wrong.”

His eyebrows rose all the way up to his hairline. “And what did you sister foresee?”

I looked up at Perry and wondered if I should have kept my mouth shut. I bit my lip and sighed. I’d made the mistake of not telling him the truth before. I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“She predicted the attempted murder and that I’d need to trust a moose if I was to survive. She said that in searching for sanctuary I’d find love.”

I looked up again, saw the look of amusement on Perry’s face. Honestly I didn’t know if I loved him yet, but I was willing to take the chance.

“I put a stop to your sister’s prophecy before. I can do it again.”

“No you didn’t, Dad.”

Dave blinked. “What the hell does that mean?”

Everyone was watching Perry now. “It means I did get Lisa pregnant. You may have stopped us going to St. John’s but that didn’t keep us from being together. She had a miscarriage a few weeks later.”

Dave’s jaw dropped, and before he could resume his rant, Perry gathered me against his side, turned, and led me through the silent crowd and out into the night.

In the distance the horizon had begun to bloom with the coming dawn. It was over.

“So you’re really okay with this?” he asked. “I should warn you, when I lose my temper I can’t control it. Once I lost it in the squad car and ended up shifting. Moose don’t fit in a car too well.”

I laughed. God it felt good to be able to do that. I wondered then if Maddy was watching. I could almost see her laughing at the trouble she’d caused. With a smile, I hoped she was, and I hoped she knew how thankful I was that I’d been able to fulfill her final prophecy.

About the Author

To learn more about Jennie, please visit <http://jennieandrus.com>.
Send an email to Jennie at jennie@jennieandrus.com or join her Yahoo!
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Beginnings: A Touch of Magic

© 2006 Cassandra Kane

A race against time to save a planet—will the price be too heavy to pay?

Captain Tirana Albasta leads the last scouting mission to mystery planet Samhain, which has already swallowed two previous missions and a starship full of New Wiccan colonists, Lalith's People.

Determined to keep the planet from UA Special Forces' harsh military control, Tirana finds much more than she expected. For the descendants of Lalith's People have split into two separate societies—the anti-magic Priests and the magical True People—and she has just been caught in the crossfire.

Complicating matters is her attraction to Loren, the broodingly handsome True People witch who ignites passions she has never before experienced, and who just might make leaving Samhain impossible in more ways than one...

Beginnings: A Warrior's Witch

© 2006 Mackenzie McKade

Legacy bonds them—betrayal will test them—but, love and a little bit of magic will keep them together.

Gifted with both Berserka and Wicce heritage, Sabine wonders which legacy will determine her fate. A path of freedom and independence? Or will the Berserka curse tie her to one man, not of her choosing?

After his father's death, Conall returns to Scotland to take his rightful place as chieftain. Fate steps in and unleashes his hot-blooded lust on one obstinate woman resolved on defying destiny.

A forced marriage binds them. Desire and their animalistic nature draw them together. But someone is threatening to destroy the fiery love growing between them. Salt in the water, poison in the wine has everyone looking askew at Sabine, including her husband.

When the clan demands Sabine's death, Conall must choose between family and the woman he loves.

Beginnings: Babe in Woods

© 2006 Lorelei James

Animal attraction takes on a whole new meaning...

Manhattanite Lacy Buchanan is out to prove she's a tough cookie by signing up for a survivalist hiking trip in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The last thing she expected was to get lost, forcing her to spend the rest of the hike alone with surly, too-sexy mountain man, Becker, who blames her entirely for their predicament. After Becker saves her from a rattlesnake, and gently calms her fears, Lacy feels lucky to be in his experienced hands.

But Sam Becker isn't really a hiking expert. He's strictly the moneyman in Back To Nature Guided Hiking Tours and a last minute, temporary fill-in guide. He can't believe his bad luck when his reluctant charge—a mouthy, but hot, blonde bombshell—pulverizes their only compass, destroying their chances of following the coordinates to base camp. Yet something about Lacy's trusting nature makes him want fulfill her idea he's her rugged hero.

As Sam and Lacy attempt to find a way out of the treacherous mountain passes, their natural instincts take them...farther away from civilized behavior and straight into the mating calls of the wild.

Beginnings: Night Music

© 2006 Charlene Teglia

When death marked her, he offered her rebirth...

Meghan Davies has been living a dream as the bass player for the all-female hit rock band, The Sirens. But the dream becomes a nightmare with the discovery that cancer, undetected and now too far gone, heralds the end of everything.

Romney Kearns has been watching the sharp-tongued, flame haired woman from afar, wanting, but never approaching because he can offer her nothing but death.

When he discovers that death already has her marked, he sets out on All Hallow's Eve to seduce her, claim her, and make her willing to accept his dark offer. An alternative. Not life as she's known it, but a kind of rebirth. Eternity with him and immortality for her to make night music.

Beginnings: Ritual Love

© 2006 Kate Davies

A lost woman. A hunted man. On a night of forbidden rituals, the veil between past and present lifts—and their worlds will never be the same.

Scientist Moira Sinclair doesn't believe in magic. Or at least she hasn't since childhood. She's only come to Iona in remembrance of her long-deceased grandmother, the last person who encouraged her fanciful side. But now she's stumbled onto a secret druid ritual—and into another time.

Aedan Ap Crannog is furious to discover an outsider spying on their sacred, banned Samhain rites. With her strange garb and stranger mannerisms, Moira is unlike any woman he's ever known. But she could cause trouble for him and the people who follow him in the ancient ways. To prevent her from sounding the alarm, he takes her captive, hiding her in the labyrinth of caves along the far shore.

Despite their differences, sparks burn between them as brightly as the Samhain bonfire. Now captive and captor must find a way to bridge the centuries before the magic disappears with the dawn...

Beginnings: The Last Prophecy

© 2006 Jennie Andrus

Hours before being murdered Maddy gives her last prophecy—her sister's death and salvation.

The MacElwain sisters had always been different. In search of a “normal” life, Lottie did her best to ignore her crazy sister, until Maddy predicts Lottie’s death. Suddenly Maddy is dead and Lottie has a very short shelf life and, according to Maddy, she’s going to need to find a moose if she wants to survive. Unfortunately, moose aren’t too plentiful in downtown Toronto.

Not willing to trust her life to an animal, Lottie runs to the shores of Newfoundland, where danger, love and acceptance wait for her to fulfill the last prophecy of Mad Maddy MacElwain

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