



JUST ONE BITE

VOLUME THREE



Just One Bite

Volume 3

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Volume 3
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My Sweet Immortal

by Rachel Carrington

She should be dead. Yet, Bianca awoke lying face down atop the cold, cracked asphalt, blistering pain in between her shoulder blades.

What the hell had happened? The last thing she remembered was chasing a murder suspect down the narrow alley. No, wait. The white, hot heat. She recalled that, too. And hadn't there been a gunshot?

Garbled voices came through a radio receiver she couldn't see. She must have dropped it when she went down. Her partner, Noel, where was he? Had he been shot, too? He'd seen her go down...hadn't he? Had he been killed?

Bianca ordered herself not to cry while trying to force herself to roll over. But no part of her body would cooperate. God, was she paralyzed? Panic started to set in, and while her heart pounded so fast against her ribcage she thought it would seize at any moment, the pain began to ebb. Was this what it felt like to die then?

"We need to get her out of here."

The deep, male voice startled her. She hadn't heard footsteps. So where in the hell had the man behind that voice come from so fast?

"Who's there?" She couldn't even turn her head to see whoever it was behind her.

"Just take it easy. We'll have you out of here in a minute."

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The soothing tone edged its way into her mind, offering comfort she didn't understand.

"I'm a cop." Not that her profession could threaten them in any way considering her present incapacitation.

"And we're not here to hurt you." The tone had softened to a low rumble then gentle hands turned her over while strong arms slipped beneath her legs and back.

Now cradled against a chest roughly the size of a small planet, Bianca gazed up into dappled gray eyes and shivered. "Are you taking me to the hospital?"

"You don't need a hospital." Her savior smiled, and her heart rhythm changed to a stutter.

"B-but I've been shot." Why was she not at all interested in her wound now that she was in this man's arms?

"Are you in pain?" He hadn't moved, just continued to hold her against his chest as though she were a down-filled pillow.

Bianca opened her mouth to respond then closed it. What had happened to the pain? She'd been shot before, had spent ten days in the hospital two years ago because of it. This time was worse, much worse. Or, at least, it should be. A cop taking a shot to the back usually meant that some family member was getting a folded flag.

"It's okay. Don't be scared." He jostled her in his arms and began walking down the alleyway. "You'll be safe soon."

"I need to call in, to let my partner know I'm okay." A strange, euphoric feeling swept away the last of her voice, and she dropped her head to the strange man's shoulder. She should be scared, at the very least, concerned. But she sensed no danger from him, only concern and protection. He held her as though he'd save her from whatever danger they might encounter.

"We're running out of time." A different voice issued the warning.

The words came at her through a black haze. Bianca wanted to respond, to demand some answers, but she couldn't think anymore. Couldn't see.

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“That was too damned close.” Julian lay Bianca down on the pile of blankets in front of the fireplace, easing her closer to the fire for warmth when all he really wanted to do was hold her.

“We had to be sure.”

Julian glared at his brother over his shoulder. “The seer’s visions have never been wrong. If we’d gotten there a few minutes later...” He didn’t finish the sentence, didn’t want to think about what might have happened.

Jalen continued peeling an apple. “I know, and there are too few of us now.”

“And now she joins us.” Julian looked back at the beautiful cop. The color had returned to her skin, and a brief glimpse of her injury had shown the wound almost healed. It wouldn’t be long before she’d wake up, and this time, she’d want answers.

“You worried about how to tell her what she is?”

“That and other things.” A soft whimper drew Julian’s gaze back to the woman. “She’s waking up. Go.”

Though he got to his feet, Jalen hesitated. “You sure you want to do this alone?”

“It’s my responsibility. She’s to be my mate. I must help her adjust to this world.” Julian glanced up at his brother. “Tell the others I’ll bring her as soon as possible.”

“Try not to take too long. It’s not safe for her to stay here now.”

Julian knew all too well the danger Bianca was in now. Still kneeling at her side, he brushed the hair away from her face, and was rewarded with a slight smile. “Open your eyes, my sweet. It’s time to see your new world.”

Bianca made a sound of protest, but her eyelids fluttered in obedience. Blue eyes looked up at him, trying to focus. “Where am I?”

No easy way. The mantra repeated itself in his brain, reminding him of his own entry into this world—a world where

death had no meaning.

“You’re safe.” They wouldn’t be here long enough for their location to matter. “Can you sit up?” Julian wrapped his arm around her shoulders and helped her to an upright position.

Bianca drew in a shaky breath and nodded. “I-what happened? I remember being in the alley. Getting shot.” Her eyes widened. “I was shot. Why am I not in the hospital?”

He wished he could erase the worry from her eyes. Instead, he added to it. “You were shot, Bianca, but you’re okay. The wound has healed.”

Pushing away from him, Bianca tried to look at her back. “How is that possible? I was just shot. Wasn’t I?” She blew her bangs out of her eyes, reached up to touch her cheeks. “I remember the asphalt digging into my skin.” Her hands faltered, and she dropped them, her eyes begging Julian for answers. “What’s happened to me?”

Julian curled his hands around her wrists and steadied his gaze on hers. “You’re not going to understand this, but you’ve changed, Bianca.

“Changed?” She tried to tug free, but he held fast. “What are you talking about?”

He considered working up to the actual announcement, but they had to get moving...and soon. Better to plunge right in and just scare the shit out of her. “Your body healed itself because you’re an immortal.”

Bianca blinked once. Twice. “Are you on drugs? Let go of me.” When he released her, she scrambled to her feet, looking over her shoulder. “Where’s my coat?”

Julian stood to intercept her charge toward the door. “Bianca, listen to me. I know it’s easier to believe I’m crazy or medicated, but what I’m telling you is the truth.” He spun, strode to the kitchen table, and took the knife Jalen had left behind. When he returned to Bianca, he held it out to her. “Take it.”

Though her gaze fell to the blade, she didn’t make a move. “Why?”

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"Because this is the only way I know to convince you I'm telling the truth."

"What do you want me to do with the knife?"

"Stab me. Through the heart."

Bianca recoiled. "Are you insane? That will kill you!"

"No, it won't. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Just as you are, I'm an immortal. Last year, our seer got a vision that you were one of us. If my brother and I hadn't gotten to you when we did, you might have been exposed."

Bianca swayed on her feet, and one of Julian's hands clamped around her arm to hold her steady. "Exposed? This doesn't make sense, and it's not possible. You're joking. That's it, isn't it? My partner put you up to this."

His watch chimed, a subtle reminder that time had grown even shorter. If Bianca wouldn't stab him, there was only one other thing he could do. "Forgive me, my love." Gripping the handle of the short blade, he brought it up and just as she gasped, he drove it into her heart.

Her eyes went wide, her body tensing from the pain. With a grimace, Julian withdrew the knife, tossed it aside, and ripped open Bianca's blouse. "Look, Bianca. Watch the wound. It's already healing. You're not dead. You're not going to die. Ever." Well, there were a couple of ways an immortal could be killed, but he'd save that information for later, once she'd had time to absorb the hardest part of the transition.

Her head dipped, Bianca stared at the closing wound, watched it until her skin refreshed, smoothed without a blemish. Then she lifted her gaze. "What have I become?"

"I've already told you. Now, that you know, we need to get going."

She shrank away from him. "Go where? How do I know you're not taking me to some laboratory?"

Julian's exasperation climbed. "If I wanted to do that, I wouldn't have waited until you were conscious. Besides that, you had the option to stab me first."

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Her teeth worried her lower lip. "This is insane. I can't be immortal."

"And yet, you just watched the wound close."

She glanced down at her torn blouse then back to his face, her eyes lighting up. "Do you realize what this means, how much good I can do now? I'm a cop who can't die. Think of how many lives I can save, how many--"

"Bianca."

"People I can protect." She began to pace as she talked, her voice growing more animated with each syllable. "I mean, I know it'll be difficult to explain, even more difficult for people to believe, but once they do, I'll be--"

"Bianca." Julian sharpened his tone, made it louder.

She stopped talking. "What?"

"You can't stay here, and you can't reveal what you are."

"Why not?"

"Because in doing so, you put us all at risk. Humans are afraid of that which they don't understand, and they won't understand a person who cannot die."

Seeming to consider his words, Bianca frowned. "Well, then, I'll only tell a few people at first. My partner. Noel will understand."

Julian closed the gap between their bodies. "No, he won't." With a gentle touch, he cupped her cheek. "You have to come with me. Please. I don't want to have to take you without your consent."

Bianca looked at him, her gaze moving up and down, perhaps sizing him up to see if she could take him. "I have a life here."

"Not anymore." Julian held out his hand. "Let's do this the easy way, Bianca."

With surprising calmness, she placed her hand in his, but just as Julian took a deep breath, she braced her feet, dipped, and flipped him neatly onto his back. His head smacked against the

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heavy wood floor, and, for a moment, he saw stars.

Already out the door, Bianca stopped to look back inside. "I've never done anything in my life the easy way."

Julian considered going after her, but it would be pointless. Bianca wouldn't go with him willingly until she saw what her difference would mean to those she knew and loved. And that was a lesson she'd have to learn the hard way.

"My God, how is this possible?" All the color had drained from Noel's face the moment he saw her standing outside her apartment building. "I saw you shot. You were lying face down on the pavement. My radio took a bullet." He backed away from her as he talked. "I went back to the car to call for help. When I got back you were gone."

"It's okay." Bianca thought about turning around to show him the closed wound, but the look on her partner's face told her he'd already seen too much. She'd expected some surprise, maybe even a little awe, but not Noel's horror or the way he backed away from her.

"What the hell has happened to you?" He stared at her shoulder, his mouth working.

"I can explain." She took two steps toward him, but he held up one hand.

"No! Stay away from me. Something's wrong. You had a huge hole in your back, Bianca. No one gets up and walks away from that." He scrubbed both his hands over his face.

Bianca frowned, her skin going cold. "I did, and if you'll think for a moment, you'll see what this means. The bad guys can't hurt me now. For once, we really will have the upper hand."

He shook his head so violently, his teeth chattered. "No! This isn't normal. Something bad has happened to you, Bianca, really bad."

Once again, she tried to walk toward him, kept her voice calm and soothing as she approached, but he wasn't having any

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part of her attempts reassure him.

"I said stay back. I don't know if you're dangerous, and I gotta think about my wife, my kids."

"Noel, I'm not dangerous. It's still me."

"The hell it is." Noel stumbled, righted himself, and raced toward the car so fast he didn't see Julian's approach. As he slammed into the massive frame, Julian grabbed him by the shoulders and said something to him Bianca couldn't hear.

With a puzzled look on his face, Noel climbed behind the wheel of the car and drove away, not once looking behind him.

"What did you say to him?" Bianca's throat clogged with tears.

"I only took away the fear. I told you we couldn't be exposed."

"So he doesn't remember me?"

Julian stroked his knuckles down her cheek. "He thinks you were killed in the line of duty. It's best that way...for everyone."

A huge knot formed in the pit of her stomach. "How can it be the best for me?"

"Think about it, Bianca. Remember your life as it's always been. Hasn't there been something missing...someone missing?"

She considered his words, wanted to dismiss them. "You mean a man?"

"I mean a bond with someone, a unity so strong nothing can tear it apart."

"Even if that were the case, and I'm not saying it is, what does that have to do with immortality?" She had to hold onto a bit of her pride.

"You could not find that union with a mortal." Humor filled his gray eyes. "Your heart would not allow it." He held out his hand. "Are you ready to go with me now?"

She looked at his palm and, without even touching it, felt the warmth. Her pulse accelerated. "What makes you think you know so much about my heart?"

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Julian didn't lower his hand. "When an immortal's mate is made whole, his heart becomes aware of it, and she becomes a part of him. They are connected heart and soul." A smile flickered across his face. "And eventually, body."

For a moment, Bianca couldn't say anything. Then she pushed the words out in a rush. "Are you trying to tell me we're supposed to...you and I are..." She couldn't finish the sentence, but the blood rush to her cheeks said far more than she could anyway.

Julian chuckled and drew her closer to his side. "Yes. We are mated, but there is plenty of time for us now that you are whole."

"Is that what you call my death? Being made whole?"

"For an immortal, that is the only way we can truly live."

His words offered a measure of comfort. "So this is it then? I just walk away?"

He cupped her face, traced her lips with his thumb. "Yes, but you do not walk alone, Bianca."

A tear leaked down her cheek, and she reached up to take hold of his hand, needing the connection. "Will I ever get to come back here?"

"No, your life here is over, but you will start a new life."

"My friends will forget about me then. I suppose that's for the best." She wondered who the department would give the flag to. She didn't have any family, any connections really other than her partner. Her life had revolved around her work.

Julian squeezed her hand. "They won't forget; they'll just move on. That's what you have to do, what your destiny is, my sweet."

She took the strength he offered, looked back over her shoulder at the city she knew and loved. As she stood there, her palm touching his, a strange sense of calm filled her. And peace. She'd never had that before.

"Are you ready?" The deep timbre of his voice was already

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doing strange things to her heart. This mating thing held promise.

“So tell me more about this connection.” She allowed him to lead her away from the parking lot.

“What would you like to know?”

“Is there dinner and dancing first, or do we just go straight to the good stuff?”

He laughed, the sound filling her with reassurance and hope. He stopped walking and turned to face her. As their gazes connected, Julian tipped her chin with one finger and touched his lips to hers, so soft, so gentle, she thought she imagined it. “My preference would be the good stuff.”

Her hands rested against his chest, and she smiled for the first time since her life had changed that day. “Well, this might work after all. We already agree on something.” She stood on tiptoe for the next kiss, sinking into his embrace, and smiling against his lips.

This new life had definite possibilities.

Just Like in the Movies

by Daryn Cross & LJ DeLeon

“Winter can be so cold with no warm memories.” Mindy muttered as she walked down the crowded city street. “Out with the old year, in with the new—ring-a-ding-ding. Every time you hear a bell ring, an angel gets his wings.” She shook her head vehemently. “Bullshit.”

Sure, everything worked out for people in the movies. But how about the average girl, like plain ol’ Mindy Castle? Not in this life.

Three hours ago she’d been handed the pink slip now crammed in her purse. Laying off half its work force three weeks before Christmas, wasn’t what she’d call great PR. But Sheckles and Hannsford didn’t care about anything but the bottom line. Should show a nice profit for the fourth quarter having saved all those Christmas bonuses. Well, maybe not. Knowing the S&H owners, they’ll pay themselves all the bonus money.

Not that she was a Christmas fanatic. Nor did she expect her employers to be big Christmas fans. Christmas was a time for children and starry-eyed optimists. It was also a time of goodwill and generosity. It was not a time for abrupt severance and poverty. Now she really understood what “Bah Humbug” was all about.

Shivering, Mindy began her slog through snow and slush to her space in S&H’s outlying parking lot a mile from work. Too bad all the city’s and company’s buses had been grounded. Poor planning and timing was why she suffered cars splashing her

ankles with frigid fingers. Huddled beneath the pushed up collar of her coat, she shoved her fists into her pockets and hunched over to better plow through the abrasive northerly wind. Much longer in this weather and she wouldn't have just been laid-off but hospitalized with a case of incurable pneumonia.

"Whatcha' doin', lady?" A little boy with brown hair sticking up in a cowlick and wide brown eyes fell in step with her. He walked like a toy soldier, knees locked and arms swinging at his side. "Playing in the puddles, huh lady?" He marched through the icy slush in the gutter, soaking his jeans legs and laughing.

Mindy glanced around for the boy's parents. "Where did you come from? Do you live around here?"

"No. I saw you and decided you needed a friend." The boy smiled. "You got a real sad frown and red eyes. Mama always said we should try to cheer those who need a lilt in their step." He shrugged. "Whatever that means."

Judging from his height and missing two front teeth, the child couldn't be more than seven. In spite of herself, she chuckled. Kids, they said and did the damndest things. Not for one minute did she believe a parent would let this cutie out of their sight.

"See?" The boy pushed out his chest. "I'm already making you feel better."

Mindy scanned the desolate street for another adult, any adult. "A boy your age shouldn't be alone in the middle of the city. Where are your parents? I'd feel better knowing they're close by."

"I don't have any," the boy said. "Not anymore."

"You don't have any parents?"

"Nope." The boy looked down. "Lost them about three years ago."

"Where do you live?" she asked again. She liked kids well enough, but she wasn't equipped to take care of one. Not now.

"Oh, a little here and a little there. Wherever someone will

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have me. I guess it's wherever I'm needed." He pointed at the spire of the Catholic church in the distance.

Must have been helped by some priest. With a shock, Mindy suddenly noted the boy's shirtsleeves and no jacket. She started to slip out of her coat to wrap the baby in warmth. He put his hand on hers. "No, I'm fine. I don't need a coat, really. I am warmed by the love of many hearts."

"Yeah, well, tell the priests next time love won't keep you from catching pneumonia. I refuse to allow you to freeze or get sick. Until I contact the authorities, I'm responsible for your welfare. And that means you're going to have a jacket. Come on." Mindy grabbed his hand and marched him to the department store down the street. Once inside, still holding his hand, she stopped.

A clerk walked up to them, his smile filled with fake holiday cheer. "May I help you, Madam?"

"Yes. I'd like to buy a coat for the boy."

"Certainly, ma'am. What size does he wear?"

Mindy turned and looked at the child. He shrugged, turning his palms up.

The clerk raised his eyebrow. "Don't you know what size coat your son wears?"

"He's not my son. He's—"

"I'm someone she feel responsible for," the little boy said with a smile, his tongue peeking out from between his teeth, "me and my welfare."

"And you don't know his name?" The clerk's eyes widened.

Mindy didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Fired with two weeks severance to her name and she's getting ready to spend it on a kid whose name she didn't even know. "I don't have a lot of experience buying children's clothing, could you bring me a coat you think will fit? Something warm, but not too expensive."

The clerk made a disapproving sniff and went to the racks.

"What's your name?" she whispered to the boy.

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"Chris." He smiled.

"As in Christopher?"

"Just Chris." The boy ran his fingers along the counter.
"Vroom, vroom."

"Sounds like you like cars."

"I did once." He frowned. "But now, not so much. That's how Mommy and Daddy died."

Mindy winced. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. They're happy now." He patted her hand.

"How about this one?" The clerk held up a blue car coat.

She took it off the hanger for Chris, and he slipped it on.
"Perfect. That'll do. How much?"

"Sixty dollars."

Mindy glanced down at Chris, then out at the gathering blizzard. Inhaling deeply, she reached into her purse and pulled out her charge card. "Put it on this." With luck she'd have a job before the bill came due. And if she didn't, then the blasted card could wait because there was no way she was letting this child freeze to death.

The man ran her card and handed it back to her. "I hope you and the boy have a Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you, too," she said through gritted teeth as she signed the sales slip.

Chris followed her out of the store and up the sidewalk.
"You don't like Christmas, do you?"

"Not any more. Nothing wonderful and stupendous is happening to me. Family is what make Christmas and its warm and fuzzy memories and miracles. And I don't have any family." Mindy kicked a slush ball down the sidewalk. "I don't think miracles happen to real people. I've never known anyone who had an honest to God, out of the blue miracle. Those kinds of things happen just in the movies."

"Maybe you can find one in church." He stared up at her, all blue-eyed earnestness. "Church can do everybody good."

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‘Specially you, when you hurt so bad.’

“I believe in God.” Mindy glared down at him. “I just don’t go to church regularly.”

“If you did, you’d believe in miracles.” He handed her a card with *John Farragut, Minister, Franklin United Methodist Church* printed on it. “Go talk to this man,” Chris said.

She shrugged. “Maybe I’ll go by some day, but ...” Mindy turned around, but the boy was gone. She looked off in the distance, but saw no trace of him. Where was he? She trudged to her car, her head down and hands jammed in her coat pockets. “At least he’ll be warm.”

#

Sitting on her sofa at home, Mindy couldn’t get Chris out of her mind. There had been something about the blond-haired kid that made her skin tingle, like Christmas once had when she was a little girl.

Innocence, that’s what it was.

The boy had all good thoughts and none of the bad ones adults seemed to accumulate like cobwebs in their hearts. He’d left her feeling like all of the tangled threads of rotten memories squeezing her heart could vanish if she wanted them to. All she had to do was call the minister.

Where is that card? She grabbed for her purse and pulled it out of the inside zippered pouch. Flicking the card back and forth in her fingers, she stared at the phone, biting her lip.

This whole idea was crazy. Why did she need to speak to a wizened old holy man to make her life better? Yet Chris had said she needed to, and in spite of herself she wondered if the minister was the real deal. Picking up the phone before she chickened out, she dialed the number.

“Hello?” a deep male voice answered.

This guy didn’t sound wizened and old. “Could I speak to John Farragut please?”

“This is he.”

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“Hi. My name’s Mindy Castle. I know this is strange, but someone gave me your name.”

“Who ?” he asked. “I didn’t know anyone was using me for a reference.”

“No, it wasn’t a reference. Oddly enough, it was a little boy named Chris.”

He chuckled. “I’ve never had a child suggest someone get in touch with me.”

“He was about seven, missing his two front teeth and didn’t have a jacket. I’m worried about him, Reverend. He was all alone. I bought him a blue jacket and then he disappeared.”

“Are you sure he said his name was Chris?”

“That’s what he said.” Mindy frowned. “Not Christopher. Just Chris. He was very emphatic about his name.”

“Would you mind coming out to the church? I don’t want to discuss it on the phone, if you don’t mind. I’ll be happy to clear up this mystery in person.”

“Sure.”

Within an hour, she’d driven to Franklin Methodist and was staring up at the bell tower on the gray stone historical landmark with a smile. There was something very stately and calming about it. It towered over the block where it stood, like a regal bodyguard daring evil to stand clear. Having admired it from afar on more than one occasion, she had never taken the time to go inside.

“Hello?” she called. “Is anyone here? Reverend Farragut. Are you there?”

A tall man walked out of the shadows. She stared in shocked surprise. He was drop-dead gorgeous. Dark brown hair, wavy with tints of gold and bright blue eyes, the color of the Caribbean. Towering over her, he was lean, yet muscular. He looked like he could pose for a men’s underwear ad, not be a minister. Probably a husband and father with five children. “You’re Reverend Farragut?”

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“Guilty as charged.” He grinned, a deep dimple appearing in his right cheek. “I’m assuming you’re Mindy Castle, please call me John.” At her nod, he gestured to his left. “My office is this way.”

They walked down a narrow hallway. John opened a door, displaying a small office space—no more than ten by ten—piled with papers stacked in piles on every flat surface. “Please excuse the mess. As you can see, I’m not much of a housekeeper, here or at home. Everything else seems far more important.”

“Your wife should help you,” she said as she walked in and sat in a side chair. “It won’t take long to whip this room into shape. As long as she has a handle on your filing system.”

“I don’t have one of either, a filing system or a wife.” He winked.

Mindy wiped damp hands on her coat. *Oh, my.* “You aren’t?” she said as she struggled not to look heavenward and mouth, thank you.

“It isn’t easy to be a minister’s wife with a husband on call twenty-four/seven, plus having to be an example to the community.” He grinned.

“The pressure of always being ready to help someone must be hard for you as well.” Mindy felt empathy for this man. He was lonely yet obviously dedicated to his job. “But, I know there’s a woman out there who’d like to be a partner in your business and your life.” As her face began to burn, she looked down. Drat and double drat. Here she was running off at the mouth like she was putting in an application for matrimonial bliss.

He cleared his throat. “Now, you said a boy told you to call me. Tell me again about him, this little boy named Chris.”

“As I told you on the phone, he’s about seven years old with his two front teeth missing, and—”

“A really bad cowlick in the back.”

“You do know the boy.” She smiled. “I didn’t think he’d make it up. He seemed so sincere when he suggested I come see

you. Tell me about him.”

“Of course. But first, how much time did you spend with him?” His eyes narrowed.

She shrugged. “About an hour or so. You see, I’ve just lost my job and I was going home and there he was.” She explained how upset she was. She didn’t feel Christmassy. Then she met Chris and bought him the blue coat.

“What I don’t understand is why you bought it,” he said. “It doesn’t fit with the the Bah Humbug attitude.”

“I don’t know. I just felt sorry for him. He was in his shirtsleeves, short shirtsleeves and he needed it.”

“It was thoughtful but not necessary. He’s in the best of hands.”

“Where is he?” she asked.

He opened his wallet, pulled out a photograph, and passed it to Mindy. “Is this the Chris you saw?”

“That’s him.” She nodded. “Are you related?”

“We were.”

“Were?”

He stared into her eyes. “Mindy, Chris died three years ago in a car accident with my sister and brother-in-law. He was my nephew.”

An electric charge sparked down her spine. “He can’t be dead! I just saw him today.”

“They died on Christmas Eve on their way to visit me.”

“How do you handle it? The guilt? I’ve never recovered from my sister’s death. It was Christmas Eve, she was the designated driver. We were coming home from a party and they say she fell asleep at the wheel and ran us off the road and into a tree.”

“Yet, you survived.”

“Because of my seatbelt. Sally didn’t wear hers and was ejected from the car. It rolled over onto her.”

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“It wasn’t you’re fault.”

“If you say it was God’s will, I’m getting up and leaving.”

“No. It was a tragic accident, just like my sister’s and her family’s. I believe Chris brought you to me for a reason,” John said. “I think I know what he had on his mind. How about going to dinner with me and we’ll delve into this mystery together.”

She nodded, her mouth still agape. “I-I’d love to. But, this type of thing doesn’t happen...except in the movies.”

He smiled. “God works in mysterious ways. Chris is proof of that.”

“Well at least he’s warm.” She looked up at John, her heart doing a stutter-step. “Maybe he’s given me a way to recapture the Christmas spirit.”

He helped Mindy on with her coat. “We’ll talk more over dinner.”

As they passed the Sunday school rooms, a solitary blue car coat appeared on the rack.

First Date

by Madeleine Drake

Homicide Detective Joe Brennan watched the woman of his dreams float into the room. The Captain's secretary dressed like a librarian: calf-length skirts, tailored shirts buttoned to the neck, wavy black hair twisted into a knot and skewered with a pointed wooden stick. She spoke in prim, quiet tones, and she even wore those old-fashioned wire-rimmed librarian glasses.

But Kallista Ophiades didn't walk like a librarian. She moved with the sinuous grace of a belly dancer, the smallest shift of her hips enough to send the blood meant for his brain on a detour to his groin. He couldn't help remembering how she'd looked in his dreams, her hair writhing free over her shoulders as she rode him, her eyes gleaming with ecstasy, and her nails digging into his chest. He'd never seen her naked, but his subconscious insisted that he dream her with a tiny emerald snake tattoo coiled around her navel.

That's the only way I'll ever be with Kallista. In my dreams.

Oblivious to his distress, she crossed the room, nodding politely at each person she passed without breaking the demure eyes-down manner she maintained. In another woman, it would have seemed pretentious, but on her it came across as polite.

He waited next to her desk, file in hand, mentally rehearsing what he was going to say. *When's the Captain due back?* But it was impossible to focus on the words when his brain superimposed sexy dream-Kalli over the real Kalli. Every time he tried to talk to her, his thoughts evaporated, his mouth went

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dry, and he blurted out something stupid.

Like, “I need a date.”

Kalli glanced at him over the top of her glasses. He barely had time to notice her eyes were gray-green before she looked down again. “When you ask like that, how can I resist?”

Joe flushed. She couldn’t possibly be flirting with him. “I was hoping Vice could spare someone for an op tomorrow night.”

“What op?”

“Those snuff films that surfaced last week. I think I know who made them.”

“Who?” She looked up again, and this time her gaze stayed on him.

This was the most eye contact she’d ever given him. The restless hum of arousal pulsed through him, keeping time with his accelerating heartbeat. “Stefan Brozi.”

“The porn king?”

Joe nodded. “All three vics worked for him in the last year. That’s the only connection between them. We haven’t found the bodies and no one wants to talk about Brozi behind his back.”

“Can you tell where the videos were shot?”

“I can see stone walls in the background, and nasty things hanging from hooks.”

She pursed her lips. “You’re working a hunch.”

Since dreams aren’t admissible as evidence, I don’t have another choice. He handed Kalli the file containing his case notes. “Could you make sure the Captain gets this?”

She nodded, took the file. “How does the date fit into your operation?”

“Brozi’s throwing a party at his mansion. If I can talk to his employees in a casual setting, maybe I’ll learn something.”

Kalli arched an eyebrow. “You still haven’t explained the part about the date.”

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Dammit, stop blushing. “I found an actress willing to give me her invitation. But it’s a woman’s name on the guest list. I need someone to be Cherry Valentine, so I can be her escort.”

“Why not go with the real Cherry Valentine?”

“There’ll be hundreds of people there. Two detectives in the house means twice as many questions asked.”

“I see.” She looked away again, and Joe experienced the loss of eye contact as a wrenching in his gut. She’d met his gaze for less than a minute but he was already addicted to the small intimacy.

“I’ll make sure the Captain gets these.” She placed the file on her desk. She seemed determined to avoid looking at him now. “Is there anything else?”

I’m sorry, he wanted to say, but he wasn’t sure what to apologize for. “No, thanks.”

* * * *

Kalli tucked her compact into her purse, then tugged on the hem of her mini-dress. Black, stretchy, and riddled with strategically placed cut-outs, the garment fit like a second skin, barely containing her breasts and riding up to the top of her thighs with every step. *A bikini would have been more modest.* But Brennan needed a porn star, so she was dressed like a porn star, right down to her rhinestone-studded stiletto pumps.

Wonder what he’s going to say when he realizes I’m his “date.” He was expecting a Vice detective. Kalli sighed. More than a year of crushing on Joe, with his soulful blue eyes and his boyish smile, fantasizing that he’d ask her out—she’d never imagined that their first date would be an undercover operation.

It’s the only way he’d ever go out with a freak like me.

Joe’s blue sedan pulled into the lot, slowing more than necessary as it approached the curb. He gaped at her as she got in the car, continued to gape as she fastened her seatbelt and clasped her scarlet-tipped fingers around her purse. Kalli’s skin heated under his astonished gaze. Self-conscious, she licked her lips. He sucked in a breath, shifting as if his seatbelt was

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suddenly too tight.

“You’re not...you can’t...” He swallowed hard, like he had something stuck in his throat. “Jesus, Kallista.”

“Cherry.” She batted her mascaraed lashes at him. “Do you want me to drive?”

“I want you to put some clothes on.” He stared straight ahead, as if she were naked and he was trying not to look.

“Dressed like this, no one’s going to guess I’m a cop.”

“You’re not a cop. You’re a secretary.”

Her anger surged, but she couldn’t contradict him. That was exactly what she’d been pretending for the last year. “I can approach Brozi. Ask him things you can’t.”

“Absolutely not.” He had a white-knuckle grip on the wheel, and his temples pulsed. “You have no idea what you’re asking me to do.”

“I’m asking you to take me to a party.”

“A party for porn stars. Hosted by a murder suspect.”

“Captain’s orders, Brennan. Are you going to disobey an order?” She almost hoped he would. Then she could go to the party alone, and if something went wrong, she’d only have to worry about herself. *Nothing should go wrong. All you’re going to do is talk to a few actors and decide whether the Guard should investigate Brozi.*

He started the car. “As soon as you get me into the mansion, you’re going home.”

* * * *

Joe couldn’t believe it. Kallista was sitting in his car, looking like a wet dream version of Wonder Woman, and it was his job to escort her to a party where countless attractive men would try to get into her panties. Captain’s orders, no explanation. *What did I do to piss you off, God?*

He drove in a daze, pulse hammering so hard his veins ached. All he had to do was slide his eyes to the right, and there she was, her dress showing more smooth, olive skin than it

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covered. Thankfully, the seatbelt cutting into his lap made his erection less obvious, because he couldn't muster the will to think about baseball or anything else except how much he wanted her.

Kalli was talking. Joe growled, struggling to focus.

"That's not what the Captain said," she argued.

"The Captain isn't here." *The Captain doesn't have to watch the woman of his dreams dress like a porn star and flirt with a murderer.* "Brozi's already killed three women. What's to keep him from killing us if he realizes we're onto him?"

"Don't worry, Brennan. I'll protect you."

She was going to protect *him*. He prayed that his dream had been wrong, and that he wasn't putting Kalli in danger by taking her with him.

The party was worse than Joe expected. Hesitating in the doorway with Kalli beside him, he choked on air thick with the musk of sex and sweat. He peered into the dungeon. Or rather, a ballroom decorated to look like a dungeon, with fake rock walls embedded with torches and naked men and women chained up in raised, illuminated alcoves evenly spaced around the cavernous room. Each shackled "prisoner" was attended by a leather-clad "guard," who supervised while guests spanked, tickled, whipped, or caressed a particular prisoner. The room's center was an undulating crush of bodies moving to the throb of frenetic music and strobing colored lights.

Was it possible to die of embarrassment? *And is there any chance I could do it right now?* It would have been tough enough to bring a Vice detective with him, but to be here with Kalli—he'd never been so mortified. Worse, his traitorous body had responded to the scene by sending even more blood away from his brain. *Baseball. Oh God. Think about baseball.*

"I don't see Brozi," Kalli yelled over the music. She seemed oblivious to the orgiastic display of flesh and his humiliating reaction to it. "Let's mingle."

Joe groaned. *No way.* He put his lips against her ear, so she

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could hear him. “Let’s walk around the house, see how far we get before anyone stops us.”

She took a deep breath, and the rising swell of her breasts made the air hitch in his lungs.

“I thought you wanted to talk to the actors in a more casual environment,” she said.

“This is *not* a casual environment.” He’d never felt less casual in his life.

A curvaceous blonde sashayed up, flail in hand. She wore nothing but a leather thong, pirate boots, and a predatory grin. Blondie stood so close to Joe that when she inhaled, one of her nipples pressed into his bicep.

“Want to play?” she asked.

Joe opened his mouth to say, No thanks, but Kalli shocked him by mirroring Blondie’s wicked smile, one predator to another.

“With that toy? What is this, amateur hour?”

Blondie giggled. “So you’ve seen the real dungeon?”

Holy hell, the real dungeon? Was it possible Blondie knew where the videos had been made?

“Stefan promised to show me tonight, but I don’t see him here.” Kalli pouted. “Do you know where he is?”

Blondie toyed with the leather strips dangling from the end of her flail. “Want me to escort you down there?”

“We’d like to, ah, explore it on our own.” Joe winked as he looped his arm around Kalli’s waist and pulled her closer. “Can you tell us how to find it?”

Blondie’s pout was more practiced than Kalli’s, but not nearly as sexy. “I’ll take you to the elevator.”

* * * *

The elevator doors opened with a rattle, revealing a long, low-ceilinged room—cobblestone floors, rough stone tiles on the walls and ceiling. Torches in wrought-iron sconces flamed orange and gold, giving off unsteady light that made shadows

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leap over the floor. From a row of hooks set into the far wall dangled blades, branding irons, and other implements Kalli was thankful she didn't recognize. A dirty table with chains and manacles at each corner took up the center of the chamber. Stefan Brozi stood next to it.

Joe swore under his breath.

"Kallista Ophiades." Brozi practically hissed her name. "Did you think I wouldn't notice a member of the Guard passing over my threshold?"

In her peripheral vision, she saw Joe's head swivel toward her. "How does he know you?"

"You haven't told the human who you are, have you?" Brozi smiled. "Or rather, what you are."

Joe stepped in front of her, plasticuffs in hand. "Stefan Brozi, you're under arrest—"

Kalli grabbed a fistful of shirt and yanked Joe back so hard he lost his balance and slammed into the back wall of the elevator. He blinked at her like he'd never seen her before. She hoped he hadn't hit his head. *Better a concussion than a taste of Brozi's venom.*

"Call the Captain. Tell him to send help." Kalli slapped the first floor button. Joe stared at her dazedly as the doors closed. She spun around to face Brozi. In the time it had taken to send Joe to safety, Brozi had assumed his true form. Patches of torchlight gleamed on his scaly green lizard skin, making his eyebrow ridges and bulging cheekbones seem larger, turning his jagged teeth a dirty yellow. Dark talons extended from his fingertips.

"Come with me, Brozi. If you turn yourself in, it'll be less painful." *For both of us.*

The basilisk took a long, serrated dagger from its hook. "But not nearly as much fun. Come and get me, Guard."

Kalli shed her human form, energy coiling and sparking as the magic reshaped her. Her legs melting into a single column of muscle, her dress ripped and fluttered to the ground as her body

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stretched the fabric beyond its limits, fangs extended to press into her lips. The hissing of snakes filled her ears, and a tiny flickering tongue tickled the side of her neck.

The elevator doors dinged open behind her. She twisted around, saw Joe, and barely averted her eyes in time.

“Holy shit!” he yelled, at the same time she yelled, “Don’t look!”

She heard a chuffing noise behind her. *No*. She launched herself at Joe, barely knocking him to the floor before the basilisk’s venom splattered against the wall. Sizzling droplets of fetid goo seared her back. She was immune to the basilisk’s petrifying stare, being a gorgon, but its saliva could make her sick. Joe wouldn’t stand a chance against either.

“Don’t look him in the eye and don’t let him spit on you.”

Joe grunted. She hoped he understood.

By the time she’d risen, Brozi was almost on them. No room to retreat, and if Kalli dodged to one side, she’d leave Joe unprotected. She had no choice but to strike, and hope she was faster.

As the basilisk swung the blade overhead, she lunged for his throat. Brozi spat again, missing her face, but spraying her neck and shoulder with poisonous saliva. Pain razored through her, but she managed to strike Brozi’s wrist with one hand, jarring hard enough that he dropped the knife, while her other hand found the soft spot under his chin. His talons pierced the skin on her wrist as he fought to loosen her grip on his neck.

“Don’t look,” she heard herself screaming at Joe. “Don’t look, don’t look, don’t look.”

The basilisk snapped at her, forcing her to rear back as his teeth sliced through the air before her. Kalli lost her grip on his neck. Brozi threw her against the wall so hard the room trembled. A sick buzzing reverberated through her skull, and dizziness flooded her, weakness she couldn’t afford. The shock of the impact, or the effect of the venom? Her breath came in ragged gasps as she gathered her remaining strength for another

attack.

Brozi laughed, a slithery sound. “Do you want to watch me eat the human? Or would you rather die knowing you failed to save him?”

An ear-shattering crack, and Brozi convulsed, pitching backward; another crack, and the basilisk dropped to the floor, twitched, went limp.

Keeping her gaze lowered, Kalli let her head turn until Joe appeared in her peripheral vision—arms outstretched, her open purse at his feet. One hand held her mirrored compact, the other held a gun.

He’d used the mirror to aim the gun. *He understood.*

Kalli pushed off from the wall, grabbed the remnants of her dress, and began to scrub off the basilisk’s venom. The fiery tingling faded to a tolerable level, and as her breathing calmed, relief was replaced by humiliation.

“You hurt?” Joe asked.

Just my pride. “I’ll survive.”

“You should’ve told me Brozi was a Gorn.” Joe tucked his gun back in the shoulder holster under his jacket.

That was his reaction to what he’d just seen? “This isn’t Star Trek, Manos. Brozi was a Basilisk.”

“Whatever, Medusa.”

“Medusa’s dead.”

“Yeah, I saw the movie.” Joe snapped the compact shut and tossed it to her. She fumbled it, caught it. “Captain knows?”

“Yes.” The word came out as a hoarse whisper. “The Guard is like the police for supernaturals.”

“You looked human. Before.”

“Great-Grandma Euryale did a favor for Aphrodite. The goddess paid her back with the power to blend in.”

He hesitated before he asked, “do you think you could look human again?”

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“Sorry.” Kalli took a deep breath and assumed her human form. Joe continued to stare at the floor. What a relief that she didn’t have to look him in the eye, to see what he thought of her in his expression. That hollow feeling in my stomach is relief, she told herself. Not disappointment.

He tossed something else at her, and this time his aim was better. His shirt. She blushed and put it on. “Thanks for the date, Brennan.”

“We should do it again. Without the dungeon and the basilisk.”

He’s joking. But she wanted him to mean it. She struggled to keep her tone light as she asked the question that had haunted her since she’d met him. “Why would you go out with a freak like me?”

“I dreamed about Brozi. That’s how I knew the snuff videos were his.” He sounded happy. “I’m not crazy. The stuff I’ve been dreaming is real.”

“Premonitions?”

Joe put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. “I also dreamed about you, Kallista. Give me a chance to make *that* dream come true.”

He saw my true form, and he’s still here. She peeked up at him. “How did it end? Your dream?”

His hands slid down to her waist, bleeding warmth through the thin fabric of the shirt, and he pulled her into a hug. “Have dinner with me tomorrow and find out.”

When he asked like that, how could she resist?

Serendipity...or Something Like That

by Jane Kent

You'd think the daughter of a siren and a selkie could find a date with no problem, wouldn't you?

I mean, really, even the child of a human and an Other—be it witch, warlock, shadow dweller, fairy or whatever—generally inherits *some* power from their Other parent. And mixed Others nearly always inherit powers. For Neptune's sake, the children of a sorcerer and an enchantress are bestowed with *enhanced* powers! So, as the daughter of two species of Others who lure and seduce the opposite sex, you'd think I could at least drum up enough magic to attract the attention of *some* male, human *or* Other.

But, no, if I'm a measuring stick for half-siren-half-selkies, then apparently a siren and a selkie cancel each other out. They're not known for their honesty, sirens and selkies, I mean. They're sneaky, and they usually only enchant and seduce humans. My parents were both masquerading in their human form when they met and...but that's another story. The short version is I, and my sister, are the result of their trickery.

We're aberrations, mutants. We don't even have to live *in* the sea, only near it. There are no Others like us. Or, if there are, I've never met one. We don't even have a species name. Hah, what would they call us anyway? Sirkies? Selrens? Maybe a whole new—

My stomach rumbled suddenly as the smell of grilling meat wafted over the fence on the warm autumn breeze to tempt me,

Just One Bite: Serendipity...or Something Like That reminding me that I hadn't had dinner yet. Evidently, my new neighbor was barbecuing.

I needed to get over the self-indulgent pity party soon, get my backside out of the patio lounge and figure out what I was going to have for dinner.

But first...

I sent a small siren song my mother had taught me out into to the universe.

Pointless, I know, but it never hurts to keep trying.

Truly, it's not like me to sit around feeling sorry for myself like this. Because you have to play the hand you're given, right? Wallowing in self-pity only makes you miserable. And who wants to hang out with someone who's miserable? But it was only a week until—

“Meow.”

My new neighbor's cat sat on the fence blinking his exotic emerald eyes at me. I'd seen him around before, exploring on my side of the fence, and he's a pretty gorgeous guy; all shiny black fur over sleek muscles, a lot like a miniature panther, in fact.

Typical. Apparently my little siren song had worked. I might not be able to call other Others or humans to me but, unlike my sister, I'm not *completely* without powers. Male animals love me. Cats, dogs, horses, pigs...well, you name it. If they're anywhere in the vicinity when I send out a song, they respond. Guess I'm kind of like one of those whistles you can't hear. Good thing the effects of my songs only last for a minute or two, or else I'd have every pet in the neighborhood showing up in no time.

Maybe my powers work on animals because my father is half seal.

Well, not *half* seal precisely...he can shed his skin to become human and then put it back on to return to seal form. Like I said, tricky.

The cat gracefully jumped off the fence and padded over to

my lounge.

Well, it could be worse. He could be a rat. Or a snake. Don't think it hasn't happen. That's why I rarely, *very* rarely, send out a song.

"Hello, handsome boy. Too bad you don't stand on two legs. If you did, you could be my date."

He hopped up on the lounge beside me and curled up next to my thigh, purring contentedly. He'd never come this close before but it was hardly surprising he would do so now. I'd called after all and he was answering.

I reached out a tentative hand and stroked his head. His fur was as silky as it looked and he returned the caress by affectionately rubbing his head along my leg.

Yup, definitely date material if he'd been Other or human.

It's not like I haven't tried dating the way other non-enchantment weaving Others and humans do, you know. I've tried hooking up in bars, flirting in grocery stores and Laundromats, and I signed up at a computerized matchmaking service. I even took a car repair course once, hoping to meet guys. Unfortunately, so did about thirty other women.

The truth is, I haven't had much luck with dating either way, magical or non-magical. Oh, I've had some dates...and, boy, could I tell you horror stories about several of them! I even had a relationship about two years ago.

For all of two weeks.

Then, *bam*, he met my sister...and now they're getting married in a week. On Halloween.

Which is why I need a date so desperately that I've sunk into this pathetic and useless "poor me" mood.

Oh, don't get me wrong. My heart wasn't broken or anything. John did have the decency to give me the "it's not you, it's me" speech and break up with me first. And Bethany even asked if it would be okay with me if they dated. What could I say? She's my sister and, until then, as feeble at love as I. And feelings are feelings. No one, Other or human, can

Just One Bite: Serendipity...or Something Like That
control attraction or love. Well, except magical Others, and they're welcome to it.

Truth be told, most of the time I'm glad I don't have my parents' powers. I sure wouldn't want to spend my life wondering if the man I loved truly loved me in return or if he loved me because I'd enchanted him. Magical enchant, I mean, not personality enchant. How long do you suppose magical enchantment lasts anyway? Forever? Or do you have to keep sending it out there?

I'll have to ask my parents.

See what I mean though? Much too messy and confusing that way.

But...back to John and Bethany. They didn't ask me to stand up with them. Considerate. And smarter than they'd acted, considering I likely would have socked one of them. But, to be clear, I do truly, genuinely wish them happiness.

It's just that...well...

...there's a teeny, tiny part of me that wants to show up at their wedding with a super hunk on my arm. You know, the kind of guy that just screams "so there!" at them.

Besides, if I show up at the wedding alone, everybody will think I'm a loser who can't get a date or, even worse, that I'm still pining for John. As if. Never mind that the first part is true.

I suppose I could hire a date. Though...where do I go to hire someone who is the clichéd tall, dark and handsome to pretend he's crazy about me?

"Excuse me, have you seen my cat?"

Startled, I swung my head around and up to find the source of that deep, sexy voice.

Uh...yeah...someone just like *that*.

Talk about tall, dark and handsome! My new human neighbor, who was looking over the fence at me, fit the bill to a T.

As with his cat, I'd seen him around—oh, okay, fine, I'd

Jane Kent

more than seen him around, I'd ogled him from my upstairs windows when he'd been in his backyard. But we hadn't officially met yet. All I knew about him was that he was a fireman, he appeared to be single—no women or kids in the yard or pool—and he was gorgeous.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

What? Oh, right, I was staring at him like some kind of star-struck teenager mooning after her current idol. He was waiting for an answer to his question. Which had been...what again?

His cat, that was it!

"Yes, sorry, I'm fine," I said, getting to my feet. "Your cat is right here." I looked down at the lounge, only to find the cat gone. "Well, he *was* right here," I amended.

"Hakuna matata," Mr. T, D and H said, the Swahili phrase for "there are no worries", familiar to me from the Disney song. I specialize in teaching junior elementary children after all. At—big surprise—a marine museum. "He'll come home when he's ready," he continued, sticking his hand over the fence. "It's nice to finally meet you. I'm Jake Gattus."

"Hi, Jake," I said, shaking his hand. "I'm Calliste Reid. But everybody calls me Callie. Your cat is becoming a regular visitor in my yard. I guess I should know his name too."

"His name? Oh, uh...it's...ah...ah...Deuce."

Well, what had been so difficult about remembering his cat's name?

Oh, please, I begged the One, don't let Jake be an Easter egg! You know what I mean—pretty on the outside, nothing on the inside.

"Because he's a little wild? As in, deuce is wild in cards?" I asked.

He grinned and my heart did a little pitter-pat dance. Wow, he'd been hot enough before but when he smiled...oh, man, when he smiled, he was devastating, lethal to women everywhere. "Yeah," Jake said, "you could say that."

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A hollow Easter egg still tastes pretty good. Who needs all the extra calories from the marshmallow center anyway?

"So, Callie...have you had dinner? Would you, uh...care to join me for a neighborly barbeque? You and...uh, your husband, of course. I could defrost another couple of steaks."

"No significant other," I said, hoping that covered all the bases—husband, fiancé, boyfriend. "Just me. I haven't eaten yet, as a matter of fact. But I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"It's no trouble," he said, and then gave a little self-conscious shrug. "I burned this steak. I was about to defrost another one in the nuke."

Well, now, there was something I could identify with; burned food. My idea of cooking is heating a sub sandwich or pizza in the oven or microwave. If I'm lucky, they don't burn or turn into cardboard. Or rocks. I returned Jake's smile. "Then I'd love to join you."

"Come on around through the gate between the house and the garage. I should have the steaks defrosted by the time you get here."

He did, indeed, have the steaks defrosted by the time I got there. And sizzling on the barbeque.

Yeah, okay, I confess, I stopped to fix my hair and my make up; I'm not supermodel material but, when I make the effort, I'm not coyote ugly either. I might not have much luck with men but I figure I can at least not deliberately scare one off by looking like something his cat had dragged home.

Jake had put on a shirt too. He hadn't had one on when he'd reached over the fence to shake hands.

A gentleman.

Just shoot me now.

I've already admitted I hadn't exactly been a lady, gawking at him secretly and all. But, in my own defense, I'd have to be blind or dead or both not to notice Jake Gattuso. Any heterosexual woman would.

Jane Kent

And...honestly? Covering up biceps and a six-pack like Jake's was a crying shame.

Still, it wasn't like he'd been on a public beach or anything. I'd invaded his privacy and I felt guilty.

At least I hadn't wolf-whistled.

Like that was any comfort.

"Have a seat," he said, indicating the patio chairs surrounding a glass-topped table already set for two. "Would you like something to drink? I have beer, water, cola?"

"Just water, thanks."

He grabbed a bottle out of a cooler, and even filled one of the glasses on the table for me.

Okay, if he kept being so thoughtful and gentlemanly, I would be compelled to confess what a terrible person I was.

He was a nice guy and I'd behaved like...well...like sirens and selkies do when they set their sights on some hapless victim. Not like myself at all; I don't normally go around spying on others. Or behaving like a siren or selkie, despite my parentage.

"Tell me about yourself, Callie," Jake said. Thankfully, stopping me from blurting out the truth, which would, no doubt, have resulted in him looking at me like some kind pervert. Which I would have deserved. "What do you do for a living?"

I told him about my job, which I love, and he told me about his. And by the time we finished eating the salad, baked potatoes and steaks—perfectly cooked, I might add— I felt better and we'd moved on to talking about other things, like what we liked to do for fun, favorite foods, movies, books, and...well, you get it, all that other get-to-know-each-other stuff people talk about on a first date.

At least, I hoped that was what we'd been doing, getting to know each other on a first date, because, whatever his problem had been earlier, Jake was no hollow Easter egg, and I really, *really* liked the guy.

"I hate to cut the evening short, Callie, but I have to go to

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work soon. I'm on nights for the rest of the week and I'll be staying at the station. I was wondering—"

"Oh, of course. I'll be happy to look after Deuce," I said, positive that was what he'd been about to ask, my hopes dashed. I told you my luck with men is crappy. I don't know why I still let myself hope. "I'll just help you clean up and be on—"

"No, that's okay, you're my guest. I've got it. But that's not what I was going to ask you. What I was wondering was, are you free next weekend, on Saturday night? Would you have dinner with me again? At a restaurant? Maybe dancing or a movie after?"

Yes! It had been a first date! Jake liked me!

"I would love to have dinner with y—oh, no, I'm sorry, I can't. My sister is getting married next Saturday. I'll be at the wedding. But...a rain check maybe?" I asked hopefully.

"Sure. Next Sunday?"

I smiled at him. No, actually, I'm pretty sure I *beamed* at him. "I'd like that."

Come on, Callie, ask him.

Go big or go home, right?

"Jake, would you be interested in going to the wedding with me? Free food. Dancing with no cover charge," I said in a rush. Oh, shoot, now he was going to think I thought he was a cheapskate. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. Like...Like I didn't think you'd want to pay. I...I..."

He grinned and I turned to mush again at the sight of that bone-melting smile, my words drying up on my tongue. "It's okay, Callie. I get it, and, yes, I would I—"

"No, wait," I said as I remembered my number one rule. "I have to tell you something first. I'm Other. Half siren, half selkie."

Humans and Others have lived peaceably for over a hundred years now, but there are still those, both human and Other, who don't think the two should mix. I learned that the

Jane Kent

hard way and I made it my rule after that to always be up front from the beginning. Humans can't always tell if someone is Other. Sometimes even Others can't recognize another Other. This way, there are no nasty surprises down the line.

"So," Jake asked, his tone serious, though there was a smile lurking in his eyes, "have you enchanted me with your song or left your seal skin somewhere?"

"No, you're safe. And, cross my heart, that's not a siren or selkie lie," I said with a laugh, relieved that he didn't seem to care that I'm Other. "I didn't inherit those powers. My sole power is enchanting animals and it only lasts for a few minutes."

"Ah, that explains it."

"Deuce, you mean? Yes, I sent out a song and he answered."

"And it explains why I burned my steak."

I blinked at him, confused. "It does?"

"Uh-huh, it does," he assured me but I still didn't get the connection. And then I saw the teasing twinkle dancing in those amazing emerald eyes.

"Okay, why does my power explain why you burned your steak?" I asked, playing along.

"Weeeell," he said, drawing out the suspense...and enjoying it. "I'm Other too. A shape shifter. Black panther family, to be precise. And sometimes...a common house cat."

I gaped at him, too stunned to speak at first, something that rarely happens to me, which, doubtless, surprises no one. "You...you're Deuce!" I finally managed to say.

"Uh, huh. Deuce, as in Jake two, the number, or too as in also. And wild, as in animal. Though you really threw me when you asked. I've never had to name myself before," he said with another of those heart-stopping smiles. "So there I was, minding my own business, grilling my steak, and suddenly, I felt this uncontrollable compulsion to shift and go to you."

Wow, had other animals I'd enchanted been shape shifters

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too?

“Uh...well, um, I’m sorry I made you burn your steak,” I stammered, since he seemed more concerned with his steak than the fact that I’d enchanted him. But I knew I should apologize for that as well. “And that I enchanted you.” Except...I kind of wasn’t sorry because I might not have met him otherwise.

“I’m not,” Jake said. “I’ve been hoping you were unattached and trying to come up with a way to meet you since my first day here. I didn’t think you’d fall for the borrow-a cup-of-sugar thing. And, shame on you, you didn’t bring me a welcome-to-the-neighborhood casserole.”

“Oh, I guess that’s something else you should know—I can’t cook.”

“Well then, isn’t it a good thing I can...when I’m not enchanted.”

We stood there, just grinning at each other like a couple of fools.

And then Jake kissed me.

He told me much later that I *had* enchanted his human form...me alone, that is, not with magic.

Romantic, right? I just love that man.

The Fortune Teller

by Selena Kitt

“You should go.”

John ignored his sister and picked up the card she’d left on the table—no moon or crystal ball, just thick, cream-colored paper with the words “Rebecca – Psychic” in raised letters.

Not another Rebecca.

He ran his thumb over the elegant script, his mind flashing on *his* Becca, wondering. The possibilities were endless. Thinking about her married and settled with two kids, a dog and a minivan made him cringe. But imagining her in that place, locked away like she’d been when their world had ended in fire, and his had become like ice...that was too much to bear.

Maybe she’s happy. He clung to that hope.

Even five years later, he missed her more than he would ever admit to anyone, let alone his sister, sitting across from him at the café table drinking her skinny latte and smirking at him. He cursed her silently for mentally opening the wound. He didn’t need to be thinking about Becca—especially not now, today of all days.

“Rebecca—no last name. Shouldn’t it be *The Spectacular Rebecca*? You know, like *The Amazing Kreskin*?”

Julia sipped her latte, looking out the window, her gaze avoiding his. *Oh great, now she’s pouting.*

“Okay, what did she tell you?” he went on. “Let me guess—you’re going to win the lottery.”

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Julia snorted softly, putting her cup down. “She’s not that kind of psychic.”

“She doesn’t tell the future?” He took a big gulp of his coffee—steaming hot and black—hoping the heat might loosen the crushing ache in his chest.

“She’s doesn’t tell the future about material things...at least, not anymore.” She frowned. “It’s all about relationships and interactions.”

He raised an eyebrow at her, checking the text coming in on his cell. He was waiting for a buyer for a very expensive 17th century armoire to call, but it was just his mother. *She* probably wanted him to go see the psychic, too. “But you’re married—you and Tim having issues?”

“She can tell you about more than just marriages.” Julia’s face changed in an instant and he recognized it, that desperately hopeful look, and knew already what she was going to say. “She said I’m going to get pregnant.”

“Oh?” John hid his clenched fists under the table. “Did she give you any timeline?”

Julia and Tim had been trying for three years—three long heartbreaking years. Four miscarriages and one failed adoption later, they were still trying. John thought any sane person would have given up but his sister wasn’t sane when it came to this, and far be it from him to try to argue with a woman’s biological clock.

“She said it would be *this cycle*.” His sister beamed.

“Well, for your sake, I hope she’s right.” He meant it.

“Anyway, you should go.” Whenever she was up to something, one side of his sister’s mouth always betrayed her with a slight smirk. “Ask her about Josie.”

He scoffed, checking his cell again, regretting the day he ever taught his mother how to send a text message. “I don’t need a psychic to tell me what to do with my love life.”

She shrugged, sipping her latte. “If you say so.”

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"As a matter of fact," John said, deleting the text. "I'm proposing to Josie."

"Oh my god!" She choked on her coffee. "When?"

"Tonight." He pulled the ring out of his pocket and flipped the gray velvet box open. His sister gasped at the three carat diamond in a unique antique platinum setting he had discovered in the south of France on a buying trip. "Made reservations at *La Maison*."

Julia sighed. "That's the perfect place for a proposal."

"That's what I thought." He snapped the box closed and pocketed it again. It had been burning there for days and he found himself checking its existence every hour or so. "But don't overwhelm me with your congratulations or anything."

"Oh John, I'm sorry," she apologized. "I just...are you sure? You know I love Josie, I think the world of her...but..."

"I'm sure." He cut her off, picking up his coffee, ignoring the inquiring look in her eyes.

"John, I...hang on." Julia fished her ringing cell phone out of her pocket, whispering to him, "It's the doctor's office," before actually saying, "Hello?...yes, this is she... yes, I... oh... yes, I will...thank you."

John watched her eyes, not even realizing he was holding his breath, trying to predict the news by her reaction. Her face was pale, her hands shaking as she flipped the phone closed.

"Sis?" He prompted her and she swallowed, dazed. He readied himself for the tears, his arms already opening to comfort her. "What is it? Are you okay?"

"I'm...okay," she managed, blinking as if the light was too bright. She opened her mouth and then closed it again, the words caught, and then she said them, surprising them both. "I'm pregnant."

* * * *

What in the hell am I doing here?

John checked the card in his hand, making sure he had the

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correct address. It was just a residence—no storefront or neon signs with posters of chakras and palmistry pasted in the windows—just a modest house with a faded picket fence. Nothing he'd expected.

He took a deep breath, preparing to raise a hand to knock. He didn't need a psychic—he'd stopped believing in miracles a long time ago—but Julia had been ecstatic since the phone call in the café and couldn't stop telling people about the woman who had predicted her good news.

He was happy for her, but he couldn't get the thought out of his mind.

What if she'd been wrong?

He wanted to meet this psychic doling out thoughtless, unfounded predictions to desperate customers, trading hope for cash. So she'd managed a lucky guess with his sister—even a broken clock was right twice a day. He still intended to give her an earful about what he thought about her unscrupulous business.

If the psychic's card and her house hadn't been what he'd expected, the actual woman who opened the door in anticipation of his knock was truly a shock, making him drop both his arms and his jaw, the card fluttering to the porch.

"Rebecca," he whispered, surprised he could find his voice at all.

"Hi, John." She stepped back, waving him in, looking for all the world as if she'd been expecting him, as if something like that could be possible.

Dazed, he followed her lead, finding himself sitting at her kitchen table and sipping tea before he could murmur more than an a faint affirmative to her offer of something to drink.

"I know why you're here."

His stomach dropped at her words and he couldn't swallow past the lump in his throat, expecting her anger, her hate. Of course she knew, had always known. He had just never believed, and his obstinate refusal and skepticism had ruined her.

Jesus Christ, get hold of yourself, he thought, bringing the

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hot, sweet tea to his mouth to give himself something to do, even though his hands were trembling and the damned cup shook the whole way from saucer to destination and back again.

“Well, I should hope so,” he managed, swallowing, the tea cloying, leaving a bitter aftertaste. “You are a psychic after all, right?”

Her steady gaze didn’t leave him. “Give me your hand, John.”

He wanted to refuse. He wanted to find the furious energy he’d mustered before coming here, to really give it to her about telling people lies, giving them false hope. He wanted to give her hell.

Instead, his betrayal had put her through hell. He could see it in her face and the guilt hit him hard, leaving him dizzy, unable to speak. He gave her his hand like a peace offering, and the familiarity of her touch was almost unbearably painful, making his throat burn, his eyes water.

Her eyes closed, her breathing becoming slow, deep, even. He took the opportunity to really study her—Becca, his Becca. He’d lost her and found her again. He didn’t think it would ever be possible to sit across from her like this, to face her, but the years they’d spent apart seemed to melt away in an instant. He remembered familiar mornings watching her sleep, her mouth turned slightly down at the corners as it was now, her eyelids twitching as she dreamed.

“She loves you.” Becca opened her eyes, those stunning hazel green eyes, and squeezed his hand. “And she will be yours within twenty-four hours.”

He snatched his hand away, startled. He hadn’t told his sister he was proposing until this afternoon. *How?* But he remembered Julia’s smirk and realized—his sister had probably called Becca, had planned this whole thing.

“Parlor tricks.” He shook his head sadly. “Becca, you’re above this. Why would you do this?”

“You don’t believe me?” She sat so still, but her hands,

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small and delicate—he remembered them all too well—clenched on the table’s surface. “You never did believe me.”

“I wanted to...” He leaned back in his chair, doing the opposite of what he felt, afraid of how much he wanted to get closer to her. He’d doubted even then, giving his statement to police after the fire, telling that young, clean-cut cop with the sharp blue eyes that yes, she had mentioned the fire before it happened, and no, he couldn’t say *for sure* she hadn’t set it. He cringed at the memory, trying hard to block it out. Yes, yes, he’d doubted his betrayal a thousand times a day.

But...

“But when your girlfriend tells you the apartment house you’re living in is going to burn down, and then it does?”

She didn’t move, didn’t speak, didn’t try to explain or defend herself.

“I mean, what else could a rational person believe?” His voice cracked, betraying his emotion. He wanted to run. But no, that wasn’t quite true. He wanted to sweep her up and take her with him, carry her off into some distant future or past where there was no betrayal, no pain, no fear.

“John, I can predict the future...” Her voice was soft, words like flower petals falling from a dying bouquet. “But I can’t change it. I learned that the hard way.”

“They told me you were mentally ill,” he went on, sounding, feeling desperate. “Why wouldn’t I believe you’d set that fire?”

Her eyes flashed but still she didn’t speak up to defend herself. He couldn’t stand it, her silence. Was it a denial? An admission? He stood to go, turning away from her, away from his past, but she reached out and caught him, her hand gripping the meat of his forearm, and he stopped, turning to face her.

“It wasn’t me who set the fire. I just knew it was going to happen,” she whispered, her face turned up to his, eyes filling with tears that she struggled to keep from falling. “And I never stopped loving you. Never. Even when you didn’t believe.”

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It happened in an instant, his mouth capturing hers, his arms around her, crushing her to him, bruising her tender flesh with his longing, his pain. She didn't resist or cry out or deny him. They were both shaking when he broke the kiss, pulling the bright fire of her hair out of its confines and burying his face in it.

"I still would have come for you," he confessed hoarsely. "I couldn't believe you would do something like that. But they said you didn't want me, Becca. My sweet, sweet Becca."

He felt her sobs but didn't hear them until she tried to speak, her voice coming in hitches. "I told them...to say that...to tell you to go..."

He pulled back to look at her. "You must hate me so much."

"No!" Her wet face, her nose red from crying, just made him love her even more. "I loved you. But you deserved someone without my...baggage."

Don't do this, he thought, even as he held her. *Don't let yourself do this*.

"I never wanted anyone but you," he whispered.

"John, I'm sorry." Tears slipped down her cheeks, wetting the neck of her blouse. "I wish it would have been different."

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you." He pulled her in close—tight—one last time.

One last time. That's what he told himself.

"Do you believe me now?" she asked.

"I do." He let her go, mouth twisted in an ironic smile. "I'm proposing to my girlfriend tonight. I'm sure Julia told you."

She watched him walk toward the door. "All I've ever wanted was for you to be happy."

The thing was, he really did believe her.

* * * *

I should be nervous. That's what he kept thinking all through dinner as Josie sipped her wine and told him about her latest client, the Bridezilla of all Bridezillas, whose current

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drama involved her mother-in-law and some sort of family wedding tradition involving a live turkey.

She set her glass down, smiling. "John, you're distracted."

He put down his fork, his heart lurching in his chest. "I am," he admitted, glancing around the little restaurant.

It was dark and intimate, the candles in the center of each table giving the room a warm glow, making Josie's hair even more fiery in the light. Hers was shorter than Becca's, coming just to her shoulders in a mass of curly brilliance. He'd ignored both his sister's and his mother's comments when they'd first starting seeing each other a year ago, how much Josie reminded them of Becca, but after seeing them both today, he understood. After Becca, his world had turned cold, and Josie had been the only warmth he'd known since.

"I have something to ask you." John pulled his napkin from his lap and put it on the table. Josie watched him, bemused, as he stood and then dropped to one knee before her. Her eyes widened when he pulled the ring box from his pocket.

"Oh John." She swallowed and he saw tears in her eyes.

"Josie, will you marry me?" He opened the box and saw her gaze shift to the ring. She reached out to touch it, her hand brushing his. Around them, tables were beginning to notice and take in the scene.

"John, I..." Her voice was choked and she closed her eyes, biting her lip, her hand covering his, snapping the box closed. "I can't."

His breath left his body and he didn't know how to take another. He'd anticipated her initial surprise, her first wordless response, but this rebuff was completely disarming. He struggled to his feet, stumbling back into his chair, hiding the ring as if he could pretend he'd never taken it out.

"Listen to me." Josie leaned forward, grasping his hand in hers, and he found himself thinking shamefully of Becca, the way she'd held his hand this afternoon. "I love you. I do." She swallowed, the tears that had filled her eyes now spilling down

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her freckled cheeks. She had freckles everywhere, a typical redhead. Becca, she was all peaches and cream, skin like...

Josie's mouth was moving, but he wasn't hearing her. His head was too full, his chest bursting.

"You don't love me, John." Josie squeezed his hand. "And I'm not selfish enough to accept you just because I love you. I know in my heart that when you do marry, she will be the luckiest woman alive. I envy her. But I'm not that woman."

* * * *

He wasn't in the mood for jokes. He'd spent half the night on the phone trying to convince Josie she was wrong—that he did want to marry her. He'd spent the other half of it rolling around looking for a cool spot on the sheets, dreaming of Becca. And now the new kid he'd hired said someone was up front, looking for a...

"I'm looking for a crystal ball."

Her voice made everything inside of him go quiet. She was impossible, smiling, forgiveness and redemption coming toward him like a dream.

"You were wrong, Becca," he murmured as she slipped her hands into his. "She turned me down."

"I know."

He frowned. "But you told me... what did you say? 'She loves you. She'll be yours within twenty-four hours.'"

"She does. And she is." Becca turned her face up to his, her expression hopeful. "If you want me."

He swallowed, comprehension dawning slowly. "You meant...? It was *you*?"

He didn't give her a chance to answer. He didn't give her a chance to breathe. "I believe you," he whispered against her mouth, her lips impossibly soft, body melting into his. "I believe. I believe."

He felt new again, and didn't know why they'd had to go through it all, but was past questioning things he didn't

understand.

“Now you get your fortune told for free.” She smiled as he kissed her neck, daring his assistant and the new kid to say a word as they stood at the register, gaping.

“I can hear it now,” he chuckled. “You will soon be taking out the trash...and cleaning out the garage...and...”

“How about, you will soon be spending the next three days in bed?” Her husky, whispered tone and the way her thigh slid up the inside of his made him groan.

“I hope I won’t be in bed sick.” He grinned.

“Lovesick maybe.” Becca smiled up at him, *his Becca*.

His eyes narrowed. “You did something to me, didn’t you? A love potion? What was in that tea?”

“I’ll never tell...” Her laughter was like rain and he let it fall all around him.

The world was no longer fire or ice. It was water and tears and love and life and Becca, and everything was as it was—it always had been and always would be.

Wolf in the Night

by Runere McLain

It was my long-buried nightmare come to life. That face-to-face confrontation I'd both dreaded and desired for so many years.

He—or should I say *it*?—stood at the club door, between me and the exit.

Panic spurted through me. Why had I visited my old college nightspot, lingering? With no real answer, I suspected it had something to do with feeling so utterly lonely, and the expectancy that lingered in the air, persistent as smoke. Our encounter inevitable, relief at being in a public place feathered my skin.

The bar and entrance were raised, the dance floor almost a pit between. Our gazes locked over writhing dancers' heads, my heart throbbing in time to the bass beat pulsing from giant speakers suspended overhead. Fatalistic as a contrived scene in a low-budget movie. But it was all too real.

You're born to trouble, Wren, I thought. *Otherworldly trouble.*

The signs had always been there; but their constant presence made them falsely familiar, less recognizable. Like not seeing the forest for the trees.

Suffering a mixture of anticipation and anxiety, I studied his black T-shirt and black leather jacket as he spoke with the bouncer stationed at the entrance. Even his pants were black

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leather now.

I tried to work up a sneer over such clichéd I'm-a-badass attire, but ended up biting my lip. The hide molded the masculine flesh of his long legs as he strode toward the steps leading into the crowd; my fingers itched to test its texture stretched taut over hard muscles. It certainly showcased narrow hips and thighs heavy with muscle.

The phrase 'love-muscle' popped unbidden into my mind.

My gaze dropped, totally without my permission, before I realized how low my thoughts—and now widened eyes—had descended. I jerked my gaze back to his face, hoping not to have been caught ogling. He smiled as he descended into the swaying dancers.

I closed my eyes and groaned. He'd *seen*.

Humiliation heated my face; his form burned into my brain. When, I wondered distractedly, had Micah become so big? So buff? Wide shoulders and that thick chest in biker garb rendered him sexy as hell. Why hadn't I noticed before? I'd seen him off and on for literally years.

Not up close and personal like that first time, but he'd been hanging around the fringes of my life.

Realization dawned with the force of a slap, dizzying me.

Somehow, maybe through his creature powers, he'd managed to always appear to me an *age-appropriate* epitome of an alpha male some . . . *thing*. Currently, he looked downright dangerous. Clever, clever critter. Because he certainly wasn't human.

I turned away, overwhelmed, worrying over how I'd come to this.

It'd begun innocently. Things have followed me home since I could walk. Dogs. Cats. A duck or two. Even hungry boys. Think that was more Mom's cooking though; at least at first. Word of a real cook gets around a town of working mothers. Ones who'd do well to buy stock in Stouffer's to recoup their grocery expenditures.

Runere McLain

But after my boobs magically inflated one summer, it'd be fairer to call it a draw. Boys are strange indeed with stranger fixations, most of them oral. Uncomfortable with the bouncy things newly pointing my way, far as I was concerned, they were the elephant in the room; seen but never acknowledged.

When I hit fifteen *other* things started dragging in after me.

And *he'd* started making himself known, more and more.

The three years between fifteen and eighteen, I learned my own version of strangeness, mostly alienating, crippling my social skills. I tried dating like other girls, but it's difficult to escape small town gossip when otherworldly things constantly approach you. And no date remains understanding when even a hint of intimacy in a conversation ends up a heated three-way diatribe. Especially when he can't see or hear the third party you're arguing with.

If ignored, my unwelcome chaperones resorted to spilling things. Or, if I was exposed to a subtle romantic suggestion, the candle flame jumped from wick to my date's sleeve as he reached for my hand across the table. Another one's parked car began rolling down the street. No denying where I stood priority wise with the guy with the Camaro. Hard to ignore the double whammy of being left standing alone on the sidewalk, watching his anxious face reflected in the mirror finish of all those lovingly applied coats of wax as he stumble-stepped alongside the driver's door trying to get in, crying, "Not my baby! Not my baby!"

I was the only one to see the ghostly figure at the wheel, grinning each time the vehicle accelerated—without the motor running—just out of reach. Or *Micah*, arms folded across his chest, shoulder against the wall in the shadows. *He* witnessed every dating debacle.

No matter how deeply I yearned for experiences of the heart, it was easier to give up the humiliation of dating, hormones unresolved, and concentrate elsewhere. Like trying to help the other *things* showing up.

Refusing to run, I snatched a furtive glance, gauging his

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position. The only way to describe his progress across the floor was a moving pocket of stillness. Dancers froze at the sight of him, staring motionless in hunger or awe until he was shielded from view once more by tightly swaying bodies.

Concentrating harder, I drew on harried memories, a deliberate effort to avoid acknowledging *his* presence in this smoky place.

Fairies are tiny and shy, happy to hide among foliage and flowers once settled in the garden. I've convinced at least a dozen people fireflies glow according to the color flower they feed from, my explanation for the brilliant hot pink, electric blue, and glittery silver nighttime flashes seen only around my yard. Yay for gullibility?

Elves, I continued the denial process, are a little difficult. But if you can teach them to poop in the neighbor's yard—the neighbor you don't like—they're not too bad. Unless there's beer at your backyard bar-b-que.

Elves love beer. The greedy little buggers will swill any bottle they can wrap their knobby little fingers around. Flat-backed in the grass, they heft the bottom with curly-toed shoes, tipping the bottle dry. It's a lie, but the mere suggestion snails might crawl into their bottle ensures guests secure them.

Ghosts? Ghosts make you pee yourself if they pop in unexpectedly, but a little sage, a little Holy Water laced with Latin, and they move on to the light. Of course, everyone else around you moves, too, only they tend to sidle. Away. Quickly.

A quick glance revealed *he* was close now. Palms suddenly damp, I resumed my dogged musings.

Of the larger, more solid things—*him* being the largest and most solid—like the sign in the yard says, “Please Don't Feed the Loup Garou”. Necessary advice. The key to remember with Werewolves is they're like raccoons and cats; feed them once and they hang around forever.

My shoulders slumped. My uncooperative subconscious kept sending my thoughts full circle, right back to *him*.

Runere McLain

I gave up, pondering him deliberately.

He'd revealed himself during my fifteenth summer, the one I dubbed Summer of the Boobs. Mine, and what the boys turned into.

Returning from night fishing at the river, I struggled to carry the five gallon bucket half full of fish and water, my tackle box, rod and reel and old folding camp chair I liked to sit on. I was regretting Barry Morgan had been forced home early with a treble hook in his right butt cheek, but he'd tried to give me a lesson in unhooking my bra I didn't need or appreciate and had to be taught manners.

I stepped in a grass camouflaged hole, stumbled and sloshed fishy water on my leg. My worn jeans now clung wetly from my thigh down. I set everything down to switch hands with the bucket handle, my left shoe squishing miserably with what the denim hadn't soaked up. As I flexed my sore fingers, the thought maybe I should have waited to hook Barry *after* I got home crossed my mind a little too late.

Resituated, I prepared to start off again, determined not to step off into anything else.

There *he* stood, not twenty feet from me, in the middle of the rutted dirt road. And different, I knew, from anything I'd yet encountered.

It *looked* like a boy. A really good looking boy with high, wide cheekbones. One with mesmerizing eyes—Was that a luminescent flash?—and tantalizing smile. I'd never truly noticed a boy's smile before. My heartbeat stumbled in reaction, disconcerting. It flustered me, as did the heated quiver, low down.

It dressed like a boy. If you like long-haired boys in all black, boots and fingerless leather gloves. It disturbed me I rather liked it a lot. In high school, hell, even through college, every other guy fell just that little bit short in the visual impact department, years of disappointment and disgruntled attitude *his* fault.

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It sounded like a boy. I take that back. Great Aunt Margaret, the one mom hid the bottle from as soon as she'd had the second drink, had described it perfectly, about a half-hour after she'd found the bottle again.

Micah'd said a polite hello (yes, *he* followed me home like everything else), and she'd declared in that bourbon husked voice, "My God, Wren, that boy's gotta voice like chocolate-dipped sin!" Followed him around begging him to "say something else" while drinking fast enough her bourbon on the rocks had no opportunity to become bourbon and water. She was right; Micah had entranced me with nothing more than that deep, rich, oh-so-seductive voice.

But no boy I ever met could move so fast my eye couldn't follow. Unless Mom's apple pie was involved. There was no pie the night I first met him. Just a summer full moon . . .

I frowned, remembering. He'd looked *good*, in that sexy dirty boy way, even back then. But it was nothing compared to his aura now. I frowned harder. Every other female in the place was noticing that invisible glow too. And clustering.

Around him. Slowing his forward movement. What happened to all that speed?

The third smile he winged to an admirer as he pushed his way through the crowd turned me to the bar, fuming for no reason I could name, signaling madly for a drink. Shades of Aunt Margaret, I needed fortification; the only way I'd survive failure to compete with all the femme fatales in attendance.

But why should I feel inferior? Education wise I was light years ahead of these snotty plastic Barbies. Twenty-three years old with a double degree. Biology.

And crypto zoology tossed in as an afterthought. Or self-defense; the jury was still out.

Yeah, right, I derided, morose. Smart is *sooo* sexy.

Snatching the squat glass as soon as the bartender set it in front of me, my lips latched onto the rim, sucking it dry as a sinking shrimp boat's hold after the Coast Guard helicopter

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dropped a Jabsco pump aboard.

The bartender quirked a questioning brow. I dabbed a finger to the corner of my mouth before pointing out I'd asked for whiskey, straight up, ice water on the side.

"Ruins them both if you mix them together," I explained, rattling the dry cubes in my glass, other hand stirring a finger in an invisible air drink.

His second brow went up. But he dug under the bar, setting a clean shot glass in front of me. Noting the white-knuckled grip of the hand I'd drop to the bar edge, he swapped it for a larger glass without prompting.

Tumbler of amber fluid almost to my lips, I jumped as a hand slipped under my hair and warm fingers circled the back of my neck. I bobbed the drink, and Canada's best rained on the bar. I set it down before I lost my grip completely.

"Still spilling things?" an amused voice murmured near my ear. Familiar, but somehow deeper. Older. Experienced . . . unlike me. My eyes closed on a shiver of yearning. Oh, yes, chocolate dipped sin.

"I was jostled," I flared. It sounded so prickly my lips should have bled as the lie fell from my mouth. I braced myself. Dared a side-eyed peek at him.

He looked the same, yet different. How was that possible? God, he was hot in more ways than one. My heart pounded, flushing blood to the surface of my skin, making it ultra sensitive to the body heat he exuded. And the palm he smoothed up and down my arm.

He was so large he loomed, the heat and hardness of him crowding me from behind. Something that generally made me nervous with a guy. But with him I felt enveloped, protected. Ridiculous since I knew nothing about him.

I couldn't explain it, not even to myself. But his strong fingers moved in a gentle massage on my tense nape and I relaxed against my will.

I needed to stay on guard, I reminded myself, casually work

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up to the questions eating at me for so long.

“Why are you here?” I blurted, instead. He studied me a moment before answering.

“Because it’s time. Finally,” he tacked on. Vehemence roughened the word so my heart stuttered anew. Made a girl wonder, was he as affected as she was?

His hand slid from my nape to toy with individual curls spilling forward over my shoulder and I missed the warmth. He wrapped their length around his fist, seeming fascinated by the texture as he rubbed the strands between the pad of his thumb and curled knuckles.

Using his grip on my hair for leverage, he forced my face up, locking his heated gaze to mine. The sheer dominance in the gesture dropped the bottom from my stomach, weakened my knees. His other hand settled on my hip, fingers biting possessively as he drew me back against his body.

His warmed male scent surrounded me, flooded my nostrils so I couldn’t help myself: I inhaled deeply. The heated spice of him, erotic, quickened something deep inside. He leaned down and I rose to my toes anticipating his kiss.

Only he stopped, his breath a sweet allure, the barest millimeter separating our lips.

“Been kissed much?” His words teased little puffs of air against my need-sensitized lips, and I knew true frustration.

Robbed of the ability of speech at the mere possibility of a kiss from those firm curving lips of his, my breathing grew erratic. I *needed* the press of his mouth to mine. Feeling a little desperate my hands lifted, wrapping themselves of their own volition in the front of his open jacket to keep him close. The negative shake of my head was a bit jerky.

“Good.” His mouth curved in a slow, sure smile; so close I could *feel* the changing tension in the skin of his lips.

“Except Barry,” the taunt slipped my guard, his arrogance begging a poke.

His body stiffened a moment. Then he relaxed, drawling,

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“Yeah, one date and he was hooked.”

I grinned. I couldn’t help it.

“What about the guy claiming he *burned* for you?” Was that bite lacing his words jealousy?

I shrugged. “One of your buddies flambéed his sleeve. He had to go home. Alone.” I frowned. Had he just muttered, “Saved his damned life” under his breath?

“And the Camaro guy?” he prodded. My heart sang! It *was* jealousy!

“I liked the car,” I replied, straight-faced.

“You like fast?” I nodded. He adjusted my position, draping me along his muscular body. “Dangerous?” His breath fell on my neck. Goose bumps crawled up my arms. Flames shot through me as his teeth threatened the tender skin of my throat.

Didn’t know if my “God, yes” was in response to his question or heat flaring through me.

He pulled slightly back. Studied my bemused expression. “My bike’s outside,” he tempted. “Fast. Dangerous.” His tongue stroking my throat separated the last words.

“Like its owner?” I gasped, lost in sensation. He grinned, strong white teeth, canines just that bit lengthened.

“Do you even know who I am?” It was important to me.

“Since the first time I saw you at the river,” he avowed. “Barefoot, bathed in moonlight, one with the night. Like me.” Gripping my hands, he talked, moving backwards.

I looked around, startled. He’d tugged me out the door, clear to his monster of a motorcycle. He bundled me in his jacket then swung a long leg over, sliding forward to pat the leather seat behind him. I hesitated.

“Who am I?” I insisted, sounding desperate.

Strong hands cupped my face. His single word answer rumbled from deep in his chest, a sincere possessive growl.

“Mine.”

His kiss finally came, his mouth and thrusting tongue wild

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with carnal promise. He broke away, hand shaking as he dragged my leg over the back of the bike. Unusually daring I opened my blouse, scooted close. Lifting his shirttail, I felt him jerk, “Wren!” hissed, his skin twitching as I settled my breasts against his muscled back.

“Damn, woman. You’re killing me,” he grated, hoisting the heavy bike upright like it was nothing, heeling the kick-stand up.

“That’s what you get for making me wait!”

He twisted around, expression incredulous. “*I* waited for *you*. Until I just couldn’t stand being alone any longer.”

We stared at each other.

“Don’t you know how to start this thing?” My prompt carried an edge.

He turned around, kicked the bike to life. My arms wrapped tight around his waist as we roared out the parking lot. Cool night wind ruffling our hair, the bike rumbled like a beast beneath us.

But it couldn’t match the rumble I felt filling the beast clasped in my arms.

My beast. Claiming me at last.

Eternally Yours

by Christine McKay

The first time I died was around the time of the Great Plague. My *dear* mother had neglected to tell me that I technically couldn't die; she'd pledged her unborn child's soul to a demon in exchange for a man's heart. The man was not my father. He died within a year of her winning his attention. His death left her a rich but bitter widow.

Money did not spare either of us from the plague.

At age five the mere sight of the aforementioned demon caused me to wet myself. Talk about monsters lurking beneath a child's bed... Mine had blood-stained teeth, claws like scythe blades, and unblinking white pupil-less eyes which prized a person's most hidden desires from his or her soul. A child has many petty wants; the demon exploited all of mine.

As an adult, the mere *thought* of the demon's impending arrival was enough to send my innards into a twisting, grimacing vat of --well, you get the picture. Luckily, my Mother Superior's spine was buttressed with knight's steel. Of course she still had her soul. And presumably, God, the choirs of angels, and all the saints at her back. I'd be a little more bold if I had an army such as that.

Ah yes, the only reprieve I found from the demon's attentions lay in seeking sanctuary on holy ground. He could still torture me and often he did, just to show me he still possessed the power to do so. But he couldn't bend me to his will. I was no longer his tool. As you can imagine, this angered him.

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Only Mother Superior and my confessor knew my “sin”. I thought of my mother’s sin as my own, though both Mother and my confessor told me otherwise. Lord only knew what the other sisters thought when I retreated to my cell, locked in by Mother Superior until the danger passed. My life was not how I imagined it, but I was relatively safe, from myself and others. I had not chosen a life of obedience, celibacy and poverty, but circumstances forced such unspoken vows upon me. What little of the cursed money I still retained from my mother, I spent upon books and manuscripts and learning, until our little library outshone all the nearby monasteries.

In hindsight, this luxury was my downfall.

Books drew monks like trumpet vine drew hummingbirds. Only the monks were not nearly as colorful or high-active as the birds, though their sermons were considerably more entertaining than our ancient priest’s. And he was only too happy to relinquish that particular duty to the monks.

Brother Henryk was a particular favorite of the sisters. With his dark good looks, serious manner, and smooth voice, not a single sister missed services when he preached. I admit, I was also ensnared, but it was his ministrations the night I fell ill that opened my heart to him.

Tomorrow we’d celebrate All Saints Day, but before us lay an all night vigil which was spent in prayer for the souls of the lost (ahem, myself) and the departed. At evening services, Brother Henryk lectured us on the pagan background of this holy day, a fascinating history I’d never heard mentioned from the pulpit. I turned my missal’s page and noticed I left a fingerprint smudge of blood upon the parchment. Snapping the book shut, I immediately rose and exited the pew. The sisters, enraptured by Brother Henryk’s speech or used to my disturbances, ignored me. Behind me, I heard the shuffle of Mother Superior’s coarse robes. Brother Henryk paused and looked right at me. I swear his dark gaze peered into my soul-less cavity and knew my sin. I dropped my gaze, embarrassed, and fled.

Mother Superior and I did not speak in the hallway. Our

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movements were rote, governed by actions of the past. I sometimes wondered why she bothered to try to save me, but I was afraid to ask. Frankly, I feared everything: her condemnation, being turned out of the convent, myself, and of course, the demon and his plans for me.

I entered my cell and lay down on my cot. Mother Superior dropped to her knees, praying while she fished the thick chain from beneath my bed and wrapped my limbs. Some of the links were warped, evidence of previous battles. The locks sealed me to my bed and my fate with reassuring clicks. Mother wiped my brow with a damp cloth and came away with blood. She hesitated. Bless her. Bless her ten thousand times.

“Go,” I begged. My back arched off the bed. I swallowed a scream. Inside my head, I heard the demon laugh. “Quickly!”

She placed a stick between my teeth, then bound my mouth with a strip of cloth. It wouldn’t do for the sisters or God forbid, the monks, to hear me curse. The cot’s frame groaned as my limbs twisted, testing the wood and metal’s strength, always testing. My hearing sharpened, my senses no longer my own. I heard the bolt slide into place, the metal key turn the lock, Mother’s fading footsteps, the swish of her skirts, the clatter of her rosary beads, even the whisper of her hurried prayers.

Tonight was different. Tonight foreign metal played with the lock tumblers and clicked. The bolt slid open. I shouted a muffled warning. Something in the bed’s frame cracked, just before I dislocated my shoulder. The pain swept through me, wringing tears and a gagged sob.

Brother Henryk slipped into my room. He said not a word, but proceeded to lay white candles in a circle around my bed. These he lit with a snap of his finger and a whispered word. My eyes widened. The demon’s voice hissed in my head.

Pulling a chair beside my cot, he undid the gag and removed the piece of wood from my mouth.

“Fool! Leave now.”

“Be at peace. You are why I came,” he murmured. Pulling

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an ointment jar from beneath his robe, he unscrewed the cap, dipped his finger into the stuff, and proceeded to draw strange symbols on my bared arms. He sketched a star on one palm, a sliver of moon on the other. The ointment tingled and smelled of herbs.

“What are you doing?”

“Protecting you.”

“It’s a little late for that.”

“Haven’t you been listening to my sermons?” His hair, ridiculously long for a monk and only passable perhaps for a knight returning from the Crusades, shadowed his face as he worked.

“Of course,” I snapped. I tried to think, but pain robbed me of reason. When I recovered my breath, he mopped my brow with the same rag Mother had.

“I had not realized how bad it was.”

“You’re as much a monk as I am a nun.” My voice deepened, the words twisting with an accent I didn’t normally possess.

“You are Cristiana.” He placed his hand over my heart.

I arched my back and screamed a string of obscenities which made my cheeks flush even though I couldn’t control myself. He covered my mouth with his hand. I bit into his palm.

“Blood to blood,” he murmured. “I call on the Guardian to the East. Hold fast the gate.” The candles surrounding us guttered, then flared, thin flames kissing the ceiling like sabers from exotic lands I’d only read about.

I collapsed. “Why are you here?” I whimpered, my voice temporarily returned to me.

“We’ve met before,” he said simply.

“I’d have remembered that.”

I must have said it a bit too fervently, for the briefest of smiles crossed his face. “I promise you, I speak the truth.”

Another pain ripped through me. The wood creaked, the

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chain carving into my wrists. Henryk grimaced. Gripping my wrists, he pressed me to the bed. "She is mine!" I/the demon shouted.

Henryk grunted. "She was taken from me."

"I will kill her before you get her back." My voice, again, not my own. I was so sick of being a prisoner. At the convent. In my own body. *This life and probably the next*, I thought wearily.

"I don't think so." Leaning forward, Henryk pressed his lips to my forehead. "Cristiana, try to remember. Try to come back to me."

"You're confusing me with someone else." I screamed, "Mother!"

He put his hand over my mouth yet again. "Your death during the plague wasn't the first time you died. We were handfasted on Midsummer's Eve." He spoke hurriedly, glancing over his shoulder as we both heard approaching footsteps. "An archer's arrow pierced your heart as we stood inside the sacred circle. Not all the guardians were invoked. The circle was incomplete. That *thing* which has you, possessed you before your mother cursed you. You are doomed to a cycle of deaths and rebirths until you remember. Until you fight and break free."

I shuddered. He spoke so sincerely, so truthfully. How could I not remember? How could it be true?

Still covering my mouth with his hand, he pressed his lips to my forehead and his other hand over my heart. The words he whispered against my brow were in a language my heart told me I should know, but my head refused to remember. He switched to a tongue I understood. "He's failed to take you all these years because you placed your heart in my hands. I've come to help you get your soul back. Help me help you. Fight." He held his left hand up. The tip of his ring finger was missing. "You bit it off the last time I tried to exorcise you. Remember?"

Mother Superior appeared at that moment, all righteous indignation. I turned my head and wept.

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When I recovered from this latest demonic episode, I avoided “Brother” Henryk as if he possessed the plague. He continued to preach at our services. I continued to listen, but now half-formed memories haunted my dreams. Of Henryk, dressed in green and brown with a mask of stag horns and vines. Of myself, garbed in flowing white robes and bearing a peeled willow branch. And worse memories for one supposed to have taken vows of chastity. Henryk did not wear a ring as Brother Aaron, his superior, did. What did that make him? Half a brother? Given my dreams and his words, not a holy man at all.

All remained silent until the Abbot and his black-robed brothers arrived a few weeks later. “I have been informed that you have one demon-possessed in your midst,” the Abbot proclaimed.

Who had tattled? I glanced, terrified, from Mother Superior to the Abbot. Brother Aaron? Henryk? One of the novices? It didn’t matter. I was to be exorcised.

The candles were lit by deeply hooded and unidentifiable brothers. I lay bound to the altar in holy-water soaked rope. Wherever it touched my bared skin, it burned. When Henry noticed this, he had to be physically restrained by the others.

But the monks had made a fatal mistake. They did not want to sully our church so another place was chosen for rites. Unfinished, Magdalene Chapel had yet to be christened and lay outside the original convent boundaries on land donated by a grateful patron. Invoking the first of the exorcism prayers only goaded the demon.

While I screamed and writhed and bled on my altar of stone, one of the robed monks stepped forward and drove his fist through the priest leading the prayers. He raised his blood-garbed fist like a gauntlet. Peeling back his hood, the demon fixed his gaze on the horrified crowd. The abbot fainted. Henryk shook off his stunned captors’ grips and drew a sword. Brother Aaron calmly picked up the book of prayers and began again.

The demon strode forward. A monk blocked his path, a cross clutched in his hands. The demon struck him down. The

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hem of Brother Aaron's cloak began to burn, but he continued his prayers. I felt as if I was burning with him. Flames crept up the brother's roped belt. He ignored them. The walls of the chapel shuddered, then the south wall collapsed.

I burned. Brother Aaron burned. And Henryk burned, but with a flame of his own power. Abruptly I remembered another burning. The raiders were coming. Our fields burned. We had so little time. I raised a cup to the sky, Henryk's hands covering mine, begging the deities to protect our people.

I sat upright, the ropes burned from my body. "Samtliche," I whispered. Demon and Henryk froze, staring at me. "I bound you once, Samtliche. I shall bind you again."

With a snarl, the demon vanished, but the fires continued to burn.

Brother Aaron grabbed the folds of my cloak. His throat worked but no sound escaped his burnt lips. He tried again. "Holy ground, Cristiana, is made every time a saint's foot strikes God's earth." Closing his eyes, he died.

My woolen skirt soaked up Brother Aaron's blood like the desert sands stealing moisture from a dying man's flesh. I didn't care.

I need not be imprisoned on holy ground. I need only walk in the shadow of a saint. Who better than a man who shunned his own redemption to follow his beloved through time?

Gradually, the sounds of the monastery grounds returned. Someone chanted Last Rites, presumably for Brother Aaron. Fat, rainbow-hued droplets splashed around me, like a forest canopy showering an early morning pilgrim. *Holy water*. I did not burn. I turned my hand up, catching several water droplets in my cupped palm. Sunlight crept over the chapel's broken stone windowsill and puddled in my hand, changing the water into thousands of prism-filled promises.

A hand appeared in my line of sight, shadowing my tiny palm-sheltered lake. I didn't dare move. The fingers wiggled. I

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noticed the missing tip of the ring finger.

The fingers wiggled again, more impatiently this time. Taking a deep breath, I raised my eyes. Henryk met my timid gaze. I wanted to ask if he'd heard Brother Aaron's words.

"You fought the demon for me." It wasn't the first thing I wanted to say. Thanking him for my wretched life would have been more appropriate. I didn't want to die again. Dying hurt. I looked down at Brother Aaron's burned face. Tears collected in my lowered lashes; I fought them back. Living hurt, too.

"Yes."

I wanted to ask if he chose damnation or was damned because of me. I couldn't do it. "Thank you."

He tipped his head. A mahogany lock dropped over one eye. He impatiently tossed his head back, like a well-bred stallion chafing against his leather restraints. "Is that all?"

"I'm ready to learn. To fight," I quickly added.

"About time," he grumbled.

I tipped my hand. The miniature lake, still calm and so tempting, fractured. The holy water spilled onto the hard-packed earth, no longer one solid lake but hundreds of droplets once again. I placed my blessed hand into his. He didn't flinch. His fingers closed around mine, strong and warm.

"Where will we go?" I whispered.

"Away."

I placed my other hand in his. It was sticky, with blood, I presumed. How fitting. Human frailty sealed one set of joined hands; faith the other.

"There are worse things out there than what we faced today," he said.

"I know. I thought you'd died." I didn't remember everything, but I didn't want to hurt him with that knowledge. I remembered just enough; he was important to me.

His hands clenched mine. He brought our joined hands to his lips. "Cristiana," he whispered.

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Standing on my tiptoes, I leaned forward and kissed him.

He groaned. Dropping my hands, he swept me into a full-bodied embrace. He tasted of wild things: truffles buried beneath loamy earth, ice cold water from an unsullied mountain spring, tart like a newly unfurled comfrey leaf. My hands slid up his arms, feeling the flex and bunch of his muscles. I cupped his stubbled cheeks, then plunged my fingers into his thick hair.

Someone cleared his throat.

Henryk paused his ravaging of my face and glanced over my shoulder. "Yes, Abbot?" he said, face wiped clean of all the emotion I'd just seen it bear.

"Bishop Weldon is a worldly man. My report will not mention any battles with otherworldly creatures."

"Of course."

"It will express my regret in losing both Brother Aaron and his promising assistant, Brother Henryk, as well as several novices, including Sister Cristiana, in the collapse of Magdalene Chapel. Do you understand?"

I understood. Even though we'd survived, we were being sentenced to death as far as the official Church was concerned. I turned in Henryk's embrace. The Abbot wouldn't quite meet my stare. "Pray for us." He met my gaze then with surprise and a hint of fear.

Henryk's arms tightened around me. "Yes, please do."

Abbot Paul glanced from Henryk to I and back to Henryk. He nodded once, a short choppy gesture, as if words failed him. What did one say to someone haunted by the likes of what he'd just seen?

Henryk surprised us all then by dropping to his knees, taking me with him. "A blessing, if you please, before we go." Henryk pressed his lips to the crown of my hair, our heads bowed.

"Oh, children, what do I say?" Abbot Paul whispered.

Henryk briefly lifted his head. "Anything from the heart

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will do.”

While Abbot Paul called upon his rote lessons to guide his words, I silently prayed in my own sloppy way. *Keep us safe. Make me strong. Help me learn to fight rather than flee.* And most importantly, *Protect Henryk from harm for though I do not possess my soul, my heart is in his keeping and his in mine.*

When the demon and I next meet, it will be I who hold blessed steel between us.

Warrior's Heart

by Alicia Nordwell

It wasn't that instant, he's meant to be mine, fireworks and cymbals crashing moment that romantic women think will come for them. My moment of meeting came on the battlefield as I was forced back to back with a stranger. No, it wasn't romantic at all, something I was truly thankful for. I, Aleria of the Falcon Clan, could never admit to having a romantic bone in my body. Or so I thought.

I was fast, faster than most of the other fledglings I trained with in Jintue. We slashed and parried, darted in and then back out as we twisted and swayed away from the wooden practice weapons. My body was small and slight just like the other Carthera fledglings. Until we matured we looked much like regular young humans. Bird Carthera were smaller than most clans but when we got our wings and talons we more than made up for it with utter ferocity in battle. Our Jintue training from a young age assured our supremacy. Of course I didn't have my wings and talons yet and unless I met my mate I never would.

I refused to go hide with the other fledglings when an attack came from the Lynx Carthera clan. They wanted to hunt the humans in the territory my clan protected. My father did not have time to argue with me but roared at me to stay back from the main attack as he flew to defend our eyrie. I circled to the south but that didn't stop a small group of lynx from splitting off and trying to flank the main battle and I met one of them sneaking through a field.

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He attacked and I shrieked in pain when a claw snagged my arm and sliced a deep cut that instantly throbbed with burning pain as I began to drip blood onto the rocky ground. I glared at the cat, "You'll pay for that!"

He laughed at me, "What are you going to do little bird? You're all alone now." He stalked me, razor sharp claws in his fingers coming out when he flexed them over and over. I could see the fading light catch his predator eyes and they gleamed with a cold green light. I pretended to stumble backward, half falling down into a vulnerable crouch which I knew the lynx would not be able to resist.

I grabbed the large knife out of my boot sheath, holding it up with both hands as the lynx jumped. His assumption that I was weak and helpless would be his biggest mistake. I visualized the strike as I waited for his body to come down on mine but the impact never came. A split second before he made contact a body came flying from the left and slammed into him, knocking him away from me and the death waiting for him. My unnecessary and unwanted defender rolled and sprang to his feet as the lynx screamed his fury at being thwarted in his attack.

"Run!" The man yelled as he swept his blade in the air in front of the crouching cat. I looked at him in disbelief. He was human but he was not human. Somehow I got the sense that he was also bird Carthera. I was puzzled and confused and angry, not a good combination in a fight. He was bigger than most of the men in my clan but not yet graced by wings or talons. Whoever he was, whatever he was, I couldn't believe he thought he could order me around.

"I do not run!" I seethed in fury. This threat would be removed if only this idiot hadn't interfered. Suddenly I heard a sound that chilled me; a snarl coming from behind us was the only sound the second prowling lynx made as he came to join his friend in a bit of bird baiting. "This isn't good," I said, "not good at all." The man risked a quick glance over his shoulder and cursed.

"Back to back," he said and I saw the wisdom in that. I

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moved my body to stand up against him, my head just barely topping his shoulders.

"Do you know the ninth move?" he asked me as we slowly moved to counter our attackers who began to pace in a circle trying to separate us.

"Yes. I'm surprised you do. Do you think it will work on the ground?" I was wishing now that I had listened to my father as I heard sounds from the main battle fade. I was too focused on the disaster I was in to pay attention. The lynx Carthera I had been fighting originally was in front of me and licking his lips as he stared at the blood still dripping down my arm. I didn't want my knife to slip in the blood so I held it in my other hand, waiting for the signal to attack.

"You think you can fight us?" the lynx laughed derisively. He was on all fours, muscles moving around his shoulders in disturbing ways as he crept a few paces closer. "You will die," he snarled.

"Not before you!" I felt the movement of my companion and surged to the left. The lynx moved faster than I thought and changed the direction of his attack almost as fast as I moved. Instead of running away I went straight for him. At the last second I leapt up and over him, twisting my body. I rolled and came back up in a blur before I launched myself on to his back. I reached up with my knife and sliced it across his throat. Blood sprayed from the wound as he snarled before his eyes widened and he slumped slowly to the ground. I rode his back down until I was sure he was dead.

I looked for the other lynx only to find him also laid out on the ground with blood pooling under his head and body and his lifeless eyes now staring out in space. I shuddered. Movement caught my eye and I brought up my knife as I watched the strange man came toward me slowly.

"It's okay, you're okay now," he crooned at me, "put down the knife sweetheart."

I narrowed my eyes at him, "Sweetheart? I don't know who the hell you are and I may owe you for helping me kill this scum

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but I am not your sweetheart!" I got stiffly to my feet, looking carefully around us to make sure that there were no more enemies creeping up. I cocked my head; I still couldn't hear any noise from the main attack.

"I've got to find my father." I kept my blade out and stalked off toward the northern approach to our eyrie trying to ignore the man who followed me.

"My name is Seth," he said as he moved up beside me, ignoring my glare and the slight move I made with my knife. I continued to walk; I needed to know my father was safe before I could fall apart. I had never killed anyone before and while my predator nature was satisfied the civilized part of me was appalled and in shock.

"Aren't you going to tell me your name?" he asked, "It's only polite." That stopped me dead in my tracks. He smirked at me.

"Polite? My people are being attacked, my family and friends are in danger and you expect me to be polite! Why don't you just go leap off a cliff somewhere?" I was glaring at him and imagining kicking his ass. Polite? I'd show him polite.

Without warning I rushed him, hooking one foot behind his leg and shoving him to the ground. I straddled him and shoved my face into his, trying desperately to ignore the feel of his lean hips between my thighs. "You are not wanted or needed. Leave me alone!" I hissed holding my knife ready.

Moving almost as fast as I could he grabbed my thighs and rolled us, landing on top of me with his body cradled between my wide open thighs. I gasped as I felt him lunge against the center of my body but it was only to give him enough room to reach up and force my hand to drop my knife. I shrieked in fury and tried to get him off me but he was too heavy, much heavier than any of the males I had trained with in Jintue. I slumped on the ground under him, panting in exhaustion.

"I want to know your name, that's all. I helped you, saved you really, and that's not too much to ask."

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I glared at him. "Go to hell! I don't owe you anything. I didn't ask for your help." I pushed at his chest, trying to shove him off me.

He smirked down at me as if amused by my struggles. "Your name or I'll just stay here until your father finds us. I'm sure that he will find our current position very interesting." He ground his hips into me and an incredible heat flashed through my body as I arched up just a little into him. He chuckled and I felt myself flushing in embarrassment and fury. I could only imagine what my father would say, much less my brothers if they saw this... this... man on top of me out in public.

"Aleria!" I stopped struggling and gave in.

"What was that?" He cocked his head and grinned at me.

"My name is Aleria. You win, okay? I don't want anyone to see me like this," I could feel the blush blazing in my cheeks, "so do you think you could get off now?"

He pushed up and back off my body, kneeling in front of me while I looked for my knife. When I looked at him he held it up wagging it a little.

"Give that back!"

"I want something in return then."

I eyed him warily; something about this man intrigued me even as his manner repelled me. "I already told you my name."

"Well, I am certain you can think of something else then." He knelt there in the dirt as I came up to a crouch. He was too cocky. I was going to take my knife back and maybe knock him down a limb or two.

I lunged at him and hit the pressure point in his shoulder which caused him to drop my knife. I started to crow in triumph when his other hand came up and around my back, pinning my much slenderer body to his. His face was barely an inch from mine and I gasped when I saw the intent in his ice blue eyes just before his mouth dipped to mine.

None of my warrior training had prepared me for the damage that came from something as simple as the soft touch of

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his lips to mine. It was my first kiss and I was overwhelmed and aroused; I could feel it deep inside, could feel him somehow completing me. I felt at peace, my arm no longer throbbed, my anger melted away, and I couldn't help but respond to the passion overtaking me. I grabbed the back of his head and kissed him back fiercely, wishing I hadn't hit him so hard so that he could wrap both of his strong arms around me.

I needed to breathe so I pulled back and stared at him, feeling that bond to him still there even with the kiss broken. Oh gods! This man was my mate. This very strange somehow human but not human man was destined to be my other half? No! I wasn't ready for this.

I pushed away from him and jumped to my feet. I took off running and luckily saw no one until I came to my own home. My mother had already returned from the battle and stood in the kitchen making tea and food for the rest of the family. My father and brothers would be hungry and the way she calmly made sandwiches assured me they were not hurt.

"Aleria?" My mother looked at me where I stood frozen in the door, "You're hurt, sit down!" She grabbed a towel off the counter and hurried over to me. I was still in shock as I sat at the table, not even noticing the cut.

"Mama? I... I met him." I was so confused.

She glanced up at me sharply. "Him?"

"My mate, Seth. I was being attacked by a lynx and he came to help me. We fought together when another one showed up. When they were dead he kissed me and I felt it. It was so strong, Mama. He's my mate."

"Oh, honey," my mother cupped my cheek with her palm, "that's a good thing, isn't it? You'll be mated and when you have your ceremony you'll get your wings. You won't be a fledgling anymore."

"I'm scared. I'm not like other girls, Mama, what if he doesn't like me?" I was crying, damn it, I hated crying! I wanted to be strong like my brothers.

Alicia Nordwell

“Well if he kissed you he must have seen something he likes. Don’t worry, love. If you’re mates it will all work out.”

She bandaged my arm while I drank tea waiting on my family. My father and brothers came home rowdy with battle high. They cheered and celebrated when my mother shared the news of my mate. They wanted to go find him but my mother somehow convinced them not to try.

“He’ll be here on his own,” she said. I was tired; too tired to think about any of this anymore so I went to bed. I was so exhausted I expected to sleep without dreaming but my mind had other ideas. I found my dreams plagued with thoughts of the man who had come to my aid. Seth...

The next morning he came for me. He brought sky lilies and my knife. I laughed, perhaps he did understand me. We walked along the cliff edge by my home and talked and got to know one another. Day after day he came back, wooing me carefully. I learned about his human father and Carthera mother, something I had never heard of before but it explained his human name. I told him of my dream to be the best, to follow my father and brothers into the Falcons, the elite hunters and defenders of our clan.

“Is there any place in that dream for me?” he asked me.

I blushed as I remembered the dreams I had every night since I met him. Knowing him now there was nothing I wanted more than to be his mate. “Yes,” I said boldly.

The ceremony to mate us couldn’t come fast enough. A month later the morning finally arrived. I wore a traditional blue gown. It was silk and backless, leaving my skin bare. Seth was dressed in black leather pants with his torso bare. The thick muscles from his human father made my heart race as we came together under the sky and before our family and clans.

The bonding ceremony was short. We were asked to acknowledge our bond before our assembled loved ones in the ancient ceremony and assent freely to mate. I had eyes for no one but Seth, making my family chuckle when I didn’t see Velarta approach. The leader of our clan held out the knife to

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complete our bond and I took it.

I took a deep breath. "I share my heart, my soul and my body with my mate." I cut a deep slice into the ball of my thumb. Blood welled up as I passed the knife back to Velarta who cleaned it on a white silk cloth and then offered it to Seth.

"I share my heart, my soul, and my body with my mate." He cut a matching wound in his thumb. We moved toward each other. I brought my hand up to his mouth and watched in fascination as he took my thumb into his mouth. I could sense his thumb in front of me though I could not look away from him. I took it into my mouth and suckled just as I felt him take his first taste of my blood.

The bond surged from a single tenuous link to a shining cable that bound his heart to mine. I could feel his ecstasy echo my own as the pleasure took over. I could barely hear our families began to sing our birthsongs that wove together into one harmonious whole as our bond was completed.

Suddenly my back arched and I lost my hold on Seth's thumb. We both let go but managed to lock our hands together. I could feel my hands tingle and a huge pressure in my back. From the small nubs behind my shoulder blades two wings began to unfurl and I could feel talons begin to grow from Seth's hands to lock together with mine. I stared at his wings, the feathers a deep black that matched his hair. He was gorgeous with them spread behind him like a black velvet curtain.

The edges of my wing blended with his, soft dove gray with shining white tips. The instinct to fly was strong. With my head thrown back I called out to the sky as my wings spread wide behind me. Seth's voice joined mine and we sang our bonding song into the crooning melody our families still sang. Standing before the edge of the cliff I leaned up and kissed my mate breathlessly as he brushed his hand down my cheek. We turned to face the open sky and jumped off together.

Complicated Cargo

by Frances Pauli

Rina slid her boots off the ship's console and frowned at the light. She reached out and gave it a flick, but it continued to flash, casting the surrounding toggles into a dance of fiery reflection. She sighed. She might not be the galaxy's most experienced pilot, but any idiot could tell you a flashing red light meant nothing but trouble.

She brushed aside her rations tray and triggered the comm. "Phil, you got a handle on that?" Her fingers drummed a rhythm against the nearest gauge. Everything looked fine. She counted flashes, reached five before the synthetic voice answered.

"I'm on it, Captain." The droid's limbs clicked as they unfolded. Rina could hear the distinctive clatter across the line.

She waited. Once Phil extracted himself from storage, he could run a diagnostic from the closest port. He could also handle more repairs than most graduate mechanics, and he wasn't half bad with a weapon either. The droid had cost her the total from her first five runs, but he was well worth it. He earned his keep, and his skills alleviated any need for a crew.

"Captain?"

"Yeah, Phil. What is it?"

"Cargo bay. Something's set off a motion detector."

"Damn." They'd probably picked up a rat along with their cargo. "Is Tamarinth known for any nasty pest species?"

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“Only the Tamrinthians.”

“Nice. Okay, hop down there for me and see if you can hunt the little bugger down.” She spun her chair to the side, resting her boots atop the pile of clothing, equipment and generic detritus that filled the second chair in the cabin. Rina grinned. No copilot required—not so long as she ran the back lanes, not so long as she kept to a class C freighter.

All of the above suited her just fine. No crew meant no sharing. It meant no conversation, no arguments, and no complications. Rina hadn’t had a complication in her life in more months than she cared to count. A burst of static rattled through the cabin. The light continued to flash on the console, but now Phil’s voice joined it, garbled and higher pitched than normal. “Phil?”

“—Not a rat, Captain.” The static growled over his words. “Cargo—compromised—assistance.”

“Shit.” The vid screen faced co-pilot territory. Rina shoved the junk to the floor and slid into the other chair. She jabbed at the controls and waited for visuals to hum to life.

Phil’s voice continued to mumble through the interference. Not a great time for communications to glitch on her. She could hear clicking, static and not a whole lot more.

“Come on,” she growled at the vid. It fluttered twice and then steadied. A bird’s eye view of her cargo bay filled the screen. The huge crates stood in lines down the room’s length, kept tight against any jostling by a layer of netting. Nothing looked amiss. She tapped the console and the perspective shifted. She twitched the view right and caught the line of cryo-couches at the fore end.

They’d picked up four loaded cryo-units along with the usual shipment of crates. She squinted at the screen. The furthest bed looked wrong. She counted indicator lights, tried to get a visual on the panels, but an inconvenient row of boxes blocked the camera. Rina toggled to ground level. She flicked through cameras and watched the picture shift down the rows. There. The second to last eye had a clear view of the couches. At this

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altitude, however, she couldn't make out the controls. Where the hell was Phil? She leaned closer to the console and squinted just as a figure appeared on screen.

Rina jumped back against the chair. "Who the hell?" Her pulse stuttered at the surge of adrenaline. The stranger on screen stopped directly in front of the camera and stared up at her. With trembling hands, she tapped a zoom and watched his features close in.

The word "broad" came to mind. "Muscles" followed, and then "practically naked." She sat up straighter, but kept her eyes riveted. He wore a cryo suit, barely enough to keep things civilized. One of her frozen passengers then, which meant at least one of the units had malfunctioned.

"Damn." She tapped the zoom again, and his face filled her view, tan skin, long, white-blond hair. His square jaw tensed and released quickly, and something around belly level squirmed inside her. Complications—she knew it. Flashing lights meant trouble.

When the stranger grinned, a sideways amused thing that darted through the camera directly to her, Rina shook off the feeling that he could see her, that he knew she watched him. She tore her gaze away and glared at the pack she'd flung to the floor. Trouble all right. She'd need a weapon, then.

She found Phil inside the bay doors. His cylindrical body leaned against the wall, and all but one of his limbs had retracted into slots along his sides. The last one remained frozen, reaching for the comm controls. Rina cursed and drew the blast pistol. Why the hell would her cargo turn hostile?

She thumbed Phil's reboot and turned on her heel, facing the lines of crates. His chassis beeped softly. She heard movement in response. Footsteps padded between the rows. Anger surfaced, this was her damned ship.

"Hello?" Rina stood and called openly. "This is Captain, Katarina Ridge. There's been a malfunction with your cryo unit,

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and I'd appreciate it if you showed yourself, so we can sort this mess out." She trained the weapon on the nearest gap and took a short step forward.

A flash of white drew her gaze to the side. Her cargo, quite unfrozen, stepped into view. He towered over her, and she didn't exactly run on the short side. His head tilted to one side, and a cascade of white hair flowed over his muscular shoulders. She didn't realize she was staring until he grinned again.

"Uh." She stepped to the side, away from the boxes and back toward Phil. "Do you mind telling me what happened?"

His mouth started to move, but his eyes darted over her shoulder. She heard the rustle behind her and spun back around. Her blaster came to a stop facing a second stranger.

"Who the hell are you?" She'd had about enough of complications, and this guy wasn't wearing a cryo suit. He didn't belong on her ship in any state.

He snarled, and dark eyes narrowed in a piggish face. He was short and squat, but Rina quickly labeled this guy the more dangerous of her two rats. She flickered a glance toward the first, and wasn't the least bit surprised to find he'd vanished back into the shadows. She focused on the one in her sights.

"What do you want, and how did you get on my ship?"

"Justice."

"Excuse me?"

"This shipment is an abomination." His lips twisted into a nasty tangle. "You are a participant in organized prostitution. Your ship and your life are forfeit."

"Hang on a minute." The guy was a freaking loony. She raised her blaster and waved it toward his head. "I have a serious problem with that, jackass."

"Your weapon doesn't scare me." The rat grinned. Rina caught a movement behind him, as a well-built patch of shadow circled their position. She almost missed his whisper, "We're dead already."

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Before she could question his meaning, he lunged for her. She fired and leapt backwards. Her blast caught him in the chest at the same instant a huge arm reached out and snapped his neck. Either way, the guy was dead before he hit the ground.

“Wow.” She trained her blaster on the big blonde. “I take it you two aren’t together?”

He shook his head, but continued to stare down at the dead man. “He belonged to a movement that wishes to sabotage our treaty.”

“Ah.” Rina lowered her weapon, but kept a hand over it just the same. “Right.” She had a policy against knowing too much about her cargo. His treaty was his business. His affect on her nervous system, however, might be hers. She needed to get him back to sleep as soon as possible. “Well, then, let’s get you to your couch, shall we? Phil?”

She heard a bleep that meant her droid neared functional capacity. Good. Phil could back her up if the cargo got frisky before she could put him away. She nodded toward the fore of the bay, but only got a grin in response. It didn’t help that the damn smile had her knees shaking. It didn’t help that she’d been alone, really alone, for almost two years. Too many months. She shook it off and slid away from him, sideways, toward the cryo-couches.

He followed behind her, even more nerve-wracking, and she led him through the rows to his fellows. The other three beds still functioned. At least his friends wouldn’t be joining them. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t be joining *them* either. The controls to his couch hung by a solitary wire, loose and damaged beyond her abilities. Rina glared at them.

“I don’t suppose you know how to fix this?”

“I’m sorry.” He stood next to her, and she could feel the heat radiating from his skin.

“Damn.”

Maybe Phil could fix it. She’d just have to keep him busy till Phil rebooted fully. She could do that. If he’d just step back a

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little. She shook her head, realized the man had been talking, and that she hadn't heard a word.

"What was that?" She turned to the side and found him even closer. Damn, he was tall. She had to lean back to make eye contact and immediately wished she hadn't. Grey eyes, almost silver, and looking at her with an intensity that said she should have been listening—she'd missed something important.

"You look exactly as I imagined." He leaned forward, brought his eyes closer to hers.

"I—what?"

"I no longer wish to comply with the treaty."

Shit. She shouldn't have let him get this close. The heat must have dulled her brain. When his arms snaked around her waist, her body rebelled as well. She curled closer. His lips brushed against hers, and the cargo bay vanished. Rina's skin flared. Her mouth pressed against his in a kiss that sent shockwaves pulsing to her toes.

He pulled her in, held her like a vice and burned the kiss deeper. Her hands found his hair and twined for purchase, leveraging their bodies more tightly together. A flash of thought intervened, stole through the heat when his lips lifted. This was a very bad idea, it assured her. He nibbled at her jaw and banished the idea. His lips trailed along her neck. His hands slid to her sides, cradled her and angled her slightly away.

Rina took a long breath and thought about stopping him. She forgot about it when his hands pulled at her uniform. The length of his body pressed against hers, and it had been far too long since anything felt that good. His fingers slid into her collar, tugged at the stretchy material while his mouth searched along the garment's edge. He peeled the fabric away from her shoulder, and his lips against her skin sent a spasm down her spine.

Her legs wobbled once when his teeth sank in. Her body seized against the bite, the flood of pleasure, and blackness engulfed her.

“Captain?” Phil’s voice broke through the quiet.

“What happened?” Rina groaned and sat up. She blinked twice before she recognized her closet-sized medical bay. “Medical? Really?” She frowned at the form on the other couch. A silver cloth covered it completely.

“The saboteur,” Phil said. “Are you feeling all right, Captain?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She felt a little stupid, but otherwise unharmed. “What about the other guy?”

“He has agreed to be confined in your quarters.”

“Right. What?”

“My systems recovered just after you swooned. The Denrian male assisted me in diffusing the explosives, and then carried you here before confining himself to your quarters.”

“I didn’t swoon.”

“Fainted?”

“Passed out.” Rina swung her legs over the side of the bed. “So who’s he?” She jabbed a finger toward the corpse and stood up. “Wait. What explosives?”

“The Tamrinthian rigged the cryo-couches to explode. The chain reaction would have destroyed the cargo and most of the ship.”

“My ship.” Rina scowled at the body. “And the other one is in my quarters?”

“He insisted that he be incarcerated until you could press charges.” Phil followed her into the narrow hallway. “For the Tamrinthian’s murder, for interfering with your contract and for your assault.”

She reached the door to her quarters and stopped cold. “You want to explain any of that?”

“Yes. The Tamrinthians signed a peace treaty with the Denrians in exchange for four of their people. The Tamrinthians traded the four Denrians to Lamuril—our client, you’ll

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remember—for mining rights. Since the Denrians are to be mated with members of the Lamuril nobility, and since one of the males has already chosen you as his mate, that contract has been compromised. As for the assault, you'll find the mark on your neck sufficient evidence to press charges."

"Back up, Phil." Her head hurt, but she figured that last bit required a few more details.

"The Denrian has chosen you as his mate?"

"That part. Yeah."

"The bite is also evidence to that fact."

Rina groaned and leaned against the door. A broken contract. A dead Tamrinthian. The Denrian has chosen you... "You should have let the ship blow up, Phil. Next time, let the ship blow up."

She clenched her jaw, stood up tall and opened the door to her room. He sat on the edge of her cot, his head resting against his palms, and a wave of blonde hair blocking his face from view. Rina stepped inside and let the door shut Phil out in the hallway. The Denrian looked up, stood up quickly at her entrance.

"Hang on a minute." Rina held out her hands and waited for him to sit down again.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Your robot informs me that I've caused you distress."

"You saved my ship."

"And ruined your contract and endangered the treaty agreement."

"You could take it back?" Did she want him too? Why did her stomach tighten at the thought?

"I displease you." He nodded, and his mouth set into a thin line. His eyes, however, blazed.

"No. It's not that."

"I cannot take it back."

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“Right.” She needed more space, more distance from her reaction to him. But his eyes stopped her from triggering the door. The wound on her neck throbbed softly, not unpleasantly. “I don’t know your name,” she whispered.

“I am Brem.”

“Brem, right.” She watched him stand. “Well, Brem, I need to sort out what to do next.” Her voice wavered. There wasn’t enough space in the whole ship to mute his effect on her.

“I don’t displease you.” His eyes lowered, smoldered. He moved forward.

“No!” Rina’s back already pressed against the door. She put her hands up between them and shook her head. He saw right through her. The grin said as much.

“Don’t worry, Katarina Ridge,” he said. “I won’t bite you again.”

“Good. That’s right.” Her fingers found the door controls, hovered over the button.

“Not until you ask me to.”

“This is wholly unacceptable.” The Lamuril ambassador glowered at her manifest. “You understand that?”

“What I find unacceptable--.” Rina leaned back in the chair and let her gaze travel to the office window. Beyond it, the port crew busily offloaded her cargo. “--Is withholding information that puts my ship and my crew at risk.”

The man waved a dismissive hand. “You don’t have any crew.”

“I’ll be taking on security after this, believe me.” Outside, Phil hovered behind the ship. A second figure joined him, and both her bite marks started tingling. She stroked her uniform collar, understood fully why the Lamuril nobility desired Denrian mates. “Ambassador, your contacts on Tamarinth knew enough about the resistance to have checked those beds for tampering. If Phil hadn’t discovered the damage, you’d have

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zero Denrians for your troubles.”

“I’m still short one. I expect that to reflect on our agreed price.”

“From what I’ve learned about Denrians, our original price was quite low. However, I’m willing to negotiate a small refund.”

“And I’ll need the male Denrian’s body.”

“Sorry. No can do.” Rina held her breath. The ambassador scowled across the desk.

“Why not?”

“Because I jettisoned it into the nearest star. You don’t keep death around on a small ship, Ambassador. Trust me.” He wasn’t happy, and Rina could see her plan waver and threaten to snap at the seams. “I can give you the coordinates,” she added. “If you hurry, you may be able to collect what’s left of him before he reaches the corona.” She considered the repercussions if Jonas’ corpse was discovered.

When the man shook his head, she let out a relieved breath. “No,” he said. “No matter. But about that refund.”

“Close her up, Phil.” Rina tapped at the comm and spun her chair to the side in time to see Brem slide into the co-pilot’s chair. He wore a crew jumpsuit, looked damn good in it. “You sure about this?”

He grinned and pulled the restraints across his shoulders. He brushed a hand over his white-blond stubble. “I’m sure.”

“I’m sorry about your hair.”

“I think I like it this way.” He tilted his head to the side and his eyes captured hers.

“Me too.” She activated the engines, waited for departure confirmation while she ticked off her pre-flight check. It was different this time. She caught a glimpse of him at her peripheral. No empty chair beside her. Their flight clearance chimed and she triggered thrusters with a smile. “I like it this way, too.”

Midsummer Daisies

by Molly Ringle

Callie Ames dropped to a crouch beyond the last streetlight, unable to run uphill any longer. Her lungs burned. The night wind felt cold on her tear-soaked cheeks, but she welcomed the sensation. Every day this June had been scorching, with none of the gentle rain Western Oregon usually received. The heat now seemed part of the hostility massing against her.

“Can I help?”

Callie gasped and straightened up. Her shoulder-length hair tumbled into her face; her ponytail band had fallen out several blocks back. She shoved away the brown tangle to stare at the intruder.

He strolled over, following the curb around the end of the cul-de-sac. He looked about thirty, a few years her senior. He wore a long-sleeved white shirt, unbuttoned brown vest, matching suit trousers, and leather shoes. His wavy reddish-brown hair stirred in a tousle of controlled chaos. His vest’s buttonhole sported a large white daisy.

“I’m fine,” she blurted between sniffles. “Bad day. It’s nothing.” Finding no tissues in the pockets of her denim shorts, she wiped her eyes on her knuckles, trying not to burst into new tears.

He approached, whipping a white handkerchief from his pocket and handing it to her.

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It felt clean and crisply pressed. When she blew her nose on it and took a deep breath, she drew in the smell of cotton dried upon a clothesline outdoors. Sheepishly, she tried to hand the sodden hankie back to him.

He waved it off. "Keep it. Bad day, huh?" Up close, his eyes proved large, dark, and kind. One end of his mouth, along with both eyebrows, slanted up in sympathy. "I'm Devin Ferris. Since I'm not a stranger anymore, tell me about it."

Callie worked up a weak smile. "I'm Callie. But there's no need for me to ruin your night."

"Nonsense. If I can return you home in better shape than I found you, this'll be my most productive night in ages."

The wryness in his voice charmed Callie. She fell into step beside him, and they descended the cul-de-sac.

"Well...my fiance and I broke up three months ago. And today I found out his new girlfriend's pregnant."

Devin groaned in commiseration, but didn't interrupt.

"I shouldn't care," she went on, "but it's been such a horrible month. I'm a high school teacher, and before graduation one of my favorite students got..." Her throat choked up. She forced out the words. "Killed in a car crash."

Devin sighed. "That's terrible."

"My best friend just moved to Texas for grad school. My family lives out of state. Meanwhile my ex is *starting* a family, whereas I'm...alone."

Devin turned onto Sequoia Street, a quiet tree-lined lane of large houses. "Yes, loneliness is the worst."

She glanced at him. "You're alone too?"

He gazed downward, hands in his pockets. "In most ways that matter."

Guessing he wasn't ready to divulge his own heartbreaks yet, Callie nodded and looked ahead--and her feet stopped in surprise. Past a peaked roof rose a small, steep hill, entirely spangled in wild daisies. The rising moon drew an otherworldly

glow from the flowers.

"Look at that!" Callie said. "The daisies! I've never even noticed that hill before."

Devin nodded. "That's where I got this." He tapped the flower in his vest.

"How do you get there?"

He gazed at her, then at the hill. "I'll show you."

They reached a three-way intersection of curving streets, empty of cars, and Devin steered her to the left, onto Ivy Drive. Only their voices and the sound of crickets thrummed through the night air. "Meanwhile," he said, "tell me why you should waste your tears on this terrible ex."

Callie drew in a long breath. The air smelled of warm streets and lawn sprinklers. "No good reason. The relationship was rocky at best. But when I ran into them today, they looked so proud and so...*pitying*. They're keeping the baby and I ought to be pitying *them*--she's still in college, he only works part-time."

"You're still free," Devin said. "Think of that."

"Yeah." As they hiked up Daffodil Place, she detached a climbing rose vine from the hem of her tank top where a thorn had caught. "Anyway, it put me in a terrible mood. So tonight I went out for a walk. Then I started running. Then running and crying."

"And ran into me." They reached another fork in the streets. Devin veered onto Heather Drive.

She paused, looking back at the daisy hill, which still lurked behind roofs. "Is this the right way?"

"It is. There's a path. It's just a silly maze to reach it. Trust me."

She had no other plans. The breeze had cooled, and smelled more of trees and flowers the higher they walked. Devin had been nothing but kind to her--and happened to be especially beautiful when he cocked a half-smile at her, head tilted, the way

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he was doing now. She smiled back, and followed.

"A girlfriend left me once, when I was a tender seventeen-year-old," he volunteered. "Back in Ohio."

"You're from Ohio? Did you come here for college?"

"Originally. Then I stayed because of another girl, and...that was foolish." His face grew shadowed.

"Want to talk about it?"

He sent her a strained smile. "How about the story of the girl in Ohio? That's easier."

As he guided her around a bend and onto Elm Place, he told her his adolescent learning experience, complete with malicious high-school gossip and overbearing parents. It made her laugh, and Devin was grinning too by the end.

Suddenly he stopped under a young tree, and picked up a twig from the ground. Crouching, he scratched letters into the dust between the roots. "Sequoia, Ivy, Daffodil, Heather, Elm."

Bending, Callie frowned at the word, which, she realized a moment later, was formed by the streets' initials: *SIDHE*.

"*Shee*," Devin pronounced it aloud--unless he meant "she"? He stood, dropping the twig. "Someone knows their Gaelic." Then, as if he hadn't just performed this odd task, he swept a palm forward. "Our hill."

Straight ahead, a narrow grass path snaked between two tall fences, and at its end rose the flower-covered hill. Callie set forth eagerly, slipping past the fences and stepping over low snares of blackberry vines, and within a minute was ascending the steep slope. Devin trudged behind her. The feathery tips of the grass tickled her waist. The daisies, wide as her palm, bobbed against her legs, leaving streaks of yellow pollen bright enough to see even in the moonlight.

At the peak Callie turned, facing the rising gibbous moon. The wind swept into her face, rich with fragrance--sweet grass, verdant blackberry, dusty broom, bitter daisies. Below, the town lights were an undulating bowl of sparkles, making Callie feel as if she were atop a thousand-foot mountain rather than a mound.

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Devin stepped up beside her, gazing outward. The tips of his unruly hair waved in the breeze.

"This summer's been a disaster so far," Callie conceded, "but this view's beginning to improve things."

Devin eased down into the grass. "Seasonally speaking, the summer's only just started. Tonight is Midsummer."

"The solstice." She now recalled seeing it on her kitchen wall calendar. "Longest day of the year." She smirked, sitting next to him. "Well, it does feel like that."

"Perhaps the days will start feeling shorter from now on. In a pleasant way."

"Maybe." She glanced aside at him. Her heartbeat accelerated. "If I get to talk to you more often, things might actually become great."

Devin looked at her, eyes softening and mouth curving in a smile of poignant gratitude, as if she had offered him some exorbitant gift he couldn't rightfully accept. He arched his arm around her, fingers stroking her bare shoulder in the lightest of touches. "Sweet woman. You've made my summer worth living for already."

They shared an electric gaze, one that could at any second topple into a kiss. But, Callie remembered with a start, kissing would be crazy at this point in their acquaintance--to say nothing of this point in her life. She dropped her gaze, and he turned his face forward.

Still, she didn't want him to pull his arm away. So she scooted closer, nestling her shoulder beneath his, and picked a daisy to twirl in her fingers.

"So, what do you do?" she asked.

He explained he wrote a little and taught a little, similar to Callie but with older students from abroad. He even lived with several of them, she eventually gathered--not that he viewed them as friends.

"Parties at all hours," he lamented. "Insane, irrational pranks. Unpredictable food quality."

Just One Bite: Midsummer Daisies

“Why don’t you move?”

He grunted a laugh. “I’m always working on it.”

They talked as the moon rose high, puffballs of cloud surfed between the stars, and window lights vanished in the houses below. Eventually the words slowed, dropping into the air at wider intervals. Callie and Devin eased onto their backs in the dry meadow, Callie resting her head below his collarbone, breathing the spice of his skin. He stroked her shoulder, drew her hair off her neck to caress her there, moved his hand up to her ear.

This time neither of them hesitated. Rolling upon him, she kissed him; he caught her in both arms and enveloped her. Grief and loneliness faded to only a glimmer on her horizon as her world filled with Devin’s warm lips and rough hands and the Midsummer night’s magic.

Kissing for a few long minutes did the work of weeks of psychiatric therapy, she thought as she lifted her face again. But going further, or staying with him all night, did border on the self-destructive. It was exactly the kind of behavior she cautioned her high school students against.

She smiled, stroked his flushed cheek, and said, “Walk me home, and do this again tomorrow?”

His responding smile looked sad, but he took her hand and rose with her.

They stumbled down the hill through the daisies. As they approached the path, a man and woman emerged from it. Laughing, they clung to one another and wobbled, as if drunk. They looked young, perhaps college age, and sported spiky color-streaked hair. The man wore cargo pants and a leather vest over a bare chest, while the woman tripped along in a ruffled blouse, miniskirt, and high-heeled sandals. Both, Callie noticed at closer range, were exceptionally beautiful.

Devin’s hand tightened on hers, and he steered her around them. But as they passed, the woman sang, “Dev-in,” and the man echoed in a falsetto, “Be good, Devin.” The couple burst

into giggles.

Devin's face hardened. Without looking back, he pulled Callie toward the path. "Come on."

But Callie looked back, as did the other pair. A cold shock speared through her.

As the couple stepped into the moonlight on the hill, the woman's ears and nose lengthened to inhuman proportions, and small but sharp-tipped antlers branched around her head. Upon the man's back appeared a pair of wings, butterfly-like but tattered, with grasping tendrils waving from their points. His eyes had gone completely black.

While Callie gasped, Devin tugged harder. "Come *on*."

The other pair danced up the hill. The bobbing flowers masked their bodies, making Callie doubt her own eyes. She fled down the path, and they hurried out of the neighborhood and back to her street.

As they drew near to her house, she began, "I thought I saw..."

"Yes," he answered.

"The crazy people you live with. Insane pranks."

"Yes."

"Costume party?" she guessed, hoping that explained it, knowing it couldn't entirely.

"With them? Always." He sounded somber.

She let out a shaky breath, deciding she needed sleep, and had to forget that strange vision for now. She led him to the doorstep of her townhouse. "So. Drop by anytime. Or, if you have a minute, I'll write down my number..."

He shook his head, glancing miserably up the street. "There's no time. Listen. Hills like that one--do research. Look me up, too. Remember what I showed you. Maybe then you..."

She stared at him in confusion. "I what?"

"Callie, I want to see you again, so please, do that for me."

She gazed down at her keys, clinking one against another. "I

Just One Bite: Midsummer Daisies
don't understand. If you want to see me, then why--" She lifted her head and stopped.

He was gone.

* * *

Weeks passed. Devin Ferris didn't drop by. Her best friend phoned; so did her parents. Callie tinkered with her fall lesson plans. Nothing chased away her haunted thoughts of Devin, and who (or what) he was.

Authorities seek help in locating missing man, said an article from the local paper's online archive. Anyone who had seen college biology researcher Devin Ferris, 29, was asked to come forward.

That article was dated twelve years ago. Maybe he'd died, and she'd kissed a ghost? But he'd seemed ordinary and tangible, as did his handkerchief. She had washed it, and often carried it in her pocket, frequently examining it as if it might perform a supernatural trick.

What about that creepy couple who knew his name? They likely knew how to find him. But what *were* they?

She tried to return to the hill. Though she often saw it behind one house or another, she could never reach it. The street veered the wrong direction, or fences stood in her way. She couldn't find the path Devin showed her, despite being almost certain it was on Elm Place. His word for solving the "maze" escaped her--something like *she*, but spelled differently? Did it matter?

A month after Midsummer, her ex phoned. "This is tacky, but I was thinking if we returned your engagement ring, and split the money...well, we could both use it, right?"

Loathing iced her stomach. "I'll bring it over tonight," she said. "You can do it."

But, in no rush to see him with his newly glowing girlfriend, she found herself stopping first at the library. A book to escape in, anything...

And there, in the fantasy section, a word on a title jolted her

to attention. *Sidhe*. At last!

She rushed to an Internet terminal and typed it in. Half an hour later, as the sun sank, she printed out a page, heart galloping, and ran for her car.

"The Gaelic word 'Sidhe' refers not only to the faerie folk but to the hills where they dwell. The hills may be visible to humans, but often can only be reached via a magic path or password. The fair folk sometimes invite humans in, but the visit usually ends up a long imprisonment."

She parked her car along Sequoia, and jogged uphill in the warm evening air.

"The unhappy mortal, suspended in time, may be allowed to wander among his own people, especially on magically potent days such as Midsummer or Samhain, but is under a spell rendering him unable to explain his predicament, and must always return to the fey dwelling."

Poor Devin. Drawn in by a beautiful, unearthly woman, possibly the one with the antlers--would she fight Callie for him? Callie doubted she'd win such a battle. She nonetheless picked up her pace, turning from Ivy onto Daffodil.

"To rescue such people one must enter the Sidhe realm and demand the return of the prisoner. An item belonging to the prisoner must be presented, and a valuable gift offered in exchange. Livestock, precious jewels, or musical instruments are all traditional."

Handkerchief belonging to prisoner: check. Livestock or musical instruments, no, but Callie hoped her gift would be acceptable. After all...

"Gifts of inadequate value are often spurned, and with violence; but gifts of quality should appease the Sidhe."

Heather Drive gave way to Elm. Panting, Callie stopped beneath the same small tree Devin had, and looked ahead. There stood the fences, but with no path between them; they touched at the shoulders with barely an inch to spare. The enchanted hill peeked over the rooftops as if laughing at her, now adorned with

Just One Bite: Midsummer Daisies
purple vetch among its daisies.

In frustration, she stomped on a fallen stick, snapping it.

Remember what I showed you.

With a sudden insight, she knelt, grabbed a fragment of stick, and inscribed SIDHE in the dust. She spoke the word aloud, and lifted her head.

An evening planet sparkled over the hill. The path lay clear and plain, leading straight forward.

Callie walked the magic lane, and stopped at the mound's base. Holding out the handkerchief, she called, "I demand the return of Devin Ferris."

The sky darkened, faster than possible. The stars wheeled and the moon slid upward, then stopped. Standing in noticeably cooler air beneath the sudden midnight, Callie watched in panic as half a hundred figures crept closer, surrounding her until they were almost at arm's reach. Wings, antlers, fangs, and claws marred the graceful bodies. Sounds resembling snakes rattling and knives being sharpened mingled with their snickers.

Maybe I'll be taken prisoner too, she thought. Then at least I'd be with him.

"Your gift?" purred a voice. Turning toward it, Callie recognized the girl with the antlers.

Callie slipped the diamond engagement ring from her pocket and tossed it to her.

She caught it, and several of the others converged upon her to examine it, like seagulls vying for the same cracker.

With nary a word spoken, the eerie folk scattered into the shadows. Callie stood, heart drumming. She jumped and spun about each time the wind brushed grass against her knees.

Then a head peeked over the hill, followed by shoulders in a white shirt. Devin strolled into view, one hand loose, the other lifting the handkerchief like a flag of victory.

Callie ran to him. He caught her in an embrace at the foot of the hill.

Molly Ringle

“You worked it out,” he murmured, “you darling, darling girl.”

Hand in hand, they sprinted down the path and back into the human neighborhood.

Something Fishy

by Angela Spencer

I've run into ex-boyfriends in the most unlikely of places, but finding Ezra Marsh wet and shirtless at the end of a dock was the strangest. This was the last place my clients' daughter had been seen, which was an unfortunate coincidence. But it didn't top the fact that Ezra was dead. I attended his funeral fifteen years earlier and cried for weeks. Yet, here he stood hunched over and staring wide-eyed at me. His expression reminded me of the last time I caught my cat pissing on my bed.

"Teresa?" he said. So much for mistaken identity. He looked thinner than I remembered. Less baby fat, more muscle. He'd aged well. Fifteen years and several forgettable boyfriends disappeared in that moment. I was seventeen and in love. I fought down the feeling.

"It was a lovely funeral," I said. "Were you even in the coffin?"

Instead of responding, he pulled on his shirt. In the dim light his dark brown hair and eyes both looked black. When he raised his arms I could make out faint scars on his chest, three parallel lines on each side.

"Fine! Ignore being dead. What brings you to the city of Crynoch?"

"I live here," he said, and picked up his shoes. "You? Last I heard you lived in Seattle. Teresa Martin, private eye."

Angela Spencer

“You know where I live?” I said. Hysteria twisted to outrage. “You know where I live, and you never bothered to find me?!”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“That’s between me and my client. But now that you mention it, you don’t know anything about the girls going missing around here, do you?”

“The college students?” he asked. His gaze flickered down and to the left. I’d learned in high school that it meant he was about to lie. “No. Just what I read in the paper.”

Bastard. How could he come back into my life just to be suspect number one?

Ezra skirted around me. I tried to grab him but he wrenched out of my grip, stronger than he looked. I stepped back, giving him distance.

“Happy hunting,” he called back.

I watched him walk away, giving him a head start so he wouldn’t notice me following. He surprised me by walking into a house right near the marina, a large, crumbling old house that looked out over the harbor.

I spent the evening watching as he wound down for the night. He turned lights on and off as he moved through the house. I sat in silence and darkness for fifteen minutes after he turned off the last light before I called it a night.

#

The next morning I staked out his house. I tucked my hair up into an old Mariners hat, wore prop glasses and parked my car halfway down the street. In case of nosy neighbors, I sat in the passenger seat as though I was waiting for the driver to return.

Ezra ambled out of his house and got into a white, mid-80s Toyota hatchback. Great for moving bodies. I cursed my fate again.

I let him gain some distance before climbing over to the

Just One Bite: Something Fishy

driver seat, starting my engine and following. It's moments like this that make me wish I had another investigator working with me. It's easier to follow someone unnoticed when you can coordinate with one another.

His stops were innocuous: breakfast at a greasy spoon, the butcher shop, the bakery, the drug store. I noted the times and addresses of the stops in my notebook.

The last stop he made was another bakery. Which seemed weird until he came out he had a large pink box in one hand, a cup holder with two cups of coffee in the other. He walked straight towards my car. I noticed what could have been a knife strapped to his leg. A glance in my purse confirmed that my pistol was there.

I cranked down the window as he came up to my window.

"How fast was I going officer?" I asked.

He snorted a laugh. "Are you aware that stalking is a crime in the state of Washington?"

I couldn't decide if I should plead ignorance or point out that I'm a licensed and bonded investigator. But neither choice reached my mouth.

"Look, I've got a box of the best doughnuts this side of the Olympic Mountains and one of these coffees has two creams and three sugars. Sweet and blonde, as you used to call it. I know that you've been watching me. I can either call the police or we can sit in your car and hash this out."

I stared daggers at him while he maintained his best attempt to look patient and innocent. Finally I said, "You're an ass" just before reaching over and unlocking the passenger side door.

He got in and offered me one of the coffees before taking his out and putting it in the cup holder. Then came the doughnuts and I wanted to hit him. A dozen doughnuts, two-thirds of which were my favorites: maple bars and raspberry-filled. The other four were clearly his: Two custard-filled and two glazed.

God, he was laying it on thick.

As I grabbed a maple bar, he asked, "Investigating the

Angela Spencer

missing college girls, huh?”

I mentally kicked myself for letting that one slip last night. “In an indirect sense,” I said around a mouthful of pastry.

Having him in my car brought on a wave of nostalgia.

“I could help. Friendly local guide and all.”

“How do I know you’re not a suspect, dead man?”

He smiled and shrugged helplessly, another habit of his that hadn’t changed since we dated. I couldn’t decide if I wanted to punch him or kiss him. “I’ve lived here for years. The disappearances are new. What, you want character references?”

“Spend a lot of time thinking up that defense?”

Another shrug and smile. I restrained the urge to throw my coffee at him. I’ve had other boyfriends since high school, but none stuck with me like Ezra had. I guess grieving his death made him stand out more. If we’d just broken up when we went to college he’d probably just be another asshole I wished I could forget.

“Fine. Where do you propose I look?”

“You’ve been checking out places where the girls were last seen, correct? So have I. And I think I’ve hit more of them than you. The only place I haven’t gone is the area around the warehouse where a girl disappeared from a rave.”

“Wait, why have you even been looking into this?”

“It’s what I do.”

“What, like a job?”

“Sort of. Less official, though.”

I scowled. “Do you have a plan? Or are we going to just fumble around the neighborhood until we find a clue?”

“When you put it that way it sounds lame. Like I said, I’m familiar with this city. I’m likely to notice something that stands out that you wouldn’t.”

I frowned but started up the car before I changed my mind.

#

Just One Bite: Something Fishy

When Ezra called for a break, I nearly cheered. I leaned back against a corrugated metal wall, hoping to take some weight off of the heavy wads of pain my feet had become. The place smelled of stale urine. I could smell the river that ran just on the other side.

We'd spent a couple hours walking up and down poorly paved streets and barely paved back alleys. All we had really found was the local collection of homeless people and drug dealers. Ezra even seemed to know some of them. This didn't reassure me.

I decided to ask the obvious question, hoping I'd catch another lie, "Are you responsible for the girls going missing?"

Ezra had been staring off at nothing, taking deep breaths through his nose and turning his head to face different directions. My question startled him and he turned to face me.

"No, I'm not." Truth.

"But you know what's happening to them, right?"

Down and to the left. I cut him off.

"Don't lie to me again."

His gaze snapped back up and made eye contact with me. I noticed that his irises did not just seem dark, but they were outright black.

"I have a theory," he said.

"Care to share it?"

"No."

Before I could speak he placed a finger on my lips to shush me. Had this been anyone else, I would have broken that finger, kned him in the face and then kicked him when he was down. But this was the first time we'd actually touched, and the feel of his skin against mine brought up a wave of memories and emotion.

He smelled almost the same, with a hint of sea salt mixed in. I wondered if that was a result of living next to the ocean.

"I would tell you if I could," he said softly, sliding his

Angela Spencer

finger from my lips along my jaw line in a caress.

“Is this some secret society Masonic bullshit?” I asked.

“Something like that.” He started to pull his hand away but I grabbed it and held it close. I fought down the urge to kiss his hand.

My next question was cut off by a crash inside the warehouse we were leaning against. The tender expression disappeared, and he looked cold and hard at the wall behind me.

“I was right,” he said.

“Right about what?”

“This is the warehouse. Stay out here.”

“What makes you think I’m going to just wait out here while you go play cowboy?”

“You haven’t changed, have you?” he asked with a sigh. He reached down and pulled the knife from the sheath under his pant leg. It was a strange thing of wood and brass. The handle looked like an octopus. “Fine, come with me. I know you’ll just follow anyway. At least I’ll know where you are if I stop fighting now.”

I scowled at him as he turned and walked to the nearest entrance. It was hell being known.

He fished out a set of picks from his pocket and set to work on the door. While he did that I slipped my hand into my purse and grabbed hold of my pistol. After a few minutes he pulled the door open. The hinges screamed in rusty protest.

A musty smell of stale water filled the inside of the warehouse, suggesting that part of this building opened onto the river. I could barely see in the dim light, while Ezra moved forward confidently and sniffed at the air. I did my best to stick close to him while placing my feet carefully. The boards felt rotten and my pride couldn’t handle falling through.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom I could make out some shapes. I saw oxygen tanks and wet suits hanging against one wall, some small off-board motors left in a heap farther down

Just One Bite: Something Fishy
with the shattered remains of a boat next to them.

A strange clicking, squeaking and groaning echoed through the metal and plywood walls. Ezra froze, placing a protective arm against me.

“We can do this the hard way or the easy way,” he called out.

I don’t know what tipped Ezra off, but one moment he was standing there staring into the dark and the next he was leaping backwards and scooping me up into his arms as though I was a rag doll. Something large hit the ground where we had just stood. Wood creaked and cracked in protest.

“Hard way it is,” he said.

In the almost darkness I could make out a hulking shape. It almost looked like someone crouched down, but no one could be that big. Ezra shoved away from the thing in the darkness before launching forward. He stabbed forward with his knife and the thing in the darkness lurched backward and screamed in pain.

Enraged, the monster lumbered forward in a weird hopping crawl, trying to swat at Ezra. Ezra just darted out of reach, a flickering shadow of movement in the dark.

The thing crashed through an outer wall as it tried to hit Ezra. The corrugated metal popped out of its rivets under the weight and fell into the water outside with a loud splash. Light streamed in and illuminated the creature.

Crouched down it was over ten feet tall and may have been twice that at full height. It looked like a frog covered with fishy scales. Rows of gills ran along its ribs. Its mouth was filled with serrated teeth and its eyes were black on black. Black blood streamed from several wounds. While it stumbled back onto its feet, I heard Ezra mutter something and a nimbus of light formed around the creature. It bellowed in frustration.

I brought the gun up and fired off three shots at the thing. The glow around it vanished and Ezra cursed. The monster didn’t react it pain, it just looked at me and started lumbering in my direction. The last dregs of volition I had were overwhelmed

by terror.

The creature was almost on top of me when Ezra intervened. Ezra clung to the creature's shoulder and plunged his dagger into the monster's thick neck. It shrieked, reached up and threw Ezra across the room. The knife clattered off into the darkness. Ezra hit the ground and tumbled away like a rag doll.

I broke out of my paralysis and ran away while trying to figure out a plan. It was big and scary, but it was also pretty slow and I was able to out pace it. If I could out run it, it might just bleed to death. Yeah, right.

I kicked something and heard it skitter. It was the strange knife that Ezra had been stabbing the beast with. My gun only seemed to annoy it, but this frog poker seemed to really do it harm. I don't normally believe in magic daggers, but I also didn't believe in twenty-foot tall fish men so this seemed fair.

I picked it up and felt a surge of energy rush through me. Even feeling empowered, my plan seemed absurd. But I looked at the prone form of Ezra and knew I couldn't just let him die. Again.

I screamed, "Banzai!" and rushed the thing. The knife sunk into its chest up to the hilt, like a knife through hot butter.

It shrieked and roared. I felt it grab me, wind rushed past me and then there was darkness.

The cold seeped into my bones, and air forced its way into my mouth. I opened my eyes and in the dim light saw Ezra swimming while dragging me along. Black blood blossomed into the water from his wounds. Along his ribs those scars throbbed like gills on a fish. He looked at me with those dark, dark eyes and I faded away.

I woke up in an unfamiliar bed. Ezra sat by the bed.

"Morning sleeping beauty," he said.

I could see he was shirtless and wearing white gauzy

Just One Bite: Something Fishy

bandages on his arms and torso. I couldn't tell if they were stained dark with dried red blood or if they were more black in color.

"What happened?"

"You were knocked unconscious. I tried waiting for you to wake up there, but the police showed up. So I took you out a back way."

"Underwater?" I asked, remembering the dream.

He paused with a pained grimace before nodding.

"But what about the rest that happened? What was that thing?"

"Humans give it a lot of names. Sirens, undines, selkies, merrow, vodyanoi. The name the underwater race gives itself best translates to 'deep ones.'"

"Are you really bleeding black like that thing was? Why did your parents tell everyone you were dead?"

"The deep ones aren't human but they've bred with humans," he said. He stood up and limped to look out a window. "The deep one side doesn't manifest until some time after puberty, if at all. Some people have only a little bit of the deep one blood. A rare few will only manifest part-way. They call us 'weak-blooded.' We gain some abilities but we're mostly human still.

"My parents never changed and probably never will. They got their hopes up when I got sick in high school. When I stopped changing, they sent me off to live with relatives. I guess they preferred to think of me as dead."

"What does this have to do with the missing girls?"

"The weak-blooded can blend in. They've become more secretive as human technology has advanced. I get the job of covering up traces of them and other weird stuff that's out there. The guy you met today probably craved human flesh and went rogue to get it. It's my job to notice this stuff and stop it."

He stopped talking, so I asked, "Why didn't you call me?"

Angela Spencer

“We could never have a normal life. Any child we might have would run the risk of becoming like me. Or worse.”

Silence hung between us for a while.

He cleared his throat. “I patched you up with some stuff I had stashed away for an emergency. It’s not really designed for humans, but it looks like it works. Your car is out front whenever you’re ready to go.”

“I don’t have to go right away,” I said. “It’ll take me a few days to figure out the lie I’m going to tell my clients. But it would save me some expenses if I could crash here. Maybe a local guide could show me around.”

“You aren’t freaked out?” he said, turning toward me.

“If you were a stranger who dropped this on me, I might have jumped out the window. But this is who you were before either of us knew about it. The way I felt then still lingers. I’m willing to stay and see what happens.”

Purr-fect Timing

by Kari Thomas

This was so *not* fair.

Just because she *accidentally* turned the Coven's meeting place into a cat litter box —*during* the meeting, no less —didn't mean she had to be punished *this* dramatically. This cruelly! What was a witch supposed to do without her powers?

Abigail (Abby to her friends) Miller shook her head, dropping her suitcase onto the living room floor of the now 'transformed-back' apartment she had earlier committed the ultimate spell-mistake upon. She sniffed.

"Cat's Meow," she muttered, "It *still* smells like a litter box."

Forcing her to move in here for her one night exile was only one of the punishment requirements. The other was too horrific to think about.

"It's not my fault Janice hadn't shaved before the meeting," she mumbled. "*Everyone* has teased her once or twice about those cat whiskers of hers. How was I supposed to know she'd put a rebuffing spell on anyone around her if they said something about the extra hairs?"

And what a rebuffing Spell it was! As soon as the words "Janice, you are the cat's meow today," left her mouth the whole room suddenly spun in a whirlwind of multi-colored dancing stars. Then, *poof!* They were all left standing in a huge boxed-in room, with all the signs of it once being a —*eeeww*—used cat

litter box!

It took the Coven's Mistress only two minutes to announce her punishment and the rules. *She's had it in for me since day one. I can't help it if I'm a bit of a mis-fire witch.*

Okay, so she probably deserved the "You are to live in this *stench* until midnight Halloween," part of the punishment. But she certainly didn't think it was fair to be stripped of her powers and left with an ultimatum she couldn't possibly fulfill.

"If, at the stroke of midnight on Halloween, you have not found your mate *then* you are forever banned as a witch. Your powers will not return."

Holy cat's meow! How cruel was that? She loved being a single woman. It was fun. She could come and go as she pleased, date anyone she chose, and never have to worry about relationship responsibilities. And what was that '*mate*' idea, anyway? She wasn't a shapeshifter or a vampire. She was a witch. They didn't *need* mates!

She recalled the Coven Mistress muttering, "If we chain you to a mate, maybe you will be less destructive. We can let someone else take over the responsibility of keeping you in control. Mother Goddess willing!"

"Ha!" Abby muttered. "If by some miracle I succeed in this mission before tonight's stroke of midnight, then I'm going to show her a thing or two. No man is going to dictate to me what I can or can't do."

Brave words, but she was forced to admit she was scared. How was she supposed to find a mate when she was bound to this house the full night and left without her powers to even use a summoning spell?

Abby walked over to the large picture window looking out onto the courtyard of the apartment building. The Coven owned the top floor of the building and used it for their meetings, etc. Below, people milled about in the courtyard, children running, playing, dogs and cats mixing in among the crowd.

Was he there? Was there a chance her potential mate lived here and even now she was looking at him? She narrowed her gaze on the few men present. *Not the fat one. He looks like he*

Just One Bite: Purr-fect Timing

could sit on an elephant and squish it. Not that too-skinny fashion plate either. He'd probably have a stroke if one hair ever got out of place.

What about that nice looking guy sitting on the bench? Ooops. Nope. He grins too much at the children.

Hmm. That tall man looks interesting. Darn. Five bucks says that's his wife or girlfriend he just kissed.

It was beginning to look like she might be out of luck. No doubt the Coven knew she'd fail in this and they were just sitting back waiting for the verdict tomorrow.

She wanted to wallow in self-pity. But she couldn't. She wouldn't give up until that last midnight stroke of the clock. There had to be a way!

"I don't suppose standing in front of the picture window *naked* would help any?" She grimaced. "No. There's no telling what I'd attract!" Just the thought made her shiver. After all, it was Halloween.

Her favorite holiday –and she was probably spending it as 'the first day of the rest of her life' as a powerless witch.

She unpacked her suitcase and decided to start her usual Halloween tradition of watching all the scary movies in her DVD collection. There was nothing more fun than scaring herself silly while watching the shows in between answering the door to all the trick-or-treaters. Before starting the first one, she changed into her typical Halloween costume (the outfit she wore to the Coven meetings) of a long, flowing, form-fitting gown in pale blue silk and her matching pointed hat. Slippers to match donned her feet. She left her long, unruly-curled blonde hair down; loving the dramatic effect it gave the romanticized costume. Dressed, she then sat out the large bowl of candy treats next to the door. It was getting dark outside and the children should be arriving soon.

Determined to *not* think about the Coven Mistress's ultimatum about finding her mate, she sat down on the sofa with a bowl of popcorn and started the first movie.

I'm not going to worry. She wasn't really serious. She just wants to make me suffer tonight, that's all. Tomorrow she'll

Kari Thomas

forgive me and let me back in the Coven.

I hope.

She always started out watching the usual movies first. “The Wolfman”, “Bram Stoker’s Dracula”, and then went on to the hard-core stuff from Stephen King’s collection. She saved her absolute favorite, “Pet Sematary”, for last. No matter how many times she watched it she still got so scared she’d scream in all the right scenes. *Gotta love a movie that can pull that kind of fear and emotion out of you!*

The first group of trick-or-treaters arrived halfway into the first movie. Delighted, she jumped up from the sofa and paused the DVR before going to the door.

Five costumed children stood on her doorstep. There was a witch, a pirate, two vampires, and a zombie.

And a cat.

Abby looked again. Sure enough, standing behind the children was the largest minx cat she’d ever seen. His huge green eyes stared into hers without blinking. For just one moment she lost all coherent thought. She felt a sudden tingle of awareness skitter down her spine. *Whoa. First time I’ve reacted that way to a cat. It can’t be an allergic reaction—I’m a witch for Goddess sakes!*

Unnerved, she glanced down at the apartment door’s built in doggie-door. The Coven cats used it to come and go. She mentally reminded herself to make sure she closed and locked it for tonight. *WHY*, she couldn’t even explain to herself.

She filled the children’s bags and congratulated them on being scary, all the while keeping her eye on the strange cat. When the kids thanked her and left, the cat went with them.

She shrugged away the warning vibes pushing into her thoughts. It had to be stress, that’s all.

Stress or not, it just plain freaked her out that the darn cat showed up with every group of children for the rest of the night. No matter how many groups came by, no matter how many short minutes in between each visit, that cat was right there with them. And he stared her down like he was issuing some kind of mental challenge.

Just One Bite: Purr-fect Timing

It's official. I've scared myself for this Halloween. Abby just hoped no one in the Coven heard this embarrassing story! Who would ever believe a witch would be unsettled by the presence of a cat!

After another round of children, she settled back on the sofa and tried not to look at the grandfather clock in the corner. She knew it was getting later –but as long as she didn't watch the clock then she wouldn't be so antsy.

Or... as long as she didn't think about that spooky cat.

It was finally time to watch "Pet Sematary". Abby hesitated for a moment before putting the movie into the DVR player. After all, it did have the scariest scene –*ever* –in it...about a cat.

She laughed softly, her eyes darting around the dark room. She'd purposely left off the lights for that perfect Halloween ambience. For just a moment she thought about turning on a lamp.

"Cat's meow," she mumbled, "I've scared myself silly this year." And it was that darn cat's *entire* fault. She shoved the unsettling fear away and started the movie.

As always, she screamed in all the right scenes. Right at the part where she always covered her eyes and choked down scream after scream...

A strangely *light* creak on the wooden entryway floor made her jump in sudden fear and pause the movie. She listened again. *Creak!* It sounded like footsteps of some kind!

Shaking, Abby stood and faced that direction. *Surely I'm just imagining this because of the movie. I locked the door. No one could break in without me hearing it.*

But what if? And she was here... alone... *powerless*.

Her first impulse was to do a revealing spell. But realization hit and her next instinct was to panic. That lasted all of five seconds. Witchy powers or not, she *wasn't* going to be a victim.

Raising her chin, she marched to the entryway, purposely stomping as she went. "Who is there? I have a weapon, so show yourself now!"

She reached the entryway and flipped on the hall light. No one was there. And the only way into the rest of the apartment

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was the direct route she'd just come.

Okay, so it was my imagination. Thank the Goddess. She re-checked the door and made sure it was securely locked before going back into the living room. Feeling silly, she re-started the movie. Within minutes she was hugging a sofa pillow and suffocating her screams into it.

Creak! Creak!

This time there was no doubt it was some kind of footsteps! Abby jumped up, shivers shaking her whole body. Was this really happening? She'd never been *this* scared in her life. *I think I'll write Stephen King a note and complain about his too-vividly effective horror scenes.* Yeah, that sounded good. Right after she faced whatever was in the apartment with her...

Hands shaking, Abby turned on the lamp by the sofa. She choked back a scream. A dark shadow, fast enough to be blurry, ran across the room!

She hoped it was a mouse. But with the Coven cats normally roaming around, she was sure *that* wasn't a possibility. *And I'm not even going to think about its size.* Rats never get *that* big, do they?

She looked around for some kind of weapon. The first thing that popped in her head was a broom. She bit back a hysterical giggle. *What's a witch without her trusty broom?*

Avoiding the side of the room where the shadow disappeared into, she ran to the kitchen and grabbed the broom. Holding it like a sword she slowly walked back into the living room.

"Come out," she coaxed, her voice shaky. "No need to hide. I'm not going to hurt you." *Okay, so that's a lie. It's you or me, buddy.*

Cautiously she approached the too-dark corner of the room she'd seen the shadow run to. Her heart raced and cold rivulets of sweat fell from her neck, coating the back of her dress.

Taking an aggressive stance she forcibly shoved the broom into the corner and yelled at the top of her lungs, "HA! Got you!"

The broom's end hit up against the solid wall. There was

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nothing there.

Her knees shook so hard she almost collapsed on the floor with the sudden rush of relief swamping her. It *had* to have been a rat. And he'd found a way out somewhere. Mystery solved.

If this had been one of those 'hidden camera' shows, she'd be really embarrassed. Abby groaned, wallowing in self-pity for a minute. "Haven't I been through enough punishment already?"

After consoling herself with two caramel apples and two sweet sodas, she felt calmed enough to settle back down and finish watching her favorite movie. *Although, after tonight, I just might decide another movie is my favorite. Who'd ever thought dead cats and zombies could be so scary?*

The Finale was coming. Horror leered at her like it did the people on the screen. Shaking, she bunched up on the sofa, arms wrapped around her knees, as the "Pet Sematary" Finale played out in delightfully gruesome details.

"Ohmygosh, ohmygosh!" Her voice was hoarse from screaming but she still managed to get out a good squeak when one particular scene –the scariest in her opinion –played out in all its shocking glory.

And then...

The huge black shadow jumped from the floor and straight onto her lap!

Abby screamed louder than she'd ever done in her life.

The shadow screamed too.

As one, both of them fell over themselves as they tumbled off the sofa and raced off in different directions...still screaming!

Above her own screaming, Abby suddenly heard a guttural male voice exclaim, "Why the hell am I running?"

She stopped, shocked and unable to move. She had to remind herself to breathe. This *had* to be a nightmare! That would teach her to over-eat all that sugary junk before watching a scary movie.

In the following silence she was about to convince herself none of it had happened, but then the male voice spoke again.

"I can't believe I screamed like a freaking girl! Dammit. If

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the guys ever hear about this one, I'll never live it down."

Huh? Abby inhaled, then exhaled, trying desperately to calm down. Squaring her shoulders she *forced* herself to go back to the living room. She didn't know what to expect but she was suddenly determined to face it with as much bravery as she could.

It wasn't what she expected. Nowhere *near* that. Her over-active imagination had conjured a zombie, a demon, a ghost, or even a vampire. But instead, she found herself staring at the most gorgeous, *naked* man she'd ever seen!

This time her "Huh?" was said aloud.

The gorgeous, naked man smiled, his lips lifting in a sexy, predatory grin. Abby gulped in reaction, her stomach feeling like a mass of butterflies had been turned loose in it.

"What –how –did you get in? *Who* are you?"

In a flash almost blinding her the man suddenly turned into a large minx cat. The same cat that had been with the children all night! Abby choked back a cry of surprise. *Shapeshifter!*

Moments later he returned to his human form. In all his naked glory. She could get used to looking at him like that...!

Before she could comprehend her unexpected feelings of 'right' with him, he grinned again and said,

"I've been all over this apartment building. I knew you were the one the moment I saw you, but I had to be sure or the spell wouldn't be broken."

"What spell?"

"I was cursed to stay in my cat form until I found my mate. If I chose the wrong woman and touched her –like I touched you when I jumped on the sofa –then the spell would stay as is. If she was the right woman –my forever mate –then I could change back to man." He smiled, the look of lust in his eyes so hot she felt singed. "Hello, *mate*."

Was this real? Had she fallen asleep watching the movie? Not possible! And even more impossible –or so she was trying hard to convince herself –was the soul-accepting attraction she was feeling for this man.

The clock struck midnight. Abby gasped. Her heart nearly

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stopped.

The man glided towards her, stopping a few inches away. His body heat surrounded her in a sensual cocoon and she swayed.

"I don't even know your name." Was that all she could say, considering her whole life had probably just changed dramatically, forever?

He touched her bottom lip with a caressing finger. "I'm Devlin Minx."

Was this mysterious, sexy man really her *mate*? Had the Coven known this would happen tonight? Did she still have her powers?

Devlin leaned forward and kissed her, the touch of his lips soft but full of promising heat. "It's true, Abigail, my love. We're mates. Proof that magic works in mysterious ways. Do you accept me?"

Oh how she wanted to! And *that* realization didn't even shock her like it should have. But first, she had to be sure of something. She turned towards the TV. With a few soft words and the wave of her hand she magically pulled "Pet Sematary" out of the DVR...

And disintegrated it.

Glory be! Her powers were back!

Devlin laughed. "I never did like that movie. Scared me to death watching it with you to the end."

Abby turned back and smiled at the man who was now her mate. She couldn't believe it –but she had already *accepted* it. Maybe this new direction in her life wasn't so bad after all. She'd have to remember to thank the Coven.

"I've always been partial to cats –must be the witch in me. So how can I resist one? She went willingly into his arms. "Yes," she said, with heart and soul-felt conviction, "I do accept you, Devlin."

"Well, *cat's meow*," Devlin whispered, his voice husky. "Let's seal this with a kiss."

And, *cat's meow*, the man could kiss!

About the Authors

Rachel Carrington resides in historical Charleston, South Carolina, and is a published author of fantasy and paranormal romance as well as romantic suspense. She has written for Ellora's Cave, Red Sage Publishing, and Samhain Publishing. Also a freelance editor/writer, she has written non-fiction articles for *The Writer*, *Writer's Journal*, *Absolute Write*, *Funds for Writers*, and *Writer's Weekly*.

To learn more about Rachel, visit DawnRachel.com

Other works include:

Burning Reflections, Samhain Publishing

Surrender, Samhain Publishing

Indigo Spell, Ellora's Cave

Breaking the Spell, Ellora's Cave

Breathless (Secrets), Red Sage Publishing

Daryn Cross & LJ DeLeon are the writing team of Bobbye Terry and Linda Campbell. They began writing together in 1995 and produced three romantic comedies and one paranormal romance/time travel under the pseudonym, Terry Campbell. They now write solo except for combining their talents on special projects.

To learn more about Daryn and LJ, visit TerryCampbell.com

Other Terry Campbell works include:

Mr. Wrong, Five Star, Macmillan

Fat Chance, Five Star, Macmillan

Intimate Investor, LTDBooks

Other Daryn Cross and LJ DeLeon works include:

It's Magic, Crescent Moon Press

Madeleine Drake writes feisty, fast-paced paranormal romance and erotica that spans the space-time continuum. Raised by a pride of cats, a friendly mutt, and the Sonoma County library system, she loves to read about ancient history and mythology, anthropology, gender roles, and sexual archetypes. Her published work includes Blood Hero (Excessica) and Faery's

Bargain (Cobblestone). Maddy's homeworld is located out past the constellation Orion, but she currently resides in Texas.

To learn more about Madeleine, visit MadeleineDrake.com

Other works include:

Blood Hero, Excessica

Faery's Bargain, Cobblestone

Jane Kent has been telling stories most of her life; when she isn't writing them she's moonlighting at her day job in professional theatre and film. She lives near Toronto, Canada and is allowed to share a home—as long as she caters to every whim—with two very spoiled cats. Jane would love to hear from readers at janekent@live.ca and promises to respond to each and every one, though not necessarily speedily!

Other works include:

Getting It Right, Whispers Publishing

Perfect for Each Other, Whispers Publishing

Selena Kitt, like any feline, loves the things that make her purr—and wants nothing more than to make others purr right

along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short catnap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

This sassy, outrageous author lives with her husband and children in the Midwest, all of whom she thinks are the cat's meow. Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out—this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she's not pawing away at her keyboard, Selena runs an innovative publishing company (www.excessica.com) and in her spare time, she worships her devoted husband, corrals four kids and a dozen chickens, all while growing an organic garden. She also loves belly dancing and photography.

To learn more about Selena, visit SelenaKitt.com

Other works include:

Babysitting the Baumgartners, Excessica Publishing

Bluebeard's Wife, Excessica Publishing

Naughty Bits, Excessica Publishing

The Sybian Club, Excessica Publishing
Under Mr. Nolan's Bed, Excessica Publishing
Falling Down, Excessica Publishing
Unfolding, Excessica Publishing
The Real Mother Goose, Excessica Publishing
A Baumgartner Reunion, Excessica Publishing
Heidi and the Kaiser, Excessica Publishing
Baumgartner Generations: Janie, Excessica Publishing
The Song of Orpheus, Excessica Publishing
The Surrender of Persephone, Excessica Publishing
Back to the Garden, Excessica Publishing
EcoEroticm Excessica Publishing
Shivers, Excessica Publishing
Quickies, Excessica Publishing
Starving Artist, Excessica Publishing
On Cherry Hill, Excessica Publishing
Paperback Romance, Excessica Publishing
Tickled Pink, Excessica Publishing
Escaping Fate, Excessica Publishing
Taken, Excessica Publishing
Confessions, Excessica Publishing
Second Chance, Excessica Publishing
Shorn, Excessica Publishing
Sacred Spots, Excessica Publishing

The Flintstone Experiment, Excessica Publishing

Stay, Excessica Publishing

A Different Angle, Excessica Publishing

The Ride, Excessica Publishing

French Lessons, Excessica Publishing

I'll Be Your Superman, Excessica Publishing

Blind Date, Excessica Publishing

Happy Accident, Excessica Publishing

Runere McLain is a retired boat captain, musician, casino pit boss, and former magazine staff writer who is finally able to indulge her dream of writing full time. Currently a TAPS associated ghost hunter, Runere credits the Standing Stone Circle on family property in Scotland for her fire for the paranormal.

Living her own love story in south Mississippi, Runere shares her imagination and love of a good tale with her husband of 25 years!

To learn more about Runere, visit RunereMcLain.com

Christine McKay was born on Corpus Christi. You can guess what inspired Christine's parents to name her Christine. She attended parochial grade school, public high school and, apparently yearning for the nuns of her youth, a small Catholic college, all in northeastern Wisconsin. Armed with a bachelor's degree in computer science, she headed off into the then largely male-dominated database administration field. Yes, her life is as exciting as it sounds in those three sentences.

She's also ridden across lower Michigan largely on muleback, acquired her motorcycle license despite her husband's misgivings, completed her first (and probably only) 100-mile bicycle race, cut up her wedding dress to make Victorian lamp shades and, so far, has managed to not horribly mangle her body despite racking up a worrisome amount of miles on a motorcycle nearly as old as herself.

Christine still lives in Wisconsin, where the summers are too muggy, the mosquitoes are too thick and the winters have too much snow.

To learn more about Christine, visit ChristineMcKay.com

Other works include:

Carnal Magic, Harlequin Spice Briefs

Loch Dragon's Lady, Harlequin Spice Briefs
The Genesis Clock, Cerridwen Press
Mysteries & Magick, Cerridwen Press
At Earth's Edge, Samhain Publishing
Romeo's Dead But Juliette Faked It, Champagne Books
A Taste of Summer Magic, Champagne Books
Shadow Queen, Cerridwen Press
The Last Queen, Cerridwen Press
Brown Paper Packages, Ellora's Cave
Uncharted Lands, Ellora's Cave
Curse of Cupid, Ellora's Cave
Smoldering Embers, Cerridwen Press

Alicia Nordwell is a 29-year-old previously unpublished writer living in Washington with her husband and two children. She writes a blend of paranormal and fantasy fiction after discovering a love of the genre through her favorite authors.

Frances Pauli was born and raised in Washington State. She grew up with a love of reading and storytelling, and was introduced to Science

Fiction and Fantasy at an early age through the books kept and

read by her father.

Her original love of Speculative fiction combined with her covert excursions into the Romance section led her into the realms of Urban Fantasy and Paranormal Romance, where she finds herself quite comfortable.

Her fascination with Science Fiction and a growing passion for the NASA channel divert her happily into tales of the far future, alternate dimensions, and the wonders of space, usually with at least a touch of romance.

To learn more about Frances, visit FrancesPauli.com

Other works include:

Roarke, Devine Destinies

Molly Ringle's paranormal romance novel *The Ghost Downstairs*, a 2010 EPIC Award finalist, was published in 2009 by The Wild Rose Press. Her contemporary romance novel *Summer Term* was released in August 2010 from the same publisher. Her young adult/women's fiction novel *What Scotland Taught Me* is due out in October 2010 from ireadiwrite Publishing.

Molly has also had short humor essays published in two different anthologies, and won the 2010 Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest with a single (intentionally) terrible sentence. For over two decades she has enjoyed writing fiction for adults and young adults, and in recent years, after having her own children, has branched out into text for picture books as well.

Molly grew up in the Pacific Northwest and currently lives in Seattle with her husband and children. Her studies include a bachelor of arts in anthropology (University of Oregon, Clark Honors College), with a focus on Native North American culture; and a master of arts in linguistics (University of California, Davis) with a focus on sociolinguistics. She is likely someday to add a master of library and information sciences to this list, while never ceasing to write novels and indulge in odd internet projects on the side.

To learn about Molly, visit MollyRingle.com

Other works include:

The Ghost Downstairs, The Wild Rose Press

Summer Term, The Wild Rose Press

Angela Spencer has written science fiction, fantasy, nonfiction, and now paranormal romance. She lives in Seattle with five cats and her partner, Danny.

To learn more about Angela, visit Angela-Spencer.com

Other works as Jeremy Zimmerman include:

A Ghost of Christmas Past, Timid Pirate Publishing

A Necessity of the Present, Wily Writers

A Tale of Two Bureaucracies, Crossed Genres

Golden Apples, Crossed Genres

A Crazy Kind of Love, Crossed Genres

Kari Thomas is a multi-published, award-winning author writing mainly in the Paranormal Romance genre. She loves the endless possibilities, the magic, of creating heroes and heroines with inborn strengths that can take them through anything. When not writing, she is also a Freelance Editor for an Arizona publisher, and a Book Reviewer for the major Publishing Houses. Her reviews can be read at her site under "Kari's Korner Reviews". She is also the caregiver for her elderly dad, and they live in Northern Arizona.

To learn more about Kari, visit AuthorKari.com

Other works include:

Spell-Kissed, Black Lyon Publishing

Under A Shifter's Moon, Black Lyon Publishing

Hunted Mate, Black Lyon Publishing

Prey for the Wolf, Eternal Press

Seducing the Hero, Eternal Press

Her Heart His Soul, Bookstrand-Siren Publishing

Temptation Unleashed, Samhain Publishing

Hold Onto The Night, All Romance eBooks