

# ***Maguolia Magick***

**Written by Jessica Coulter Smith**



## *Magnolia Magick*

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### **Prologue**

*November 1, 2008*

Lissa knelt at the base of the old Yew tree. It was almost midnight – the witching hour. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Hopefully the rain would hold off. It had taken some unusual abilities to locate Jesse's grave, not to mention locating the spell itself. Thanks to Gemma's unique abilities, she already had the supplies and ingredients she needed.

Making a circle with black candles, Lissa began laying everything out. She had a charm, which contained shavings from an Alder tree and the petals of an Iris, along with various herbs.

Lissa pulled out her small cauldron and placed it in the center of the circle. Glancing at her watch, she saw that midnight was only a minute away.

Reaching into the pocket of her jeans, she removed a small box of wooden matches. Lighting the candles, Lissa cast her circle. Facing the grave at the base of the tree, she began her incantation.

Goddess Hela,  
I beseech thee.  
Release this soul  
From Heheimr.

Dropping the charm bag into the cauldron, she lit the bag on fire. It burned quickly, leaving behind the ashes Lissa needed to complete the ritual. Dipping her fingers into the cauldron, she spread the ashes on her forehead and cheeks. Spreading the remaining ashes across the grave, she continued;

In life he knew not love,  
In death he roams the earth.  
I beseech thee,  
Release him into my care.

Lissa continued to chant her spell until she was exhausted. An hour after she had begun, she collapsed at the foot of the grave. Had she still been

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conscious, she would have felt the ground begin to shift.

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### **Chapter One**

*A month earlier*

Lissa parked her car in the circular drive in front of the huge house. It was a gorgeous antebellum plantation, or it would be if someone had been taking care of it. Gothic columns stretched up toward the sky across the front of the home. At one point, the house had been a brilliant white. Now the paint had yellowed with age and was chipped and peeling.

Stepping out of the car, Lissa faced the monstrosity. She was starting to question her sanity. She shouldn't have signed the six month rental agreement without having first seen the house. Then again, it was huge and isolated; her main requirement had been isolation. She didn't want neighbors who would want to come and visit all the time.

Sighing, she trudged up to the front door. Inserting the ancient key into the rusty lock, she unlocked the door and pushed it open. It opened slowly with a loud creak. Obviously she would need to stop in town to get some oil for the door.

Lissa stepped into the entry and reached for the light switch. Groping the wall near the door, she cursed. Where was the damn switch?

"Let me help you with that," said a deep male voice in the darkness. A lamp came to life on a table across the entry.

"Who's there," Lissa asked, peering into the darkness. She hadn't expected anyone to meet her way out here.

"Just me," said the husky male voice, which had a heavy southern drawl. Lissa strained to see in the dark, but she could only make out the faint glow of a male silhouette.

"And who is me?" she asked, starting to get irritated.

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"My friends call me Jesse," he replied, stepping into the light.

He was well over six feet tall, with reddish brown wavy hair and bright blue eyes. He was broad shouldered and muscular. If Lissa had to guess, she'd say he did manual labor for a living. His face had a strong chiseled jaw and a straight nose. His lips were full and looked very kissable. Kissable? What in the heck was she thinking? She didn't have time for lascivious thoughts about a stranger. She had a deadline!

"I didn't realize anyone was here. Did the rental agency send you?"

Jesse chuckled. "Not exactly. I sort of live here."

"Here? But ... but I rented the place for the next six months!"

"I guess they forgot to tell you about your roommate," he replied, looking her over. She was a pretty little thing, curvy in all the right places. If he had to guess, he'd put her at about five foot four inches tall; she had long blonde hair and flashing blue eyes. Her features were delicate, like a pixie's. Her face was oval with a delicate chin and small button nose. She had a generous mouth, which was scowling at him at the moment.

"You can't stay here! I rented the place for peace and quiet. I need the solitude so I can finish writing my novel," she exclaimed.

"You're a writer?"

Lissa straightened her spine. It had been a while since she hadn't been recognized. She wasn't sure if she should feel insulted or happy. "Yes. You may have heard of me. I'm Amaryllis Rose, the romance writer."

Jesse gave her a blank look.

Lissa couldn't believe he hadn't heard of her. Pretty much everyone in America knew her name by now. "You know; the author of Red Roses?"

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Jesse still gave her a blank look. Had the man been in a cave for the last few months? Not only had her book been on the best seller list for months, but it was also being turned into a movie. She could barely leave her house without a mob of people asking her for a picture or an autograph.

"Don't you read the papers or watch TV?" she asked.

Jesse shook his head. "There isn't a TV here and I haven't read a newspaper in a while. I'm sorry for not recognizing you."

Lissa hesitantly smiled. "Honestly, it's a little refreshing."

Jesse returned her smile and Lissa almost stopped breathing. If she had thought he was handsome before, he was downright sinful when he smiled. Letting her eyes rove over him, she took in his un-tucked white button down shirt and tan pants. The material of his shirt stretched taught over his broad shoulders. The sleeves were rolled up to reveal strong tanned arms. She could easily see women falling all over themselves to be with him.

Lissa shook her head. She needed to get her wayward thoughts in order. "I'm afraid there's still been some sort of misunderstanding. When I rented this house, I was assured that it was vacant and isolated."

"I think they forget about me occasionally."

"Forget about you?" Lissa was stunned. How on earth could anyone forget this man?

"That tends to happen when you've been dead for a while."

Lissa thought she must have misheard him. "I'm sorry; I thought you just said you were dead."

Jesse nodded. "I did."

Obviously the man wasn't dealing with a full deck. Just her luck, Mr. Gorgeous was crazy as a bed bug. "Uh-huh. I think I'll just go back to town and get you



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some help. You must have hit your head or something."

Lissa inched back toward the door. Jesse sighed. He should have known she would react this way. There was only one thing he could do to prove to her that he really wasn't alive. He walked over to her until he was standing directly in front of her.

"I guess you've left me no choice. Sorry about this."

Lissa opened her mouth to respond, but before she could get a single word out, Jesse had disappeared. Lissa's mouth snapped shut. What the hell? She looked around, but didn't see him anywhere.

"Jesse?"

She heard a chuckle by her ear and turned her head in that direction. Before her eyes, Jesse slowly materialized again. Lissa grabbed for the door frame to support herself. She'd never fainted before in her life, but there was a first time for everything.

"Oh my god. Oh my god. You ... you... you're a ghost!"

Jesse smiled sadly at her. "Yes, I'm afraid that I am."

Lissa's eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped to the floor. Jesse shook his head. It would be nice to meet someone for once who didn't faint the moment they discovered he was dead. Okay, so maybe that was asking a bit too much. Finding out that ghosts exist wasn't something that most people could handle, especially when they were face to face with one.

Reaching down, he lifted her into his arms. He was surprised at how light she felt. Turning to the large staircase, Jesse carried her up to the second floor. The rental company had sent maids by yesterday to clean and prepare all of the rooms. He carried her to the master bedroom and gently laid her on the bed. She looked like a small child lying in

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the large king size bed. Brushing her hair away from her face, he looked at her in concern.

Lissa swam back into consciousness. Looking around, her surroundings were foreign to her. Then it all came rushing back to her... she was in the plantation home – with a ghost! She sat up quickly and looked at Jesse.

“Are you really a ghost?”

He nodded, “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Wow. I mean ... wow. Well, that certainly explains why the rental agency didn’t mention a permanent tenant in the home.” Lissa was still shaken, but her brain was slowly taking it all in.

She was taking this better than he had expected. Jesse observed her in silence.

Lissa looked him over. He really was a handsome guy. Too bad he didn’t have a pulse!

“So, um, how long have you been a ghost?”

Jesse smiled at her sadly. “A long, long time. I was born in 1880, in this very house.”

Lissa was surprised. She had figured that he was tied to the house in some way, but she didn’t realize he’d been dead for so long. His clothes certainly didn’t look like something a man would have worn in the late 1800’s.

Jesse must have read her mind. “I can change my clothes whenever I’d like. If I see a picture of something I like, I can imitate it.”

“How does that work?”

Jesse shrugged. “As far as I can tell, since I’m not really here, neither are my clothes. As long as I can keep an image in my mind, the clothes can look like anything I’d like for them to.”

Lissa was curious. “So, what do the clothes look like if you forget to hold the image in your mind?”

Jesse gave her a wicked grin. “Maybe I’m naked then... want to find out?”

Lissa laughed. “Thank you, but I think I’ll pass. I have a hard enough time having relationships with

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the living, I'm not sure I'd fair much better trying to have a fling with a dead guy."

Jesse watched her. She was a beautiful woman. It was hard for him to imagine her alone. Surely there were men falling over themselves just to be near her. Never had he been so attracted to a woman before. She was not only beautiful, but she had spirit and wasn't afraid to speak her mind. Jesse found both of those qualities to be attractive in a woman. He was definitely looking forward to the next six months; it wasn't often he had company in the house, especially beautiful company.

"I'll let you rest a bit. If you'd like, I can step outside and bring your luggage in for you?"

"You can do that?"

Jesse gave her a cocky grin. "I carried you up here, didn't I?"

Lissa blushed. "Um, yeah, I guess you did. If you wouldn't mind, that would be great. The large bag is rather heavy though."

"I think I can manage."

Lissa sighed as he retreated out of the bedroom. If she was going to share this monstrous house with a gorgeous ghost for the next six months, she'd better learn to focus better. The last thing she needed was a distraction, particularly of the male variety. If she didn't make her deadline for the follow-up novel to Red Roses, her editor was going to kill her!

Getting out of the bed, Lissa wandered around the room. It was sparsely furnished, but was rather large. The bed took up most of the space, but she didn't plan on being in this room that much anyway. Walking down the hall, Lissa began opening doors to check out the other rooms. At the far end of the hall, she found a large office that doubled as a library. It was the perfect location for her to use for writing. Once her bags were brought up, she'd begin setting up her work space.

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The front door closed and Lissa heard Jesse's footsteps on the stairs. She was still having trouble believing that ghosts not only existed, but that she could see them, hear them, and feel them. It was a bit much to take in. It made her wonder what else lived in the shadows that people "knew" didn't exist. Then again, maybe it was better to *not* think about it.



An hour later, Lissa had unpacked her clothes and placed them in the dresser and closet. Her laptop and files were set up in the office at the end of the hall and she was ready to stretch her back and take a break.

Walking downstairs, she went to the kitchen. Lissa knew she would have to go grocery shopping today if she wanted to eat anytime soon. It was better to go ahead and see what else she would need instead of finding out after her trip into town. The house wasn't too far outside of the city limits, but it was a good thirty minute drive down a small two lane highway. She would prefer to only make the trip once if it could be helped.

As she entered the kitchen, she saw Jesse sitting at the small round table in the corner. He was looking out the kitchen window into the back garden. It didn't seem that he had noticed her presence yet.

"I can't remember if I thanked you for bringing up my bags," she told him.

Startled, Jesse turned to look at her. He should have heard her approach, but he had been lost in thought. "No, you didn't, but that's okay."

"Well, thank you. I really do appreciate it. I don't think I could have gotten that larger bag upstairs by myself."

He smiled. "I'm sure you would have managed one way or another. You seem like a determined lady."

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Lissa laughed. "That's putting it mildly. My daddy always said that I was part mule."

Jesse chuckled. "Well, thankfully you didn't get your looks from the mule side of the family."

Lissa blushed. She wasn't used to compliments about her looks. People complimented her all the time on her books, but that was different. She hadn't had a steady boyfriend for a while and Sam, the last guy she had dated, had made it apparent that he found her lacking when she discovered him in bed with her best friend. Since then, Lissa had decided that men just weren't worth the trouble. Or maybe she just wasn't certain that her heart would be able to survive being broken again.

Jesse watched the myriad of emotions cross her face. He wondered who had hurt her. Obviously a man was involved; there was *always* a man involved. The question was what exactly had the man done to Lissa? The thought of someone laying a hand on her in anger infuriated him. Of course, she hadn't said anything about abuse so maybe it was something else. Jesse hoped she would come to trust him enough to share her story.

Shaking his head, he realized that it was pointless to even wonder about Lissa. Seeing as how he was dead, it was a little hard for them to have a relationship.

Lissa cleared her throat. "I'm just going to look through the cabinets and pantry to get an idea of what I'll need from the store."

Jesse nodded. "You might also check the bathrooms. It's been a long time since anyone was here – other than me."

Lissa began opening all of the cabinets in the kitchen. It quickly became apparent that she was going to need everything from plates and silverware to food and drinks. With the exception of some cobwebs and a stray spider or two, the cupboards

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were bare. Thankfully the refrigerator had been turned on, but it needed a good scrubbing.

Heading upstairs, she checked the bathrooms only to discover they were just as empty as the kitchen. She would need towels, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, a scrub brush, and sponges. Her list was growing by the minute. Stepping into the hall, she checked the linen closet. Thankfully there were spare sheets in the closet and extra blankets.

The rental company had told her a maid would clean the place before Lissa arrived. That would explain the clean sheets. Apparently the maid hadn't felt that the kitchen and bathrooms deserved a good scrubbing. Lissa would definitely be calling the rental company to complain. The house was far from livable in its current state.

It looked like Lissa had some work ahead of her before the house would be inhabitable enough to both work and live in, which meant her book would have to be put on hold for another day or two. Then again, she hadn't done much with it over the past two weeks so what was another day? If her editor heard her thoughts, Lissa's head would be served on a platter for sure.

After completing her list, Lissa grabbed her keys and her purse. Before she left, she went back to the kitchen in search of Jesse. He was still sitting in the same spot, looking out the window. Lissa briefly wondered what he did all day. Did he ever sleep? For that matter, did he *need* to sleep?

"I'm going into town for some supplies. I should be back in a few hours."

Jesse looked over at her, "I'll be here when you get back," he said with a grin.

Lissa smiled back and walked to the front door. Maybe living with a ghost wouldn't be so bad after all. At least she wouldn't get lonely. And she didn't have to worry about him trying to hit on her since he was a ghost... over all it was probably going to be the best

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relationship she'd ever had. Lissa shook her head sadly. It said volumes that her best relationship would be with a ghost who had been dead longer than she had been alive. Obviously she needed to get out more.

## **Chapter Two**

Half an hour later, Lissa pulled her car into a parking space on Main Street. She had driven around the small town for a few minutes, but hadn't seen hide nor hair of a Wal-Mart or Target. It looked like she would be shopping for her items in the more expensive boutique stores that lined the main thoroughfare in the tiny town in rural Georgia. The nearest big city was Atlanta and it was a good two and a half hour drive away. She was probably closer to Alabama than Atlanta in all honesty.

Getting out of her car, Lissa closed the door and set the alarm. She headed for the pharmacy in hopes of locating cleaning supplies. As she pushed open the glass door, a bell jingled over head. Lissa pushed her sunglasses on top of her head and walked down the nearest aisle. Never having been in the store before, she decided to browse the aisles and see what the little store had to offer.

Since she was something of a klutz, she decided it would be best to go ahead and pick up some band-aids and Neosporin. One could never be too careful, especially when staying in the middle of nowhere. Lissa looked around for a cart, realizing that it wouldn't be long before she wouldn't be able to hold all of her purchases. She spied one in the corner and quickly put her items in the cart. Pushing it toward the back of the store, she located the laundry detergent and cleaning supplies. In a matter of minutes, Lissa had filled the cart half way.

Walking briskly to the front of the store, she began emptying the cart onto the counter. Her total was staggering, but Lissa pulled out her credit card and paid the bill. Once her items were bagged, she grabbed the sacks and headed back to her car. It seemed she would be making frequent trips to the trunk of her car; otherwise, she would end up so



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loaded down with bags that she wouldn't be able to walk.

Once her purchases were secured, Lissa looked around. On the corner of Main Street and Second Street she spotted what looked like a linens store. Hopefully they had towels! Quickly walking over to the little shop, she peered in the window. Sure enough, they carried towels. Lissa was on her way to completing her list in record time!

Entering the store, she stopped to get a shopping cart. Pushing it to the far wall where she had seen the towels, Lissa began to look them over. They had various types, sizes, and colors. Since she wasn't planning on nesting at the house, she just grabbed her favorite colors – turquoise and purple. Once she felt she had enough towels, hand towels, and wash clothes, Lissa decided to check out the rest of the store.

Even though the house was equipped with sheets and blankets, Lissa found a bed set she couldn't pass up. It was a dark aqua and chocolate with satin cord trim on the comforter. The sheets were a dark chocolate Egyptian cotton. Lissa just knew they would be soft as silk. Picking up the bed set, she put it in the cart with her towels. After perusing the shelves another few minutes, she purchased her items and headed back to the car.

Lissa didn't recall seeing a grocery store on Main Street so she decided to stop and ask someone where the nearest one was located. A man in a nice pin-stripe suit was heading her way.

"Excuse me. I hate to bother you, but I'm new in the area and I was wondering if you could tell me how to get to the nearest grocery store," Lissa asked, stepping onto the sidewalk.

The man paused, looking her over. "There's one a few blocks away on Third Street," he said pointing in the general direction she needed to travel.

Lissa smiled. "Thank you."

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The man returned her smile. "I'm Jared by the way. I work at the bank down the street."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Lissa."

Jared cleared his throat, "I don't mean to be forward since we just met, but would you maybe like to have dinner one night?"

"Oh, um..." Lissa knew she should turn him down. She didn't need a romantic involvement to mess up her time table right now. Then again, how often did she have a cute guy ask her out? "Sure, I'd really like that," she said with a smile.

"Great! Would Friday work for you?"

"Friday would be fine. Let me give you my number," Lissa said, digging in her purse for a pen and paper. Writing her cell phone number and her name on a small piece of paper, she handed it to him.

"I'll give you a call in a day or two to set up a time and get directions to your place."

"Oh, well, I live kind of far out."

Jared raised an eyebrow. "Really? I don't recall any recent real estate transfers out of the city limits."

"I'm renting actually. I'm only in the area for the next six months. You may know the house I'm staying in, it's the old Pearson place."

Jared's eyes widened slightly. Obviously he had heard of the place. "I know where it is. That's a pretty big place."

Lissa nodded, "Yes, but it's beautiful. Or at least it would be if someone painted it."

Jared laughed. "That place could definitely use some paint. I wish the owners would sell it. Honestly, I don't know if they could. I think you're the longest lease they've had on the place in a long time."

"Does it have anything to do with the ghost?"

Jared sobered immediately. "What do you know of the ghost?"

"Oh, well... he sort of materialized when I first got to the house. I was shocked to say the least! The

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rental agreement didn't say anything about another tenant," she joked.

He grinned at her. "Yeah, I'm sure it didn't. Well, I don't want to keep you since you obviously have a lot to do, but I will definitely give you a call in a day or two."

"Okay, I'm looking forward to it."

"It was nice meeting you, Lissa. Here, let me give you my card. If you need anything, anything at all, don't hesitate to call me," he said, reaching into his jacket. He handed her a business card. It was beige with black lettering and read,

Jared Hallbrook

River Bend Bank, Owner

Worked at the bank indeed! Lissa smiled. "Thank you, Jared. I'll see you Friday."

Jared waved and started walking down the sidewalk toward the bank.

Lissa got in her car and watched him for a moment. Maybe things were starting to look up after all. She could go to dinner with a nice guy without it turning into more than a friendship. Couldn't she? It wasn't like gorgeous eligible men were throwing themselves at her feet. Being short and on the chubby side was usually a turn off. It seemed like the willowy size six women were the ones with all the dates – not the short, doughy size fourteens.

Sighing, Lissa backed out of the parking space and headed down Main Street toward Third. Hopefully she would be able to locate the grocery store without getting lost. Her sense of direction was horrible! In all honesty, she could probably get lost in a shoe box.



Several hours after she had left the house, Lissa was finally pulling back into the driveway of her temporary home. The trunk and backseat of her car were both filled to the gills. While Lissa usually

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enjoyed shopping, it wasn't as much fun when you *had* to do it. Parking near the door, she got out of the car and started pulling packages out of the backseat.

Jesse must have sensed her presence because he materialized by her side almost immediately.

"Do you need help with your packages?" he asked.

Lissa smiled at him. "That would be great. Otherwise, I'll be hauling this stuff inside all night long."

Jesse unloaded the backseat and left everything in the front entry while Lissa started pulling things out of the trunk. It took them about fifteen minutes before the car was finally empty. After making sure the car was locked, Lissa went inside and closed the front door.

"Where do you want all of this stuff?" Jesse asked, waving his hand at the large pile of sacks on the entry floor.

Lissa looked at the piles of bags. "Some of it goes in the kitchen and the rest goes upstairs. Let me look through the bags and separate them into groups."

Digging through the sacks, Lissa made a pile of things for the kitchen and pile of things that needed to go upstairs. She was amazed at how much stuff she'd purchased. Maybe she could get a discount on the rental amount if she left some of it behind for the next tenant. After all, they would need towels, pots and pans, dishes, and some of the other things she had purchased. Regardless, she was still going to complain about the condition of the house since she had been assured it would be clean when she arrived.

"Let me carry the heavy things into the kitchen. You can start putting things where you want them while I carry everything else upstairs," Jesse told her.

"That's sweet of you, but you shouldn't have to carry everything."

He shook his head, "I insist. A gentleman never lets a lady do more work than is necessary."

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Lissa shouldn't have been surprised by his comment; he *was* from a different time after all. "Well, thank you just the same. Let me get a few cleaning supplies out of one of the bags going upstairs so I can wipe down the counters and clean out the cabinets before putting anything in them. They look like they were last cleaned about thirty years ago."

Jesse grinned at her. "You wouldn't be far off!"

Lissa quickly located some cleansing spray and a package of sponges. Removing them from the sack, she took them into the kitchen. It had gotten dark since she'd been gone and she had to turn on the light as she walked through the kitchen door. At night, it looked even worse. It was obvious that the house hadn't received a good scrubbing in quite some time.

"What has that cleaning lady been doing?" she wondered out loud.

Coming up behind her, Jesse said, "Mostly talking on her cell phone. She did make the beds up with fresh sheets, but I don't think I ever saw her dust or clean anything."

Lissa shook her head. It was going to be a long night. There was no way she could go to sleep until the kitchen, master bedroom, office, and master bath were livable. Deciding that the house wasn't going to clean itself, she opened the sponges and got to work.

Once Lissa had meticulously cleaned the kitchen appliances, cabinets, and counter tops, she began lining the shelves with contact paper. She wasn't sure if the rental company would approve so she left the backing on the sheets instead of permanently sticking them to the wood. With that task accomplished, she opened the box of cooking pans she had purchased. It wasn't an expensive set, but it would allow her to make most of her meals at home over the next six months. Next she opened the box of

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casserole dishes and put those in the cabinet next to the pots and pans.

Standing and stretching her back, Lissa nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt hands on her shoulders.

"Easy, it's just me," Jesse said as he kneaded the tense muscles in her neck and shoulders.

"Oh, that feels so wonderful," Lissa groaned. She hadn't realized how tense she had gotten while cleaning and putting things away. "If you don't stop though, I'll never finish getting this stuff into the cabinets and pantry."

"Did you buy anything cold at the store?"

"Oh crap! Yes, I did and I completely forgot about it," Lissa exclaimed as she scurried across the kitchen to the food sacks lined up along the far wall.

"Here, let me take care of that while you finish what you were doing."

"Are you sure?" she asked him uncertainly.

Jesse nodded. "Sure, you go ahead and finish up with the other stuff. I can put the cold things away and start on the pantry." Jesse was actually happy to help Lissa. For a little while, he was able to enjoy the company of a beautiful woman; able to pretend he had a normal life. While it saddened him to know he would never have a wife to share these tasks with, it was nice to dream – to pretend.

"Okay. I really appreciate that; it should make things go by a lot quicker."

While Jesse began putting the groceries away, Lissa started putting the new dishes in the cabinet. It had been one of the fun items to shop for. She had found a pretty set with a lavender floral design. She typically didn't go for flowers, but they seemed to fit the theme of an older home. After carefully arranging them in one of the top cabinets, she pulled out the silverware. She had chosen a simple design and only had four place settings. Lissa didn't plan on

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entertaining while she was here so there wasn't really a need for more.

Opening the box of canisters, she filled one with flour, one with sugar, and left the third one empty. Maybe she would hide some cookies in there later. Sometimes she got the munchies when she was writing, especially if she hit a road block. The canisters matched the plates; with lavender and dark purple flowers. A matching vase held her cooking utensils.

Lissa placed her pot holders and kitchen towels in the drawer by the refrigerator. She put an extra sponge in the cabinet under the sink along with dish washer detergent and some dish soap. Turning toward the stove, she hung a dark purple towel on the oven door and she sighed. Everything was finally in place. The kitchen sparkled and looked lived in. Lissa glanced around the kitchen and saw that Jesse had already disappeared.

Rubbing her aching lower back, Lissa turned out the kitchen light and made her way upstairs. She walked down the long hall to the master bedroom. Closing the door behind her, Lissa looked for the bag of cleaning supplies. Once she found the bathroom cleansers, the toilet brush and another package of sponges, she walked into the large master bath and got back to work.

Lissa was happy to see the house had been updated at some point in the last ten or twenty years. There was a large garden tub and separate shower in the master bath. One wall held a double vanity with a long counter.

Spraying the tub and shower with bathroom cleanser, she let them soak while she started cleaning the cabinets under the sinks and the built-in cabinet next to the tub. Lining them with contact paper, she started putting the towels, toothpaste, soap, and other items away. It was arduous work, but it gave Lissa satisfaction.

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Lissa turned back to the tub and shower and started washing them out. Rinsing all of the cleanser out of them, she was happy to see most of the dirt and grime go down the drain. Dousing the tub and shower with the cleanser once more, she grabbed her sponge and started scrubbing the rest of the dirt away.

An hour after she had begun, Lissa finally had a gleaming, organized bathroom. Wanting to ease her aching body, she filled the tub with steamy hot water. Opening the cabinet, she pulled out some bubble bath and added it to the water.

Lissa walked into the bedroom and pulled out her long satin peach nightgown and a clean pair of matching panties. Laying them out on the bed, she undressed and put her clothes in the laundry basket she had purchased during her trip to town. Otherwise, she would have had a pile of dirty clothes on the bedroom floor. Lissa couldn't stand to have laundry piled everywhere.

She walked back into the bathroom and closed the door. Turning off the water, Lissa stepped into the tub and sunk up to her shoulders in the hot water. She sighed in bliss. The water was heavenly. Leaning her head back, Lissa rested it on the back of the tub and closed her eyes. This was definitely the best part of her day.

Lissa became so relaxed that she started drifting to sleep. As she started to sink up to her neck in the water, she jerked awake. Obviously she was more tired than she realized. Quickly washing, Lissa drained the water and got out of the tub. Drying off, she wrapped the towel around her body and walked into the bedroom. Putting the wet towel in the laundry basket, she slipped into her nightgown and panties.

Lissa almost collapsed at the foot of the bed from exhaustion. She managed to crawl up to the head of the bed and dropped onto the bedspread. She didn't



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even have the energy to pull the covers down before going to sleep. Her eyes were closed before her head touched the bed.

Jesse materialized in the bedroom and looked down at Lissa. She was beautiful and the long silky nightgown almost made him swallow his tongue. She also looked worn out. Moving to her side, he reached out and lightly ran his hand down her back. He would have loved nothing more than to take her in his arms and hold her all night. It had been a long time since he had responded to a woman, and even longer since he'd been able to touch one.

Lissa sighed. She was too tired to really process what she was feeling, but the hand rubbing her back felt wonderful. When it stopped, she groaned in protest.

Jesse crawled onto the bed beside her. He gently kneaded the knots from her back and shoulders. She had worked herself to death. He hadn't seen the house looking this nice in a really long time. It would be interesting to see what else she did with the place. If he were lucky, maybe he could convince her to stay longer than six months... maybe he could talk her into forever.

As Jesse worked on easing the tension in Lissa's body, he day dreamed. What would it be like to be married to her? To come home every night and be able to make love to her? To hold her close?

Sighing, Jesse drew a blanket over Lissa and lay down beside her. She would never be his, but at least he could be near her, hold her, when she slept. It would have to be enough. No amount of wishing would change the fact that he was dead.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### **Chapter Three**

The sun streamed through the windows in the morning. Lissa stretched and slowly woke up. The first thing she noticed was a long hard body next to hers in the bed. Opening her eyes, she looked over and saw Jesse sleeping beside her.

Sitting up quickly, Lissa put some distance between herself and Jesse. When had he gotten into bed with her? Lissa tried to think back to last night. Had she been awake when he had entered the bedroom? She didn't remember seeing him.

Groaning, Lissa remembered hands rubbing her back. It must have been Jesse. Poor guy had only been trying to help and had probably fallen asleep. Did ghosts sleep? Lissa leaned a little closer, watching him sleep. He looked so peaceful.

Before she could do something she would regret later, like giving in to the temptation to run her fingers through his hair, or kiss those full lips of his, she climbed out of bed and pulled out some jeans and a warm shirt. Carrying them into the bathroom, Lissa dressed quickly. The last thing she needed was Jesse seeing her without clothes on. Of course, now that she thought about it, he probably hadn't seen anything like her nightgown before. Women in his time had worn a lot more clothing than they did now. Her nightgown left little to the imagination in comparison. It was a good thing she had been asleep last night or she would have been mortified.

Lissa brushed her teeth, brushed out her long hair and pulled it into a pony tail. Putting on a tiny bit of makeup, she decided it was time to start her day. After all of the shopping and cleaning the day before, it was time to get to work... her real work. Otherwise, she was going to have one pissed off editor.

Careful to not wake up Jesse, Lissa quietly closed the bedroom door and walked down the hall to her

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temporary office. Opening up her laptop, she booted up the machine. Selecting the file for her latest novel, *Roses in Bloom*, Lissa began writing. Or at least, she should have been writing. Instead, she found herself staring at the screen with a blank mind. No words were coming to mind.

Panicking, Lissa decided to re-read what she had written previously. Maybe it would spark her creativity. She really needed to write about three thousand words today since she hadn't done anything the day before. Her editor had asked for the first three chapters by the end of the week and so far she only had one chapter. Lissa loved to write, but she hated deadlines with a passion.



A few hours later, Lissa had managed to write a second chapter and had started on chapter three. Things were definitely looking up! At this rate, she could appease her editor and stop feeling guilty for ignoring her latest work. In a way, her books were like kids – she felt guilty when she ignored them.

Lissa stretched her arms over her head. Her neck and back were stiff from leaning over the computer all morning. Before she could get back to work, the phone rang.

"Hello," she said, answering her cell phone.

"Lissa? It's Jared... from yesterday."

Lissa smiled. "Hi, Jared. How are you this morning?"

"I'm doing very well, thank you. I know it's probably a bit soon to call, but Friday seemed like a long ways away. Would you maybe like to have lunch today?"

Lissa glanced at the clock on her laptop. It was a little after eleven. "What time did you want to meet? I'm not exactly dressed for a restaurant."

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"I was thinking around one o'clock. I'm sure that what you're wearing is fine. There's a small café down the street that has a relaxed atmosphere. Most people wear jeans to eat there."

"Well, if you're sure that jeans are okay..."

"I'm sure. Why don't you meet me at the bank and we can walk over to the café together?"

"That sounds great. I'll see you at one," she said, hanging up the phone.

Lissa stared at the phone for a minute with a bemused expression on her face. Had that really just happened? A successful bank owner, who was gorgeous as sin, had asked her out for not one, but two dates in less than twenty-four hours! Nothing like that had ever happened to her before. Lissa just wasn't the type of woman that received a lot of offers. Guys usually looked at her for a moment and then dismissed her.

Jeans may be okay for lunch, but she was definitely going to do something with her hair and change her shirt. Walking down the hall to the bedroom, she started digging through her drawers and her closet. She finally selected a soft lavender cashmere sweater that would hug her large bust without accenting her pudgy waistline.

After heating her flat iron, Lissa straightened her hair one small section at a time. When her hair was curly, it hung about half way down her back. Straightened, it hung almost all the way to her waist. Hopefully Jared liked long hair. It took Lissa forty minutes to finish her hair, but the end result made it worthwhile.

Once she was finished with her hair and had changed her shirt, Lissa stepped back into the bedroom. Jesse was sprawled across the foot of the bed. It seemed as if he had been waiting for her. He looked as if he belonged there, belonged with her.

Shaking her head at her folly, she said, "Hi, Jesse."

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Jesse looked her over. "Morning, Lissa. Going somewhere?"

"Actually I am. I'm meeting someone for lunch."

Both of Jesse's eyebrows shot up. "I didn't realize you knew anyone in town."

Blushing, Lissa responded, "I didn't until yesterday. I met the owner of the River Bend Bank and he offered to take me to lunch today."

Jesse scowled. He knew that he couldn't have her, but he'd be damned if he liked the idea of another man being with her. "Oh yeah? Must be a nice guy to have won you over so quickly."

Lissa could hear the strain in his voice. What was his problem? "He did seem very nice."

"Well, I hope you enjoy your lunch," Jesse said with a sulky tone, before disappearing into thin air.

Lissa shook her head. If she didn't know better, she'd say that Jesse was jealous. Obviously that was ridiculous since he was a ghost. Besides, Lissa wasn't the type of woman who had two men fighting over her. Things like that only happened to the heroines in her books.

Grabbing her purse and keys, she headed downstairs. Lissa paused at the door, wanting to say something to Jesse, but not sure what exactly. Sighing, she left the house and got into her car. Whatever was bothering Jesse would have to wait until she returned. Right now, she had a hot date with a super hot banker, she thought with a grin. Her day was definitely looking up.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### **Chapter Four**

Lissa parked outside of the River Bend Bank. Locking her car, she walked up to the double glass doors. Before she could grasp the handle, the door was opened by a security officer standing inside the door.

"Morning, ma'am," he said, as she entered the bank.

"Good morning," Lissa replied with a smile. "Could you please tell me where I can find Jared Hallbrook?"

The security officer nodded. "Yes, ma'am. His office is right through that door over there," he said, gesturing across the bank to a wooden door in the back corner.

"Thank you."

Lissa started across the tiled floor. She'd only made it half way to the door when a tall red-head stopped her.

"Is there something I can help you with?" the woman asked.

"I'm here to see Mr. Hallbrook."

The woman eyed her up and down, clearly wondering what Lissa could possibly want with Jared – or vice versa.

"And do you have an appointment?"

Before Lissa could answer, the man in question walked up to them, wearing a black suit, maroon shirt and a nice tie. He looked good enough to eat! Lissa hoped she wasn't drooling.

Jared was six foot two at the very least. He had sculpted features, dark blond wavy hair, and beautiful gray eyes. His shoulders were broad. Since he was wearing a suit jacket, Lissa couldn't see his build very well but she would bet he was strong.

Bending to kiss Lissa's cheek he said, "I'm glad you could make it."

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Lissa blushed furiously. "I'm glad you called," she said with a small smile.

The red-head glared daggers at her. Uh-oh, this didn't look good. Was she involved with Jared in some way? Surely the man wouldn't have asked her out if he was seeing someone. And she definitely hoped he wouldn't have kissed her on the cheek in front of another woman he was dating.

Turning to the red-head, Jared said, "Janie, I'll be out to lunch for a bit. If you need anything while I'm gone, ask Steve. I'll have the ringer on my cell turned off during lunch."

Jared promptly turned from Janie and took Lissa's arm. "Shall we?"

Lissa nodded mutely. She was a bit overwhelmed at the moment. Had that just happened? Had he really just dismissed the model-like woman and given his full attention to Lissa? If Lissa had known years ago that men in southern small towns would find her irresistible, she would have come down here ages ago! If nothing else, the next six months could be good for her ego.

Once they were out of the bank, Lissa looked up at Jared. "I hope that our lunch isn't disrupting your day," she told him.

He smiled down at her, "Not at all. It isn't often that I escape the office for lunch; and I never have a beautiful woman with me when I do."

"Oh, well, I, um..." Lissa was at a loss.

Jared laughed. "Not used to compliments?"

Lissa shook her head. "Not really."

He gave her a thoughtful look. "Then the men you know must be blind fools."

Lissa wasn't sure how to respond so she kept quiet. Half a block down, she spotted the restaurant. It was painted a pale yellow and had a black and white striped awning over the front door. The door itself was painted a deep red. There were a few

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bistro tables set up outside in a patio area. It was very quaint – Lissa loved it on the spot.

Jared opened the door and motioned Lissa to enter the little café. Inside, the place was spotless, with gleaming hardwood floors and small cozy tables with white table cloths. Each table held a vase with a single red rose. It was very romantic.

The hostess walked over to them with a bright smile on her face. “Hi Mr. Hallbrook, it’s nice to see you again. Table for two?”

Jared smiled, “Yes, please. Maybe somewhere quiet?”

The hostess nodded. “Follow me please.”

Jared placed his hand on the small of Lissa’s back and guided her to their table. The hostess led them to a small table for two in a corner near a window. The other restaurant patrons were on the other side of the restaurant. When Jared had asked for quiet, he had certainly gotten it.

Jared pulled out Lissa’s chair. Once she was seated, he claimed the other chair. The hostess handed them their menus and excused herself.

Lissa tucked her hair behind her ears and picked up her menu. She peeked over the top of her menu and found Jared watching her intently.

“What is it,” she asked, putting the menu down.

He shook his head. “Nothing. I was just admiring a beautiful woman.”

Lissa didn’t know what to make of Jared. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the compliment, but...”

“But,” he prompted.

“Well, it’s just that, I’m not exactly the type of woman that men can’t wait to be with. I’m not tall, I’m not thin, and I’m not drop dead gorgeous.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” he responded. “For instance, I happen to find petite women with curves to be overly appealing.”

At her blush he grinned. “And I find you to be absolutely gorgeous.”



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Lissa blushed even more, if that was even remotely possible. She felt as if her face were on fire. "Well,..." she cleared her throat.

Jared chuckled. "Our waitress will be here any moment. You should probably concentrate on that menu," he told her, his voice laced with humor.

Lissa wasn't as thrilled by her discomfort as he obviously was, but she was delighted that he found her so attractive. The man was definitely mouth watering, with his muscular build and smoky gray eyes. When you added the fact that he was a successful businessman, it just made him even more irresistible.

Thankfully Lissa had found something appetizing, other than the man sitting across from her, by the time the waitress returned. She ordered the baked ziti with rolls on the side and an iced tea. Jared ordered the grilled chicken with steamed vegetables and bottled water.

After the waitress left, Jared reached across the table to take her hand. Lissa's shock must have shown on her face.

"I didn't mean to startle you. If I'm moving too fast, just let me know."

"It's not that, it's just that I'm not used to this."

"Not used to men paying attention to you?"

She shook her head, "Any of it. I dated someone seriously for a while, but I haven't dated at all this past year."

"What happened, if you don't mind my asking?"

Lissa took a breath. "Well, let's just say that he wasn't with me for my body or my winning personality. I came home early one night and found him in bed with my best friend, who looked like a runway model."

Jared winced. "That had to hurt."

"Yes, it did. If anything, it just proved to me that if a gorgeous guy pays me attention, it isn't because he thinks I'm hot." She looked at him across the table,

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"So that's why I have a hard time believing you find me so irresistible."

Jared released her hand long enough to trail his fingers down her cheek. "I wish I could take away those memories and the pain he caused you. More importantly, I wish you could see yourself through my eyes. Then you'd see how truly beautiful you are."

Lissa ducked her head and smiled. So far Jared was saying and doing everything right. She looked back up and her breath caught at the look in his eyes – desire. This man wanted her, looked at her as no other man ever had before. It was a heady experience!

Changing the subject, Jared asked, "So, are you just taking an extended vacation in our small town? If I remember correctly, you said you're only here for six months."

"Yes, I rented the Pearson place for that long, but I'm not on vacation. I'm a writer and came here for some peace and quiet. My editor was breathing down my neck and I was having problems writing."

"What do you write?"

"Romance novels."

Jared's eyes widened in recognition. "You're Amaryllis Rose, aren't you?"

"How did you know that?"

"My sister reads your books. She's been talking non-stop about that movie coming out, Red Roses. I thought you looked familiar."

Lissa smiled. "I'm glad to hear she's excited about it. I have some of my books back at the house. I'd be happy to sign one or two of them for her."

"She'd really like that."

The waitress returned with their food. As they ate, they discussed Lissa's career and Jared's family. They laughed and had a great time. All too soon, their lunch ended. As the waitress cleared their table, Jared took Lissa's hand once more.

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"I've had a really nice time, Lissa."

She smiled at him. "I have too. I'm really glad you called today."

The look he gave her was wistful. "I wish I didn't have to return to work. I could easily spend the rest of the day with you."

"I feel the same way. But you have to get back to the bank and I have a book at home that won't write itself."

Jared nodded. "You're right. I guess I'll just have to wait until Friday."

"If it makes it any easier, I'll be anxiously awaiting Friday as well."

Rising from his chair, Jared held his hand out to her. Lissa placed her hand in his and let him pull her to her feet. They walked out of the restaurant hand in hand. As they neared the bank, Jared put his arm around her waist and pulled her close to his side.

They stopped in front of the bank and Jared pulled her into his arms. "Mind if I kiss you goodbye?"

In response, Lissa's lips parted and she leaned into him. Jared bent his head to hers and gently claimed her lips. He hadn't planned on getting carried away, but once his lips touched hers his mind was no longer in control. Deepening the kiss, he wound his hand through her hair as his other hand pulled her hips against his.

Hearing a throat clear behind them, the couple sprang apart. Lissa's hand automatically rose to her tingling lips. Never before had she been kissed like that!

Jared, slightly embarrassed to have lost control in public, looked over his shoulder to see his security guard grinning from ear to ear and a pissed off Janie glaring at them from inside the bank.

Turning back to Lissa, Jared caressed her cheek. "I'll call you later."

Lissa nodded with a smile on her face.

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Jared grinned. He would definitely be calling her later. The woman lit him on fire as no other ever had. He couldn't wait to see her again on Friday night.

Turning, Jared walked into the bank whistling. The guard chuckled as Jared walked past him. He walked through the lobby, right past the glaring Janie, and into his office, where he firmly closed the door on the gaping customers. Never in his life had Jared acted like that in public before. Yes indeed, Friday was going to be an interesting night.



Back at the Pearson house, Jesse was pacing in the front entry. Where was she? Lunch shouldn't take this long. Hearing a car coming up the driveway, Jesse stopped and looked out the front window. Finally! She was home.

Opening the door, he stepped out onto the porch. As Lissa stopped the car and got out, Jesse crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

Lissa saw Jesse on the porch. He didn't look happy either. Wondering what was up, she got out of the car and walked up the steps to the front porch.

"Is something wrong Jesse?"

"You were gone an awfully long time."

Lissa stopped, her mouth dropping open. "That's what your belligerent look is about? The fact that I took a long lunch?"

"Well, I just thought you'd be home sooner is all. I was worried something had happened to you," he grumbled.

Lissa was dumbfounded. "You're jealous!"

Jesse stiffened. "I am not!"

She laughed. "Yes, you are. That's why you were so upset when I came home late; why you didn't want me to leave earlier."

"Whatever," he mumbled, vanishing.

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Lissa shook her head; first Jared and now Jesse. Of course, she could actually have a relationship with Jared, while Jesse... well, Jesse was tempting, but the ghost thing was a problem.

Hurrying into the house, Lissa ran upstairs to get back to work on her book. After the steamy kiss she had shared with Jared, she had a ton of ideas for her story. Not only would her editor get the first three chapters, but if Lissa was half as creative as she felt, she would probably have a quarter of the book finished by Friday afternoon.

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### Chapter Five

Later that night, Lissa was just settling into a tub of hot, bubbly water when her cell phone rang. Picking it up, she recognized Jared's number on the caller ID. Should she answer while she was in the tub? Maybe if she was really still he wouldn't realize she was soaking in the tub.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi. Miss me," Jared asked.

Lissa smiled. "Actually, I did. Did you miss *me*?"

"Mmm-hmm. All day in fact."

Lissa shifted and the water sloshed a bit.

"What are you doing?" Jared asked, having heard the water in the background.

"Um... nothing. Why?"

"I could have sworn I just heard water sloshing."

"Oh, that. It's nothing."

"Lissa..."

"Hmm?"

"Lissa, are you in the tub?" Jared asked, his voice deep and husky.

Lissa blushed. "Maybe."

On the other end of the phone, she heard Jared groan. Grinning, she felt rather naughty, and powerful.

"You're killing me woman. Between that kiss this afternoon and now the idea of you naked in a tub, I'm going to need a cold shower before bed."

"Really? The thought of me in the tub turns you on that much?" Lissa wasn't sure what prompted to ask such a question! This *wasn't* her! Normally she was shy. Only the heroines in her novels were this bold with men.

"Oh yes. It definitely turns me on. You have no idea how much!"

Lissa opened her mouth to respond, but heard a male shout on the other side of the bathroom door, "Lissa, are you okay in there?"

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Lissa groaned.

"Was that a man's voice I heard?" Jared asked, curious and jealous.

Lissa sighed. Putting her hand over the phone, she yelled to Jesse, "I'm fine. Go away!"

"Lissa..." Jared wasn't sure what to think. She hadn't mentioned a boyfriend or husband. Surely she wouldn't have kissed him like that if she had a guy in her life and in her home.

"Sorry Jared. That was the ghost."

Jared was quiet for a moment. "The ghost at the house is a guy?"

"Yes, his name is Jesse. Usually he's rather pleasant to be around, but today he's being something of a pill."

"Lissa, what's this ghost like exactly?"

Lissa paused. "Are you jealous of a ghost?"

"Yes, dammit!"

Lissa laughed. "You don't have to be jealous of a ghost."

"He's in the house with you. For all I know, he's spied on you when you're naked. What's not to be jealous of? Is he old and ugly?"

"No," she hedged. She wasn't about to tell him that Jesse was almost as gorgeous as he was. She may not have a lot of experience with men, but she knew that would be a big no-no.

"Lissa, I know we just met and I have no right to say this, but I really don't like you staying in that house all the way out there by yourself with a male ghost hanging around."

"I'm fine Jared, really. Jesse would never hurt me."

"I wasn't worried about him hurting you. I'm worried that he won't be able to keep his hands off of you."

"Jared ... I appreciate your concern, but everything is fine. I promise."

## *Magnolia Magick*

She heard Jared sigh on the other end. "Alright, but I want you to promise that you'll call me if you need anything."

Lissa smiled. "I will. I promise."

"I'll let you get back to your bath. Call me tomorrow?"

"You bet."

"Sweet dreams, beautiful."

"You too. Good night, Jared."

Lissa hung up the phone and sat it on the floor beside the tub. Leaning her head back against the back of the tub, she closed her eyes and relaxed. Today had been one of the best days of her life. Lunch with Jared had been fantastic and she'd accomplished so much with her book. Life was definitely taking a turn for the better!



After midnight, Jesse materialized in Lissa's room. He stood by the bed watching her sleep. The moonlight filtered through the bedroom window, illuminating her face. Her long blonde hair was spread across the pillows and her hands were tucked under her chin. She looked angelic.

Reaching out a hand, he brushed a lock of blonde hair back from her face. Lissa stirred in her sleep and sighed, "Jared."

Jesse frowned. Who exactly was this Jared person? She came home from lunch with a goofy grin on her face; she'd talked to the guy while she was in the tub! And now she was sighing his name when it was Jesse touching her.

Fists knotted at his side, Jesse disappeared. She may not be meant for him, but he didn't have to like it when she saw someone else. His life had been extinguished before he could find a woman to love. It didn't seem fair that he should find her now, so long after his death. The Fates were definitely cruel.



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The next morning Lissa decided to sleep in. Normally she was up and ready to face the day between seven and eight o'clock. Today was another matter... she opened her eyes at eight o'clock, stretched, rolled back over and decided to sleep a little longer.

When nine o'clock rolled around, Lissa sighed and forced herself to get out of the bed. While she may have written enough to make her editor happy, she still had a lot of work to do. If she played her cards right, she could finish her book a month early and have a month to enjoy herself before going back home.

Lissa went through her morning ritual of brushing her hair and teeth, putting on makeup, and getting dressed. As she changed her clothes, she looked around the bathroom. Jared's words from the previous night came back to haunt her. *Could* Jesse be invisible and spy on her while she was changing? Shaking her head, she decided she was being ridiculous. Jesse was a gentleman and would never do that to her.

Exiting the bathroom, Lissa dropped her dirty clothes in the laundry basket. Eyeing the growing pile, she realized she would need to wash clothes the next day. Heading downstairs, she decided to grab a cup of coffee and a cinnamon roll before getting to work. Working on an empty stomach never turned out well. Her brain just couldn't function without caffeine and sugar. Patting her stomach, she decided that in the future she may have to forgo the sugar and start eating fruit for breakfast.

After she was armed with her breakfast and a large cup of coffee, Lissa slowly climbed the stairs to the second floor. If nothing else, the stairs were going to be good exercise for her. She wondered how

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many times she'd have to climb them before she worked off the cinnamon roll she was about to consume.

As she entered her office, she turned on her laptop. It took the machine a few minutes to pull up. As much as Lissa loved the old thing, it was definitely time to get a new one. She had seen a green laptop that had looked pretty nice the last time she had been to the electronics store. When she got home, she'd have to look into it.

Once her file was open, she looked over the last few paragraphs she had typed the previous day. Getting her focus, she began typing. Lissa worked all through the morning. Before she knew it, it was almost noon. As she stood to take a break and scrounge through the pantry for lunch, her phone rang.

Glancing at the caller ID, she saw that it was Jared. She smiled remembering their lunch yesterday and their conversation last night. It was starting to become a habit for him to call her near the lunch hour.

"Hello," she said, answering the phone.

Jared smiled. "Hi Lissa, how are you this morning?"

"I'm good. I was just taking a break from my latest book. What are you up to?"

"Well, I was calling to see if I could convince you to meet me for a late lunch."

Lissa looked at the time. She had accomplished a lot that morning so technically she could take some time off. "What time did you want to meet?"

"How about one o'clock at the bank?"

"I can do that. Any particular dress code?"

"I want to take you someplace special. Would it be too much trouble for you to wear a dress?"

Lissa paused. She had only brought a handful of nice things with her. "How fancy of a dress are we talking?"

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"It doesn't matter," he said with a smile in his voice, "I mostly just want to see you in a dress."

Lissa laughed. "Okay, I think I can manage a dress. I'll see you at one o'clock."

Realizing she only had thirty minutes to get ready, Lissa ran down the hall to her bedroom and threw open the closet door. Rummaging around inside for a few minutes, she finally decided on her sapphire blue long-sleeve knit dress. It was an a-line so it accentuated her good parts and hid the not so good parts.

Quickly shimmying out of her clothes, she slipped the dress over her head. After digging through one of the dresser drawers, she located a pair of neutral thigh highs and pulled them on. Slipping her feet into her black high heels, she rushed into the bathroom. Her make-up was passable. Lissa added a little lip-gloss. Her hair was another matter entirely. Twisting it into a loose knot, she used rhinestone butterfly pins to hold it in place. She curled a few stray hairs to give her face a softer look.

Satisfied that her reflection was as good as it was going to get, Lissa grabbed her purse and hurried down the stairs. When she reached the bottom, she saw Jesse standing off to the side, hands tucked into his pants pockets, trying to look nonchalant.

"Hi Jesse, I haven't seen you today," Lissa said, pausing at the foot of the stairs.

He looked her up and down, appreciation showing clearly on his face.

"I've been around. You look really nice."

She smiled at him. "Thanks, I was just stepping out for lunch. I may do some shopping while I'm in town, but I don't think I'll be back too late."

Lissa paused, realizing that she was talking to Jesse as if they were a couple, or at least roommates. Which, in a sense, they were roommates... it's just that one of them no longer had a pulse.

"I hope you have a nice time," he told her.

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"Thank you."

Lissa smiled at him one last time before dashing out the door. If she didn't hurry, she was going to be late. She felt as if she had butterflies in her stomach she was so excited. Sliding into the car, Lissa started the car and took off.

The usual thirty minute drive into town only took Lissa twenty minutes. There were times when having a lead foot was a good thing. Thankfully she hadn't passed any police cars along the way. The last thing she needed was a speeding ticket!

Zippering into a parking place a few doors down from the bank, Lissa hopped out of the car. Setting her alarm, she briskly walked down the sidewalk. She only hoped she wasn't grinning like an idiot. Just because she was overly excited about her lunch date didn't mean she had to show it.

As she entered the bank, the piranha from the day before glared at her. Lissa smiled at Janie and continued toward the back of the bank and Jared's office. Pausing outside the wooden door, she gently knocked.

"Come in," she heard from within the office.

Turning the knob, she pushed open the door. Jared was seated at his desk, his suit jacket draped over the back of his chair. There was a mountain of papers scattered across the large wood desk and a laptop was open on the corner.

"Hi," she said softly, stepping into the office and closing the door behind her. After the door clicked shut, she wondered if she should have done that. Maybe she should have left it open?

Jared looked up. When he saw it was Lissa, he smiled.

"Hello gorgeous. You look amazing," he said, his eyes roaming over her blue dress.

Lissa blushed. "Thank you. You look good too," she said, eyeing his dark gray suit and blue pinstripe shirt.

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Jared stepped around the desk and pulled Lissa into his arms. Lissa was surprised, but didn't resist. Capturing her lips in a gentle kiss, Jared pulled her closer. Leaning into him, Lissa wrapped her arms around his neck. Even in heels, she had to stand on tip-toe to reach him. It was one of the downfalls in being short.

When his tongue swept past her lips to tangle with her own, she moaned into his mouth. Lissa felt as if she were on fire. She wanted him and she wanted him now!

An outraged gasp coming from the doorway startled them. Jared lifted his head and spotted Janie standing in the open doorway. A few of the younger women in the bank lobby giggled, letting him know that several people had seen them kissing.

Reluctantly, Jared released Lissa. "What do you want, Janie?" he all but barked.

Janie snapped her mouth shut. "I... I, um... I just came to tell you that Mr. Peterson moved his appointment until tomorrow so your afternoon is free."

Jared nodded. "Good, thank you."

Janie stood there, glaring at Lissa. Jared gave her a cool look, "That will be all, Janie."

Realizing she had been dismissed, Janie closed the door and stomped back to her desk.

Looking down at Lissa, Jared realized she was embarrassed. "I'm sorry about that."

Lissa shook her head. "It isn't your fault."

"No? So there was another man in here kissing you?"

"No, but it wasn't your fault that we were caught."

Jared looked at her thoughtfully. "Are you sorry we were caught?"

Surprised, Lissa said, "No. I mean, it's a little embarrassing to have complete strangers watch me kiss someone, but I'm not sorry that you kissed me... if that's what you were asking."

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"That's what I was asking. I'm not sorry either," he said with a grin.

Things were moving a little fast, but Jared couldn't seem to help himself. Where Lissa was concerned, he seemed to have very little, if any, self control. No woman had ever made him feel the way Lissa did. It was a little scary to be honest.

"Jared, can I ask you something?" Lissa asked hesitantly.

"Anything. What is it?"

"It's just, well... Janie always seems so angry to see me. Did the two of you ever date?"

Jared threw back his head and laughed. "Me? Date that pushy woman? No, I never dated her."

Lissa relaxed. "Oh, that's good. I just wanted to make sure. She just seems a little hostile around me."

Jared sobered. "If she makes you that uncomfortable, I could always meet you away from the bank. Assuming, that is, that you want to see me again after today?"

She smiled at him. "Of course I want to see you again. And I honestly don't mind coming to the bank to meet you."

Lissa's lips tingled every time Jared kissed her. Surely that had to be a good sign. And he didn't seem repulsed by her size, so that was *definitely* a good sign.

Offering her his arm, he said, "Let's go to lunch."

Lissa curled her hand around his arm and let him escort her to the door. Opening the door, Jared escorted her past the knowing smiles on the faces of every woman in the lobby, past Janie, and out the front door of the bank. He led her over to a sleek black Mercedes AMG SL-65. Lissa had never seen one in person and was in awe of the gorgeous car. If she remembered correctly, they cost almost two-hundred-thousand dollars. Jared must be doing *very* well if he could afford a car like this!

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Jared opened the passenger door and helped Lissa into the car. The inside was just as amazing as the outside of the car. Jared closed her door and walked around to the driver's side. As he slid into the vehicle, Lissa caught a whiff of his cologne. She had gotten a nose full earlier when she'd been kissing him, but she couldn't place the scent. Whatever it was, it made her knees weak.

"The place I want to take you to for lunch is about fifteen minutes away. I hope that's okay."

"It's fine. I'm not familiar with the restaurants around here so I trust your judgment."

Jared smiled. "Hopefully I won't disappoint you then."

"I don't think you could," Lissa murmured. She thought she had spoken too low for Jared to hear, but he had picked up what she had said. He hoped she meant that in more than one way.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Jared parked the car near the door. Walking around to the passenger side, he helped Lissa out of the car. The restaurant was a one-story brick building with bay windows and decorative lanterns on either side of the door. With it being mid-day, the lanterns weren't lit. The sign over the door read *Le Café Plaisant de Felipe*.

Jared opened the ornate door and ushered Lissa inside. The floors were a dark hardwood. The inside was rather dark considering how bright the sun was outside. There were no more than twenty tables in the entire restaurant, all of them had black table clothes, lit candles, and a vase with a single red rose. It was very romantic.

"Monsieur et Madame, this way please," the hostess said.

After seating them and handing them menus, the woman disappeared.

Lissa took in the ambience of the place. It really was quite lovely. The walls were painted with murals

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of what she supposed were scenes of Paris. The ceiling sported rustic exposed beams and black iron chandeliers.

"Do you like it?" Jared asked.

"It's lovely. I'm glad you brought me here."

He smiled at her and opened his menu. Lissa opened hers as well and was stunned to see that everything was in French.

"Um, Jared. There's just one problem."

"Let me guess, you don't speak French."

Lissa shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

"Well, if you tell me some of the things you like, or things you absolutely hate, that will narrow the menu down a bit. Then I can read the rest of it to you."

"I like just about any kind of bird – chicken, pheasant, quail, duck. I love vegetables no matter how they are prepared."

"Hmm. What about the Duck a L'orange? It comes with steamed vegetables and a side of rice."

"That sounds nice."

Jared nodded and motioned for the waitress. He ordered for both of them. The waitress didn't even write the order down before turning and walking to the kitchen.

Jared reached across the table and took Lissa's hands in his.

"I know that things are moving really fast. I had told myself I wouldn't call you today, or if I did that it would be later this evening. But then I kept thinking about you all morning."

"I was thinking about you too. It took a lot of concentration to get any writing done today, but I managed to have a productive morning."

"What are we going to do Lissa? I don't want to rush you and I don't want you to feel smothered. I don't want things to move any faster than *you* want them to."

Lissa was glad for the candle light, it would hopefully hide all of her blushes. "I think that's the



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problem. I know things are moving too fast, but I've never felt this way about anyone before."

The moment the words left her mouth, Lissa wished she could recall them. If the man thought she was falling in love with him, he would run in the other direction. Falling in love? Where had that idea come from? It made Lissa a little uneasy, but the butterflies in her stomach went into over-drive.

Lissa hadn't realized she had spoken her thoughts out loud until Jared asked, "Is that what this is? Love?"

"I... I don't know. I mean, I've never been in love."

She looked so beautiful in the candle light. Then again, Lissa looked beautiful to him in any light. He knew that she was self-conscious about her weight, but he thought she was perfect. He didn't like the bone thin women running around town. Jared had made it to the age of thirty-nine without ever being married. It wasn't because women weren't interested in him, it was because he wasn't interested in the women who lived in this town. They were all so busy trying to look like models that they didn't eat properly and were always staring in a mirror.

"Neither have I," he told her quietly.

Lissa and Jared looked into each other's eyes. Was that what this was? Were they falling in love? If neither of them had ever been in love, how could they know?

"I'm going to be honest with you. I haven't had a serious relationship in over five years and I haven't slept with a woman in over two years."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Jared sighed. "Because in the event that things go anywhere with us I want you to know that I don't sleep around. I'm not into one night stands or weekend flings."

Lissa grinned. That meant that he wanted things to go somewhere with them, which was a good sign. Sometime over the last twenty four hours Lissa had

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decided that she wanted more than just friendship with Jared. The man lit her on fire; she craved his kisses and his touch.

"While we're being honest, Sam and I broke up over a year ago. We had been going out for about two years. When I told you before I hadn't really dated any in the past year, it included sleeping with anyone. I can't be with someone that way unless I feel something for them, and I don't just mean lust."

"I have to admit that being a guy, I've been known to sleep with a woman just for lust. But that was a long time ago. I'd like to think I've grown up a bit since then."

The waitress reappeared with their lunch and a bottle of red wine. The couple ate in companionable silence for most of the meal.

"You know I'm leaving in six months, right?" Lissa asked out of the blue.

"I know that you *plan* on leaving in six months. Maybe I'm hoping I can change your mind."

"It's just that I don't know where this is leading, whatever this thing is between us, and I don't want you to think I'm going to be here forever."

Jared contemplated her a moment. "Well, you're a writer, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"So you can write from pretty much anywhere, just like you're doing now, right?"

"I guess so."

Jared nodded. "Then there's no harm in me trying to convince you to stick around at the end of your six month stay."

Lissa smiled, she couldn't help herself. "I guess there isn't."

When they were finished and Jared had paid the bill, they climbed back into his car. Jared had only driven a block or two when he pulled the car over and stopped.

"What's wrong," Lissa asked.

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"I was thinking... Janie said that my schedule was clear for the rest of the day. If you're done writing for the day, would you like to spend some time together?"

"I'd really like that, but I think we're both a bit over-dressed."

"That's an easy fix. I don't live too far from here. We can swing by my place so I can change and then I'll take you to get your car. I can follow you out to your house so you can change too."

"It sounds like you have it all planned out. I would hate to ruin a perfectly good plan."

Jared smiled that slow sexy smile of his. The man really was just downright sinful. Without another word, he pulled back into the lane and drove to his house.

Lissa was surprised. With his job and the fancy car he drove, she expected to see a mansion. Instead, he had a small one bedroom condo over-looking a park. The place was very nice and upscale, just not quite what Lissa had pictured.

They walked up the stairs to Jared's door. When they stepped inside, Lissa took everything in. The living room and kitchen opened to each other. There was a granite top bar dividing the two rooms with barstools tucked under the counter. The living room boasted a large black leather couch with a matching chair and a glass top coffee table. There was a flat panel TV hanging on the wall across from the couch.

"You can have a seat if you'd like. I'll just be a minute," Jared told her, disappearing through the French doors to their left.

Lissa figured that must lead to his bedroom. The only other doors she saw led out to a small balcony. He had a beautiful view, but she got the impression he didn't have time to enjoy it. Jared seemed like the type of man who would work himself to death if someone didn't make him slow down periodically.

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She noticed he didn't have pictures of family, or even of himself. For that matter, she didn't see artwork of any type. The walls were bare and were painted a light cream. If she had to guess, she'd say the place had come with that color. Over all, the condo had a feeling of not being lived in.

Hearing the doors open, Lissa turned toward Jared's bedroom. Before he closed the doors, she caught a glimpse of a large bed covered with a black comforter and a long black dresser against the opposite wall.

Jared himself took her breath away. He had on blue jeans and a black sweater. The sleeves were pushed up to expose his forearms. It fit him snugly through the upper arms and across the chest. As Lissa took in all of those muscles, her mouth ran dry. She wasn't sure she could put together a coherent sentence if her life depended on it. The man was a veritable god!

"Ready to go?" he asked.

Lissa mutely nodded.

Jared escorted her out the door, locking up behind them. Once they were back in the car, Lissa found her voice again.

"Your place was a little different than I had expected."

Jared laughed. "Let me guess, you were expecting a mansion?"

"Well, maybe not a mansion, but I figured you would have a larger place than a condo. You just seem like someone who likes their space."

Jared nodded. "I do, but I'm not at the condo much. I go home, grab a bite to eat, go to bed, then get up and go to work. If I were home more often, I probably would have bought a house."

"Why do you work so much? I know the bank is yours, but surely it runs smoothly enough that you could take more time off."

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"It does. I could actually disappear for half a week without there being any issues. The problem is that I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but why don't you have a family? I don't mean that in a bad way, it's just that I find it hard to believe there aren't women out there dying to marry you."

Jared laughed. "Yes, there are. The problem is that I'm not dying to marry them. Most of the women in this town or more worried about their looks than their personality. Ten minutes in the same room with them and I want to jump out the window. I could never spend the rest of my life with someone who refuses to eat just so she can look like the models in the magazines."

That answer pleased Lissa to no end. "I was just surprised is all. You're a really nice guy and seem to have things together."

"Thanks. Why didn't you ever marry?"

Lissa thought about her answer for a minute. "Well, you already know what happened with Sam. The only other lengthy relationship I had was in college. I thought that Brad loved me. We had talked about marriage. Later I found out it was just that, only talk. He had convinced me that we would get married just so he could sleep with me."

"I'm sorry. You've had it really rough with relationships, haven't you? You deserve so much more than what you've been given."

"I guess. Then again, it's given me plenty of things to dream about, which means I've had plenty to write about."

Jared smiled at her. Pulling into the parking space next to her car, he pulled her across the car and kissed her.

"Why don't you drive home and I'll follow you?"

"Okay," she whispered. His kisses had a way of making her forget everything, including her own name.

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Unbuckling her seat belt, she climbed out of the car. Fumbling with her purse for a minute, she managed to locate her keys and unlock her car door. Once she was in and buckled, she started her car and backed out of the parking space.

Keeping an eye on her rear view mirror, she made sure that she didn't lose Jared. On the way, she started to worry about her resident spook. How was Jesse going to react to a man coming home with her? Hopefully he would behave himself. She had started to suspect that her hunky ghost had feelings for her. If that was the case, things could be rather uncomfortable with Jared in the house.

Half an hour later, they pulled into Lissa's driveway. Coming to a stop in front of the large house, Lissa turned off her car and got out. She waited patiently by the trunk of her car while Jared got out of his Mercedes. Lissa's little gray Honda looked frumpy next to the sleek sexy lines of the black car.

Jared got out of his car and gave the house an appreciative glance. Lissa had been right, it really could be gorgeous if it were fixed up. Walking over to her, he put an arm around her waist.

"It really is something," he murmured.

"Shall we?" Lissa asked, nodding to the front door.

They ascended the stairs together. Once they reached the door, Jared removed his arm from around Lissa's waist so she could unlock the large wooden door. As it swung open on its creaky hinges, Lissa cringed. She had forgotten about getting some oil for the door all three times that she'd been in town.

"I keep meaning to fix that," she said apologetically.

"Nonsense, it lends charm to the place. Besides, you shouldn't have to dirty your hands and ruin your pretty nails by oiling doors," Jared responded.

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Lissa smiled. They had just closed the door when Jesse appeared, arms crossed over his broad chest. Lissa's smile slipped from her face. This couldn't be good. Jesse didn't look the least bit pleased to see her guest. He was eyeing Jared as if he'd like to physically throw him out of the house – head first.

"Hi Jesse," Lissa said.

Jesse grunted, dismissing her, as he eyed the intruder. So this was the man Lissa had slipped out to meet two days in a row. He hated him on sight. While the man was dressed in casual clothes, he still seemed well put together. Obviously he was charming or Lissa wouldn't have seen him more than once. Yep, Jesse definitely hated him.

Jared cleared his throat, more than a little shocked at seeing the ghost in such solid form. Especially since the ghost in question was glaring at him. If looks could kill, Lissa would have *two* ghosts standing in her entry hall. Jared had no doubt the man didn't like him. That answered his question about the ghost's relationship to Lissa – even if he didn't have one, he clearly wanted one. Honestly, Jared couldn't blame him.

"I'm Jared," he said, taking a step toward the ghost.

Jesse eyed the man, not sure if he wanted to speak to him or not. Reluctantly, he nodded at Jared. "I'm Jesse."

Jared smiled at him. "It's nice to meet you, Jesse. Lissa has mentioned you a few times."

Jesse was surprised, and oddly pleased. If she had mentioned him, that meant she'd been thinking about him. Of course, Jared hadn't said whether or not those comments had been good or bad. Lissa didn't seem like the type of woman who would speak poorly of someone when they weren't around to defend themselves, so he was betting that she had only said nice things about him.

## *Magnolia Magick*

"Jesse, could you come with me for a minute?" Lissa asked.

Jesse flashed a triumphant smile at Jared. "Of course, Lissa."

Lissa turned to Jared. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Why don't you make yourself at home?"

Jared nodded and watched her head upstairs with the resident ghost. He didn't like the fact that she was obviously going to change her clothes and was taking the ghost with her. Just what had been going on in this house? Shaking his head, he decided to explore the lower level.

Once Lissa and Jesse were safely in her bedroom, she closed the door and turned to face him.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

Jesse was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

Lissa waved her hand in the general direction they had just come from. "I mean that macho male crap you pulled downstairs with Jared."

Jesse stood a little straighter and walked over to Lissa. "I am merely looking out for your best interests. You've only known the man a few days and yet you've already brought him home with you. What's next? Sex by moonlight on the front lawn?"

Lissa gasped. "I can't believe you just said that to me!"

Jesse sighed. "I just don't want to see you get hurt. What if he's only after sex?"

"Jared isn't like that. He knows I've been hurt and he's aware that things are moving rather quickly. As a matter of fact, he was worried he would scare me off. We had a very nice talk during lunch today."

Jesse rolled his eyes. "You don't think he'd tell you something like that just to throw you off his scent? What if he said those things so you wouldn't think he was only trying to get laid, but in reality that's exactly what he's up to?"

Lissa shook her head. "You're starting to confuse me."



### *Magnolia Magick*

"Just think things through and be careful, okay? I can't protect you when you're away from the house. It doesn't hurt for me to put the fear of god into the man while he's here."

Lissa hugged Jesse. "Thank you for trying to look out for me, but I'm a big girl and can take care of myself."

Jesse nodded in defeat. "I'll let you change, or whatever you were about to do."

Lissa gave him a quick smile before turning to her closet. Behind her, Jesse disappeared.

Pulling out her charcoal gray sweater and a pair of jeans, Lissa quickly changed her clothes. Tired of always feeling short around Jared, she finished the outfit off with her three inch spiked heel black boots. They always made her feel sexy.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### Chapter Six

A few hours later, Lissa and Jared found themselves outside of Atlanta at Stone Mountain Park. They arrived a little after four o'clock. First they visited the antebellum plantation and the farmyard; next on their agenda was the scenic railroad, which took them on a five mile train ride. By the time they were finished, people were spreading out picnic blankets at the base of the mountain to prepare for the laser show. Even though it would put them back home late, Jared and Lissa decided to stay for the show.

When all of the fun was over, they tiredly walked back to Jared's car. Jared reached over and took Lissa's hand. She was surprised, but pleasantly so. Holding his hand, she leaned against his arm a little. Jared smiled down at her.

"I'm sorry that our day has to end," he told her.

"Me, too. I've had a really great time today," she replied.

"I'm glad. Although, I'm not sure how I'm going to top all of this tomorrow night."

Lissa grinned. "I'm sure you will think of something."

Jared had an idea of what he'd like to do, but he was uncertain how Lissa would react. He had a small two bedroom log cabin in Alabama. You would think that living in a lazy little town like Maple Falls he would want a retreat in the city and not in the country, but Jared found that he liked the peace and quiet. It was about thirty minutes outside of Dothan, Alabama on thirty acres of land. It's where Jared went when he needed some time to think or just wanted to be alone. He had never taken anyone there before, but wanted to share it with Lissa.

After helping Lissa into the car, he slid into the driver's seat and started the car. He glanced her way and noticed that she was looking at him.

## *Magnolia Magick*

"What is it?"

Lissa blushed at being caught. "Nothing, I was just..."

Jared raised an eyebrow and looked at her. "You were just?"

"Admiring the view," she blurted out.

Jared gave her that sexy grin of his and pulled her closer, giving her a gentle kiss. "I think my view is much better."

Lissa sighed and gave him a happy look. The man had the ability to turn her insides to mush, and her brain was usually the first to go. She was amazed they had been able to have any conversations. He made her feel excited, nervous, and desirable all at the same time.

"I had better get you back home. I would hate to drop you off and find your not-so-friendly ghost pointing a shotgun at me."

Lissa laughed. "He really isn't so bad."

Jared wondered about that. The man had seemed jealous when they had arrived at the house earlier. If he had feelings for Lissa, which Jared could hardly fault him for, just how far would he go to keep her? Was he a threat to Lissa? Or just to Jared? Maybe going to the cabin this weekend wouldn't be such a bad idea after all.

"Do you work on the weekends?" he asked her.

"Not usually, why?"

"Well, I was thinking of going to my cabin this weekend."

Lissa wasn't sure how to respond. While the idea sounded exciting, she wasn't sure she was ready for that yet. Apparently her emotions were clearly painted on her face.

"It has two bedrooms," Jared assured her.

Lissa smiled. That did make her feel a little better, then again, the thought of sharing a bed with Jared made her feel hot all over. Did she really want to take that big of a leap with a guy she just met?

## *Magnolia Magick*

Sure, he was gorgeous, polite, well-to-do, and seemed to be genuinely interested in her, and hey, those only came along every... well, to be honest, someone like Jared had never come along before. She would be an idiot *not* to go.

"I think I'd like that. When do you want to go?" she asked.

"Well, if you don't mind grabbing dinner on the way, we could head out that way on Friday and come back Sunday afternoon."

Lissa nodded. "That sounds good. Just let me know when to be ready on Friday."

"Any time you want to leave is fine with me. The trip won't take any longer than the one today did. I don't have to go in on Friday so we can leave whenever you're ready to."

"I have to turn in my first few chapters to my editor on Friday. Can we leave after lunch?"

"Sounds perfect. I'll come pick you up around one o'clock."

Lissa chewed on her lip. "Actually, would it be okay for me to meet you at your place?"

Jared glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "If you're worried about Jesse, I won't let him get to me."

"It's not that. Well, okay, it's partially that. But I hate for you to drive all the way out to my place just to turn around and have to drive back through town."

"You don't mind leaving your car on the street at my place?" he asked.

Lissa hadn't thought of that. Everyone in town would see her car there. "I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I shouldn't. The whole town would be talking by the time we got back."

Jared grinned at her. "Don't worry about it on my account. Being a guy, I really don't mind if they see the car of a pretty woman out in front of my place for a few days."

## *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa laughed. "You aren't worried it would hurt your business? Or make someone jealous?"

Jared took her hand in his. "Honey, I really don't care what the townspeople think. And if anyone gets jealous, it's their problem. There isn't a single woman in town who has any right to be jealous over me – except for you."

Lissa felt warmth spread through her at his statement. She hadn't missed his term of endearment either.

"Well, if you're sure..."

"I'm sure," he told her.

Lissa nodded. "Okay, then I'll meet you at your place around one o'clock."

They rode the rest of the way to her house in silence, both of them looking forward to what tomorrow would bring.



An hour after being home, Lissa was soaking in the tub. She was sorely going to miss the large garden tub when she went back home. A pang of regret hit her, she wasn't just going to miss the tub, Lissa was going to miss Jesse and Jared too. Jesse was becoming a good friend to her and Jared... well, she wasn't sure what Jared was to her just yet, but she had a feeling that if things were different that he could be everything to her.

Tilting her head back, she closed her eyes and sighed. She'd had a productive morning, a great lunch, and a wonderful afternoon with a terrific guy. All in all, it was probably one of her best days. It seemed right to end it all with a nice long soak in a hot bubble bath.

When Lissa heard a deep voice beside her, she was very thankful for those bubbles.

"Lissa, can we talk?" Jesse asked as he materialized beside the tub. He flushed a deep red

## *Magnolia Magick*

and quickly turned around. "I'm so sorry! I had no idea ... I mean, I ..."

"It's okay Jesse. Why don't you wait in the kitchen and I'll come down when I'm done?"

He mutely nodded and vanished.

Lissa quickly looked down to make sure he hadn't been able to see anything. Thankfully the bubbles had covered everything important. She would have been mortified if he had actually seen anything.

Her relaxing mood now killed, Lissa washed and got out of the tub. As the water was draining, she dried her body. Her nightgown was draped across the bed. She cautiously peeked out of the bathroom door to make sure the coast was clear. Quickly walked to the bed, she pulled her nightgown over her head and smoothed it down her body.

It was one of her favorites. A deep blue satin with spaghetti straps, it fell to mid-calf and had a slit up one side to mid-thigh. She had bought it after throwing Sam out of the house. While she hadn't had a man to wear it for, it made her feel pretty.

Pulling the matching robe on, Lissa made her way down to the kitchen. As she stepped into the dimly lit room, she turned on the light switch. The small kitchen was immediately filled with fluorescent light. Jesse was sitting at the table, his head in his hands.

"Everything okay?" Lissa asked him.

He groaned. "No, it's far from alright. I can't believe I did that!"

A grin twitched the corner of Lissa's mouth. "Jesse, look at me."

Slowly, he raised his head, dragging his hands down his face as if to wipe away the vision haunting him. He opened his eyes and looked at her; looked her over from head to toe and back up again. He swallowed once, twice; realized if he kept it up he was going to swallow his tongue. The nightgown and robe she wore made her eyes an even more vibrant shade of blue. Her long hair was piled on top of her

## *Magnolia Magick*

head in a loose knot with curly tendrils caressing her cheeks. Jesse would love to tumble the pins from her hair and make love to her.

Lissa walked over to the table and sat down next to Jesse. "I know you didn't materialize by me on purpose. Well, okay, you may have been focusing your energy on me, or whatever it is that you do, but I know you didn't mean to show up while I was in the tub. That just isn't something that you would do."

Jesse sighed. "No, I didn't do it on purpose, but that doesn't change the fact that it happened."

"Jesse, I was completely covered in bubbles. It's not like you saw anything."

"That isn't the point, Lissa. I'm a man, or at least I was a man. We don't have to see the whole package. Even a glimpse of naked skin and the knowledge that you were naked under the bubbles was enough for me to piece together the rest of the picture."

Lissa wasn't sure how to answer that. For that matter, she wasn't sure she wanted to even think about it. She liked Jesse, but he was a ghost. There was no way they could be together. Well, okay, so technically they *could* be together since he could touch her and vice versa, but it was an impossible situation. Besides, Jared was a wonderful man and Lissa really liked him. She briefly wondered if it made her a slut since she liked two men. Make that a kinky slut since one of the men in question was dead.

Shaking her head, she focused on the task at hand – making Jesse feel better about what happened. Better yet, maybe she could just make him forget it all together. A thought formed... a friend of Lissa's was an honest to goodness spell casting witch. Maybe she needed to take a time out to call Marney. Surely her witchy friend would have a magickal solution.

"I'm okay with what happened, Jesse. Really. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to head upstairs. I need to call a friend back home and then I think I'm going to get some sleep."

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Jesse nodded. "Sweet dreams, Lissa."

She smiled. "Thanks, Jesse. You too."

Back in her room, Lissa pulled out her cell phone and quickly dialed Marney's number. Her friend picked up on the third ring.

"Hello," Marney said in her sultry voice.

Lissa had always been jealous of Marney's voice. Hell, she'd been jealous of her tall lithe body, incredible selection of men, and the fact that the woman was talented as sin in just about everything. It was a miracle they were friends.

"Hi Marney, it's Lissa."

"Hey girl! How's that book coming along?"

"It's going really well. Listen, I was actually calling for a favor."

"Anything, just name it."

Lissa paused. She'd never asked her friend for magickal help before.

"Well, I kind of have a problem. You see, there's this guy who saw something that he shouldn't have. It's really bothering him, I mean, *really* bothering him."

"Uh-huh," Marney said, having a slight clue where the conversation was headed.

"Well, um. I was kind of wondering, is there a spell or something that could help me, I mean, him out?"

Marney grew quiet on the other end.

"Marney?"

"I'm here, Liss."

"Can you help me? Or rather, can you help me help him?"

"I think I can. Are you sure you're up for this? You've never really been into magick before. I know you dabbled some in college, but this is different."

"I know it is, but I have to do something."

"Okay, if you're sure. Check your email first thing in the morning. I'm going to send you a spell along with a list of what you'll need."



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"Thanks so much Marney! You're a life saver!"

Marney laughed her smoky laugh. "Anytime hon. Now, get some rest. You'll need it to perform the spell."

"Okay. Good night, Marney."

"Good night Lissa."

Closing her cell phone, Lissa sat it on the dresser. Pulling back the covers on the bed, she slipped between the sheets. Snuggling under the warm covers, Lissa sighed and forced herself to close her eyes.

Lissa had never done a real spell before. She was nervous about tomorrow, but she knew that she should help Jesse. Not only for his peace of mind, but for hers as well. It would just be better for both of them if they could put the whole thing behind them.

Lissa slowly drifted to sleep. Her breathing evened out and she relaxed into the bed.

Jesse stood by the bed, watching her. She looked so soft. Reaching out, he ran his fingers over her cheek, touched her hair, gently ran his thumb across her lips. What he wouldn't give to taste that full luscious mouth, to hold her delectable body, to lose himself in her scent.

Walking around the bed, Jesse carefully climbed on top of the covers on the other side. Inching his way closer to Lissa, he pressed his chest against her back. She murmured in her sleep and snuggled closer to him. Putting an arm around her, Jesse spooned his body around hers. This was as close to heaven as he could get. He may not have a shot at a relationship with her, but at least he could have a few stolen moments at night while she slept.

Jesse knew he was only torturing himself. It was obvious that Lissa liked that Jared guy she had brought home earlier. He would have given anything to be alive again. It would be worth any amount of pain just to kiss her lips once, to hold her body close to his, skin to skin. All of that would be worth dying

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all over again, and Jesse's death had not been pleasant. He would walk through the fires of hell just to have one night with her.

Jesse had died on a cool autumn day. He had just come up to the house from the fields. He had gone out to check on the crops. While slaves were a thing of the past, he did have a small handful of workers that tended his animals and crops. Jesse didn't have to do any of the actual work, but he did it anyway. There was just something wrong in asking someone to do work you yourself were not willing to take on. So at least three or four times a week, Jesse would go out in the fields and work beside his paid helpers.

On that particular day, he heard noises coming from the house. Jesse lived alone and knew that no one should be inside. The housekeeper had called in sick and the cook had already left for the day. He had cautiously entered through the front door. Most of the noise was coming from the kitchen.

Peering around the edge of the door, Jesse saw two men rummaging through his pantry and cabinets – looking for valuables more than likely. As Jesse was tiptoeing up on the men, he missed the third thief. The man had snuck up behind Jesse and hit him over the head.

When Jesse had come to, he was tied up outside at the back of the house. Two of the men, the ones from the kitchen, looked nervous. The third one, well, the third one was the scary one. He had a flat cold look in his eyes and was playing with a large sharp knife.

Jesse had told them to take whatever they wanted. He swore not to alert the authorities until they had time to escape. The evil man had laughed and told him that he wouldn't be getting the authorities at all.

Before Jesse had time to process what was happening, the man plunged the knife into Jesse's chest. He hadn't hit any major organs or arteries.

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Jesse felt fire spreading through his chest; his breathing had become shallow and labored. The man tortured Jesse for another hour, until he finally bled out. It had been a slow and agonizing death. But for just a few moments in Lissa's arms, Jesse would go through it all over again.

Jesse rested his eyes and pretended that Lissa was his woman. If he were alive, he would ask her to marry him; give her whatever her heart desired; raise a family with her. The thought of Lissa's children brought a smile to his face and regret to his heart – he knew that any children of Lissa's would be beautiful beyond words, just like their mother. They also wouldn't belong to him.

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### Chapter Seven

The next morning Lissa stretched. She hadn't slept that well in ages. In her dreams, Jared had been in bed with her. Sex hadn't been involved, but she had slept well with the thought of his arms being around her.

Lissa climbed out of the bed. As she turned to straighten the covers, she froze. On the other side of the bed, there was an indentation the size of a large man. It *had* been a dream, hadn't it? Or had Jesse been in her bed, held her in his arms... A chill ran down Lissa's back. She was really starting to get worried. Jesse seemed to not only be feeling things for her that he shouldn't, but he seemed to be crossing more and more boundaries.

Without bothering to change her clothes, Lissa rushed down the hall to her office. Pulling up her laptop, she checked her email. Bless Marney, she had remembered to email the spell!

Opening the email, Lissa scanned the contents. She didn't pay much attention to the words, but scrolled down to the items she would need. It looked like she would need some hematite, a black candle, and salt. It looked like the ritual would take an hour. How was she going to get hematite and a black candle in such a small town? It wasn't like being in a big city where new age stores abound.

Pulling up the internet, Lissa ran a search on occult stores in Georgia. Amazingly enough, the next town over had a Wiccan supply shop. Lissa jotted down the address, along with the supplies she would need, and hurried back down the hall so she could get dressed. The sooner she took care of this, the better.

Not even bothering with make-up, Lissa brushed her teeth and her hair before dashing out the door. The drive wasn't too bad. It was a beautiful morning, and thankfully, there were no cops around. Arriving

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in the small down of St. Ives, Lissa began looking for the streets she needed.

A few minutes later, she parked her car outside of the small store. Pushing open the door, she breathed in the scent of jasmine and sandalwood. There was peaceful music playing in the background. Looking around the store, Lissa spotted a tortoiseshell cat on the counter near the register. It was eyeing her thoughtfully, as if it were trying to decide if she belonged.

A small woman with short ebony hair came out of the back of the store.

"Bright blessings! How may I help you today?"

Lissa gave her a tentative smile. "Hello, I was hoping you might have some black candles and hematite."

"Ah, doing a banishing spell, eh?" The woman smiled. "Follow me, I have everything you need."

As they walked down the small aisles, Lissa looked at the cauldrons, goddess statues, cat statues, incense, jewelry, and various other objects. The shop keeper selected two small taper candles, both black, and led Lissa over to a wall of small stones. Grabbing a piece of hematite, she handed all of the items to Lissa.

"Do you want to look around a bit more?" she asked Lissa.

Lissa shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't have time for that today, but I think I'll be back soon."

The woman smiled at Lissa in a knowing way. "Yes, you will."

Lissa was a little uneasy at the certainty that rang in the woman's voice. Was that something she knew? Was she psychic or something?

Paying for her purchases, Lissa glanced at the cat. Noticing the direction of her gaze, the shop keeper said, "This is Moonbeam. She is the guardian of the shop, and I am Gemma."

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"It's nice to meet both of you," Lissa said, looking first at Gemma and then at Moonbeam. She could have sworn the cat winked at her. Maybe she hadn't slept as well as she'd thought. Obviously she was seeing things if she thought cats were winking at her.

"Blessed Be, Lissa. We will see you again soon," Gemma said with a smile.

Lissa was a little disconcerted. The shop keeper and her cat were both a little odd, friendly, but odd. She gathered her purchases and walked out to her car. The ride back to the house was quick.

Lissa ran upstairs to retrieve the spell from her email. It looked like she could do the spell anywhere, but she didn't want Jesse popping up in the middle of it. Printing off the spell, Lissa gathered her things and went for a walk. When the house was a tiny speck in the distance, Lissa stopped. Surely this was far enough away. She wasn't sure how far Jesse could travel from the house, but hopefully he wouldn't make an appearance out here.

First Lissa used the salt to draw a circle around herself and her magickal ingredients, and called the four corners as her notes instructed. Next she sat on the ground cross-legged, holding the hematite in one hand, and lit the blank candle with her other. The candle was on the ground in front of her. As she watched the flame, she chanted:

Goddess Hecate, hear me.  
I ask that you banish  
Jesse's memory.  
What happened last night  
He will remember no more.  
Goddess Hecate,  
Take those memories and etch  
Them into this candle.  
When the flame runs out,  
The spell will be done.  
So I will it,  
So mote it be.

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According to Marney's note, she now needed to concentrate on those memories, channeling them into the candle. On a piece of paper, she had written the word memory. Once the flame ran out, she was to bury the candle and the piece of paper. If what Marney said was true, this would banish Jesse's memories of popping in on Lissa last night and any memories he had of being in the bed with her.

Lissa wasn't sure how long she sat there, but eventually the flame died out and she was able to complete the ritual. Closing the circle, Lissa stood up and dusted off her pants. Carrying what remained of her ingredients, she walked back to the house.

She had barely closed the front door when Jesse appeared.

"Your phone rang while you gone," he said.

"Oh, thank you. I'll go see if they left a message."

"Where did you go? I saw your car out front, but I couldn't find you."

Lissa shrugged. "I just went for a walk. The land around here is really pretty, but I haven't had a chance to enjoy it."

Jesse seemed to accept her explanation. Lissa hurried upstairs to check her messages. When she picked up her phone, she realized it was almost twelve o'clock. That only left her half an hour to pack before she had to leave for Jared's house. She also needed to email her book to her editor.

Going through the three voice mails, she had one from Marney asking if the spell had worked, one from her editor reminding her of her deadline, and one from Jared making sure they were still on for today.

Lissa called her editor back first and assured her that she was about to email the file to her. The woman could be a dragon, but she was also the best editor in the business. As Lissa was talking to her, she emailed the first five chapters of her book. Seeing that Lissa had indeed been busy, her editor was

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happy. Her new deadline was for chapters six through eight to be emailed within two weeks.

Lissa hung up the phone. While she was online, she went ahead and emailed Marney. She honestly wasn't sure if the spell had worked or not. Lissa explained that she would be away from her computer until Sunday afternoon and assured her friend she would give her an update at that time.

As Lissa began packing, she called Jared.

"Hello," he answered.

"Hi Jared, it's Lissa."

"Hey! I was starting to think you were going to stand me up," he joked, a smile in his voice.

"Sorry about that. I went for a walk earlier and lost track of the time. I'm packing now though and will be leaving in about fifteen minutes."

"Okay, well, I guess I will see you when you get here," he replied.

Lissa smiled. "See you soon."

She hung up the phone and finished packing. Taking a moment to put on a little make-up, she packed up some of her bathroom things.

Lissa looked for Jesse as she carried her overnight bag to the car, but she didn't see him anywhere. Just to be safe, she called out, "I'm going to be gone a few days. I'll see you Sunday."

There was no response. Lissa shrugged and locked up the front door. After she stowed her bag in the backseat, she climbed in and buckled up. Starting her car, she pulled down the driveway and headed to Jared's place. Hopefully she wouldn't get lost. That would be embarrassing beyond belief. Between the directions he had given her the day before and the print out from her computer, she was somewhat confident she'd make it on time.

Forty-five minutes and three wrong turns later, Lissa parked alongside the curb in front of Jared's condo. As she unbuckled her seatbelt and turned off the car, she spotted Jared heading her way.



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Stepping out of the car, she said, "Hi, sorry I'm late! I got a little turned around on the way here."

He smiled at her. "I'm just glad you made it. Have you had lunch yet?"

Lissa shook her head. "No, I didn't have time."

"I haven't either. Why don't we stop at one of the cafés in town and grab a bite to eat before we drive out to the cabin?"

"That sounds great."

Jared helped her with her bag, putting it in the trunk of his car. After helping Lissa into the car, he climbed in and drove to the Main Café. It was practically across the street from the bank. Lissa was a little surprised. First he let her park in front of his condo, and now he was taking her to lunch where all of his employees could see them. What was he up to?

They were seated by a window overlooking Main Street. Lissa kept stealing glances at the bank. So far no one was pointing so that was a good sign.

Noticing her quick glances, Jared asked, "Is everything alright?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, everything is fine."

He grinned. "I was just wondering since you keep eyeing the bank. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were casing the place."

Lissa laughed. "No, I was just... well, I guess I'm a little nervous."

"Why?"

"I know you said that you and Janie had never dated, but that woman hates me. I half expect to see her fly out of the bank and come rushing over here."

Jared laughed. "I would say that would never happen, but since it's Janie we're talking about, anything is possible."

Lissa gave him a dirty look. "You aren't helping."

"Sorry," he said with a grin that proved he really wasn't.

He took her hand and kissed the backs of her fingers. "Lissa, I truly don't care who sees us together."

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I'm not seeing anyone and you're a beautiful woman. What are you so afraid of?"

Lissa sighed. "That it's all too good to be true."

"What is?"

"This, us. I don't normally get attention from guys like you."

Jared had a perplexed look on his face. "What guys like me? I didn't realize I was a type."

"I didn't mean it like that. It's just ... you're successful, nice looking, charming. You can have any woman you want."

"I do have the woman I want. Well, she's having lunch with me anyway. I don't know that I necessarily *have* you."

The look he gave her should have steamed up the window. Lissa started feeling hot all over. How was she supposed to respond to that?

"I guess I just have a hard time understanding why you would want me, but if that's what you really want, then I'm yours... well, at least for the next six months."

Jared smiled at her. "I'll take what I can get. Who knows, maybe I can convince you to stick around at the end of the six months."



After their lunch had ended, Jared had escorted Lissa back to the car. They had been on the road now for about an hour. While they had talked at first, Jared had ended up on the phone with his bank for the last twenty minutes. Lissa had pulled out the book she always kept in her purse. What she should have done was pack her laptop, but she had decided to leave work at home.

The scenery was beautiful and relaxing. As they drove down the winding highway through the pines, Lissa wondered what to expect out of the weekend ahead. The more she thought about it, the more she

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knew she wanted to sleep with Jared. The question was, should she? She had another two or three hours to think it over. Jared had planned on stopping for dinner along the way, which would put them at the cabin around six o'clock.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### **Chapter Eight**

A little after six o'clock that night, they pulled down the long winding road that led to Jared's cabin. When he parked out front, Lissa looked through her window. It wasn't as small as she had imagined, but it was definitely charming.

The cabin had a front porch that went all the way across the front, with two rocking chairs and a table on one end. It had a simple wooden door, with windows on either side of it. Judging by the size of the cabin, it looked like it could have a room or two upstairs.

Jared offered to get their bags after he opened the cabin. He unlocked the door, pushed it open, and turned on the lights. Lissa was impressed. The place was just as spotless as his condo had been, with beautiful hardwood floors and lots of windows. The furniture was masculine, but tasteful. Instead of curtains, he had natural wood blinds over the windows, not that he really needed them since there wasn't another cabin for miles.

Jared watched Lissa. He hoped she liked his retreat. Sharing the place with her was kin to baring his soul. No one had ever been up here except him, not even the bank knew where it was located.

"What do you think?" he asked.

With a grin, Lissa replied, "It's wonderful. I bet you come out here all the time."

Jared shook his head. "Unfortunately, I only get out here a few times a year."

"You work too hard."

"I guess I do. I haven't had a reason not to."

Lissa heard the implied 'but I do now' part. It made her tingle all the way to her toes.

"Let me give you the grand tour," he said.

"I'd like that."

They started out going to the left, where the kitchen and small dining area opened into the living

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room. The living room itself was rather large and had a stone fireplace. At the back of the cabin was an enclosed staircase leading up to the second floor. Upstairs there was a bedroom on either side of the stairs and the bathroom was between them.

Jared's room had a large four poster bed in a dark mahogany with dark bedding. Without the light on, Lissa couldn't quite make out the color. The room across the hall was to be hers for the next two nights. It had a pretty queen size cherry sleigh bed with a beige comforter. The room was neutral so Lissa assumed he had set it up to be used for either men or women. She briefly wondered how many women had come out here with him, then dismissed the thought. She wouldn't let her self-doubts ruin the weekend.

"Well, that's it for the grand tour. If you'd like to wait here a minute, I'll bring your bag up to you. I'm sure you'd like to get your things settled," Jared said.

"I'll be here," Lissa replied with a smile.

While Jared went to get their bags, she looked out her bedroom window. The cabin was surrounded by the woods. She could see a lake off in the distance. It was very peaceful out here. Lissa could easily see herself using a place like this as a writing retreat.

"Here you go," Jared said, coming up behind her.

Lissa jumped. "Sorry, you startled me."

Jared gave her that slow grin of his. "Sorry about that."

Mentally he called himself a liar. He hadn't meant to startle her, but when she'd jumped, her breasts had almost popped free of her shirt. Now that would have been a sight to see! Lissa might complain about her curves, but she was all woman; Jared just wished that she would be his woman. He figured the weekend was the perfect time to convince her. It was obvious they had chemistry.

He gave himself a mental shake. "I'll let you unpack. I'll be across the hall if you need anything."

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Lissa nodded and reached for her bag, which Jared had sat on the bed. Lissa carefully removed her clothes and placed them in the small dresser. The bathroom had been small, but Jared had assured her there was plenty of room under the sink for all of her bathroom stuff.

Once all of the Lissa's things were put away, she walked over to Jared's bedroom. He had finished putting his things away and was looking out his bedroom window. Hearing Lissa step into his room, he turned.

Smiling he said, "All done?"

Lissa nodded. "Everything is all put away."

Jared held his hand out to her. Lissa went to him, placing her hand in his. For a moment, they just stood there, looking into each other's eyes. The man really did have a way of taking away all of Lissa's thought and speech capabilities. She could drown in his eyes.

"Let's go downstairs and I'll start a fire. You can pick a movie out if you'd like," he told her.

Lissa mutely nodded.

Jared grinned and tugged her toward the stairs. Downstairs, he released her hand to go outside and get some firewood. When he came back inside, he motioned toward a door in the corner of the room.

"If you'll open that door, you'll find several shelves of movies and books."

Lissa walked over to the door and opened it to discover a small closet lined with shelves. The top half was filled with books and the lower half contained rows of DVDs. Lissa briefly noted that Jared seemed rather fond of mystery, suspense, and horror novels. Maybe she could convince him to read a romance novel, she thought with a grin.

Browsing through the movie selection, she was surprised to see a few romantic comedies and dramas on the shelf. Spotting her favorite movie, she picked it up and turned to Jared.

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"I'm not sure if this is on your shelf because you like it or if it's on the shelf because your guests like it."

Jared looked to see what was in her hand. He blushed when he saw she held a romantic drama that he was rather fond of. It was unseemly for a man to like such a sappy movie, but he'd always loved the ending. It always made him wish he had someone to share his life with, someone he wanted to grow old with.

"Do I lose man points if I say it's there because I like it?"

"Hmm. Well, you may lose one man point, but you gain three sensitivity points. And sensitivity in a man is always a good thing."

"In that case, it's there because I like it."

Lissa smiled at him. "So you wouldn't have a problem watching it tonight?"

"Not at all."

Lissa closed the closet door. Walking over to Jared, she handed the movie to him. Settling herself on the couch, she curled up in the corner. Jared put the DVD in the player and turned the TV on. Lissa had missed it when she'd been in the room earlier. It was to the left of the fireplace, mounted on the wall. The DVD was built-in on the side of the TV.

Once the movie was starting, Jared walked over to the couch and sat down. He had sat on the opposite end, not sure if Lissa wanted him to sit closer to her or not. After the third time he caught her glancing his way, he held his arm out to her.

Lissa was embarrassed to have been caught stealing looks at Jared, but she was thrilled when he wanted her to sit by him. Sliding down the couch, she snuggled up beside him.

With Lissa by his side, Jared put his arm around her, pulling her close. Her head rested on his chest as they watched the movie. Part way through the movie, Jared's arm started going to sleep. He shifted

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a little so that his arm dropped down around Lissa's waist.

Sighing, Lissa shifted closer to Jared. It had been so long since a man had held her like this. She was enjoying every moment; although, Jared's nearness was making it a little difficult for Lissa to concentrate on the movie. It was a good thing she'd seen it a few hundred times already.



The movie ended and Jared removed the DVD and returned it to the closet. It was around nine o'clock. He wasn't sure what time Lissa usually went to bed.

"Do you want to watch TV or are you tired?" he asked her.

Lissa stifled a yawn. "I'm not normally tired this early, but I think all of the traveling today has worn me out. Would you mind if I turned in early?"

Jared turned off the TV and helped her off the couch. "I don't mind at all."

"I didn't mean for you to turn the TV off. I wasn't expecting you to go to sleep just because I wanted to."

Jared shook his head. "I'll probably turn in early too."

They walked upstairs together. At the top of the stairs, Jared pulled Lissa into his arms and kissed her. Lissa moaned and leaned into him. She could never grow tired of this man's kisses, not even if she lived to be a hundred.

Jared pulled back. He was afraid if he didn't stop now, there would be no turning back. His will-power slipped when he looked down into Lissa's eyes.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?" he asked.

"No, but I hope it's the same thing you do to me."

With a groan, he lowered his head back to hers. Lissa wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. Jared didn't want to stop, but he didn't want



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Lissa to feel that he had brought her out here strictly for this purpose. He wouldn't lie, he hoped they would end up in bed at some point, but it was okay if they didn't.

Breaking the kiss, he rested his forehead against hers. "I think we'd better stop before we hit the point of no return."

"What if I don't want you to stop?" Lissa asked.

Jared tightened his arms around her. "I don't want to either, but I didn't invite you out here so I could ravage you," he said with a grin.

She looked up at him. "Then why did you invite me out here?"

"I just wanted to spend some time with you. I've never brought anyone out to the cabin with me before. It's a special place and I wanted to share it with a special woman."

Lissa was touched. "I'm glad you wanted to share it with me. And I'm glad to know you didn't just bring me out for sex," she said with a playful grin.

"Well, if that's all I had wanted, I could have just kissed you back at the condo and saved us a three hour drive."

Lissa laughed. "You're right about that. Every time you kiss me I can't seem to think about anything else."

Caressing her cheek he said, "I know what you mean."

"I guess if we're going to try and behave I should go to bed now. If I stand here much longer, I'll want to kiss you again," she said in a soft voice.

"That would probably be a good idea."

She smiled at him and slowly backed towards her room.

"Sweet dreams, Lissa."

"You too," she said, as she reached the bedroom. Giving him one last smile, she gently closed the door.

Leaning against the door, Lissa concentrated on breathing. It was taking everything in her to not

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open the door and throw herself back into his arms. She really should have brought her laptop with her. Writing would have been a great way to alleviate some of her sexual frustration. A nice steamy sex scene or two and she'd have been right as rain again.

Sighing, she pushed away from the door and walked over to the dresser. Looking at the nightgowns she had packed, Lissa decided to be a little bit naughty. Instead of the plain cream satin one, she picked up the short satin black one with lace trim. It didn't even reach mid-thigh and had a slit in the side that went almost to her waist.

Lissa might be on the plump side, but she still loved sexy lingerie. Digging through the drawer, she found the matching string bikini panties. She quickly changed her clothes and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She wasn't a Victoria Secret's model, but she didn't look half bad.

Lissa cracked open the bedroom door to peek out into the hall. Jared's door was mostly closed and she could hear him talking on his cell phone. Opening the door wider, Lissa crept out into the hall and went into the bathroom.

Closing the door behind her, Lissa brushed her teeth and her hair. She washed her face and put on some scented lotion. When she had put everything away, she walked over to the bathroom door.

With her ear pressed against the door, Lissa heard Jared hang up the phone. When he sounded like he was heading her way, she casually opened the bathroom door and stepped out into the hall. She turned toward Jared's room when she heard an intake of breath.

Jared stood in his bedroom doorway looking at her. Maybe devouring her would be a better description. Lissa watched as his eyes travelled down her body and back up. Lissa would have been doing some eye roving herself, but Jared had taken off

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his shirt and she was a little preoccupied looking at his muscular chest.

Jared was the first to snap out of it. "Come here," he said in a husky voice.

Lissa slowly walked over to him. When she stood less than a foot away from him, Jared reached out and pulled her into his arms. His hands travelled down her back to grip her waist and pull her closer.

"I had every intention of being a gentleman tonight until I saw you wearing this. Now all I can think about is making you mine."

"So why don't you?" Lissa asked. She briefly wondered when her voice had become so seductive. Normally at a time like this, it would have come out as a nervous squeak instead of the husky smoky tone she so often heard in Marney's voice.

Jared didn't need any more encouragement than that. He bent his head to hers, claiming her mouth in a savage kiss. The hands on her waist pulled her tight against his erection. The man may have been wearing jeans, but Lissa could feel a noticeable bulge.

Jared broke the kiss long enough to pick Lissa up and carry her to the bed. Lissa gasped as her feet left the floor. He made it seem so effortless, but she knew for a fact that she weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds; and yet Jared didn't seem to be struggling or even remotely out of breath.

When they reached the bed, Jared lightly tossed her onto the mattress, following her down to cover her body with his. Burying one hand in her hair to pull her face close to his for a kiss, he slipped his other hand under her lower back, pulling her hips firmly against him. As his tongue caressed hers, his hips bucked against the juncture of her thighs, causing her breasts to graze his chest with each movement. The material of her satin nightgown was so thin that the friction caused Lissa's nipples to pucker.

## *Magnolia Magick*

Wrapping her legs around his, she met his hips thrust for thrust. If the man didn't take off his jeans soon, he was going to drive her insane. She already wanted him more than she had ever wanted anyone before.

Jared pushed up her nightgown to expose the small scrap of satin she wore underneath. He trailed kisses down her neck, down the middle of her chest, and slowly slid off the bed. Quickly removing his jeans, he kicked them aside. Resuming his position over Lissa, he looked down at her.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" he asked.

Lissa shook her head. She didn't trust her voice to work at that particular moment.

"You are. You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Jared's hand slid up the outside of her nightgown to cup her left breast. His thumb flicked over her hard nipple, causing Lissa to gasp and arch her body toward him. He spread her legs and pressed himself against the satin of her panties. Leaning down to kiss her, he continued to tease her nipple through her nightgown.

Lissa moaned when he lightly pinched her nipple and she thrust her hips upward, wanting to feel him inside of her. Jared kissed the side of her neck, his five o'clock shadow gently scraping her skin. Trailing kisses across her collar bone, he nuzzled the top edge of her nightgown. He kissed her breast through the material. He nipped her nipple with his teeth.

Jared loved watching Lissa's body react to him. As she arched off the bed, he reached between them to slide his hand over her satin panties. She was so wet and ready for him that her panties were soaked. Her nub was full and swollen; he could feel it through the material and gently flicked it with his thumb.

Lissa thrust her hips up, wishing he would stop teasing her, and yet not wanting him to stop. She was

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almost mindless with pleasure and she still had her clothes on. She could only imagine what it would feel like when they were both naked, skin to skin, with him buried deep inside of her.

Jared slid his hand back up her body. Lissa whimpered, unsure if she wanted him to keep going or if she wanted him to stop. As Jared pushed her nightgown further up, exposing her breasts, she pressed herself against his erection. She could feel how big and hard he was.

Jared first took one nipple into his mouth, sucking, licking and nibbling on it, before turning to the other one. He grabbed her hips as he thrust against her, continuing to lick and suck on her nipples.

Lissa wasn't sure she could take much more. Reaching down, she lifted her nightgown over her head and dropped it off the side of the bed. Jared watched her with heavy-lidded eyes. Lissa ran her hands up his chest and over his shoulders, pulling his body down on hers. When his chest lightly touched her breasts, she arched against him, loving the feel of his skin against hers.

Lissa's hands travelled down his back. She grabbed his hips and pulled him tight against her. Tightening her legs around him, she thrust herself against his erection, rubbing against him.

Jared kissed her, pulling her body as close to his as he could. Wanting to make her climax, he met her thrusts, rubbing himself against her swollen clit. With a final upward thrust of her hips, Lissa cried out her release.

Happy that he had satisfied her, Jared slid off of her body.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He gave her his slow sexy grin. "Where do you want me to go?"

### *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa let her eyes travel up and down his body. "I was kind of hoping we could try that again, but this time without any clothes between us."

Jared's eyes darkened with passion as he slid his boxer briefs off. Lissa's breath caught in her throat at the sight of him. She had guessed that he was big just from feeling him against her a moment ago, but she had never imagined just how well endowed he was.

Leaning over her, Jared pulled her panties down her legs, dropping them to the floor. He climbed onto the bed beside her and turned her to face away from him. Pulling her body back against his, he nudged her legs apart.

Lissa felt his erection slip between her legs, rubbing against her. Jared reached around her and cupped her breasts in his hands. Thrusting his hips against her, his erection rubbed against her hot wet lips. Lissa wanted him so badly she was almost in tears.

Jared's hand slowly caressed her breast, her stomach, and slipped between her legs. He guided himself into her hot wet core, slowly filling her. When he was all the way inside of her, he flicked her clit with his thumb.

Lissa gasped, arching her hips first toward his hand and then back, drawing him even further inside of her. Jared draped his leg over hers, pulling her leg back between his, managing to open her further. As he thrust in and out of her, his thumb continued its slow torture. Pinching her clit between his fingers, teasing her, he thrust into her with long, hard strokes. He nibbled the side of her neck and used his other hand to play with her nipples.

Lissa cried out in pleasure as she climaxed. Jared trailed his hand back up to her hip. His fingers were still wet from her and it turned Lissa on. After having two orgasms she thought she wouldn't have been capable of much else, but as Jared continued to thrust in and out of her the pressure started building again.

### *Magnolia Magick*

Realizing that she was going have a third orgasm, Jared reached for her hand; guiding it down between her legs.

In her ear he whispered, "Feel us joined together?"

She nodded mutely. She could not only feel him inside of her, but her fingers felt him slide in and out of her. Lissa had never done anything like this before. Before, she would have felt embarrassed, now she only felt desire.

Jared slipped his hand under hers, gently caressing her clit. When Lissa climaxed, she arched against their hands. Feeling her muscles clamp down on him sent him over the edge. He slammed into her a few more times, finding his own release.

Afterward, Jared remained inside of her, pulling her firmly back against him. He wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her hair. He admitted that he had been with quite a few women, but never had he experienced anything like this. This one time with Lissa was worth more than all of the others together. It was the most amazing night he'd ever had.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### **Chapter Nine**

Lissa awoke the next morning wrapped in Jared's arms. She shifted a little, pressing herself more firmly against him. Jared murmured in his sleep and tightened his arms around her. As Lissa's brain began waking up a bit more, she suddenly realized they hadn't used protection last night.

Absently, her hands drifted to her abdomen. What had she done? Not having been sexually active for the past year, she hadn't been on birth control pills. She hadn't seen the need to spend extra money knowing that she wasn't likely to have sex anytime soon.

Jared hummed in her ear and nuzzled her neck. Lissa rolled over to face him. Feeling her shift in position, Jared opened his eyes. Even with her hair mussed, Lissa was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"Good morning," he rasped, still a little hoarse from just waking up.

"Morning," she replied.

Jared pulled her close and kissed the top of her head.

"How do you feel this morning?" he asked, caressing her hip.

"I feel fine."

"You aren't sore?"

Lissa shook her head. "No."

Jared tipped her head back and kissed her. "Good."

He rolled them over and pinned Lissa to the mattress. Pressing his weight into her, she felt his erection throbbing against her. Taking her nipple into his mouth, he sucked on it until it hardened. Then he did the same to the other one.

Lissa groaned. She knew that she should stop him, but she couldn't. Lifting her hips, the tip of him slid into her.



## *Magnolia Magick*

"Not quite yet," he told her, sliding back out.

Lissa whimpered, lifting her hips again, seeking him out. She could feel him against her clit. Shifting her hips, she rubbed herself against him.

"Do you like that?" Jared asked.

Lissa nodded, unable to vocalize her answer. She shifted her hips again, feeling the length of him slide up and down her clit. Grabbing his hips, she tried to pull him closer, but he resisted.

"I bet I know something you'd like even more," he said, kissing his way down her body.

Before Lissa realized what he was planning, she felt his tongue swipe against her clit. With a gasp, she lifted her hips off the bed. Jared continued to tease her with his tongue, pushing her to the brink. When Lissa thought she couldn't take another moment of his torture, he sucked her into his mouth. She screamed out her orgasm, spasms racking her body.

Jared trailed kisses back up her body. Positioning himself against her opening, he slowly slid into her, one slow inch at a time. Slowly sliding in and out of her, Jared started building another fire inside of Lissa.

Grabbing his shoulders for support, Lissa met him thrust for thrust. When his motions started coming faster and harder, she knew he was close to his climax, and she was getting close to hers. As Jared slid into her hard and fast one last time, they both found their release.

Careful not to crush Lissa, Jared rolled to his side, bringing her with him.

Lissa was out of breath and a bit stunned. Jared did things to her that no other man had done before. And it wasn't just the acts themselves, it was the fact that he made sure she was taken care of, he wasn't doing it just for himself. With Sam, Lissa had been lucky to have one orgasm, much less two or three.

"Now probably isn't the best time to mention this," Lissa started.

Jared placed a finger over her lips, silencing her.

## *Magnolia Magick*

"If your news is going to ruin the moment, wait until we're showered and dressed."

Lissa smiled and snuggled closer to him, after all, the damage had already been done. She might as well enjoy their closeness while she could. Once she pointed out to him that they had enjoyed unprotected sex not once, but twice, she was sure he would be running in the opposite direction as fast as his legs would carry him. Hell, he probably wouldn't even need the car in order to go back home, he'd practically fly there.

Pulling out of her, Jared kissed the top of her head. "As much as I would love to lie here with you all day, I think I'd better shower so we can head out for breakfast."

Lissa nodded. "I'll need one when you're finished."

Jared trailed his fingers down her arm, "Or you could come and take one with me."

Lissa picked her head and looked at him. She realized he was serious. Sam hadn't even wanted to look at her or touch her after sex, much less ever wanted to shower with her. Since the weekend seemed to be full of firsts for Lissa, she agreed.



An hour and another orgasm or two later, Lissa and Jared were showered and dressed. Lissa was just putting the finishing touches on her hair and make-up when Jared poked his head around the bathroom door.

"I'll be downstairs when you're ready. I think I'll warm the car up."

She smiled at him. "I'll be there in just a minute."

Quickly putting on her lip gloss, Lissa put her make-up back under the sink. Checking her reflection one last time, she went downstairs.

## *Magnolia Magick*

As she neared the front door, Jared held her coat out for her. Slipping her arms into the sleeves, she shrugged it the rest of the way on.

"Thank you," she told him.

"You're welcome. Are you ready to go eat?"

Lissa nodded with a smile. "Where are we going?"

"There's a small restaurant a few miles from here. It's back off the road a ways so most people don't know about it. I thought it would give us a quiet place to talk about whatever was on your mind this morning."

The smile slipped from Lissa's face.

"What's wrong, honey?" he asked.

Lissa looked at the floor. Wanting to find out what was troubling her, Jared tipped her head back. When he looked into her big beautiful eyes, he couldn't resist kissing her.

Lissa melted into Jared's embrace, kissing him back. When he broke the kiss, she buried her head against his chest, not wanting to look him in the eye.

Rubbing her back, Jared kissed the top of her head. "Tell me, what's wrong Lissa?"

"I don't want you to think I haven't enjoyed last night and this morning because I did, very much in fact."

"But?"

"Well ... um, it's just..."

Jared's stomach was in knots. He had worried that something like this would happen, that Lissa would have regrets. He had known it was too soon, but when he had seen her last night he hadn't been able to control himself. She had looked so damn beautiful in that skimpy nightgown.

"Are you sorry that it happened?"

"No! It isn't that," Lissa assured him.

"Then what? You're killing me here, honey. Please just tell me what's wrong."

Lissa sighed. "Do you remember me saying I hadn't been with anyone since Sam?"

## *Magnolia Magick*

His brow furrowed. "Yeah."

"Well, I kind of stopped taking birth control pills back then too."

The light finally dawned. "Is that why you were upset this morning? Because you were worried about getting pregnant?"

"Yes. It's not that I don't want children, but we just met and I don't want you to think I tried to trap you into a relationship."

Jared hugged her tighter. "Honey, I would never think that of you."

Lissa eyed him. He was a lot calmer than she had anticipated. "You did hear me right? That I could be pregnant?"

"I heard you. And if it comes to that, then we'll decide what to do. I won't leave you though, if that's what has you so worried."

Lissa allowed Jared to lead her out to the car. It was nice and toasty inside since it had been running for a few minutes. It only took about fifteen or twenty minutes to arrive at the restaurant. They were seated immediately and provided menus.

Looking over the menu, Lissa couldn't get her mind off their previous conversation. What had he meant by 'we'll decide what do'? He didn't honestly think she'd have an abortion just because he didn't want to be a father, did he? Frowning at her menu, she tried to concentrate on the breakfast items listed.

"Anything look good," Jared asked.

"Mmm. I'm not sure what I want."

He watched her intently. She was concentrating awfully hard on the menu. Something was obviously on her mind. Was she still worried about being pregnant? He had tried to reassure her, but maybe he hadn't tried hard enough. He had meant what he said. If they ended up expecting a baby, he would stay by her side. The thought of Lissa pregnant with his child almost brought a grin to his face.

## *Magnolia Magick*

The waitress came over to take their order. Lissa wasn't even sure what she had ordered. It probably wouldn't matter anyway; she doubted she could taste anything.

"Lissa, is something bothering you?" Jared asked.

She looked at him, startled. Had she been that transparent?

"I'm fine, really."

Reaching across the table, he took her hand in his, absently rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. He wanted her to know she could talk to him, could trust him. Jared knew that she had been hurt before, knew that trusting men probably didn't come easy to her anymore. She may write romance novels, but the woman didn't know anything about love – had never experienced it for herself. He wanted to be the man to show her what it was like to love someone and be loved in return.

"Honey, you can tell me if something is bothering you. Whatever it is, we can talk about it."

Lissa sighed. "It's just... At the cabin, when you said that we would decide what to do, what did you mean?"

Understanding dawned in Jared's eyes. "You thought I meant an abortion, didn't you?"

"You didn't?"

Jared shook his head. "No, I didn't. I just meant that we would decide how you wanted me to be involved. I only wanted you to know that you wouldn't go through it alone."

"Oh," Lissa said with a sheepish expression. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'm just sorry I didn't make it clearer. I didn't mean to worry you."

Their food arrived and they ate quickly. The food was good, but they were anxious to be alone. When they were finished, they paid their bill and walked out to the car. As Jared was sliding into the driver's seat, Lissa looked at him thoughtfully.

## *Magnolia Magick*

"Is there a pharmacy or small store in the area?"

Jared looked at her quizzically. "Why?"

"Well, I just thought that if we had a repeat of last night or this morning, maybe we should be prepared."

Jared backed the car out of the parking space and started driving through town. He glanced at Lissa out of the corner of his eye.

As they passed a drug store, Lissa looked his way. "Wasn't that a drug store we just passed?"

"Hmm, maybe."

"But, why didn't you stop?"

He glanced over at her. What could he tell her? That he hoped he *did* get her pregnant? Maybe she would stick around at the end of her six months if he did. Jared could think of worse things than spending the rest of his life with a talented, funny, caring woman.

"Just missed it is all. You know, I had an idea. Not much further down this road is a lake. They have a walking trail that goes all the way around the lake and they also have boat rentals."

"That does sound nice," Lissa commented, of course, it also sounded like a diversion. Why was he avoiding the drug store? Maybe last night and this morning hadn't been as great as she had thought. Maybe he didn't want a repeat performance and was just too nice to say so.

Lissa sighed and decided not to dwell on it. If he wanted to be with her again, they could always stop on the way back to the cabin. If they didn't stop, she would know that he wasn't interested.

Jared was thankful that Lissa had finally stopped questioning him. If he was lucky, she'd forget all about their stop once they reached the lake.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### Chapter Ten

When they arrived at the lake, Jared rented a canoe and took her out on the lake. It was chilly, but peaceful. By the time they turned back to shore, it was lunch time. After grabbing a quick bite to eat, Jared took her to a movie.

As they exited the movie theater and walked to the car, Jared reached over and took her hand. "I'm really glad you came out here with me, Lissa."

Smiling at him, she responded, "I am too."

"Want to grab something to take back to the cabin for dinner? We could watch a movie while we eat or just talk, whatever you want to do."

"That sounds nice. I don't suppose there's a Chinese place around here, is there?"

"Hmm. No, I don't believe so, but there's a pretty good pizza place about a mile from here."

"Pizza sounds good. You can never go wrong with pizza."

Jared laughed. "No, I guess you can't."

When they arrived at Martin's Pizza, Jared ran in to place their order, leaving Lissa in the warm car. Once the order was placed, Jared went back out to the car, not wanting to leave Lissa alone longer than necessary.

"They said it would be ready in about fifteen minutes."

"That's not bad. Should we stop by a store to get something for breakfast tomorrow?"

"I thought we'd come back into town for breakfast, if that's okay with you?"

"That's fine. I just hate that you keep spending a small fortune on all of our meals."

Jared grinned at her. "Well, I don't think the pizza is going to break me. Actually, none of it is going to break me."

He hadn't told her he not only owned the bank, but he also owned some of the buildings around

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town. His parents had made sure he was taken care of. Jared's father had been an investment banker who had invested his own money rather well. When his parents had passed away in a car accident, he had used the investment money to get through college. Purchasing two or three buildings around town had also given him a steady income from rental fees. Needless to say, he was financially well off.

Jared didn't like to flaunt his wealth. His car was the one thing he had allowed himself to splurge on. His condo wasn't exactly cheap, but it was small and furnished sparsely. If he had a family, things would be different. Jared would purchase a house with a nice yard, make sure his wife had a safe vehicle, and take more time off from the bank.

Before he could say more, the owner of Martin's Pizza was waving to him through the window.

"It looks like our pizza is ready. I'll be back in just a minute."

Lissa watched him hurry into the restaurant. She hadn't missed his comment about being able to afford for them to eat out all the time. His car alone had told her that he was well off. Honestly, all of Jared's wealth was a little intimidating for her. Yes, Lissa was a well known author, but her writing allowed her to live comfortably, not purchase two-hundred-thousand dollar cars and cabins in the woods. Was that the problem? Did he not want to be with her again because they were too different? He certainly hadn't seemed worried about it last night, she thought.

Jared hurried back to the car, pizza in hand. After placing the pizza in the back floor board, Jared slid into the driver's seat and buckled his seat belt. "Let's go home and eat."

The ride back to the cabin was quiet. Jared was trying to figure out what was on Lissa's mind. He hoped that he had eased her fears earlier. Surely she wasn't still worried that he would run out on her? Or



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had she found something else to worry about now? If he lived to be a hundred, he would never understand women.

As they pulled up in front of the cabin, Jared turned off the car. Lissa started to get out of the car, but he put a hand on her arm.

Lissa looked over at Jared, a question on her face. He hadn't spoken to her the whole way back to the cabin and he hadn't made any stops along the way.

Putting his hand behind her neck, Jared pulled her closer, pressing his lips to hers. Hesitantly, Lissa put her hand on his cheek. Okay, so he obviously didn't find her repulsive. At least that part was cleared up for her. It just didn't answer the question of why he didn't want to sleep with her again. Maybe he thought it had been a mistake?

Jared broke the kiss. "We'd better get inside before the pizza gets cold."

Lissa mutely nodded her head, opening her car door. Jared snagged the pizza out of the backseat and hurried after her. Opening the cabin, he ushered Lissa inside. After locking the front door, he took the pizza to his small kitchen.

"Would you like me to start a fire?" Jared asked.

"That would be nice," Lissa said, still a little chilled from the cool night air.

Jared stacked the firewood in the fireplace. Finding a few scraps of paper, he lit them and placed them around the wood. In a few minutes, the fire had started to grow.

Walking back to the kitchen, Jared took down some plates from the cabinet. "While I get our plates ready, why don't you pick out a movie?"

"Okay," Lissa said, walking over to the closet. Looking over the selection, she decided on a suspenseful murder mystery. She'd seen it once before, but it had been pretty good.

As Lissa was putting the DVD into the machine, Jared brought their plates and drinks to the living

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room. Once the movie was started, Lissa sat down on the couch.

They ate through the first half hour of the movie. Jared took a few minutes to return their dishes to the kitchen and then rejoined her on the couch, pulling her against his side. Lissa enjoyed the intimacy between them, but she wondered if it would go any further tonight. Surely he would have stopped to get some condoms if he planned on sleeping with her again.

Focusing once more on the movie, Lissa tried to block all other thoughts from her mind. It was hard to concentrate with Jared's body pressed against hers. They were sitting thigh to thigh and hip to hip.

When the movie was over, Lissa stood and stretched. "I hate to be such a wuss, but I think I'm going to call it a night."

Jared looked at her in surprise. "Okay."

Before she could change her mind, Lissa went upstairs. When she reached her room, she closed the door and leaned against it. To make sure he believed her, Lissa gathered her light blue nightgown and matching panties. It was a gauzy light blue babydoll style that tied in a bow under the bust. She had brought it on the off chance that things went well between them. She hadn't anticipated that Jared would sleep with her and then lose interest. Of course, with her track record with men, she *should* have anticipated it.

Opening her bedroom door, she heard Jared downstairs in the kitchen. Dashing into the bathroom, she closed the door. Lissa washed her face and brushed her teeth. After changing into her nightgown, she brushed out her hair.

Hearing Jared's tread on the stairs, she cautiously opened the bathroom door. Jared had reached the top of the stairs just as she was leaving the bathroom.

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"Are you trying to kill me?" he asked in a strangled voice, his wide eyes taking in every detail of her nightgown, including all that it didn't cover.

"What?"

"You say you're going to bed so obviously you aren't planning on being intimate tonight. But then I come upstairs and find you dressed in a short skimpy nightgown that I can see through. It seems to me you're trying to kill me."

Lissa fought back a grin. "I wasn't trying to kill you. And I thought you didn't want to be intimate tonight."

"What on earth gave you that idea?" He was astounded! Did the woman not have any idea how much she turned him on? He could barely be in the same room with her without wanting to throw her down and bury himself inside of her.

"Well, you didn't make any stops on the way home."

He remembered her discussions previously about finding a pharmacy so they could stop for condoms. "I honestly just didn't think about it," he said, lying through his teeth. He hoped the lie didn't show on his face. The last thing he needed was for Lissa to suspect that he was *trying* to get her pregnant.

"Oh," she said in a small voice.

Jared walked slowly toward her, stopping mere inches from her. Lissa could feel the heat from his body, his breath on her hair. She wanted desperately to lean into him, press herself against him, feel his strength.

"Lissa, look at me," he said quietly.

She looked up into his eyes and her breath caught at the desire she saw. All of her fears throughout the day seemed ridiculous now. It was clear that this man desired her above all others, wanted her.

Jared bent his head to hers, kissing her fiercely. He thrust his tongue between her lips and pulled her close. Lissa moaned as he thrust his erection against

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her. Jared ran his hands down her back, lifting the hem of her nightgown.

Lissa felt his large warm hand slide up the naked skin of her back. His other hand rested on her hip, playing with the satin ribbon holding up her panties. Trailing both hands down her thighs, he grabbed her legs and forced them up around his waist. Supporting her weight in his hands, Jared carried Lissa to the bedroom.

Tossing her on the bed, he stripped off his shirt and pants, but left his boxer briefs on for the time being. After all she had put him through, she was going to pay. By the time Jared was finished, Lissa would be begging him to take her.

Pressing his body down on top of hers, Jared kissed her. He rested his hips against hers, thrusting his erection against her damp panties. Lissa moaned and absently rubbed her foot up and down the back of his leg, trying to draw him closer.

Cupping her large breasts, Jared trailed kisses down her throat and across her collar bone. Lissa could feel his hot breath across the tops of her breasts, felt the friction of his palm against her nipple. Through the thin gauzy material her nipples hardened, begging for more.

Lissa lifted her hips, rubbing herself against him. She was swollen and aching, wanting to feel him inside of her. Lifting her hips, she rubbed herself against the hard length of him again.

Jared pulled the top of her nightgown down just enough to expose one breast. Taking her nipple into his mouth, his hand grabbed her hip, pulling her firmly against his erection. He thrust against her, slow and hard, rubbing his full length up and down her hot damp panties.

Lissa gasped and arched her back off the bed, not sure what she wanted anymore, just knowing that she wanted more... more of his mouth, his hands, the hard full length of him pressing into her.

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Jared lifted his head from her breast and grabbed her hips with both hands. He thrust against her again and again, making her writhe under him. Lissa cried out, bucking against him as her orgasm spiraled through her.

Undoing the ribbon at the top of her nightgown, he slowly pushed the material up, first exposing her stomach, then inch by inch exposing her creamy full breasts. Pulling the nightgown over her head, he tossed it to the floor.

"I have no idea where you bought that thing, but I'd like to get one in every color," he told her in a hoarse voice.

"A boutique I found the other day. They make sexy lingerie for women my size."

Jared growled. "There is nothing wrong with your size!" He thrust against her to prove his point. "Feel how much I desire you."

Lissa gasped, arching into him. Jared slowly untied the ribbons on the sides of her panties, pulling them from her body. He slipped out of his underwear and kicked them off. Sliding up her body, he slowly entered her.

Lissa whimpered, wanting to feel him all the way inside of her. She lifted her hips, drawing him in further.

"Easy sweetheart. We have all night," Jared murmured. He certainly planned on making love to her more than once.

Lissa wrapped her legs around his waist, taking him in as far as she could. Shifting her hips, Lissa rubbed herself against him.

"Ah, so that's how you want it," he said. Jared rolled to his back so that Lissa was straddling him.

Lissa gasped. "I don't know what to do."

He grinned at her. "Just use your instincts," he said, reaching between their bodies to tease her. Her clit was swollen and sensitive. At the barest touch, Lissa arched against him.

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As Jared played with her, she rocked her hips back and forth, feeling him slide in and out of her. Between the friction inside of her and the friction his hand was creating, she was lost in pleasure. When he touched her in just the right spot, she slid her hand down to cover his, caressing his fingers as they caressed her intimately.

Grabbing his other hand, Lissa placed it on her breast. As he teased and pinched her nipple, Lissa began thrusting harder and harder against him. As her orgasm broke over her, she shouted his name.

Lissa's hips slowed, but Jared wasn't done yet. He wanted to feel her convulsing around him again and again. After two orgasms, Lissa was even hotter and wetter. His hand was slick as it continued to rub against her.

As the pressure began building within her again, Lissa began to thrust against Jared again. He was still hard and full inside of her. Remembering how much she enjoyed feeling him caress her, she reached between them and covered his hand with hers again. Her hand caressed his as she thrust against him. Thrusting her hips harder, she leaned back, tilting her pelvis and taking him in deeper.

Jared groaned. He was more turned on than he'd ever been. Between feeling her wet heat sliding up and down him, and feeling her hand against his, he was close to the edge. As Lissa thrust against him faster and harder, panting and moaning with pleasure, he could feel his release coming.

Lissa cried out, thrusting hard, the inside of her convulsing around him as she had her third orgasm of the evening. Jared removed his hand to grip her hips firmly; he thrust into her again and again, harder and harder. Lissa continued rubbing herself. As Jared found his release, she did as well.

Lissa couldn't remember having that many orgasms in her whole life, much less all in one evening. Falling limply across his chest, her legs

### *Magnolia Magick*

clamped down on his hips, holding him in place. She knew it was a dangerous game to play, but she liked feeling him inside of her, even after they were finished. There was something intimate about it, a closeness she hadn't felt with anyone before.

Jared lay under her breathing heavily. The woman draped across his body was absolutely amazing, never had he met anyone like her. As Lissa shifted her weight, her hips shifted as well. Just that slight movement was enough to make him grow hard again.

Lissa raised her head, her eyes wide. Clearly she hadn't expected a round two, most especially this soon after round one. Jared grinned and thrust upward, filling her even more.

As her stunned expression turned to desire, Jared flipped her over, pressing his weight on top of her. As he began thrusting in and out of her, Lissa met him thrust for thrust. His motions were slow, intent on building her pleasure until she couldn't stand anymore.

Lissa whimpered, tossing her head mindlessly. She wanted... she wanted... she honestly had no clue what she wanted, other than for Jared to continue what he was doing. She was close to her release when he suddenly pulled out of her.

Opening her eyes, Lissa asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he assured her. "Why don't you sit up on your knees?"

Lissa looked at him questioningly, but did as he asked. When she was on her knees, he turned her so that her back was facing him. Before she could ask what he was doing, he spread her legs and entered her again, pulling her back against his chest.

"Oh my," Lissa murmured.

Jared reached around her, caressing her breasts. His hands slid down her torso. Grasping her hand, he placed it at the juncture of her thighs, lightly rubbing

### *Magnolia Magick*

her fingers against the wet curls. He guided her finger between her wet lips, finding her swollen clit.

Lissa gasped and arched against their joined hands. As she rubbed herself, she felt Jared's hands gliding back up her torso to cup her breasts. His thumbs flicked over her nipples, making her moan with pleasure.

Jared thrust into her harder and faster, ramming himself all the way inside of her. Lissa cried out, her inner muscles clenching down on him.

"Don't stop," he whispered in her ear when she started to remove her hand. He could feel her finger tips brushing against him as he thrust in and out of her, felt her pleasuring herself, and it turned him on even more. He had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted Lissa.

Jared gently squeezed her nipples, continuing his fast, hard rhythm, sliding in and out of her. She was so wet and so hot. As she rubbed herself, he rammed into her as hard and fast as he could, feeling the pressure build within Lissa. He knew that she was close to another orgasm and this time he planned on joining her.

Lissa's orgasm came fast and hard. She fell limply back against Jared, unable to hold herself up. She felt Jared thrust into her a few more times before he cried out his own release, holding her tightly against him. Wrapping his leg around her, he laid them on their sides, Lissa's back pressed against his chest.

"Would you like to go take a shower?" he murmured in her ear.

Lissa nodded. "If I can get up, that sounds nice."

Jared chuckled. Pulling out of her, he rolled to his feet.

"Come on," he said, holding his hand out to her.

Lissa grabbed his hand and pulled herself to her feet. They walked to the bathroom together. Jared turned on the light and started the shower.



## *Magnolia Magick*

"It should only take a minute for the water to warm up," he said, pulling her into his arms.

Lissa lifted her head, kissing him.

Breaking the kiss, Jared looked down at her. "If you start that again, we won't make it into the shower."

Lissa smiled. She loved the fact that he found her so desirable. He made her feel sexy.

Reaching into the shower, Jared tested the water. "I think it's ready now."

He helped Lissa in first, then followed behind her. The water sluiced over their skin, washing away the sweat from their frenzied lovemaking. Jared reached for the soap. Angling the water away from them, he soaped his hands and reached for Lissa.

He gently soaped her neck, trailed his fingers over her collar bone and massaged her shoulders. "Why don't you turn around?" he asked.

Lissa turned, giving him her back. Jared continued to massage her neck and shoulders, his hands slick with soap. He washed her back, her hips, ran his hands over her butt and down to her thighs. Reaching around to her stomach, he pulled her back against him, rubbing himself against her soft soapy skin. Jared kissed her ear as his hands reached up to cup her breasts, lazily soaping them, making her nipples pucker.

Lissa felt him grow hard against her, felt him pressing against her butt. Continuing to rub her breasts with one hand, he reached between her legs with his other one, soaping her, rubbing her. Lissa gasped and leaned further back into him.

Jared thrust his hips, the long hard length of him sliding between their bodies, rubbing against the soft skin of her butt. Moving so the water ran over their skin, Jared continued to tease Lissa as the water washed the soap from her skin.

Reaching between their bodies, he pushed himself between her legs, but didn't enter her.

### *Magnolia Magick*

Instead of his hand rubbing against her, Lissa could feel his erection rubbing her, making her thrust herself back against him.

As Jared thrust against her, making her hot and wet, he played with her nipples and nibbled on her neck and ears. Lissa reached between her legs, guiding him inside of her. He pressed her against the wall and began thrusting deeply.

Lissa's hands splayed against the tile of the wall, bracing herself against his thrusts. With her breasts pressed against the tile, Jared slid his hands to her hips, drawing her back as he thrust into her. Pulling her hips from the wall, he reached between her legs to gently rub her, thrusting in and out, long and hard.

When Lissa cried out, finding her release, Jared allowed himself the same pleasure. Grinding himself against her, he filled her completely. Sliding from her body, he turned her to face him.

"Wow," she said. "I can honestly say this is a first for me. A lot of firsts for that matter."

Jared grinned. "I'm glad I was able to please you."

He kissed her, pressing his body against hers. Jared knew that he would never tire of Lissa, would never get enough of her. He craved her touch, her scent, her heat.

"We should probably rinse off and go to bed," he told her.

Still drunk on passion, Lissa only nodded. They both rinsed and got out. After drying each other off, Jared took her hand and led her back to his bedroom.

Turning down the covers, they crawled into bed. Lissa rested her head on Jared's chest and draped her leg across his. Wrapping his arm around her, Jared pulled Lissa close. In a matter of moments, they were both asleep.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### Chapter Eleven

The next morning, Lissa awoke to find herself alone in the bed. Looking around the room, she spotted Jared's bag on the floor. It looked like he was packed and ready to go; it was time to go back to reality. Lissa was a little disappointed. She wished they could stay longer.

Lissa climbed out of bed, picked her clothes up off the floor, and went to her bedroom. Quickly dressing, she packed her clothes and sat her bag at the top of the stairs. She went into the bathroom and brushed her hair and teeth. After putting on a little make-up, she gathered her things and put them into her bag.

Downstairs, Lissa heard the front door close. She descended the stairs and looked for Jared. Apparently he had been going out as he was nowhere to be seen. Lissa opened the door a little and peeked outside.

Jared was standing on the porch looking at the scenery. Hearing the door open, he turned and saw Lissa.

Smiling, he said, "Good morning."

She hesitantly smiled back and stepped outside. "Good morning. I'm sorry I slept so late."

Jared shook his head. "You didn't. It's only nine o'clock."

"You could have woken me up. I know you must be anxious to get back to town."

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her. "Actually, I'm anxious to *not* go back and just stay here with you making love all day and all night."

Lissa blushed. "Oh."

He chuckled at her. "If you're all packed, we could put our things in the car and get some breakfast before we make the drive back home."

"Yes, I left my bag at the top of the stairs."

"I'll grab it when I get mine. Why don't you get your coat and purse and I'll meet you in the car?"

## *Magnolia Magick*

"Okay."

Heading back into the cabin, Lissa went to get her coat and purse while Jared went upstairs to get their bags. Once she had her coat on, Lissa went back out to the car and buckled in. A few minutes later, Jared put their bags in the trunk and climbed into the car.

"Let's go eat," he said, pulling down the driveway.



About five hours later they were back in Maple Falls. Lissa's car was still parked outside of Jared's condo. Taking her bag from the Mercedes, Jared put it into the trunk of her car.

"Do you have to head home right now? Or do you want to stick around and go to dinner with me later?"

Lissa ran her fingers across his jaw in a soft caress. "I'd love to have dinner with you, but I should probably go home. My editor tends to go nuts when she can't reach me for long periods of time."

Jared pulled her into his arms. "I understand. Have dinner with me tomorrow?"

Lissa smiled and hugged him. "I think I can handle that."

He briefly kissed her and let her go. "You should go while you still can," he said with a wicked look.

Lissa grinned and climbed into her car. Waving, she pulled away from the curb and started her thirty minute drive back to the house.

As Lissa pulled up in front of the monstrous home, she spotted Jesse standing on the front porch, arms crossed and a fierce look on his face. This couldn't bode well. What could have possibly happened while she was gone? She'd never seen him this upset.

Lissa stopped the car and turned it off. Getting out, she grabbed her bag from the trunk and locked the car. Walking up the steps, she stopped in front of Jesse.

## *Magnolia Magick*

"Hi Jesse."

With a frown, he stuck a piece of paper under her nose. "What is the meaning of this?"

Lissa's brow furrowed. "The meaning of what?"

"This!" Jesse exclaimed, shaking the paper at her.

Lissa sighed. "I can't tell what that is right now. Can I at least get my bag inside and put my things away?"

Jesse glowered before disappearing. Lissa mumbled under her breath about chivalry being dead as she balanced her bag and her purse while fumbling for the house key. Unlocking the door, she pushed it open and stumbled across the threshold. After closing the door and putting her coat and purse down, Lissa drug her bag up the stairs.

When she got to her bedroom, Jesse was pacing back and forth across the room.

"Thanks for the help," she grumbled.

Jesse stopped pacing long enough to look at her. If looks could kill, she'd probably be dead – twice over. Sighing, Lissa put her bag down and held her hand out for the paper.

Jesse gave it to her and she glanced down to see the spell she had performed before going on her trip with Jared. Uh oh. This definitely wasn't good.

"Did you put a spell on me, Lissa?"

"Um, well... maybe."

Jesse gave her a dark look, advancing on her until the backs of her knees hit the edge of the bed. "Maybe? I've been going crazy trying to remember things that happened over the past several days! Do you realize that I lost almost two whole days prior to your little jaunt out to that man's cabin?"

"Two days?" she asked in a near whisper. While Lissa had never been scared of Jesse, having a large man bellowing in your face was rather disconcerting.

"Yes, two days!"

"I didn't mean for that to happen."

"But you did intend for me to forget something?"

## *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa nodded miserably. "Yes, but I swear I wouldn't have done the spell if I had known what would happen."

"What exactly did you want me to forget so badly that you risked my memories and thoughts? You had no right to toy with me like that!"

Lissa blushed furiously. "You, um, kind of popped into the bathroom the other day while I was in the tub. You were acting a little strange afterward, so I thought I would be doing you a favor by making you forget it happened."

Jesse froze. He had seen Lissa in the tub? Now that was a memory he definitely didn't want to forget! Then he realized what she had said, that she had done it for his benefit and not hers.

"You were trying to help me?"

Lissa nodded.

Jesse sighed; she had managed to knock the wind right out of his sails. "I guess I can't be angry with you for that. Just don't do any more spells on me please."

"I won't, I promise."

Jesse looked her over. She had a glow to her that he hadn't noticed before. Realizing she had probably slept with Jared was enough to put him over the edge again.

"You seem to have enjoyed your trip," Jesse said with a knowing look.

Lissa blushed even more. "Yes, I did, thank you."

Edging around him, Lissa went to her bag to unpack. When she turned back around, Jesse had disappeared again.

After her things were put away, Lissa went to her office so she could check her email. Thankfully her editor had loved what she had sent on Friday. There were only a few minor changes to be made and she needed to write two more chapters by the weekend. Deciding there was no time like the present, Lissa got to work on the edits.

## *Magnolia Magick*

A few hours later Jesse materialized beside her. "Are you going to work all night or do you plan on eating?"

"Is it that late already?" she asked, peering at the clock on her laptop.

"You get too wrapped up in your work. I honestly don't see how you've survived on your own. Without a keeper, you'd probably starve to death."

Lissa just shook her head. "Honestly Jesse, I can take care of myself. Times are different. Women don't need a man to take care of them."

"Hmm. Well, whether you want one or not, you've got one for the next six months. Come down to the kitchen and at least eat a sandwich or something."

Lissa sighed, saved her files, and shut down the laptop. Obviously she wasn't going to win this round. She walked down to the kitchen and found Jesse peering into the cabinets.

"I have no clue what half of this stuff is," he mumbled.

Lissa laughed. "I'll probably just heat up some soup and make a sandwich. I'm a little wiped out and not very hungry."

Jesse looked her over carefully, now that she mentioned it, there *were* dark circles under her eyes. "I would offer to cook for you, but I haven't had much of an opportunity to watch people use the appliances. I'd probably end up burning it."

Lissa gave him a wan smile. "That's okay. It's the thought that counts."

Looking through the cabinets and pantry, Lissa pulled out a can of tomato soup and bread. She went to the refrigerator and pulled out some butter and cheese. Putting the soup and some milk into a pot on the stove, Lissa turned the burner on low. While the soup was cooking, she pulled out a skillet and made a grilled cheese sandwich.

## *Magnolia Magick*

Once her dinner was ready, she ate quickly and put her dishes in the sink. She really was tired; she hadn't just said that to Jesse. Slowly climbing the stairs, Lissa made her way to the bedroom. Pulling out her nightgown, she started to change clothes.

"You want me to... sorry!"

Lissa spun toward the bathroom to find Jesse standing in the door, his hand over his eyes and a blush creeping up his neck. Her shirt still in her hand, she quickly drew it back over her head.

"What is it Jesse?"

Peeking through his fingers, he dropped his hand when he saw she was dressed. "I'm really sorry! I didn't mean to pop in at the wrong time."

"I know you didn't."

"I just thought you might like a bath. I was going to run some water for you."

Lissa smiled. "That's really sweet, Jesse. I'd like that."

Jesse turned and stepped into the bathroom. A moment later, Lissa heard the water running. Following the sound, she was surprised to see him adding bubbles to the water. There was a soft fluffy towel sitting out for her. Lissa was touched by Jesse's thoughtfulness. It was sad that he had never married. He would have made a terrific husband. Now why was she thinking of Jesse as a husband? Lissa gave herself a mental shake. She just left the bed of an amazing man and here she was lusting after a ghost. Granted, he was one hunky ghost, but still... it was wrong and she knew it was.

"Thank you for doing this," Lissa said.

Jesse turned in surprise. "You're welcome." Turning off the water, he walked to the door. "I'll leave you alone so you can relax."

Jesse pulled the door closed behind him. Lissa undressed and stepped into the heavenly water. It was just the right temperature and the bubble bath gave it a nice lavender scent.





An hour later, Jesse noticed that Lissa was still in the bathroom. He knocked on the door, but didn't get a response. Worried about her, he cracked the door open and peeked inside. Lissa's head was tipped back against the back of the tub and her eyes were closed. Her breathing was even and deep; she had obviously fallen asleep.

Jesse was torn. Should he wake her up? If he left her in there, she could slip under the water. Deciding to brave her wrath, he stepped into the bathroom and walked to her side. Crouching beside the tub, he gently shook her shoulder, careful not to look anywhere but at her face. The bubbles had vanished, leaving him an excellent view of her perfect body. He felt himself grow hard and swore under his breath.

"Lissa, you need to wake up."

She murmured in her sleep, but didn't open her eyes. Jesse shook her once again, but she still wouldn't wake up. She must have been exhausted.

Trying to remain a gentleman, Jesse drained the water from the tub, wrapped a towel around Lissa, and lifted her out of the tub. Lying her on the bed, he dried her off as best he could without removing the towel. Pulling the covers over her, he gently kissed her brow.

Lissa sighed and rolled over, tucking her hands under her chin. Jesse stood beside the bed looking down at her. In sleep, she looked angelic. When she was awake, there was fire flashing in her eyes. Never had he met her equal – both innocent and seductive. She would even tempt a saint, and Jesse was no saint.

Deciding that his work was done for the night, he turned out the lights and roamed the house. Being a ghost, he never really slept. He had down time, but it was different. While Lissa slept, he would keep watch over the house, and over her.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### **Chapter Twelve**

*Three weeks later*

Morning found Lissa kneeling in front of the toilet. This was her third morning to go through this. She felt horrible. Maybe she had the flu? Groaning, she slowly climbed to her feet. Jesse stood in the doorway, a look of concern on his face.

"Maybe you should see a doctor," he said.

Lissa gave him a dirty look. "I don't want to go to the doctor. It's just the flu, it will pass."

In the bedroom, Lissa's cell phone rang. As she rushed to answer it, she saw Jared's name on the caller ID.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi honey. Are you feeling any better today?"

Lissa groaned. "Not really."

"Are you going to the doctor?"

"What is it with everyone? I'm fine! I just have the flu or something. It will pass on its own."

"Let me guess, Jesse is worried about you too."

Lissa sighed. "Yes, he's worried about me; you're worried about me; Gemma's worried about me..."

"Gemma?" Jared asked.

"Yeah, she's sort of my friend. She owns the local magick shop."

"Magic shop? As in card tricks and stuff?" Jared was confused. Why was Lissa going to a magic shop?

Lissa laughed. "No, as in spells, incense, and stuff." Jared grew quiet on the other end. "Jared? Are you still there?"

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, I'm still here. So you practice witchcraft? Is that what you're telling me?"

Now it was Lissa's turn to be quiet. She had been worried that he would react this way. After all, he was a banker and believed in facts.

"I guess you could say that. I've done a few spells and my best friend at home is a practicing witch."

## *Magnolia Magick*

"Lissa, I don't like you messing around with that stuff."

Lissa instantly stiffened. How dare he condemn her and her friends! "Who said that you had any say in the matter?"

"I'd like to think my opinion mattered to you. We've been seeing each other almost daily for the past several weeks."

Lissa sighed. "Your opinion does matter to me Jared, but I'm good at magick. It's getting to be a part of who I am."

"What if I don't like that part?"

Lissa wasn't sure how to answer. "Then I guess you don't like the other parts either. You either accept all of me or none of me."

"Maybe we should take some time to think things through. I'll call you in a day or two." Jared hung up the phone and stared at it a moment. He couldn't believe that Lissa just told him she practiced witchcraft. How could the woman he had come to care so much about be a stranger to him? Living in a small town meant that people tended to have small minds. For a prominent member of their town to date a spell-casting witch was unheard of! It would ruin his business if word got out. He may have told her that the opinions of others didn't matter to him, but it was completely different when it came to witchcraft. There were some things you just couldn't overcome in a small southern town.

Lissa stared dumbfounded at the phone. Had that really just happened?

Jesse was lounging against the door frame. "I take it loverboy didn't take it well?"

"Oh shut up," she growled.

Jesse just shook his head. "How can you want to be with someone who can't support your decisions? Who only wants bits and pieces of you?"

"You don't know what you're talking about. He just needs some time is all."

## *Magnolia Magick*

Jesse eyed her skeptically. For her sake, he hoped she was right. However, he had a bad feeling that things weren't going to end well. As Lissa dashed off to the bathroom again, he briefly wondered if it was the flu or something else plaguing her... something a little more permanent.

"Lissa, at the risk of you biting my head off, could you possibly be pregnant?"

Lissa groaned. "This is *so* not happening to me!"

She splashed some cold water on her face and brushed her teeth. Throwing on some clothes, she grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Jesse asked, following her down the stairs.

"Into town."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"How else am I going to get a home pregnancy test kit?"

Jesse froze. Well, at least she was taking his suggestion seriously. He wasn't sure how he felt about her being pregnant. If Jared couldn't accept Lissa for who she was, what would that mean for the baby? If Lissa had been pregnant with Jesse's child, he wouldn't have cared if she danced naked under the full moon as long as she was his. It was too bad that ghosts couldn't have kids. Jesse would have loved nothing more than to be the one having a baby with Lissa.

Lissa tore out of the driveway and zipped down the highway. Her usual thirty minute drive into town only took fifteen. Rushing into the pharmacy, she grabbed two different test kits, unsure which would be more accurate. They both advertised immediate results. Paying for her purchase, she walked back to her car and drove home.

When she got home, she locked the front door and went immediately to the upstairs bathroom. Passing Jesse along the way, Lissa told him, "Don't go popping into the bathroom for a few minutes."

## *Magnolia Magick*

Jesse merely nodded.

Once she was in the safety of the bathroom, Lissa opened the kits with shaky hands. Deciding it was best to be one-hundred percent sure, she used both of them. A few minutes later, she was staring at two positive results. She was pregnant.

Lissa slumped to the floor and rested her head against the wall. Now what was she going to do? Jared wasn't speaking to her. Because of being sick all the time she hadn't been able to write. Maybe it was time for a trip to see Gemma. Surely her friend would have some advice. Gemma was forever consulting her cards, maybe she had foreseen something that would help Lissa out.

Putting on a little make-up and brushing out her hair, Lissa picked her purse up again and walked back out to her car. She froze on the front porch when she saw Jared parking behind her car.

"Were you heading out?" he asked as he approached the house.

"Um, yeah, I was just going to see Gemma."

"I'll drive you."

Lissa was surprised. It had only been an hour since Jared had complained about her interest in magick and now he was offering to drive her to the store. Maybe he realized that she was still herself regardless of what she believed or practiced.

Sliding into Jared's car, she battled with the decision to tell him about the pregnancy. In the end, she decided to wait until they came back to the house. He probably shouldn't handle heavy machinery right after finding out he was going to be a father.

It didn't take long for them to arrive at the magick shop. Moonbeam was waiting for them by the door. Lissa slid out of the car and started walking up to the shop.

Getting out of the car, Jared stopped her. "You really do shop here, don't you?"

## *Magnolia Magick*

"Of course I do. I told you earlier."

"I know. I guess I was secretly hoping that it had been a mistake."

Lissa walked back over to him. "What's the big deal Jared?"

"I have a reputation to consider around here, Lissa. While I can get away with some things, having a girlfriend who practices witchcraft isn't one of them."

"But..."

"I don't think we should see each other anymore."

"What?" Lissa sank to the curb. He was breaking up with her?

"I'm sorry, but I just don't think it will work."

Before Lissa could say or do anything else, Jared got into his car and drove off. Lissa stared after him in shock. He had left her! He had driven her out here and left her!

Behind her, Lissa heard the shop door open.

"Lissa, are you okay," Gemma asked, sitting beside her.

"I don't know. I feel a bit numb right now."

Gemma nodded her head. "Did you tell him about the baby?"

Lissa looked at Gemma in shock. She should be used to the woman knowing things by now, but it still surprised her. "I'd ask how you know, but I'm afraid you may actually tell me."

Gemma laughed. "Come on. I'll lock up the shop and take you home."

"Thank you. I hate to impose, but I really don't know anyone else around here."

Gemma went inside. A moment later she came out carrying her purse and a small plastic sack. She handed the bag to Lissa.

"There are some herbs in there that will help calm your stomach. There's also a calming lavender and white tea bath and some books I thought you might like."

## *Magnolia Magick*

"Thanks."

Gemma and Lissa walked over to the car. Once they were in and buckled, Gemma began the drive to Lissa's house. When they pulled up outside, Jesse was pacing on the front porch.

"Oh my," Gemma murmured. "I knew there was another man in your life, but I didn't know he was a ghost. That explains some of the reading choices I found for you."

"Pardon?"

"There's a book in your sack that talks about resurrection spells. If you decide to do one, let me know or call your friend Marney. She seems to know what she's doing."

Lissa mutely nodded and got out of the car. She slowly walked up the steps to face Jesse.

"Why didn't Jared bring you home?"

"He sort of left me at Gemma's shop."

"He left you?" Jesse was sure he must have misheard her. While he may not like Jared, he didn't think the man was horrible enough to leave a pregnant woman alone outside of a store with no means of getting home. Especially if that pregnant woman was carrying his child! What was with the men in this time period? When Jesse was alive, the men acted like men. They took care of their families and their responsibilities.

Lissa nodded. "We got into a fight about the whole magick thing. Before I knew it, he was breaking up with me and drove off."

"What did he say about the baby?"

Lissa looked at the ground guiltily.

"Liss, you *did* tell him about the baby, right?"

"Well, I sort of didn't get a chance. I had planned on telling him on the way back home, but then he left me so I wasn't able to."

Jesse shook his head. Putting his arm around Lissa, he led her into the house.

"Come on, we'll figure it out," he told her.

## *Magnolia Magick*

When they got inside, Jesse closed and locked the door. Lissa looked about ready to drop. Picking her up, he carried upstairs to her room.

Setting her on the edge of the bed, he asked, "Are you okay?"

Looking at him with sorrowful eyes, she asked, "What have I done?"

"Last time I checked, it took more than one person to make a baby."

Lissa sniffed as a tear trickled down her cheek. "That may be, but I'm the one who has to carry it, give birth to it, and raise it."

Jesse hated to see her upset and he knew it wasn't good for the baby. He reached for the sack she had brought in with her.

"What's in here?"

Lissa looked up at him. "I'm not sure. It's a care package that Gemma put together before she brought me home."

Jesse pulled out the books. "She gave you books on ghosts?"

Lissa shrugged. "I guess."

Jesse flipped through the pages. Half way through the second book, he froze. Was it possible? Could the book be right?

"What is it, Jesse?"

"I'm sure it's nothing," he said, putting the book down. "I'll go make you some tea."

After Jesse left, Lissa picked up the book. Flipping through, she found the section that must have surprised Jesse. According to the book, resurrection spells could work if you knew where the ghost's body was located.

Putting the book aside, she called Gemma. Her friend told her that if the ghost in question didn't know where they were buried, there were special people who could locate them. Gemma just happened to know such a person. Lissa wrote down the name and number and called the guy.



## *Magnolia Magick*

By the time Jesse came back upstairs, Lissa had made arrangements to meet Luke the next day. If what he said was true, he would be able to locate Jesse's body as long as it rested within a few miles of the house.

"Here's your tea," Jesse said, sitting it on the bedside table.

"Thanks, I think I'll let it cool a minute and check my email."

Jesse nodded. "I'll wait here for you."

Lissa quickly walked down the hall and emailed Marney. With any luck, her friend would have the spell she was looking for. After emailing Marney about the spell and emailing her editor for an extension due to illness, she shut the computer off.

Walking back down the hall, Lissa closed the bedroom door and climbed into bed. Picking up her tea, she sipped on it.

"How does it taste?" Jesse asked her.

Lissa nodded. "It's good. Thanks for making it for me."

"You needed it. You really should relax and try not to stress; it isn't good for the baby."

Lissa sighed. "I know."

She frowned, deep in thought. What was she going to do? She had never thought to raise a baby by herself. Then again, she had never planned on getting pregnant without a husband or fiancé.

"What is it, Lissa?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing."

"You were thinking awfully hard for it to be nothing."

Lissa shook her head. "It's just that I never expected to be pregnant and alone. I'm scared and I don't know what to do."

"Come here," Jesse said, pulling her into his arms. "You don't have to figure it out tonight. I'll help you as long as you're here. I just can't go with you when you leave."

## *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa shifted and looked at him. "What if you could? What if you could go anywhere you wanted?"

"As wonderful as that would be, it isn't going to happen Lissa. I've been dead a long time." Regardless of what Lissa's book said, Jesse knew it wasn't likely spell could bring him back to life. Things like that just didn't happen.

Lissa decided not to mention her appointment with Luke. Only when she knew for sure that she would be able to bring Jesse back would she tell him anything. Otherwise she might get his hopes up for no reason.

Once her tea was finished, she set the cup back on the nightstand. "I think I'm going to get some sleep."

Jesse nodded. "Get some rest."

Lissa rolled onto her side. Jesse reached down and pulled the covers over her. He brushed the hair back from her face, enjoying the silky feel of it.

Lissa tried to hold back her tears. The man she had trusted, the man who had fathered the child she now carried, had turned his back on her, and yet here was Jesse, dead for almost a century, taking care of her and worrying about her. It didn't seem fair that such a kind man should have had his life ended so abruptly and so horribly. Maybe she could make it up to him. If she could bring him back, he would have another chance to find happiness, to find a wife and start a family.

She closed her eyes, forcing herself to go to sleep. Lissa's body was worn out, but her mind was still running ninety miles an hour. She couldn't still her thoughts no matter how she tried. Counting sheep didn't work, thinking of her latest novel didn't work, finally she tried imaging what her baby would be like... wondering if the child was a girl or a boy, Lissa finally drifted to sleep.



## *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa had woken up an hour before her appointment with Luke. She quickly showered and dressed, ran down to the kitchen to grab a bite to eat, and then went to her office. Opening her computer, Lissa saw that she had email. The first message was from Marney – she had found the spell!

Lissa's breath caught. Her stomach knotted and her hands shook. This was it, the way to save Jesse, to bring him back. All she needed now was the location of his body. According to the spell, she already had the ingredients she would need. Gemma had apparently 'seen' what Lissa was going to do and what would be needed, all of the supplies listed had been in her sack.

Downstairs, the doorbell rang. Lissa closed her laptop and ran downstairs.

Pulling the door open, she looked up, and up. Luke was six and a half feet tall, with brown hair and brown eyes. He had a lean swimmers build. A sharp nose and small chin gave him average looks.

"You must be Luke, I'm Lissa."

Luke smiled. "It's nice to meet you Lissa. I hate to rush you, but could we possibly get started? I have another appointment in two hours and it's three towns away."

Lissa nodded. "Just let me grab a coat."

She went to the entry closet and pulled out her coat. Slipping it on, she hurried out the door and closed it firmly behind her.

"I appreciate you coming out so soon."

Luke nodded. "It's no problem."

They started walking around the house and then widened their search. Luke explained it as a vibration. When he approached the grave he was seeking, he felt a vibration in the air. He wasn't sure where the gift came from or how it worked exactly, but he was glad it allowed him to help people.

## *Magnolia Magick*

An hour later, Luke stopped near a Yew tree at the edge of the property. "Here, your ghost is here," Luke said, pointing to the tree.

Lissa slowly walked up to the tree. "Do you know what side he's buried on?"

Luke walked around the tree. When the vibration was the strongest, he stopped. "His body is on this side."

Lissa stripped a small piece of bark off the tree so she would be able to find the spot again. Tears came to her eyes. It was sad that Jesse had gone for so long without knowing where he was buried, without anyone giving him the last rites, without flowers left on his grave.

"Thank you for your help, Luke."

He nodded. "It's no problem. I'm glad I was able to help. Any friend of Gemma's is a friend of mine."

Lissa reached into her pocket and pulled out some money. When she handed it to Luke, he held his hand up. "That isn't necessary. Keep it."

"Are you sure? I don't mind paying you."

"I'm sure," he said with a grin. "Use it to buy something for the baby."

"Gemma told you?"

Luke shook his head. "It's another gift."

"Well, thank you. I can't begin to tell you what it means to me to finally know where Jesse is buried."



Later that night, Lissa knelt at the base of the old Yew tree. It was almost midnight – the witching hour. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Hopefully the rain would hold off. It had taken some unusual abilities to locate Jesse's grave, not to mention locating the spell itself and the ingredients for the resurrection spell.

Making a circle with black candles, Lissa began laying everything out. She had a charm, which

### *Magnolia Magick*

contained shavings from an Alder tree and the petals of an Iris, along with various herbs.

Lissa pulled out her small cauldron and placed it in the center of the circle. Glancing at her watch, she saw that midnight was only a minute away.

Reaching into the pocket of her jeans, she removed a small box of wooden matches. Lighting the candles, Lissa cast her circle. Facing the grave at the base of the tree, she began her incantation.

Goddess Hela,  
I beseech thee.  
Release this soul  
From Heheimr.

Dropping the charm bag into the cauldron, she lit the bag on fire. It burned quickly, leaving behind the ashes Lissa needed to complete the ritual. Dipping her fingers into the cauldron, she spread the ashes on her forehead and cheeks. She spread the remaining ashes across the grave.

In life he knew not love,  
In death he roams the earth.  
I beseech thee,  
Release him into my care.

Lissa continued to chant her spell until she was exhausted. An hour after she had begun, she collapsed at the foot of the grave. Had she still been conscious, she would have felt the ground begin to shift.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### **Chapter Thirteen**

Jesse broke through the ground, gasping for air. One minute he had been searching the house for Lissa and the next he had been underground. What the hell was going on? Where was he?

Looking around, he recognized the area. They were on the eastern side of his land. At his feet, Lissa was sprawled across the ground, magickal supplies all around her. Jesse's eyes widened when he saw the spell clutched in her hand.

Looking at his own hands, he saw that his fingers were bleeding from clawing his way out of the ground. It wasn't possible for him to bleed! Dead people didn't bleed! Placing a hand over his chest, he felt his heart beating.

He shook his head in wonder. Lissa had brought him back from the dead! He didn't know how it was possible, didn't know what to think or what to feel for that matter. As the thunder rumbled again, the rain began to come down. Quickly picking up Lissa, he took off for the house.

By the time they reached the front porch, Jesse and Lissa were both soaked and covered in mud. Trying not to track too much of the muck through the house, Jesse quickly got them to the master bathroom. Lissa was still out cold, but he knew he couldn't leave her in her wet dirty clothes.

Turning on the shower, Jesse made sure the water was warm. He turned to Lissa and stripped her clothes from her body. Undressing himself, he carried Lissa into the shower. Jesse tried not to think of the warm, soft, naked body in his arms. He rinsed the two of them the best he could.

Getting out of the shower, Jesse dried both of them off. He carried Lissa to the bedroom and laid her across the bed. Digging through her drawers, he found a nightgown and slipped it over her head. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he gathered his

## *Magnolia Magick*

dirty clothes from the bathroom. Holding them up, he saw that the shirt was ruined, sliced to ribbons by the knife that had killed him. By all rights, his clothes should have been dust. Apparently they had been restored to their state at the time of his death when he had been resurrected. Looking over the pants, he saw they were dirty but still in one piece.

No time like the present to try out that washing machine. Jesse went downstairs and washed his pants on the shortest cycle he could find. Once they were clean, he put them into the dryer. His stomach rumbled, telling him it was past time for him to eat.

As his pants dried, Jesse went to the kitchen and ate three sandwiches and drank a few glasses of milk. He was still stunned that he was sitting here, alive and breathing. Never would he have thought it to be possible! No matter what, he would find a way to repay Lissa for what she had done, even if it took him the rest of his life – however long that might be this time around.

Once his pants were dry, Jesse dressed and went back upstairs. He knew he should sleep in one of the guest rooms, but he wanted to be near Lissa, wanted to make sure she was okay. It worried him that she hadn't woken up yet.

Lying down beside her, he pulled her into his arms. Within minutes, he was asleep.



The next morning, Lissa woke up slowly. Stretching, she felt a warm hard body next to hers and an arm wrapped around her waist. Opening her eyes, she looked next to her and saw Jesse lying on the bed. A half naked Jesse at that!

Tentatively, Lissa reached over and felt his warm hard skin. Her hand slid across his chest, stopping when she felt his heartbeat. Her breath caught in her

## *Magnolia Magick*

throat and tears gathered in her eyes. She had done it! She had really brought him back!

Jesse slowly opened his eyes and looked at her. "Good morning."

"Morning," she said with a smile.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"Um.. I brought you back?"

Jesse looked her over carefully. "I noticed that. Any particular reason you didn't mention it before?"

"I wasn't sure it would work. I would have hated to disappoint you if I couldn't pull it off."

Jesse shook his head. "Do you have any idea what you risked? You were so exhausted from your efforts that you passed out! If I hadn't woken up and dug my way out of the ground, you would have drown out there!"

Lissa winced. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize that would happen."

For the first time, Lissa noticed she was in her nightgown. A blush stained her cheeks.

"Yes, I put you into your nightgown," Jesse told her matter-of-factly.

"So I see."

"I couldn't very well let you sleep in your wet muddy clothes. You even had mud in your hair."

"You washed me too?"

Jesse nodded. Now Lissa was *really* embarrassed. She'd let one cute guy see her pudgy body and look where that had gotten her!

Misunderstanding her silence, Jesse said, "I just held you under the water. I didn't touch you intimately if that's what you're worried about."

"It isn't that."

He frowned at her. "Then what?"

"It's just that... well, I'm a little on the heavy side. I don't like people seeing my body."

"You have got to be kidding me! Do you have any idea how perfect your body is?"

Lissa looked at him skeptically.



## *Magnolia Magick*

Jesse growled. "If I weren't a gentleman and you weren't already seeing someone, I'd show you just how perfect it is!"

"Technically, I'm not seeing anyone." Lissa inwardly groaned. Now where had *that* come from? She was just asking for trouble!

"He'll come around, Lissa. Just give him some time."

Lissa shook her head. "I don't think so. I mean, he just left me there, and he never even called to check on me."

Jesse hugged her to him. Absently he realized that he wasn't wearing a shirt and her body felt a little too good pressed closed to his. If he didn't release her soon, she was going to feel just how desirable she was.

Lissa hugged him back before getting out of bed. "Well, it seems I need to do a little shopping this morning."

"Shopping?"

She nodded. "I need to get you at least one outfit. Once you're dressed, we can hit the stores and buy you a few more things."

Jesse frowned. "I can't let you do that Lissa. I may be alive again, but I also don't have a job."

Lissa paused. "I'm not worried about the money, but you have a point about the job. You also don't have any of the forms of identification that are required these days."

Picking up her phone, she quickly called Gemma. She was excited to tell her new friend that the spell had worked. Gemma was surprised, but happy. Once Lissa told her their dilemma, Gemma told her not to worry that it would be taken care of.

Lissa didn't question how Gemma planned on handling it. She was just grateful that it would be done. The sooner Jesse was legal, the better. Lissa turned to Jesse.

"What's your full name?"

*Magnolia Magick*

"Zachary Lawson Jesse Pearson."

Lissa repeated the information back to Gemma.

"When were you born?"

"June eighteen-eighty. And in case you need to know, I died in October nineteen-eighteen."

Lissa passed the dates along to Gemma. That made Jesse thirty-eight years old. Well, technically, it made him one-hundred-twenty-eight years old. Lissa figured they should stick with the thirty-eight though.

Hanging up the phone, Lissa cocked her head, looking Jesse over. "You know, enough people know about the 'ghost' that haunts this house that I can't call you Jesse in public. Especially since Jared has met you."

"One of my cousins always called me Zach."

Lissa nodded. "That will work. Let me grab a measuring tape so I can figure out your clothing sizes."

Rummaging through the drawers, Lissa finally found a tape measure. Walking over to Jesse, or rather, Zach, Lissa measured his waist, breadth of his shoulders, length of his torso, and his inseam, which made him jump. Lissa was going to have a hard time calling him anything other than Jesse.

"Okay, I think that's all I need." Glancing down she realized he would need shoes. Holding her foot next to his, she got an idea of what size shoes he would need.

"I'll just get dressed and run to the store. As soon as I get back, we'll get you dressed and we can go shopping."

Jesse flopped back onto the bed and sighed. "If we must. I always thought shopping was another word for torture."

Lissa laughed. "I won't be long."

She quickly threw on her clothes, put on a little make-up and dashed out the door.

*Magnolia Magick*



An hour later, Lissa returned carrying a large shopping bag. She pulled out a pair of black shoes, jeans, a black sweater, some socks, and a package of underwear. Laying everything out on the bed, Lissa scooted back toward the door.

"I'll just let you change."

Jesse eyed the clothes and watched Lissa back out of the bedroom. It took him a few minutes, but he managed to get himself dressed. Opening the bedroom door, he stood there, uncertainly. Did he look okay?

Lissa looked him up and down. He was definitely one mouth-watering man! "You look nice," she told him. Was that *her* voice? It sounded so husky!

Jesse gave her a slow grin. "I guess that means I'm ready to go shopping."

"I, um, thought we'd go one town over to see what they had."

"In other words you don't want to see Jared today?"

Lissa nodded. "I'm just not ready yet."

Jesse put his arm around her and helped her down the stairs. "It's okay, Lissa. We can go wherever you'd like."

## Chapter Fourteen

Lissa and Jesse had shopped all day. They had managed to buy him another pair of shoes, more jeans and sweaters, a few pairs of nice dress slacks and button-down shirts, and more socks and underwear. Lissa had even picked up an electric razor at one of the shops.

Stopping at a drug store, Lissa picked out some cologne and a toothbrush for him. She was trying to think of everything Jesse would need now that he was alive again. Once Lissa was confident she had everything, she checked out and carried the bags to the car. Jesse had stopped outside to talk to someone.

Seeing her, Jesse walked over and took the bags from her. "Ready?"

Lissa nodded. "Do you mind if we stop by Gemma's shop on the way home?"

"Not at all."

They got into the car and drove to Gemma's. When they stepped through the door of her shop, Moonbeam came to greet them. Jesse stopped to pet the cat while Lissa went in search of Gemma.

"You must be Jesse," Gemma said as she approached them.

Jesse nodded and shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"Actually, I'm glad y'all stopped by. I recently expanded my shop and opened a location an hour away." Gemma looked at Jesse. "Would you like to learn how to run a shop?"

Jesse was surprised. "I guess."

"If you can be here every morning until noon, I'll show what you need to know. By the time I'm ready to open the other store, you should be able to handle this one solo on the days I'm gone."

"But you just met me."

## *Magnolia Magick*

Gemma smiled. "The cards told me to expect you today, that you would be the answer to my dilemma."

Jesse just shook his head. He didn't understand any of it, but if she was offering to teach him a new trade, he was open to it. He would need a way to support himself.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow morning," Jesse said.

"Oh, no rush. You can start next week. Take some time to get used to being corporeal again."

Jesse laughed. "Thanks, I think I'll take you up on that."

Jesse and Lissa excused themselves and headed home.



*February 2009*

It had been a little over three months since Lissa had brought Jesse back to life. He had learned how to handle the shop for Gemma and often worked there. Through a DNA sample, Lissa and Gemma had convinced the state that Jesse was the legal descent of – well, himself. The house Lissa was renting now belonged to Jesse, along with the twenty acres surrounding it. In his spare time, he had started painting the outside, bringing it back to its former glory.

Lissa was three months pregnant and starting to show a tiny bit. The doctor had warned her that it could be as long as six months before she began to show, but she wasn't that lucky. It seemed she was going to get fatter faster than most other people, just her luck.

Jesse had been wonderful, always helping her around the house and making sure she ate properly.

### *Magnolia Magick*

She didn't know what she would have done without him.

Lissa had been working all morning. Closing her laptop, she stretched and stood up. Hearing the door downstairs, she knew Jesse was home. Apparently he was only working half a day today.

"Honey, I'm home," he called up the stairs. It had been their running joke lately.

Lissa smiled and made her way over to the stairs. Holding onto the railing, she carefully made her way down to the entry hall. Jesse was putting his things in the coat closet.

"Have you had lunch yet?" she asked.

"No, I thought we'd go into town to eat."

A frown crossed Lissa's face. She hadn't been in town since Jared had broken up with her. She'd found one excuse after another to go to the other neighboring towns for her grocery needs. Mostly she stayed home and worked on her book. If Jesse was home, she'd talk to him.

Jesse pulled her into his arms. "Honey, you have to face him sooner or later."

She sighed and leaned her head against his chest. "I know."

Looking at her loose sweatshirt and knit pants, he shook his head. "Why don't you go put on that new maternity outfit you bought? You'll feel better if you dress up a little."

Lissa glanced down at her clothes. It would be nice to wear something other than sweats or stretchy clothes for a change. She just hadn't seen much reason for it lately. She honestly didn't care if she looked like a bum or not. It wasn't like she was seeing anyone. She dressed half way decent when she went into town, but didn't see the point when she was going to be around the house.

"Give me a few minutes and I'll meet you back down here."

## *Magnolia Magick*

Climbing the stairs, she made her way to the bedroom. The maternity outfit in question consisted of black maternity pants and a purple long sleeve shirt that tied in the back. It emphasized the tiny bump she was now sporting. Once she was dressed and had on some comfortable black flats, Lissa put on her make-up and pulled her hair up into a loose knot, fastening a pretty clip in it.

Satisfied with her overall appearance, she went back downstairs. Jesse was sitting in the living room flipping through a magazine.

"Ready?" he asked, seeing her in the entry hall.

"As I'll ever be," she grumbled.

Holding his hand out to her, Jesse tugged her to the door. "You'll be fine. I promise I won't leave your side."

That made Lissa feel a little better. At least if she saw Jared, she wouldn't have to face him alone. She absently rubbed her belly. The maternity shirt made her look a little bigger than she actually was, but at least people would see she was pregnant and not just fat.

Jesse had perfected his driving over the past few months. Now he drove just about any time they left the house. Once Jesse had helped Lissa into the car, he went around to the driver's side and slid into the car.

Noticing her tightly clenched hands, he reached over and took her hand in his. "It's going to be fine Liss."

"What if he asks about..." she gestured toward her stomach.

Jesse wasn't sure what to tell her. He felt that every guy had a right to know he was going to be a father, but at the same time he wanted to protect Lissa. Jared had callously abandoned her. In Jesse's eyes, that didn't make him much of a man.

"There's actually something I've been meaning to discuss with you."

### *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa studied his profile. She could tell he was nervous and it made her worry about the turn the conversation was about to take. "What is it, Jesse?"

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small velvet box – the kind jewelers used for rings. Lissa's mind went blank.

"I know you have a home elsewhere, but I have this huge house with all of this land here. I think you've been relatively happy the last few months and I have been too. Even though you don't love me, I know that I could take care of you and the baby."

Jesse stopped long enough to open the box. Inside was a platinum band with a two-carat marquise diamond in the center. It was breathtaking.

"If you think that I could make you happy, I'd like for you to be my wife. But I only want you to say yes if you really think it could work. I know that Jared broke your heart and that it hasn't been that long ago, but I've come to care for you a great deal and I want to be a part of your life."

Lissa had silent tears streaming down her face. "Jesse, I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything right now. Take as much as you need to think it over," he said, closing the ring box and placing it in her lap.

Lissa placed a shaky hand over the box. "I've come to care for you too, Jesse, but I don't want to take away your chance at finding love. You have a second chance at life. You shouldn't waste it on me."

Jesse gently grasped her chin and turned her to face him. "Being with you could never be a waste of time. Do you have any idea what an amazing woman you are? You're intelligent, caring, loving, and strong. Any man would be lucky to all you his wife."

Lissa reached up and covered his hand with hers. Leaning forward, she brushed her lips across his. Not willing to do anything half way, Jesse pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. Kissing Lissa was every bit as wonderful as he had imagined.



## *Magnolia Magick*

Breaking the kiss, Lissa realized that she didn't need to think about anything. While she may not feel that unbridled passion she had felt with Jared, there was no doubt that Jesse's kisses made her want more. She knew that if they were to sleep together she wouldn't be disappointed. Even though she didn't want Jesse with the same desperation she had felt with Jared, she knew that being in his arms would be amazing.

"I'll marry you," she whispered.

Jesse looked at her in surprise. "Are you sure?"

Lissa nodded. Handing the box back to Jesse, she held out her left hand.

Jesse opened the box and removed the ring. Taking her hand in his, Jesse slid the ring onto her ring finger. It was a perfect fit. His throat was tight with emotion. While Lissa may not love him, he would do everything in his power to make her happy. He only hoped she wouldn't come to regret her decision.

Looking at her hand in his, the engagement ring on her finger, Lissa knew that she had made the right choice. She knew that Jesse cared about her and would take care of her and the baby.

Throughout the drive into town, Lissa kept glancing at her engagement ring. She still felt as if she was trapping Jesse, but he seemed to genuinely want to marry her. When they arrived in town, Jesse parked across the street from the bank. Lissa felt nervous again. She really didn't know what to say to Jared if she saw him.

Jesse got out of the car and walked around to Lissa's side. Opening the door, he helped her out of the car. Tipping her face up, he briefly kissed her.

"Everything is going to be fine. Stop fretting."

She gave him a small smile. "I promise to try."

With his arm around her, Jesse walked with Lissa to the small café a few doors down. If the full parking places were any indication, the café was really busy

## *Magnolia Magick*

today. When they walked in the door, they were relieved to see a few empty tables. The hostess was able to seat them immediately.

As they were perusing the menu, Lissa heard Jared's voice across the room. Unable to resist, she glanced his way. He was seated a few tables over with a brunette who looked like a model. Lissa felt as if she couldn't breathe.

Jesse saw the look on her face and followed her eyes. He instantly spotted Jared and the woman he was having lunch with. Focusing his attention back on Lissa, he reached across the table and put his hand over hers, gently squeezing her fingers.

"Are you okay?"

Lissa looked at Jesse and the concern in his eyes. Here she was upset over a man who had dumped her outside of a store when a sweet, caring man, a man she was going to marry, was seated across from her. Giving herself a mental kick, she smiled at Jesse and reassured him.

"I'm okay, just surprised."

"What are you going to say if he asks about the baby?"

Lissa frowned. "I'm hoping he won't ask."

Jesse gently rubbed her fingers. "Since we're going to be married, would you mind if I claimed the baby as mine? And I don't just mean for today, but for always."

Lissa fought back tears. She blamed her hormones for constantly turning her into a watering pot these days. "I'd like that."

The waitress appeared and took their order. It didn't take long for their food to arrive. Lost in conversation with Jesse about the progress of her book, she forgot all about Jared and his date. When they had finished their meal and paid, Lissa and Jesse left the café. On the way to the car, Lissa heard her name called. Turning, she spotted Jared and his date heading toward her.

## *Magnolia Magick*

"Lissa, I thought that was you," Jared said as he approached, looking Jesse over. From the look on his face, Lissa knew he hadn't recognized Jesse.

Lissa forced a smile. "It's nice to see you Jared."

Lissa felt an arm come around her shoulders and she leaned into Jesse. He always seemed to know exactly what she needed. Just being near him was a comfort.

"I see you're on a date so I won't keep you. I just wanted to say hi."

"Oh, I'm not a date," she told him.

Jared looked between her and Jesse and back again, obviously trying to figure out the connection between them. A nudge in his ribs reminded him of Natasha.

"Sorry, this is Natasha," he said, indicating the woman to his right.

Lissa smiled at her. She really was a beautiful woman. "It's nice to meet you Natasha."

Jared raised an eyebrow and looked at Jesse. "And you are?"

"Zachary Pearson."

"Ah, the owner of the Pearson house. I bet you were surprised to find it was rented."

Jesse looked down at Lissa with a tender smile on his face. "I was definitely surprised. Especially since the rental company didn't say anything about the tenant being so beautiful."

Jared clearly didn't like Jesse's answer if the frown on his face was any indication. "Were you able to find accommodations until the lease runs out?"

Lissa spoke up. "That wasn't necessary. After all, the house belongs to him and there's plenty of room."

"So y'all are staying out there together? Aren't you worried that people might talk?" Jared asked.

Lissa shifted, her coat falling open to expose her stomach. Jared's eyes went wide when he realized she was pregnant. "Are you pregnant?"

## *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa ran her left hand over the small bump, making sure her engagement ring was noticeable. "Yes, I am."

His eyes flicking up to her face, Jared studied her expression. "How far along are you?"

Obviously the man was wondering if the baby was his. There was no way that Jesse was going to let him claim the child and wreak havoc in Lissa's life again. Lissa had been through enough pain. The stress and tension that Jared was creating wasn't good for her or the baby.

"Let's see honey, I moved out there about three months ago now? Is that about right?" Jesse asked, looking down at Lissa.

She smiled up at him, grateful that he stepped in when he did. "That's about right."

"So what, you jumped straight from my bed into his?" Jared asked snidely.

Lissa blushed. "The last time I checked, you made it abundantly clear that you didn't want anything to do with me. I believe the main hint was your tail lights as you drove off and left me at a store twenty miles from home!"

Jared had the grace to look chagrined. "I didn't mean to leave you there. By the time I realized what I had done, you were already gone. Since the shop was closed, I figured your friend must have taken you home."

"Yes, she did. I don't know what I would have done without her. Thankfully, Zach showed up a few days later and took my mind off of the whole thing."

"I bet he did," Jared grumbled with a baleful glare in Jesse's direction.

"I would really appreciate it if you'd stop trying to belittle my fiancé," Jesse growled.

Jared paled a little. "You're getting married?"

Lissa lifted her chin. "Yes, we are. We're getting married and we're having a baby. Anything else you'd like to know?"

## *Magnolia Magick*

"How does your precious ghost feel about all of this?" Jared asked.

"Jesse and Zach got along just fine," Lissa answered. Granted, they *would* get along fine since they were the same person.

"Got along?"

Leave it to Jared to catch that part. "Jesse found a way to cross over. He's found peace and doesn't have to haunt the Pearson house anymore."

Natasha pulled on Jared's arm. "You said we'd go shopping after lunch. I still need to get a throw rug for the living room."

Lissa's short fuse was finally lit. "Do you mean to tell me that you've been criticizing me for being with another man, a man I happen to be engaged to, and you've been shackled up with someone?"

Jared blushed. "Natasha and I dated in high school. We ran into each other a few weeks after you and I broke up. Things just kind of went from there."

Lissa rolled her eyes, grabbed Jesse's hand and walked off. "Let's go baby shopping."

"Baby shopping?" Jesse asked a little bewildered.

"Well, I know we still have a ways to go and won't know for a few more months if it's a boy or girl, but I'd like to go ahead and pick out a bed and some small things. I want to go ahead and start setting up the nursery."

As they walked off talking about the nursery, Jared and Natasha stared after them. After Lissa and Jesse cleared the corner and knew they weren't being watched, Lissa leaned against him for support. The ordeal had taken a lot out of her.

"I have no idea how I just made it through that," she said.

Jesse stopped and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her to him. "Because you're a strong woman, that's how."

## *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa smiled up at him. "You always know just what to say and just what to do in order to make me feel better."

"I aim to please," he murmured before kissing her.

"I think there's a baby store just down the street," Lissa said when she was able to come up for air.

"Then let's go check it out."

They walked past several stores before stopping in front of a window display of baby clothes, a rocking horse, and a cradle. Lissa sighed, looking at the tiny clothes. Stepping up behind her, Jesse wrapped his arms around her, placing his hands on her stomach.

"Before you know it, you'll be able to dress the baby in some of those clothes."

"It's hard to imagine sometimes. There are mornings when I wake up and wonder if I dreamt it all."

"Let's go in and see what they have," Jesse said, guiding her toward the door.

As they browsed the shop, Lissa wanted to buy one of everything. In the end, they selected a cradle for the bedroom, a crib for the nursery, and a white crocheted baby blanket. The cradle and bed would be delivered later that week. The blanket was wrapped in tissue and placed in a pretty paper bag.



When they arrived back at the house, Lissa slowly climbed the stairs. She shouldn't be tired, but she was. Maybe the afternoon had been more taxing than she had thought. She had heard that emotional stress could wear you out pretty quick.

At the top of the stairs, she started to turn toward the office, until she felt a warm hand on her back.

"Honey, why don't you go lay down for a bit? It's been a long afternoon and I'm sure you could use the rest."

## *Magnolia Magick*

"But I need to work."

Guiding her toward the bedroom, Jesse said, "It can wait. Even your editor would agree that your health comes first; especially since you're pregnant. If you don't take care of yourself, the baby isn't getting what he or she needs either."

Lissa sighed. It was obvious she was going to lose this battle. Walking into the bedroom, Lissa kicked off her shoes and crawled across the bed. She curled up in the middle, not bothering with a pillow or covers.

Removing his shoes, Jesse crawled onto the bed behind Lissa. He draped his arm around her waist and pulled her back against him. Resting his chin on top of her head, Jesse closed his eyes. He didn't think his life could possibly be more perfect than it was right then.



After an hour nap, Jesse and Lissa woke up. Lissa went to her office to work on her novel while Jesse checked in with Gemma.

By dinner time, Lissa had completed another two chapters of her book and was ahead of schedule. She emailed what she had completed to her editor. Maybe that would buy her a few days of freedom.

Jesse poked his head around the office door. "Are you ready for dinner?"

Lissa's stomach rumbled in response. With a laugh she said, "Yeah, I guess I am."

"We need to get some shopping done so I thought we might go out for dinner. Or, if you don't feel up to going out, I can go and pick something up."

Lissa smiled at his thoughtfulness. "I think I can manage going out." She looked down at her wrinkled outfit. "But I'll need to change first."

"Take your time. I'll probably change my shirt. It seems a little cooler outside than it was earlier."

## *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa walked down the hall to the bedroom, pausing in the doorway of the nursery, or what would become the nursery once the bed arrived. The walls were a plain cream. They wouldn't be able to paint until they knew if the baby was a boy or girl. She rubbed her belly, wondering what her baby was thinking or feeling right then.

"Liss, everything okay?"

Startled, she looked up to see Jesse towering over her. "I'm fine, just thinking about the baby."

He kissed her cheek. "Come on, if we don't get ready, that baby may come out and demand his dinner in person."

Lissa laughed and followed him to the bedroom. Digging through the closet, she pulled out the knit blue dress she had worn on her date with Jared. She hadn't worn it since and was determined to make new memories in it. Ever since Jared had broken up with her, Lissa hadn't been able to wear the blue dress. It reminded her too much of the lovely time she and Jared had had that day.

The dress had always hung a little loose around her stomach before, but now it hugged her showing the slight bulge. Lissa was slowly discovering that she enjoyed showing off her pregnant stomach. It was a long time away, but she was anxious to hold her baby.

Tossing the dress on the bed, Lissa reached behind her to untie her top. As she started to pull it over her head, she caught a glimpse of Jesse. He had removed his shirt and was looking through one of his drawers to find a sweater.

Her mouth went dry as she looked at his muscular tanned arms and torso. Technically they were engaged now. Surely that gave her the right to look him over. While they had shared the closet and dresser, Jesse had been sleeping in another room. Lissa realized now that he must have been hoping she would say yes this morning. She wondered how long



## *Magnolia Magick*

he had been planning this, when had he decided to ask her to marry him?

Jesse pulled his navy sweater out of the drawer. Slipping it over his head, he saw Lissa out of the corner of his eye. It pleased him that she was enjoying herself, watching him get dressed. He briefly wondered if he would have to leave the room while she changed or if she'd let him help.

Taking a breath, Lissa pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it into the laundry basket. She felt Jesse's eyes on her and forced herself to remain calm. It was ridiculous to feel nervous, it wasn't like he hadn't seen her naked before. Of course, she hadn't been showing then... or conscious for that matter.

Jesse walked toward Lissa. Stopping in front of her, he looked down into her eyes. Slowly, he reached out and placed his hand on her protruding stomach. He slid his hand up over the bump, up between her breasts, around her neck and leaned down to kiss her.

Moaning, Lissa leaned into Jesse, opening her mouth under his. She wanted to taste him, to feel him. She wanted him to replace every memory she had of Jared. Instead of remembering Jared's hands on her body, she wanted to remember Jesse's hands touching her, caressing her, giving her pleasure. When she closed her eyes, it was Jesse's face she saw now, but not having being intimate with him, she still felt Jared's hands on her body.

Breaking the kiss, Jesse brushed her hair back from her face. "You'd better finish getting dressed if you want to eat."

"Jesse..."

He silenced her by putting his finger over her lips. He wanted to be with her more than he'd ever wanted anything, but they had a baby to think of and take care of first.

"If you want to finish this when we get back, we will. If you change your mind during dinner, then we

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won't. But right now, the most important thing is making sure you eat dinner."

"I won't change my mind."

"I'm hoping you won't, but I don't want you to feel obligated to sleep with me. I didn't ask you to marry me for sex. I asked you to marry me because I care about you and I want to be there for you and the baby."

Lissa reached out and took his hand. "I know that, Jesse. And I know that you would never ask me to do something I didn't want to – and you aren't, because I want to be with you."

Jesse hugged her and pressed a kiss on top of her head. "Finish getting ready so we can go eat. I'll be downstairs waiting on you."

Lissa nodded. Turning back to the bed, she changed out of her pants and slipped the dress over her head. While she would have normally worn high heels with the dress, she opted for the flats. She didn't want to take a chance on losing her balance and harming the baby.

As Lissa descended the stairs, she stopped part way down. Jesse was standing at the front window looking out across the lawn. He really was spectacular to look at. She remembered the first time she had seen him, her reaction to him. Now that she had Jared out of her system, she could appreciate Jesse again.

Lissa made her way down the remaining steps. Jesse turned, hearing her approach.

"Let me get your coat," he said, walking to the closet.

He helped Lissa into her coat and then grabbed his own. Picking up the keys off the entry hall table, Jesse opened the door and escorted Lissa outside. After making sure the house was locked up tight, they walked down to the car and went to dinner.

## Chapter Fifteen

Later that night, Lissa was soaking in the tub. Jesse had done some reading and discovered that hot water wasn't good for the baby, so the water wasn't as toasty as she would have liked. When she realized that her skin was starting to prune, she washed and drained the water.

Drying off, Lissa wrapped the towel around her body. She moisturized her skin and brushed her teeth. Undoing the clip in her hair, she let it cascade down her back.

She had left her nightgown in the bedroom. Opening the door, she stepped into the chilly room. Lissa dropped her towel into the laundry basket and slipped the nightgown over her head. It was a billowy blue cotton nightgown that fell all the way to her ankles. She didn't see anything sexy about it, but it would allow room for her growing stomach over the next several months.

As Lissa was reaching into her dresser drawer for a pair of panties, the bedroom door opened. Jesse walked in bare-chested and bare foot. When he saw Lissa, he stopped.

"I'm sorry, I should have knocked." The lamp on the bedside table illuminated her, showing her body through the thin material of the nightgown. Jesse swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the knot that had suddenly formed in his throat.

Lissa blushed. "It's okay."

Jesse went over to the dresser and pulled out some flannel pajama pants. Turning back to the door, he paused. Common sense told him to run back to his room and stay there, but there was a little imp on his shoulder telling him to stay and kiss her senseless.

"Jesse, you don't have to leave," Lissa said. She had decided that if they were going to get married she was going to throw herself into the relationship whole-heartedly.

## *Magnolia Magick*

Jesse turned to face her. "I don't want to rush you into anything Lissa. We have all the time in the world."

Lissa walked over to him, stopping close enough that he could feel her breath on his chest. "You're not rushing me. I want you to stay. This shouldn't just be my room, it should be our room."

Tipping her head back with his fingertips, Jesse leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. Lissa put her hands on his chest and pushed up on her tiptoes to return the kiss. Jesse's lips were warm and firm against hers. His arms went around her, pulling her closer.

Breaking the kiss, Jesse smiled down at her. "If you want me to stay, I'll stay."

Lissa returned his smile. "I want you to."

"Why don't you get in bed? I'll be back in a minute."

Jesse went into the bathroom to get ready for bed. While he was out of the room, Lissa put on a pair of panties and climbed into the bed. Drawing the covers up to her chest, she sighed and stretched. Reaching over to the bedside table, she turned off the lamp.

Coming out the bathroom, Jesse put his clothes in the laundry basket and walked around to his side of the bed. Sliding under the covers, he pulled Lissa close to him.

Lissa rolled towards him, lifting her face to kiss him. Jesse kissed her, but when she opened her mouth under his, he pulled back. "It's late Lissa and I know you're tired. Why don't I just hold you for tonight?"

"You don't want me?"

Jesse took her hand and slid it down to the front of his pajama pants. The bulge under her hand was hard to miss. "I want you more than you could ever know. I just don't think that tonight is the right time."

Lissa didn't understand. If he wanted her, why was he telling her no? In her books, it was always the

### *Magnolia Magick*

woman who played hard to get. Having the man play hard to get just wasn't something she could comprehend.

Her brow furrowed and she looked down at the blankets. Lissa knew she should just lie down and try to get some sleep, but she didn't want to. What she wanted was for Jesse to make love to her; to show her that everything would be fine; to make her forget.

Jesse sighed. He knew that look by now. That was Lissa's 'I know what I want and I won't stop until I have it' look. Why couldn't the blasted woman just let him attempt to be a gentleman? Did he want to be a gentleman right then? Hell no! What he wanted was to make love to the beautiful woman he was sharing a bed with; the woman he was going to marry and spend the rest of his life with; the woman that he loved.

Startled, Jesse realized that his thoughts were true, he really did love Lissa. If he were honest with himself, he'd just admit that he had loved the woman the moment she'd walked through his door. The day he had seen the fire flashing in Lissa's eyes when she'd realized someone else was in the house; the day she had fainted at his feet when she realized he was a ghost. Never had he met a woman like her and he knew there wasn't another like her in the whole world, or in any time period for that matter. If Jesse had remained a ghost for another hundred years, he would have never met another woman like Lissa. She had an inner strength that would rival that of any warrior and a beauty that would steal your breath away.

Pushing up on his elbow, Jesse pulled Lissa closer and kissed her. When he pulled back, he studied her face a moment. "You aren't going to let go of this, are you?"

Lissa shook her head. "Probably not."

"Why is it so important to you for this to happen tonight?"

### *Magnolia Magick*

"I want you to make love to me, Jesse. I want us to be closer, to be a real couple."

"I want that too, but I also want you well rested. If you don't get enough sleep, it isn't good for the baby."

Lissa looked at him with pleading eyes. "Please, Jesse. I need you."

Jesse couldn't take anymore. Rolling her under him, but careful of her protruding stomach, Jesse kissed her. Caressing her arm, his fingers glided from her shoulder to her hand and back again. He twined his fingers in her long hair.

Lissa wrapped her arms around him, trying to pull him closer. She whimpered, thrusting her hips up to meet his. She desperately wanted to feel Jesse inside of her.

"Easy honey," he murmured against her lips.

"I don't want to wait Jesse. I know it's our first time together, but I want you now."

Jesse couldn't deny her anything. He had wanted their first time to be more romantic, and he had certainly planned on it lasting longer, but if this was what Lissa wanted and needed, then that is exactly what he would give her. All he truly wanted was for her to be happy and to feel loved.

Reaching under Lissa's nightgown, he slid her panties down her legs. He quickly kicked off his own pajama pants and settled over her again.

"Are you sure you want this Lissa?" While he wanted her more than anything, if she changed her mind he would back off.

"I'm sure," she said, pulling her nightgown over her head and tossing it to the floor.

Jesse admired her beauty, from her full breasts to her slightly rounded stomach. "You are so beautiful," he whispered.

Lissa pulled him down for a kiss while wrapping her legs around his waist. Jesse could feel the tip of his erection rubbing against her wet heat. He hadn't

## *Magnolia Magick*

been with a woman in over a hundred years. Hopefully he wasn't about to embarrass himself.

Lifting her hips, Lissa felt Jesse slide inside of her. As he gently thrust his hips forward, she felt him fill her completely. Never had anyone filled her as deeply as Jesse did.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" Jesse asked.

Lissa shook her head. "You feel wonderful."

Jesse grinned and began slowly thrusting in and out of her. She felt so tight and so hot. He was trying to be careful with her, but what he really wanted to do was take her hard and fast. Bending down, he gently took her nipple in his mouth. Lissa gasped and arched against him.

Grabbing at his shoulders, Lissa dug her nails in. Thrusting her hips up hard, she felt him slide deeper. Lissa groaned and thrust her hips again. As Jesse slid deeper and faster, Lissa climaxed.

Feeling her muscles clench down on him, Jesse couldn't hold back any longer. With long, fast thrusts, he shouted his release, burying himself as far as he could inside of her. Jesse tried to pull out, but Lissa tightened her legs around him, holding him in place. He looked at her questioningly.

"I don't want you to leave me yet; I like feeling us joined together."

Jesse grinned, wrapped his arms around her, and rolled them to their sides. He gently kissed her and pulled her close. "You are one amazing woman."

"You're pretty wonderful yourself," she murmured, nuzzling his chest.

Jesse tipped her head back and kissed her again, his tongue sliding between her lips. Lissa kissed him back, never wanting to forget this night. As they broke their kiss, Lissa murmured against his lips, "I love you."

Jesse pulled back, stunned. "What?"

Embarrassed Lissa ducked her head. Why had she done that? She hadn't planned on saying it that was

## *Magnolia Magick*

for sure. For that matter, she hadn't realized that she *did* love him until she'd said it. What if he didn't feel the same about her? What if he *never* came to love her?

Gently Jesse tipped her face so he could see her eyes. "What did you say, honey?"

"I... I said I love you," she whispered, afraid he would reject her.

Jesse gave her a slow smile. "I'm happy to hear you say that. I love you, too."

Now it was Lissa's turn to be stunned, surprise showing in her beautiful eyes. "You do?"

"Yes I do," he murmured before kissing her again.

Lissa wiggled closer to him. She could feel Jesse growing hard again and it excited her even more. She could feel herself getting wet and knew he did too. Pressing her hips closer to his, she rubbed herself against him. She was still sensitive enough, that she gasped from the contact.

"Again?" Jesse was surprised she was ready again so soon. He knew she had to be tired.

"Yes, I want you again."

Jesse wrapped his leg around her and pulled her toward him, angling her hips so he could thrust upward, managing to not only slide deeper inside of her but to rub her clit as well. Lissa whimpered and tried to wiggle closer. Jesse chuckled in her ear, kissing her ear and her neck.

Sliding out of Lissa and then thrusting back in, he ground himself against her. He could feel her getting hotter and wetter by the minute and knew that she was close to her release. He briefly wondered how many she could have in one night.

Lissa tried to thrust against Jesse, but the angle she was in wasn't helping her. She felt his hands on her hip, holding her still as he slid in and out. Jesse drew almost all the way out of her and thrust into her hard and fast. Lissa gasped and arched against him, her climax breaking over her in waves. Jesse growled



### *Magnolia Magick*

against her throat and thrust faster and harder. Lissa climaxed again and again. When she thought she couldn't take anymore, she felt the heat of Jesse's seed spread through her as he found his release.

Lissa kissed him and wrapped her leg around his waist, holding him in place. She loved feeling him inside of her.

"Honey, as much as I love being inside of you, I don't think you're going to get any sleep that way."

Lissa looked into his eyes. "I don't care if I get any sleep."

"Be that as it may, the baby needs for you to get some sleep. I promise this won't be the last time I make love to you."

Lissa smiled and kissed him once more. Loosening her grip around his waist, she felt Jesse slide from her body.

"Do you want to rinse off in the shower?" he asked.

Lissa shook her head. "No. I like feeling your sweat mingled with mine; feeling the after affects of our lovemaking on the insides of my thighs."

Jesse groaned and kissed her again. "You should put on your nightgown. Otherwise I'll never be able to keep my hands to myself"

"I don't recall asking you to."

Jesse just shook his head at her and grabbed his pajama pants. Slipping them on, he helped her with her nightgown. Once they were dressed again, he pulled Lissa into his arms and lay back on the bed. The woman was going to be the death of him. He was glad that he had pleased her.

"Get some sleep, honey. The morning will be here before you know it."

"I know," she murmured. "But it doesn't mean I have to like it."

Jesse kissed the top of her head and sighed. She really was one hell of a woman, and she was all his. It didn't take long for Lissa's breathing to even out.

*Magnolia Magick*

Once Jesse knew she was asleep, he allowed himself to relax.

While Jesse would have preferred to wait a little longer before being intimate with Lissa, he was glad that she wanted to be with him. After their encounter with Jared, he had wondered if she would change her mind about marrying him. If anything, it seemed to have given her a push toward making the relationship the real deal.

Lissa telling him she loved him had been the biggest surprise. He had been stunned by her declaration and yet thrilled at the same time. Never had he thought that Lissa would come to love him. The only thing that could possibly make life better would be having a baby with her – *his* baby. He was going to love the child she carried now as if it were his own, but he hoped some day they would have a child that truly belonged to both of them. Tightening his arms around his future wife, Jesse drifted to sleep.

## Chapter Sixteen

As the months passed, Lissa's stomach grew larger and larger. Now that she was seven months along, she was large enough that she had trouble with the stairs, trouble getting out of the tub, trouble getting out of the bed. Her lower back ached all the time and she was tired more and more often. She still had eleven weeks left before the baby was due, but there were times when she wasn't sure if she'd make it. Jesse had gone with her to the doctor the day the ultrasound had been done. They were going to have a baby girl.

It had taken a few weeks of arguing, but Lissa and Jesse had finally decided on a name – Isabel Angelique. Lissa had added the middle name when Jesse kept asking her how his little angel was doing. Never had she seen a man so excited about a baby!

Instead of going with the standard pink for a girl, they had painted the nursery a pretty shade of lavender. Well, Jesse had painted it while Lissa had gone into town. He was forever reading baby books and had informed her that the paint fumes would be harmful to the baby. She had been banned from the house for the entire day. On the plus side, she had bought a ton of cute baby clothes and bedding.

Lissa had managed to finish her book. Her editor had loved it. It was out of Lissa's hands now. The publisher would take care of everything else, including setting up book signings. Of course, Lissa had told them about the baby, about Jesse, and that she would be moving to Maple Falls permanently. They had taken the news pretty well and were happy for her. Her book signings would be local until the baby was born. Then she'd be allowed a four month break before she had to do any travelling. Jesse had even worked it out with Gemma so that he and Isabel would be able to go with her.

### *Magnolia Magick*

Ever since Gemma's other store had opened, Jesse had worked at the local store more and more. Last month, Gemma had made him a partner. He now received seventy percent of the profits from his store, which gave them a nice income. Lissa had already received her commission check for her second novel even though it wouldn't be released for another month. Since her first book had done so well, her publisher had sent her a check for twenty-five thousand dollars for the sequel. At this rate, Lissa could write two books a year and do very well financially.

Looking at the clock, Lissa saw it was noon. Jesse would be home for lunch soon. Heading downstairs, Lissa dug through the kitchen cabinets and pantry. She had baked a glazed ham the night before and decided to use the meat to make sandwiches. She pulled some potato chips out of the pantry to go on the side. Just as she was putting the plates and drinks on the table, she heard the front door open.

Jesse went straight to the kitchen. He paused in the doorway and watched Lissa. She had wanted to postpone the wedding until Isabel arrived. Jesse had finally managed to convince her to go to the Justice of the Peace to get married so that Isabel would have the last name of Pearson, along with her mother. Jesse promised her they would have a real wedding once she had lost her baby weight. While he thought she was beautiful when she was pregnant, Lissa always complained about looking fat.

Lissa turned and saw Jesse standing in the doorway, watching her. "Are you hungry?"

"Always," he said with a grin.

Lissa shook her head. "I meant for food!"

Jesse laughed. "I knew what you meant, and yes I'm hungry."

"Come sit down. I made sandwiches from the ham I baked last night."

## *Magnolia Magick*

Jesse walked over to Lissa and kissed her on the cheek. "How are you feeling today?"

"I'm fine. A little tired, but other than that I'm fine."

Jesse rubbed her back. "Just don't over-do it."

Lissa turned and put her arms around him. "I won't. I promise that I'm fine and so is Isabel."

Jesse gave her a quick hug before sitting down at the table. They ate lunch and talked a bit. After twenty minutes, Jesse stood.

"I have to get back to the store. I should be home by six o'clock tonight. Why don't we go out for dinner?"

Lissa cocked her head. While they usually ate out once a week, Jesse normally didn't ask in the middle of the week. He was normally tired when he came home and preferred to spend time with her around the house. What was her husband up to now?

"I guess that would be fine. How fancy of a restaurant are we going to?"

"A customer told me about a little French café outside of Maple Falls. I've heard it can be rather dressy at night. Your teal and black dress would be perfect."

Lissa's stomach knotted briefly. She knew the place he was speaking of... Jared had taken her there. She hadn't been back since. Even though she and Jesse were married and were quite happy, it still hurt to think of Jared and his rejection.

Forcing a smile she nodded. "Okay, I'll be ready when you get home."

Jesse flashed Lissa a smile before leaving. He had noticed the tension when the restaurant had been mentioned. Knowing his sweet wife, it meant Jared had taken her there at some point. He had tried to erase the memories of her time with Jared, but he hadn't been completely successful. It was only to be expected since she was carrying the man's child. Hopefully Isabel would look like her mother and

## *Magnolia Magick*

never give Jared a reason to question the child's paternity.

After Jesse left, Lissa cleaned up the kitchen and went upstairs. She checked her email and decided to take a nap. Hopefully it would refresh her before dinner. Curling up in the middle of the bed, Lissa wrapped her arms around herself.

It bothered her that she still had trouble thinking about Jared. Thinking about him in general didn't bother her; it was only when she went some place they had gone to on a date. It always brought back memories that were best left forgotten. He had changed overnight, not even over night, it had been in a matter of minutes that he had gone from caring about her to dumping her. She still didn't understand it.

Absently she rubbed her belly. There were times she felt guilty for lying to Jared about Isabel. At the same time, she was grateful that Jesse wanted to claim her as his own. Lissa didn't doubt that Jared would do everything in his power to take the baby from her. Thanks to the spells she had done since arriving in Maple Falls, he would do his best to show she was unfit to be a mother. He could never find out that Isabel was his.

Lissa pushed all thoughts of Jared from her mind. She focused on Jesse. He had been so good to her. Even her first day here, he had been a perfect gentleman. He always worried that she wasn't getting enough sleep, enough to eat, enough vitamins. There were times it was a little smothering, but she knew that he only worried because he cared so much about her and Isabel.

Jesse loved her. He didn't care that she did spells on occasion or that her two good friends were witches. When she broke down into hormonal crying fits, he simply held her and let her cry. When she was upset over something, he would reassure her that everything would be fine. He worked hard to make a

## *Magnolia Magick*

living for them. It hadn't been easy for him to re-enter the world, but he had done so without complaint. Jesse really was a terrific guy. Lissa wasn't sure she deserved him.

Once her mind stopped racing, she was finally able to go to sleep.



Jesse was a little late arriving home from work. He was surprised that Lissa hadn't called to check on him. The downstairs was dark. If he had to guess, he'd say his wife was in her office working on a book or curled up in the overstuffed chair reading. He put his things away in the entry closet before climbing the stairs to the second floor. He looked down the hall toward the office, but the lights were off.

With a frown, Jesse walked toward the bedroom. The house was quiet... too quiet. He hoped that Lissa was okay. Opening the bedroom door, he spotted Lissa immediately, curled into a ball in the middle of their bed. Her even breathing told him she was asleep.

Gently easing onto the bed, Jesse curled around his wife. She must have been exhausted to have slept for so long. He constantly worried that Lissa was over-doing it. She was always on the go or doing things around the house. At least her book was finished so she didn't have to add writing to her list of things to accomplish before Isabel arrived.

Jesse lightly shook Lissa's shoulder and whispered in her ear, "Liss, honey, it's time to get up."

Lissa mumbled in her sleep, but didn't open her eyes. Jesse brushed the hair out of her eyes and looked at her peaceful face. While she was always beautiful, she looked truly angelic when she slept.

"Lissa, it's time to get up," he said in a louder voice.

## *Magnolia Magick*

Lissa slowly blinked herself awake. Rolling onto her back, she saw that Jesse was home. Frantically sitting up, she looked at the clock beside the bed. Groaning, she dropped her head into her hands.

"I'm sorry Jesse. I didn't mean to sleep so long."

"It's okay honey. I'm glad you were able to rest."

Lissa shook her head. "No it isn't. I know you're hungry. Just give me a few minutes and I'll be ready to go."

Taking her hand in his, Jesse brushed a kiss across her knuckles. "It really is okay Lissa. You don't have to rush to get ready. So I won't smell like incense, I'll probably change my shirt before we go. You take your time and we'll leave when you're ready."

Lissa flashed him a grateful smile and scurried off the bed. Pulling her dress out of the closet, she draped it across the foot of the bed before rushing into the bathroom to do her hair and make-up. She wanted to look her best for Jesse.

Once her make-up was finished and her hair was curled, Lissa slipped on her dress. It was a pretty teal long-sleeved maternity dress with a black satin trim around the neck and a matching black satin sash that fell just under her bust. Lissa put on her black silky thigh highs and slipped on her black flats.

Wandering over to her dresser, she dug through her small jewelry box. Lissa found her diamond stud earrings. She didn't have a necklace that she particularly liked so she decided to go without. Looking in the mirror one last time, she decided she was ready to go.

Lissa went in search of Jesse. Slowly making her way down the stairs, she spotted him in the front entry. He had changed into a dark gray button down and had put on a tie and black jacket with matching slacks. Lissa paused half way down the stairs; looking at Jesse would never grow old.

Hearing her soft tread on the stairs, Jesse turned. His breath caught in his throat. Lissa looked stunning



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in her teal and black dress. He quickly walked to her side and helped her down the stairs.

"You look wonderful," he told her.

Lissa blushed. "Thank you, so do you."

Jesse smiled and placed her hand in the crook of his arm. He escorted her out on the porch and Lissa gasped. Sitting in the driveway, next to her older gray Honda, was a newer gold one. Jesse helped her down the steps to the driveway and she waddled over to the new car.

"Jesse, it's beautiful."

He grinned, happy to have pleased her. "With Isabel joining us soon, I thought we should have two vehicles."

Lissa peered into the passenger window. It had beige leather interior with a faux wood-grain dash and door panels. There was a sunroof as well.

"Before you get too excited, it isn't brand new. It's about two years old, but the owner didn't drive it often so it only has five-thousand miles on it."

"It's perfect," she murmured, still in awe that he had purchased a car.

"I know you don't feel up to driving right now, but once Isabel gets here and you begin driving more often it's going to be yours."

"What?" She couldn't have heard him correctly.

"I bought it for you Liss. I'll take the gray one. You'll need the newer car since Isabel will be with you most of the time."

Lissa threw her arms around Jesse and kissed him. "No one has ever bought me a car before. I love it!"

Jesse smiled. Opening the passenger door, he helped her into the car. Walking around the car, he slid into the driver's seat and started the engine. They made it to town in record time.

Jesse parked outside of the little restaurant. Reaching over, he helped Lissa with her seatbelt. Leaning across the car, he caressed her cheek and kissed her.

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Lissa kissed Jesse back, her senses drowning. She buried her fingers in his hair, trying to pull him closer. She felt him grin against her mouth before he pulled back.

Looking into her eyes, Jesse's heart felt as if it would burst. He loved this woman so much, *his* woman. It still astounded him that he was not only alive, but married to someone so wonderful and caring.

"Let's go eat so we can go back home and finish what we've started."

Lissa smiled. "I'd like that."

Jesse exited the car and walked around to Lissa's side. Opening her door, he helped her out of the car. Once the vehicle was locked, Jesse escorted Lissa into the restaurant.

The interior was dark and romantic with lit candles everywhere. Jesse briefly spoke to the hostess and they were seated in a cozy corner toward the back of the restaurant. Once again, Lissa was staring at a menu she couldn't read. She glanced at her husband.

"I don't suppose you know how to read French do you?"

He grinned at her. "Actually, I do. My parents made me learn French and Latin."

Lissa was impressed. "Well, you're definitely ahead of me. I can't speak any foreign languages much less read them. Would you mind ordering for me?"

"Of course I wouldn't mind. Just tell me what type of food you're in the mood for so I'll have some idea of what to order."

"Hmm, either chicken or shrimp I think; maybe a salad on the side."

When the waitress came to take their order, Jesse ordered both of their meals. When asked if they would like some wine, Jesse gave a pointed look to

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Lissa's very pregnant stomach and ordered tea for both of them. The waitress left with their order.

"You could have had some wine. I wouldn't have minded," Lissa told him.

"I'm not going to have any when you can't, it wouldn't be fair. Besides, I'm driving."

Lissa smiled and reached across the table for his hand. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"Maybe once or twice, but it never gets old, feel free to tell me as often as you'd like."

Lissa laughed. "You're incorrigible."

"Probably, but since you love me anyway, I don't think it matters much."

For the rest of the evening they made light conversation and enjoyed their meal. It was a nice romantic night and Lissa enjoyed herself immensely. Neither she nor Jesse realized they were being watched from across the room.

Jared sat in the opposite corner at a table by himself. He had asked his girlfriend to move out last week. When he woke up night after night from dreams of Lissa, he realized that it wasn't going to work with Natasha.

He stared at the couple across the room. How could Lissa be that happy without him? He thought about her constantly. Life without her was making him miserable. He'd tried for a while to put their relationship behind him, but he wasn't fooling anyone, especially not himself. If only he could get Lissa alone for a few minutes, he knew that he could talk to her and make her understand. He hadn't *wanted* to end their relationship, but he couldn't very well have dated someone who cast spells. Surely if he had talked to her a bit more about it, they could have come to an understanding.

Why did she have to go and jump in bed with the next guy that came along? Jared had thought that Lissa loved him as much as he had loved her. Watching her with her fiancé was like a kick in the

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gut. Her smiles and laughter should be for *him*, her baby should be *his*... instead she was with another man. Jared inwardly seethed. There had to be a way to set things right. He just needed to come up with a plan.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

*Two months later*

Lissa was putting away the last of the baby clothes she had bought and washed. Everything was ready for Isabel, even though she wasn't due for another three weeks. Knowing that her mother had problems breast-feeding, Lissa decided to be prepared and had purchased some bottles and formula. She had purchased a small first-aid kit, special laundry detergent made for infants, diapers in every size imaginable, and hundreds of other items.

Straightening, Lissa rubbed her aching lower back. Wincing, she felt a dull pain across her belly. Obviously she had done way too much today.

Lissa made her way to the bedroom and stretched out on the bed. She curled up on her side and took deep calming breaths. Closing her eyes, she thought she might take a nap. She felt another spasm across her belly. Surely she couldn't be in labor! It was too soon!

Downstairs the front door opened and closed. She heard Jesse calling out her name. Lissa opened her mouth to shout back to him, but she bit her lip and groaned as another pain overtook her.

Jesse noticed all of the lights were off downstairs and figured Lissa must be in the office or the nursery. Hurrying up the stairs, he glanced toward the office. The lights were off. He walked down the hall to Isabel's room. The light was on, but Lissa was nowhere to be seen. As he turned toward the bedroom, he heard Lissa whimper.

Jesse rushed into the bedroom. Seeing Lissa on the bed, he hurried to her side.

"What's wrong Liss?"

"I think its Isabel. She's trying to come early."

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Jesse swallowed down his panic. Lissa needed him to remain calm right now. He smoothed the hair back from her face.

"How far apart are the contractions?"

"I don't know, maybe five minutes?"

Jesse nodded. "I'm going to get your bag and put it in the car. Then I'm going to take you downstairs and get you to the hospital."

Lissa looked at him, worried. "It's too early, Jesse. She wasn't supposed to be here for another three weeks."

"Everything will be fine honey. I'll be right back and we'll get you to the hospital. They'll know what to do."

Jesse grabbed Lissa's bag from her closet and carried it down to the car. Starting the engine, he ran back into the house to get Lissa. Taking the stairs two at a time, he rushed back down the hall to the bedroom.

"Liss honey, I'm going to carry you down to the car."

"I'm too heavy," she protested.

Jesse scooped her up into his arms. Brushing a kiss against her temple, he replied, "You're not too heavy. Just hang on to me and I'll get you to the car."

Jesse carefully carried Lissa to the car. Getting her buckled, he ran back up to the house to make sure the door was locked. Running back to the car, he jumped in and sped down the driveway. Turning on his flashers, he drove down the highway at twenty miles over the speed limit.

When they arrived at the Maple Falls Hospital, Jesse found a parking space by the door.

"Wait right here. I'm going to run inside and get an orderly with a wheel chair for you."

Lissa nodded and concentrated on breathing. Her contractions were now coming three minutes apart. It wouldn't be long before Isabel made her appearance. Glancing out the car window, Lissa

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spotted Jesse and a man in blue scrubs hurrying toward her, pushing a wheel chair.

The men helped her out of the car. Once she was seated in the uncomfortable chair, she was whisked down one hall after another until she arrived at the maternity ward. When they were placed in a room, the nurses allowed Jesse to stay with her. He helped her into her gown and helped her into the bed.

"Is there anything I can do for you honey?"

Lissa shook her head. As her contractions came closer and closer together, they also became stronger and stronger. When they were down to one minute apart, Lissa's water broke. The nurses ran to get the doctor; it wouldn't be much longer before she could hold her daughter.



Several hours later, Lissa was exhausted. Sweat plastered her hair to her face. After two hours of pushing, little Isabel had entered the world. She had curly blonde hair and puffy little cheeks. Isabel was the most beautiful thing that Lissa and Jesse had ever seen. They were so proud of their baby girl!

While Isabel was getting cleaned up, a nurse helped Lissa into a clean gown and gave her fresh sheets. Having missed lunch, Lissa was starving.

"Would it be possible to get something to eat?" she asked the nurse.

The older woman smiled at her. "Of course dear; I'll bring a menu to you in just a minute."

Lissa hoped she could keep her eyes open long enough to eat and visit with her daughter. Every breath seemed to drain more and more of her energy.

"You did great, Lissa," Jesse said, leaning down to kiss her gently on the lips.

She gave him a wan smile. "I knew it wouldn't be a ball of fun, but it was a lot more work than I had anticipated. I'm just glad she arrived safe and sound."

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The nurse bustled back into the room, a menu in her hand. "Why don't you choose something to eat? I'll place your order and bring your little girl down to you. Or would you prefer to keep her in the nursery tonight so you can get some sleep?"

Jesse knew that Lissa would want Isabel nearby, but he was worried about her. She looked pale and had dark smudges under her eyes. "I know you probably want her down here, but I think it might be better if you let her sleep in the nursery tonight."

Lissa was torn. She wanted desperately to hold her little girl and keep her by her side, but she was also exhausted. "I guess it won't hurt for her to sleep in the nursery for one night."

Marking her choices on the menu, Lissa handed it back to the nurse.

Thirty minutes later, her meal arrived. The smell of food made Lissa's stomach growl. Jesse laughed and helped pull the tray closer to her.

"While you're eating up here, I think I'll slip down to the cafeteria and grab a quick bite."

Lissa nodded. "I may be asleep when you get back."

"It's okay; you've earned a good night's rest. I'll be back as soon as I can."



An hour later, Jesse settled himself into the recliner in Lissa's room. He had checked on Isabel on his way down to the cafeteria and again on his way back to the room. His daughter was sleeping peacefully, as was his wife. Jesse watched Lissa sleep; her breathing deep and even. Today he had witnessed a miracle; his brave strong wife had given him a perfect tiny daughter.

With a smile on his face, he eased the recliner back and closed his eyes. A few moments later, Jesse was asleep. It had been an emotionally stressful day. He



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was only happy that Gemma had called him at the store and urged him to hurry home. If she hadn't made that call, he wouldn't have been there when Lissa went into labor.

As the couple slept peacefully in the hospital room, their daughter was giving the nurses down the hall a fit. Nothing they did seemed to satisfy her. Holding her, feeding her, changing her... regardless of what they tried, little Isabel cried and cried. The nurses began taking turns checking on the little baby's parents, in hopes the couple would wake up and want to see their new daughter. Little Isabel was as fierce as she was beautiful; she was going to be a handful to be sure.

An hour later, Jesse stretched and slowly came awake. Glancing at the bed, he saw that Lissa still slept. He pulled the blankets up and smoothed a strand of hair back behind her ear. Smiling, he decided to check on his daughter.

When Jesse stepped into the hall, he heard a baby wailing down the hall and saw a frantic looking nurse hurrying his way. Why did he get the feeling that horrible sound was coming from his baby girl? Sighing, he began walking toward the nurse.

"Mr. Pearson am I glad to see you! Little Isabel has been terribly unhappy ever since you and your wife went to sleep."

Jesse felt his lips twitch as he fought back a grin. "Well, let's see if she'll be satisfied with Daddy for a while."

Following the nurse down the hall to the nursery, Jesse looked forward to holding his baby. When they entered the nursery, Jesse spotted Isabel. She was surrounded by three nurses who were all trying to calm her down.

"Let me try," he said, reaching for Isabel.

The moment he lifted her into his arms, Isabel quieted. She opened her blue eyes and stared up at her daddy. Taking a shuddering breath, she closed

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her eyes and went to sleep. All was right in her world now; her daddy was here to watch over her.

Jesse smiled down at the little bundle in his arms. She smelled of baby powder and her skin was as soft as satin. Rocking her in his arms, he hummed to her. The nurses smiled at him in relief and went about their duties.

Settling into a rocking chair, Jesse rocked Isabel, watching her sleep. He felt completely at peace.

## *Magnolia Magick*

### **Chapter Eighteen**

It had only been a few weeks since Lissa and Jesse had left the hospital with little Isabel in tow. Thankfully their delightful daughter slept at least six hours at night. Otherwise her parents would be running ragged already.

Needing some time alone, Jesse had arranged for Gemma to watch the baby in order for him to take Lissa out to dinner and a movie. He figured it would be good for Isabel to learn to be around other people and he knew that Lissa could use the break.

Lissa had already managed to drop all of her baby weight. She slipped into her favorite jeans and a black short sleeve shirt. Brushing out her hair, she put on her make-up. Jesse was due home any minute and she wanted to be ready.

The phone rang and Lissa rushed to answer it.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi honey. Listen, would you mind meeting me in Maple Falls? I thought we'd eat at the café across from the bank before going to the movie."

Lissa's brow furrowed; it wasn't like Jesse to be late. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine sweetheart. I just had some last minute customers that need assistance. Once I'm finished, I'll meet you at the café."

"Okay. I think I'll stop by the bookstore first if you think I'll have time."

"I'll probably be there in an hour so you should have plenty of time if you leave soon."

Lissa smiled. "I'll see you there. I love you."

"I love you too."

Lissa hung up the phone and grabbed her purse. Slipping her feet into a pair of black high-heeled sandals, she picked up her car keys and made her way downstairs. Making sure that everything was turned off, Lissa left the house and climbed into her car.

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Thirty minutes later she pulled into a parking space between the bookstore and the café. Locking the car, Lissa walked down the sidewalk to the bookstore. She hadn't had time to read lately and wanted to see what new books were out. As she perused the romance section, she heard a voice behind her.

"Hello Lissa."

Turning, her eyes widened when she saw Jared. "Hi Jared, I'm surprised to see you."

His eyes roamed over her from head to toe. "You look great Lissa."

She blushed. "Thank you."

Glancing around, Jared realized they were drawing the attention of the other bookstore patrons. "I'd like to talk a minute, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Oh, um, well... I guess that would be okay."

Jared gently grasped her elbow and guided her toward the back of the store. There was a dimly lit hallway the employees used to get to and from the storage area. Jared escorted her into the hallway.

Lissa felt a little nervous over their secluded spot. Then she felt ridiculous, this was Jared for heaven sake! "What did you want to talk about?"

Jared ran his hand through his hair and sighed. "I wanted to apologize. My behavior that day was horrible. I've had trouble sleeping; I keep thinking about how I just left you there. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Lissa softened toward him. "It's okay Jared. It all worked out for the best. You ended up with Natasha and I got Zach."

Jared forced a laugh. "Yes, well, I don't actually have Natasha. I asked her to leave a few months ago."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

He gave her a tortured look. "She wasn't you."

Uh-oh; things were taking a turn for the worst. "Jared, I'm sorry that things ended the way they did, but I have a daughter now and a wonderful husband."

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"Husband? You mean you already married him?" Jared realized he was practically shouting, but he was outraged. Here he had planned on convincing her to return to him and she was calmly telling him she was married!

Lissa took a step backward. Unfortunately, Jared had placed himself between her and the exit and she backed into a wall. "Yes, we went to the Justice of the Peace before Isabel was born. It was important to both of us that we be married when our daughter arrived."

Jared growled and stalked toward her, placing a hand on either side of her, pinning her to the wall. "And when precisely did you plan on telling me?"

"I... I don't know. I guess I didn't think about it."

Jared pressed his body close to hers. "You belong to me! *I'm* the one you should have married!"

"Jared, I..." Lissa didn't have a chance to finish her sentence. Jared bent his head and claimed her lips in a rough kiss.

Lissa pushed against him and tried to wiggle out of his embrace, but she couldn't budge. Beating her fists against his chest, she started to panic.

"What in the hell is going on?" Jesse bellowed, finding his wife in the arms of her ex-boyfriend.

Jared slowly lifted his head and gave Jesse a dark look. "What does it look like Pearson? I was just renewing my acquaintance with Lissa."

Lissa fought back a sob. She still struggled against Jared, but it was no use. His body was pressed tightly against hers; she had no means of escape.

Jesse felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. He had believed Lissa every time she had professed her love for him. Had it all been a lie? Had she secretly waited for Jared to come around?

Lissa waited; sure the Jesse would rescue her at any moment. When he stood there in silence, she began to worry.

## *Magnolia Magick*

Jesse cleared his throat. "Lissa, is this what you want?"

Silent tears fell down Lissa's cheeks. How could he ask her that? How could he think for one minute that she wanted anyone other than him?

"Lissa?" Jesse thought he was going to stop breathing.

Finding her voice, she said, "No, this isn't what I want. He tricked me into coming back here."

Jared laughed. "Like you needed to be tricked. You still want me and you know it."

Lissa sniffled. "Jared, please let me go. You made your choice when you drove away that day. You set me free and allowed me to find love. I'm sorry if you have regrets about what happened because I don't. I love my husband and my daughter."

Before Jared could respond, Jesse pulled him away from Lissa. Slamming him into a wall, Jesse got right in his face. "Don't *ever* touch my wife again. Is that clear?"

Jared nodded, astonished that Lissa had rejected him.

Jesse gathered Lissa in his arms and held her close. "Are you okay honey?"

Lissa cried against Jesse's shirt and nodded her head. "I'll be fine."

Jesse picked her up and carried her out of the bookstore. Setting her on her feet on the sidewalk, he brushed the tears from her cheeks. "Do you still want to go to dinner? Or would you prefer to go home?"

With tears still in her eyes, Lissa looked up at her husband. "Did you really think that I wanted him to kiss me? Did you think I could toss you aside so easily?"

Jesse sighed. He had hurt her, but he hadn't meant to. "I'm sorry Lissa. When I saw him kissing you, I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't feel anything but shock. I didn't doubt you, I doubted *me*. Can you ever forgive me?"

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Lissa caressed his cheek. "As long as you make it up to me later."

Jesse grinned before kissing her. "I'll make it up to you all night long honey."

## *Magnolia Magick*

### **Epilogue**

*A year later*

Pandemonium ensued at the Pearson house. There were balloons strewn about the grounds and lower level of the home. There were people everywhere. It was Isabel's first birthday and practically the whole town of Maple Falls had shown up for her party.

Lissa and Jesse had set up a huge buffet. The cake was pink and white and could easily feed several hundred people. A small table had been set up in the garden where presents were being piled high.

Walking up behind his wife, Jesse wrapped his arms around her. Together they watched Isabel romp through the yard with her birthday present from her parents – a white German Shepherd puppy, which Isabel had promptly named Ghost. Around the couple's feet, a black cat twined.

Lissa smiled down at the cat. "What are you doing out of the house Magick?"

Magick looked up at her with unblinking green eyes and meowed. He and his sister, Magnolia, had joined the family the previous winter. Someone had left a basket outside of the store with a black kitten and white kitten tucked inside. Lissa and Isabel had been visiting Jesse and had been unable to turn the kittens away.

Lissa smiled and leaned back against her husband. Life could not be more perfect. She had everything she could ever need – the love a good man, a beautiful precocious daughter, and a little magick in her life.