

sexstrology

sagittarius

OPEN HEART, OPEN MIND

SÈPHERA GIRÓN

ra[♥]venous
romance

Sagittarius

Open Heart, Open Mind

A Ravenous Romance™ Lovestrology™ Original Publication

By Sèphera Girón

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication
www.ravenousromance.com

Sagittarius: Open Heart, Open Mind
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ISBN: 978-1-60777-008-4

This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

This series is dedicated to my husband, Derek,
whom I met when he came to me for a tarot reading.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Welcome to the mystical town of Hermana, where anything can happen.

Are you looking for romance?

Never-ending love?

Erotic adventure?

Magic?

Dream your darkest desire, and Hermana will make it happen.

The LOVESTROLOGY™ series takes place in the fictional New England town of Hermana, Massachusetts, which was founded by twin sisters who escaped the Salem witch trials in the 1700s.

The sisters' names were Sorona and Seraphina and they both lived well into their nineties, sharing their holistic healing secrets and building up the mystical vibrations of the area. They married twin witches, Nigel and Nathaniel, who shared their voracious sexual appetites and magical healing abilities. Consequently, the foursome enjoyed a long line of descendants who continued to grow the town and add to its magical and erotic qualities.

The town is old and rich in tradition, and combines the beauty of both ocean and forest. Much like Cassadaga in Florida or Sedona in Arizona, the town resonates with a vibration that attracts spiritualists, occultists, ghost hunters, and divination experts from all over the world.

The town is about forty-five minutes from Boston, a few miles from a major highway, by way of a long winding road that weaves through a forest, a meadow with a ring of trees and then into the village. The road leads directly to the ocean, where there is a large public beach. Some of the residents enjoy nude sunbathing and in Hermana, anything goes. There are many funky little shops, several pubs, dance clubs, bed and breakfasts and even a gym and library. The town is inhabited by both people who believe in the power of the sisters and those who do not.

The biggest and most well-known landmark in town is a huge New England Gothic house, complete with turrets, which is where the sisters originally lived. Of course, it was just a shack when they first cobbled it together but over the generations, wings were added, along with tunnels, wrought iron fencing and lush gardens.

One of their descendants lives there now. Lucy, who is about eighty years old, opens her doors now and again to the town for various celebrations. She has a core group of twelve local ladies who meet with her at least monthly to discuss life and love, cast spells, and welcome the various equinoxes. Guests are often welcome and are allowed to bring questions to the witches.

People flock to Hermana for answers. Some find them. Some do not. Others go for the rumored hedonistic pleasures, and usually find something to entertain and entice them.

Each month, the LOVESTROLOGY™ series will focus on the romantic quest of a different lady connected to Hermana who was born under the sun sign of that month. December tells the story of our Sagittarian friend, Maggie.

The power of love and lust, magic and mysticism is at the heart of the town, which keeps beating as steadily as the waves that crash along the beach. Connections are made and lost. Passion ebbs and flows. And still the town continues to beguile the seekers, the wanderers, the lost to experience its hedonistic pleasures and unearth its darkest secrets.

Welcome to Hermana.

I hope you enjoy your stay.

Sèphera Giron

SAGITTARIUS

November 22 – December 21

Element: Fire

Ruling Planet: Jupiter

Symbol: The Archer

Primary Mode: Intuition

Key Phrase: I Philosophize

Life Lesson: Stop and enjoy the physical presence of those who love you

Colors: Denim blue, royal blue, purple, white, beige, bronze

Stones: Turquoise – protects against catastrophe

Amethyst – promotes mental peace, calming, healing

FIRE SIGN BUZZ WORDS: enthusiastic, sexual, aggressive, ambitious, impatient, energetic, short attention span, impulsive, adventurous, masculine

SAGITTARIAN TRAITS:

You are free-spirited and hate to be tied down. Your mind is always feasting on new ideas and information, so you are a natural teacher and philosopher. Always looking for fun, you love to travel and can't stay still for long. Tenacious and idealistic, your friendly nature charms even the hardest of hearts. When it comes to love, you are passionate and romantic but you tend to lose interest after that initial spark is gone. One-night stands and quickies turn you on. If someone comes along who can engage your loins and your curiosity and keeps you on your toes by actually saying no once in a while, you can be very loyal.

MAGGIE'S DECEMBER FORECAST

Your travels have led you back to where you started, and you yearn to build a life that is deeper and more meaningful. A person with whom you can share ideas in an easy flow of energy will inspire a desire to connect in a more intimate manner. Building a foundation towards a united existence will free you to continue your spiritual quest for your life's meaning.

Chapter One

New beginnings may take you on an unexpected trip.

Golden fingers of dawn pierced through darkness, glinting across the dresser and along Maggie's closed eyes. She moaned in her sleep, hugging the satin-wrapped pillow against her chest. Long, curly red hair splayed along the crisp whiteness of the bedsheets as she rolled back and forth, deep in the grip of a dream.

Hands caressed her breasts, squeezing them, kneading them, cupping their fullness. Darkened faces were hidden under hoods, in the shadows, as busy fingers ran along her body. Her flesh danced with pleasure as the anonymous lovers probed and pushed every inch of her. She spread her legs and let the explorations penetrate her deep inside the moist heat that burned like an eternal fire; never satiated, never satisfied. Although she was restrained in her dream by arms and legs lashed with leather thongs to hooks in a large stone slab, she happily embraced every moment of ecstasy.

The dawn's rays mocked her, glinting around the room, glancing from the large mirror on the dresser to the wooden stand-up mirror nearby on the floor. The light shimmered against her eyelids and she squeezed her eyes tighter. She flopped over onto her stomach, her pale round ass protruding from the rumpled sheets, her legs curling up and down as she fought the edge between waking up and staying asleep.

A teetering pile of dirty clothes was flung into one of the corners and several containers of makeup littered the nightstand. A half-empty bottle of water and a partial chocolate bar lay on a doily shared with a wooden table lamp that had a crocheted shade covering.

The queen-sized bed itself was a piece of art. Four tall wooden posts reached towards the ceiling. Each post had deep spirals that ended in a pointed cone. The base of the posts curled into giant talons of what might have been some mythical creature's

feet.

There was a matching wooden dresser with a large mirror. Piles of papers, receipts, makeup, a hair brush, a curling iron and assorted other bits of clutter were strewn along the top.

The closet door hung open as mounds of clothes overflowed from it onto the bedroom floor. On the rack, outfits were squashed together so tightly that it was nearly impossible to pull something out without disrupting the entire closet.

The chaos that was Maggie's life reached out into the rest of her apartment. One glance at her clutter indicated a woman on the go, with crystals and condoms spilling from her overturned purse.

The sun continued to dance against her reluctant eyelids. Maggie squished her pillow, hoping to retain a moment more of the dream, but it was fading rapidly. In defeat, she flung the sheets from her and rolled over.

"It's always too soon," she sighed as she glanced at the sleek black alarm clock.

Green luminescent numbers glowed.

"Seven-thirty. Well, I guess that's not so bad." She rolled back into the softness of her many pillows and stared at the ceiling. The swirls and whirls of stucco caught her attention as faces took form in them.

A woman with a long hooked nose and protruding chin.

A crowd of people gathered around some unseen event.

A handsome man with large, soulful eyes and full lips.

Natasha sighed as she stared at the image of the man.

"I hope this is a vision and not just wishful thinking," she said, then sat up and swung her feet to the beige carpet. She stretched and caught a glimpse of her naked body in the dresser mirror.

She smiled at the lovely young lady staring back at her. Her birthday was coming, and as she did every year, she tried to reinvent her body and her life.

The hours of working out had begun to shape and tone her normally soft

body. Her arms were firmer and her waist was narrow. When she stood sideways, her belly was barely a soft bulge. She had always been tall, but rather square and manly, especially back in high school. In grade school, she had towered over most of the boys in her class and often felt clumsy and awkward. As an adult, weight had a habit of coming and going, especially around her belly, but she'd never had a big weight problem like some of her friends.

In preparation for her coming birthday, she had sought the advice of a personal trainer at her gym and learned some of the secrets of body sculpting. Her trainer knew that as a Sagittarius, Maggie wasn't cut out for body building, or even focusing on exercising for very long periods of time. The routines she used were short and focused. Although Maggie had a hard time getting to the gym or even remembering to go to the gym in the first place, she did put in some time and the results were showing.

Her newly sculpted self smiled, revealing freshly whitened teeth. They were long, but not too crooked, and now that the coffee stains were banished for a while, her smile was quite engaging.

She stood before the mirror and stuck out her hand. "Hello, I'm Maggie. Pleased to meet you." A big grin stretched across her face.

Then she giggled and her attention turned towards a pile of tarot cards teetering on a mountain of papers and whatnot on top of her dresser.

She fingered the cards, looking around the room. One day she'd have to get organized, but at that moment, she had to get to work.

She lifted a card from the deck and looked at it.

Four of pentacles.

Closed. Selfish. Greedy. Stubborn... She sighed. *Also, frugal, cautious, won't lose anything but won't gain anything either.*

None of that was what she wanted to think about today. Today had to be an Ace of Pentacles day or she wouldn't make her rent.

The town of Hermana wasn't very large, but it boasted a thriving and steady

tourist business. It had been founded in the late 1700s by two sisters who had fled the Salem witch hunt. The sisters, Sorona and Seraphina, had come to the United States as children, the daughters of a Spanish fortune teller and healer. They could barely remember their journey to the new land, but their beloved parents often told tales of the long boat ride and the excitement of starting over.

Their father died, while hunting, not long after their arrival. He'd been mauled by a raging mother bear when he ventured too close to the cave. The girls' mother died of a fever when they were in their teen years.

By the time they were in their twenties, the gifts they had inherited from their parents were their way of life and they enjoyed a thriving business in Salem.

When the nightmare of the witch hunts began, they packed a few belongings and set out into the night.

They loved the ocean and New England and couldn't bear the thought of leaving their part of the world. After walking for a day, they found a ring of trees and slept on the grass beneath.

Their dreams were so magnetic and encouraging that they didn't want to leave the area at all. As they walked further on, there were more paths, and one led to a large sandy beach right on the ocean.

"This is our home," Sorona proclaimed, and that day, Hermana was born.

They found a place in the woods where they built a small cabin. Over the years, other people joined the sisters and their growing family, building more tiny houses and clearing away parts of the forest.

The sisters had practiced mostly holistic therapies and were willing to share their secrets with others. A coven was formed, yet more people wanted to join. There was something in the gentle manner of the sisters combined with the thunderous pull of the ocean and the graceful enormity of surrounding pine trees that spoke to people.

The sisters eventually built a huge house that stood to that day. Each generation added an extension or a floor to it, so that by the twenty-first century, the mansion was

enormous. Its giant Gothic turrets could be seen from the main road. A huge black wrought iron fence surrounded the massive property. There were pathways through gardens and several sitting areas with ornate fountains.

One of the sisters' descendants, Lucy, lived in the house, and she opened it up on special occasions for circles and celebrations.

The town was hard to find from the main roads, yet thousands of people descended on it from May to October. A booming tourist economy led to the building of hotels and many little stores. Witches had founded the town and witches still ran it. From the mayor to the checkout clerk at the variety store, there was a lineage of witchcraft and other types of occult talent in the Hermana citizens.

People of all types came through the town. There were the curious, the arrogant, the mystified, the accidental tourist, but mostly people who needed answers to their questions.

Answers were plentiful in Hermana. If a client didn't like his palm reading, he could go next door for an aura painting. Perhaps a channeller or a tarot card advisor would do better. There was a specialist in nearly every New Age activity practicing his or her craft. The tourists demanded top-notch service, so only the best practitioners survived for more than a season.

Since the '70s, the town ran an outdoor flea market in the humid summer months. The tourists loved it, flocking from psychics to fresh fruit to souvenir T-shirts. Word of mouth spread, and within a decade, the flea market had become known as a must-do event for spiritualists traveling through New England.

Another flea market had been set up in the mall just off the highway. Many locals ran booths at both locations, relying on family members to help operate them.

Maggie had run her booth on weekends for nearly a year. She found it arduous because readings were so short and they were barely worth her time financially. However, the goal of the venture had been not to rake in tons of dough, but to widen her sphere of people who might become regulars or take advantage of her online services.

Meeting new people was always a good thing, psychic or not. Maggie had been stuck in a rut for far too long. Three years ago, Sam had moved out and yet she still had not moved on.

That day had been so painful, yet she had survived. She wasn't sure what had hurt more, his betrayal of her trust or the sight of him packing his things to move to someone else.

Either way, the memory left a raw gnawing wound in her stomach, and she tried in many ways to let it go.

* * * *

Moving through the stalls at the mall, other vendors nodded hellos, sipping their morning coffee as the swell of easygoing banter filled the air.

Maggie opened her booth and set to work organizing her displays in the hopes of enticing people to pick up some gemstones or jewelry.

As Maggie sat behind the square table adorned with a silk sun-and-moon tablecloth, she studied the man walking towards her. He had an easy gait and dressed with a bit of flair. The way he nodded as he passed people led her to believe he was European. He continued to walk straight towards Maggie and her pulse quickened.

"Is that you?" he asked, indicating the sign.

"Yes, that's me."

He nodded as if he knew everything about everything and looked around her booth. There were bowls of gemstones, tiny figurines, crystal balls and jewelry.

"I read palms," he said.

"Really?" Maggie stared at his small pale hands.

"Want to do a trade? I'll read your palm if you read my cards?"

"Sure thing. Have a seat."

"Paul," he said.

"Maggie."

"I'm a Pisces."

“Sagittarius,” she countered.

“Oh, a birthday soon? Or just did you have one?”

“It’s coming up.”

They settled across from each other at the tiny table. The din was pulsing as the fever of the day bustled towards the peak.

“Give me your hand,” Paul said. Maggie dutifully stuck out her hand, watching how his slight form mirrored every movement of his head. He opened her palm and flexed it, tracing the deeply grooved lines with his finger.

“You’ve been single for a while,” His intense eyes met hers. Under his gaze, his words were strong and valid.

“Yes.”

“Are you seeing someone new?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are going to meet him any minute.”

“Where do you see that?”

He traced a line along her palm. “See all the breaks in here? Those are all the times you’re heart has been broken.”

“No kidding.”

“This here is your heart beating strong and willfully again. A new man.”

“And I suppose you think that man is going to be you.”

“No, not me. But if you want, I do have a thing for pretty eyes and red hair.”

Maggie laughed. “Tell me more.”

“He’s not what you are looking for at all.”

“Who is? I’m not even looking for anything serious so that covers all of you.”

“No. You know, you have that secret checklist. Everyone does. You need to throw it away. Open heart. Open mind.”

“Yes. Open heart. Open mind.”

Paul told her a few more things as he peered at her hand, flexing it one way, bending it another to examine the lines that curved and crisscrossed.

When he was finished, Maggie kept her promise and read a few cards for him.

As he left, he reminded her: “Open heart, open mind.”

Maggie walked over to a long table with a red cloth, where an assortment of crystals was laid out in matching glass bowls. She fiddled with the handmade signs and arranged the tiny stones into tidy piles. There was a tall cylinder case where three levels of gemstone totems and figurines glittered in one of the spotlights that beamed down on it. The top level held Chinese symbols of auspiciousness that included a pig, a jade elephant, a silver ox and the like. On the next level were various sizes of crystal balls. The bottom level held an obscure collection of eclectic items such as tiny labradorite skulls, hematite, rose quartz and fluorite hearts, several quartz crystal wands wrapped with copper and decorated with gemstones and the claw of some unknown animal.

The claw crept her out and she handled it as little as possible. It had come to her one day through the friend of a friend who was leaving for England.

“Do you want this thing?” Sharon had asked her that day. Maggie stared first at the gnarled furry little fist and then at Sharon’s bright blue eyes.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“You can sell it at that little boutique thing you have going on at the mall?”

“I don’t know. That thing is awfully icky.” Maggie took another look at the despicable offering.

She gingerly picked it up and held it in the air. “Who the hell is going to buy this thing?” She placed it firmly back into Sharon’s hand. Sharon pouted, her full pink lips puckered out as she batted her wide blue eyes that were thickly rimmed with black mascara.

“One day, you’ll need it. Trust me.” She winked.

“But what is it?”

Sharon shrugged. “It was given to me in New Orleans as part of a spell I was supposed to do. I got too freaked out and never cast it.” She stared out the window and licked her lips. “I wonder if things would be different now if I had gone through with it.”

“Well, I think things are going just fine,” Maggie said as she put her arm around Sharon. “I’ll take this...monkey’s paw rabbit foot thing off your hands.”

“Thanks,” Sharon said as she hugged Maggie. “It needs to find the right home. And I sure can’t take that to England with me.”

“No. I’d say there’s a lot of things you can’t take with you.” Maggie looked around at the room. Most of it was packed into big cardboard boxes but there were still shelves of assorted gemstones and knickknacks that had to be dealt with.

“Hey, if you’d like to take some more for your store, be my guest.”

“I’d give you a percentage,” Maggie said, smiling.

“You’re doing me a favor. I don’t want your money.”

Maggie shrugged. “We’ll see how it pans out. I may sell a lot, I may sell nothing. It’s a funny business and there are so many of us there.”

“You’ll do fine, and I’m happy to help. Never hurts to have more stuff on display. Here, you can take these display cases too.” Sharon waved. Maggie smiled.

“You rock.”

* * * *

Maggie grinned as she wiped the case with a damp cloth. Sharon had e-mailed her just the other day to say she’d met a great guy and they were going to spend the holidays skiing in the Alps.

Maggie yearned to go on an adventure, but she had to get money together to finance it first. It was hard for her to stay focused on much of anything, and freelance tarot reading was good for her. The weekends at the flea market were hit-or-miss. Although it was the busiest shopping time of the year, the little towns that fed off

the mall had very few tourists coming through the area, so the malls weren't exactly bustling.

Still, the mystique of a collection of seers and antiques did draw curious and superstitious people out for unique gifts and New Year's forecasts.

When Maggie turned back from her puttering, a tall, lanky man was slouched in the client chair at her little reading table.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you there," she said as she put the cloth down and hurried to her chair.

She picked up her tarot cards and shuffled them, staring intently into the man's piercing brown eyes. He had a slight French accent and waved his hands when he spoke.

"I have a question. A real quick one." He slid a folded ten-dollar bill across the table. Maggie took it and put it into the money box beside her chair. When she returned her gaze to his, he leaned forward.

"Is my girlfriend cheating on me?" he asked. Maggie grinned.

"Are you sure you want to know the answer to that question? You know, you should never ask a question unless you really want to know the truth."

"Just tell me. Here, give me a card."

Maggie fanned out the deck as he reached for one. He slammed it down in triumph as the Lovers was revealed.

"See!" he laughed and slapped the table. "Fucking bitch."

He stood up with a chuckle and shook his head.

"Thanks, Maggie."

"Sure," she said and watched him walk away.

No sooner was he gone than a petite lady sat down before her. Within minutes, there was a small line forming for her services. It was the lunchtime rush. Maggie always found it funny, but so often people would go to the mall for lunch and then poke around the flea market as some kind of outing. It amazed her how many people were

addicted to the ritual. Saturday shopping, a bite to eat and a reading.

Many of her clients that day were regulars. Some people came every week, some once a month or so. She'd only been reading there for less than a year, so it had taken a while to understand the rhythm of the demographic.

After her fifteenth or so reading, Jimmy came along. She smiled when she saw him, for he was so easygoing.

"Hi, Maggie," he said. His blue eyes always twinkled as if he were about to burst out laughing at some kind of inner joke. The *joie de vivre* he carried was infectious, and Maggie grinned as she shuffled her cards.

"What's going on today, Jimmy?" she asked.

"Well, my dear Maggie," Jimmy said as he touched her wrist lightly. "I've decided that today is the day that I turn over a new leaf. I'm going to become a new man. Faithful, trustful and responsible."

"My, oh my, Jimmy. What brings this on?"

Jimmy cleared his throat. "I've been thinking, really thinking, you know, about these past few months."

"And?"

"Well, I've been thinking that I want to get to know you better. In other words, can we go for a coffee and talk about stuff?"

"What stuff?"

Jimmy grinned. "Why, you and me babe, you and me."

"I'm not going out with you Jimmy. Jeez, you've gone mad with the holidays." Maggie pushed his hand away. "You just want someone on your arm to show off to your friends at the parties. I know you Aries men."

"It's not like that. Not at all. I like you, Maggie. A lot. I think we'd be good together."

"Maybe in another life, Jimmy. But really, I'm not looking right now. Not really."

“Come on. A hot girl like you has got to want to have some fun once in while, you know what I mean?”

“I have fun. Don’t you worry,” she said with a wink. “Now, focus. What do you want for a reading?”

“You’re funny, Maggie.” Jimmy said as he took the cards and shuffled. “Okay. Here goes.”

He laid out the cards. Maggie looked at them and nodded.

“You’re going to meet someone. Really soon. Like in the next week or so. You’re going to hit it off and it’s going to be so great. Lots of hot sex.” She winked.

“Yeah?” he asked staring at the pictures on the cards.

“Yep. So, don’t worry about any false claims to me. You have lots of opportunities waiting for you and you don’t have to change a thing.”

“Thanks, doll.” Jimmy said and leaned over to kiss her on the forehead as he stood up.

The next person was a teenaged girl with tight jeans and stringy hair. Her hat pushed her bangs over her eyes. She stood shyly in front of Maggie.

“Hi. Sit down.” Maggie said. The girl sat in a half slouch, head down as she peered at the cards from under her hair.

“So, like. How does this work and all?” the girl asked, her leg bobbing up and down with nervousness.

“Most people like to ask a question. Just whatever’s utmost on your mind. It’s going to come out anyway.”

“Then what?”

“You pick however many cards I tell you to and then I tell you what they mean.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Cool.” The girl reached into her jeans pocket for money. She pulled out two crumpled fives and put them down.

The reading went well and time was moving along. The clients were slowing down again and Maggie even had time to stand up to stretch her legs before another regular, Bert, sat down at her table.

“Boy, I’d sure like to have a date tonight with someone,” he said as he sat down. “Let’s see what’s in the cards.”

When Maggie turned them over, she had to keep from laughing. Right there in the pictures were all of his wants and desires pouring out in unabashed lust for her. She swallowed and tried to look him in the eyes.

“It seems to me that you already have your eye on someone,” she said with a stern voice.

“Yep. There are a couple that I’m thinking about. Just not sure how to ask.”

“Well, sometimes you just have to spit it out.”

“It’s so hard.”

“Well, if you want something, you don’t know until you ask.”

“But shit, I hate rejection.”

Maggie nodded. “I know. Who doesn’t hate rejection?”

“So, am I going on a date tonight?” he asked.

“Yes. The cards indicate a yes.”

“Really?” He smiled. “Will you be my date tonight?”

“Me?”

“Sure, why not? We’d have some fun. Take you to dinner, maybe some dancing.”

“I have to work in the morning.”

“It’s Saturday night, babe. What do you say?”

“I can’t. I’m sorry. I just can’t.”

“Well, shit. I hate rejection and you know that.”

“I’m sorry. I already have plans for tonight.”

“For real?”

“Yes, for real. Don’t worry, the next one you ask will go out with you. Just get your nerve up.”

“Okay. I’ll do that. I’m calling her right now.” He pulled out his cell phone and dialed as he walked away. He waved as the call connected.

Maggie watched him as he disappeared into the crowd.

* * * *

A man studied the case, piercing blue eyes sparkling in the sun. He wore a brown leather jacket, brown sweater and jeans. His light brown hair was short and spiky. When he looked towards Maggie, his face was sincere. Strong chin and large forehead spoke to her of intelligence and stubbornness. She smiled.

He leaned over, his gaze directed at the paw.

“Can I help you?” Maggie asked as she approached him. A light scent of cologne pleased her senses.

“That – claw thing? What is it?”

“I’m not sure. It’s for voodoo spells.”

“Why do you have it?”

“Someone somewhere may want it,” she said.

He stood up with a shudder. He pointed above the claw.

“What are those skulls?” he asked.

“They’re labradolite. They help you connect to the unconscious world.”

“Oh, really? Like psychic stuff?”

“Yes.”

“Can you cast spells with them? Or a curse?”

“You could if you wanted to. But I don’t recommend it.”

“Why not?”

“Whatever you put out into the world comes back to you three times. So if you put out a bad thought, you’ll get three times worse in return. Unless you’re a professional, and even they can’t always manipulate the outcome of things. The

universe has its own way of balancing things.”

“Huh,” he said, his brow furrowed in thought. “Can I see one?”

“Sure.”

Maggie took the key from her pocket for the case. She opened the door and reached in for one of the skulls. She carefully took it out and handed it to the man. As their fingers touched, a jolt passed through her body. She looked at the man, and he winced too.

“You feel that?” she asked as her thoughts spun to a cloudy place and a distant voice whispered something in the back of her head.

He nodded. “I’m always getting shocks. I’m a welder,” he said shrugging it off.

The voice whispered louder.

It’s him.

Maggie shook her head and met his eyes.

“Oh. A welder. So welders get sparks?”

“Sometimes when I touch things, I get shocks. I think there’s a build-up in the body or something.”

“And there’s always the typical everyday it’s-winter shocks.” She said.

A welder. What on earth would she ever have in common with a welder? He took the skull and held it up, examining it thoughtfully. His eyes were stunning, ringed with dark lashes as he peered at the stone.

“Labradolite?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“Interesting.” He handed her the skull and she put it back into the case “It’s cool.”

He stood staring at the display a while longer and then turned to her.

“Can I have a reading?”

“Sure.”

They sat down at the table and Maggie shuffled the cards.

“You’ve actually read for me once before,” he said. She thought and a vague recollection of him and his sad blue eyes came back.

“What is the secret?” he had asked that day a few weeks earlier.

“Secret?” she’d mused as she flipped the cards. So many uneasy cards. So much pain and sadness emitted from the pictures. Even remembering that day, she could still feel the whoosh of secrets unspoken pulsing from him.

“I remember now,” she said. “You wanted an answer and all I could see was sadness.”

“Today I’m more focused. More time has passed and I’m ready to receive the answer.”

She looked at him with amusement. “You’ve been reading up.”

“A bit.” He said, and blushed. “I don’t really read much but I saw some things on the Internet about this tarot reading stuff. I had never done it before last time.”

He reached his hand into his jacket and pulled out a box. “I brought something that might help you see better.”

He handed the locket to her and again she felt the strange shocking vibration tingling through her hand and up her arm.

“What’s this?”

“It was my mother’s, before she passed away. She always wore it. I think there’s something to it.”

“Why do you think there’s a secret?”

“A sense I’ve had. In going through some of my mother’s belongings, some stuff doesn’t make sense. There’s some kind of secret and I need to know what it is.”

“Well, psychometry isn’t really my thing, but I’ll see if I can see anything.”

She held the locket between her hands and closed her eyes.

A brilliant flash of light glowed behind her eyelids. Waves of sorrow and confusion swept through her. The image of a man floated before her. The man was the man in front of her, so that didn’t help her at all. She put down the locket.

"I'm afraid I'm not much help when it comes to this sort of thing. Maybe another psychic."

"I don't know. I feel drawn to you. I don't know why since I'm not really into this stuff. I feel like you can give me the answers."

"I can try again but I don't really see anything today. But that's no surprise, 'cause I never do from that. Let's try the cards."

She gave him back the locket and shuffled up the cards. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Steve."

"And your sign?"

"Virgo."

"Ah, a Virgo. Practical and orderly."

"Sometimes."

"You like everything in its place. No wonder this mystery is bugging you."

"Yep."

"Pick seven cards."

He shuffled the cards and placed them face down. It took him several minutes but at last he was content with his selection.

As Maggie flipped over the cards, she frowned.

"There's nothing new here. Nothing I can see that can help the mystery. It's the same as before. Family. Sadness. Grief."

"No more?"

"Nothing more. Practically the same cards too," she said. "Do you have something else you want to ask?"

"No." he sighed.

"I'm sorry I can't help you. There's no charge for the reading."

"Oh, please. Of course I'm going to pay you. I believe that when the time is right, the answer will be there. I'll have to come back again."

Steve pulled out his wallet and gave her a twenty. As she reached for her money box to get him change, he put up his hand.

“No, twenty is fine. You helped me just by listening.”

He stood up to go. Maggie looked at his tall slender body, or what she could see of it under his coat. He was nicely built, but still it was his eyes that drew her in. Large, blue soulful eyes. Sad. But not with disappointment over his reading. Sad because life was sad.

Chapter Two

A friend may have good advice.

It was after nine by the time Maggie walked over to the Dance Cave. The air was crisp, a few snowflakes fell lazily, and Maggie was cheered that there was no wind. She pushed her scarf up over her nose as she carefully stepped along the sidewalk in her two-inch boots. The path was pretty clear and had been salted, so she felt confident she'd arrive at her destination intact. The booming bass from the warehouse echoed through her feet and into her ears. Judging by the number of cars in the parking lot, people were eager to get out and party.

Maggie cut through the back parking lot and walked by a circle of five people huddled together over a joint. Their laughter betrayed their actions and Maggie smiled as she passed the thickly perfumed air. As she approached the door, there were several people milling out front smoking cigarettes.

"Do you have a light?" A tall man with dreamy blue eyes was watching her intently for her answer. She smiled as she fumbled through her purse.

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact." It took a few minutes of digging but at last she produced the prize. As she lit his cigarette, he held his pack out to her.

"Would you care to join me?" he asked. Maggie nodded.

"Sure."

He took the lighter and lit her cigarette.

"My name's Tom. And you?"

"Maggie."

"Nice name. You live around here?"

"Yes. You?"

"No, I'm just here visiting my cousin for a few days. I'm from Vermont."

“What do you think?”

“I like what I’ve seen so far.” He grinned.

“And what is that?” she asked, flirting.

“Well, I must say, the ladies around here are very pretty. Especially the one talking to me right now.”

“Thank you.” Maggie blushed. She smoked her cigarette and stared up at the sky. “New moon soon. New beginnings.”

“You believe in that stuff?”

“Yes. Do you?”

Tom shrugged. “Maybe a little.”

“That’s okay.”

“So this is *the* happening club, huh?”

“Yep.”

“*Is* it a happening club?”

“Well, it’s like anywhere. There are good nights and bad nights. Seems to be quite a crowd.”

“I think it’s the weather myself,” Tom said. “No storms tonight. That’s good.”

“There’s that.”

“I’d better go find my cousin. I said I wouldn’t be long. See you inside.” Tom said suddenly as he put his cigarette out in the nearby metal ashtray.

“See you.” Maggie took another drag off her cigarette and put it out. She entered the club, the music assaulting her ears.

Her first glance was towards the dance floor. Not many people were up yet, just a few college-aged girls clutching beers and giggling as they swayed to Madonna’s “Like a Virgin.”

Natasha was easy to spot with her tall lean body, long dark hair and pale face. Maggie had to push through several clumps of cocktail dresses and Italian shirts before she reached her.

“What’s up?” Natasha asked as she turned her cool, dark gaze towards Maggie.

“Late as always, but nothing new. You?”

“Same old, same old.”

“How was work?” Maggie asked. Natasha also had a booth at the market. She was a medium, a Capricorn, and mostly worked with a ouija board, although she had an eerie way of picking up on people’s thoughts.

“I did okay. You?”

“Made a few bucks.”

They pushed their way towards the bar.

“It’s really crowded in here tonight.”

“I guess it’s the first Saturday night it’s been half-decent out in forever.”

They ordered bottles of beer and found a space by the wall where they could study the dance floor.

“Is Ellie coming out?” Maggie asked as she spotted Tom across the room. He waved as he caught her eye and resumed talking with a short, curly-haired man.

“She’s late, as always. You two and your lateness. At least you’re not as bad as Ellie.” Natasha sighed with mock frustration, her throaty voice low.

Maggie shrugged, for Natasha was always serious, always intense. Instead of responding, Maggie took a sip from her beer and watched one of the college girls bouncing to the song. Her dress clung tightly to her shapely body, her cleavage just peaking from the scooped neck.

Ellie finally arrived, flustered and pink-cheeked. She was a tiny little thing; thin, large-breasted and curly-haired. The aroma of vanilla always emanated from her pores as if she bathed in vats of fresh vanilla beans all night. Natasha coyly mocked her, pretending to be angry about Ellie’s late arrival.

“Oh, come now, Natasha, it’s not like we have tickets to a show.”

“Late is late, Ellie. It’s about manners and respect as well as the activity,” Natasha chided.

“Don’t be mad at me, my moody Capricorn,” Ellie said stroking a piece of Natasha’s long black hair. “You know you love me.”

Ellie hugged the ladies and they laughed.

The three women watched as the dance floor was suddenly flooded with writhing gyrations to Billy Idol singing his gravelly rendition of “Mony, Mony.” They nodded their heads, each sinking back into a reverie of images the song conjured.

Maggie and her little brother would jump on her twin bed, mouthing the words in the mirror as the bass bounced through the walls from the living room. Her mother, a clean-freak regimented Virgo, was stickler for keeping her figure. Her morning routine consisted of a quiet cup of coffee followed by a rousing forty-five minutes of aerobics to ’80s songs. Looking back, Maggie realized her mother had a lot of stamina, for she would belt out the song with Billy without missing a beat as she bounced around the living room.

Maggie’s mother was still beautiful and shapely and still jumped around to Billy Idol as well as any twenty-year-old. Maggie thought back to children’s picture books where women in their sixties wore buns and faces worn with wrinkles as the stress of the years sank down into their pores. Not Bernadette. She was as sharp as a tack and, though she couldn’t fool anyone that her youth had fled, she kept great pains to control what she could.

Many of the women on the dance floor were older than Maggie and her friends. She knew most of them from seeing them over the years. It was funny how there were so many that she had never said more than a passing hello to in the bathroom, though she would encounter them repeatedly. Many new faces also shined from the dance floor.

There seemed to be quite a few college boys. By the way they kept joking around on the dance floor, Maggie assumed they were traveling together.

After the song ended, the three ladies headed outside to get air. Ellie had her cigarettes out before they found a spot to stand. She offered them to Maggie and Natasha. Maggie took one and Ellie lit it. Natasha waved them away.

“Not just yet. I want to feel the night first.” Natasha sighed, staring wistfully at the sky.

The coolness was welcome relief from the sweat trap of the club, and they stood to the side of the building, protected from the breeze blowing in from the ocean.

“Now that we can think...what’s up?” Ellie asked Maggie. “Making plans for your birthday?”

“Nothing except for going for drinks with you guys.” Maggie sighed. “No Mr. Right.”

Natasha stared at Maggie. “There’s a Mr. Right.” Natasha said coolly.

Maggie turned to look at her.

“Pardon me?”

“You heard me. There’s a Mr. Right. You’ve met him. I can feel it,” Natasha insisted.

“Well, enlighten me.”

“No, you enlighten me. You know exactly who I’m talking about. You made a connection.” Natasha leaned in, her black eyes blacker as she stared into Maggie’s. “Something happened.”

Maggie frowned. “The welder? When our fingers touched, there were sparks. He said that always happens to him because of his welding.”

“Nonsense. The spark was your connection. I knew it.” Natasha’s smile was sly and secretive.

“I have nothing in common with him.”

“Have you talked to him? Gone on a date?” Ellie was all ears.

“No. He came for a reading and had come once before. He’s kind of sad, like lonely lost sad.”

“Awww. Picking up the stray puppies again, are you?” Ellie said.

“I don’t know. I don’t know his deal. I don’t know if he has someone.”

“Did he ask you to read about someone?”

“Not a lover. No.”

“So you know as well as I do that if he didn’t ask about a lover, there isn’t one. That’s the number-one question,” Natasha said.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter,” Maggie said as she took a drag from her cigarette. “Nothing’s going to happen.”

“Nice attitude,” Ellie said.

“Well, it’s been three years and still I’m hung up on the ex and can’t seem to shake this lonely emptiness that constantly haunts me.”

“Maybe you should try some feng shui,” Ellie suggested.

“God, that stuff always seems like so much work.”

“Anything worth having is work, don’t you think?” Natasha said.

“Rearranging your apartment might help bring in some good vibrations,” Ellie added. “At least a good clean-up would.”

“You know I always need a good clean-up.” Maggie laughed. “I’m such a slob.”

“Maybe,” Natasha said, “your sloppiness is impeding your ability to attract positive energy. I think there’s something to ‘clean home, clean minds.’”

“I know when I reorganize my closet, I always feel better. Get rid of the old stuff.” Ellie said.

“It’s so hard to get rid of the old stuff,” Maggie said.

“Maybe you just need some help. I can come over next week and get you started,” Ellie said.

“Would you?”

“Sure. I can tell you where your love corner is and we can try to activate it with crystals.”

“I’ve done it before – with no success.” Maggie sighed.

“Not for a very long time, though, right?” Ellie asked.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Maggie said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve thought about love corners and clutter and all that stuff.”

“Well, the time has come to do it again. And with help this time.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

The women went back inside. The dance floor was packed. They hit the bar and bought more drinks, then moved to the edge of the dance floor to watch the dancers and look out for attractive men.

As always, there was no shortage of eye candy at the Dance Cave that night. Maggie’s gaze flitted from man to woman, examining breasts and hips, boots and skirts. It was always thrilling to watch the college girls dance because they came from all over the place and brought the latest moves with them. Maggie watched a girl near her flinging her arms and legs in angular hip-hop movement, performing body rolls with ease as if she were part rubber. Maggie loved the Rihanna song that was playing, and her own hips were swinging to the beat. The song ended and a Guns and Roses version of “Live and Let Die” started up.

Tom appeared before Maggie, a few drinks in him, eyes shining. “Care to dance?” he asked.

“Sure.”

They headed out to the floor and were lost in the throngs of people as they rocked out.

Maggie studied Tom. He was tall and nice to look at. Sweat glowed from his forehead as he threw his body into the music. As GNR faded into Eminem, Tom danced closer. They mouthed the satirical lyrics to each other, gyrating and strutting to the fast paced song.

The Nine Inch Nails song “Closer” blasted from the speakers while Maggie and Tom rubbed their groins together on the chorus.

Sweat-soaked, they left the dance floor and headed for the bar. Tom bought shooters which they downed with laughter and then had more beer.

“Do you want to get some air?” Tom asked as they finished their beer.

“It’s pretty hot in here. I wouldn’t mind cooling down,” Maggie said.

“I was thinking in terms of getting even hotter.”

Tom leaned over to kiss her on the mouth. She responded eagerly. They wrapped their arms around each other, soft lips pressing and touching hungrily. Tom slipped his tongue along her teeth and she giggled.

“Now I’m even hotter,” she said with a mischievous grin.

Tom pressed her against one of the posts on the dance floor, his body full to her own, grinding his hips and legs with hers as the music continued to pulse through them.

“Let’s go,” he said, grabbing her by the wrist. They pushed their way through the club and down the narrow hallway where the bathrooms were.

“Give me a minute,” Maggie said as she went into the women’s room. She took a moment to relieve herself and freshen up. Her eyes in the mirror sparkled happily and the anticipation of sex quickened her heartbeat. She checked her purse for condoms, lube, and towelettes. Once she had pulled herself together, she returned to the hallway.

Tom grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her. People pushed by them trying to get to and from the bathrooms. Tom’s hands ran along her breasts, squeezing them in anticipation.

They ran, holding hands, out the back entrance along parked cars. He suddenly turned to her and kissed her full on the mouth. She responded hungrily as he pushed her back against a car. She broke off the kiss and gently pressed her hands against his chest. “Come on - where’s your car?”

He pulled the keys out with a swagger and held them up dangling from his fingers.

“Right here, darling.”

He wrapped his hand around hers and led her along another row of cars until they reached his white Volkswagen.

“You look like you’re part of a mob.” Maggie giggled as he opened the passenger side door for her.

“No.” He shut the door and went over to his side. “Actually, I provide

transportation for weddings and proms. This is my work car.” He pressed a button and his seat slid back. “Here,” he said, helping her with hers.

“Nice.” Maggie studied the silver chrome dashboard with mahogany border and marveled at all the lights that flashed when he turned the key.

“Just a bit of music,” he said as he turned the satellite to an easy listening station.

“Good system.” She said as the music poured through speakers that peppered the car frame.

“Now, where were we?” he asked as he leaned across to her once more.

Their lips pressed and he slid his tongue along hers. Her breath grew quicker as her own tongue darted along his lips. Easy soft kisses led to longer, fuller ones. He ran his fingers along her neck and wrapped them around her thick curly mane.

“Do you want to take your coat off? The seats should be warmed by now.”

“Can we go into the back seat? There’s more room.”

“Of course.”

They removed their coats and left them in the front seat. As Maggie slid closer to Tom, she looped her arm through his.

“This is nice. I feel like I’m going out to the prom now.”

“You’re a mighty fine date, Miss Maggie,” Tom mocked.

Their eyes met and she fell back onto his soft, hungry lips. Their hands were bolder, slipping beneath the fabric of their tops, exploring warm flesh beneath. Maggie slipped her blouse off and tugged at Tom’s shirt.

“We can get warmer if we press our naked bodies together. I saw it on Discovery Channel.” Maggie moaned.

“Whatever you want.” Tom chuckled as he unbuttoned his shirt. With a flourish, he tossed it aside. Maggie admired his firm chest and lightly rippled abdomen. She ran her fingers along his impressive biceps.

“You must work out.”

“Not as much as I should, but ...”

“Very nice,” Maggie said as she kissed his bicep. She lightly traced his bulge with her lips then her tongue followed with long languorous licks. Tom tilted her head back towards him and she looked into his smoky eyes. Although she was lured in by his hypnotic stares, there was something mysteriously dark inside that she couldn’t put her finger on.

“When’s your birthday?” she asked.

“Again with the hocus pocus. You a witch?”

“Never mind that. Humor me.”

“If you must know, I just had it November third. Scorpio.”

“Ah...I like Scorpions.”

“And you?”

“Sag. My birthday is coming up quick.”

“A biggie?”

“Naw. Just twenty-seven.”

“I just hit thirty. Ouch.”

“I like older men,” Maggie said and their lips met again. Tom hungrily kissed her as his hands roamed along the length of her body. They slid along the long lines of her torso and he grabbed a fleshy handful of her butt.

“I have darkened windows so no one can see us,” Tom offered as he sucked on one of Maggie’s nipples.

“You’re prepared,” Maggie said, running her hands through his hair.

Maggie lay back in the seat, spreading her legs wide under Tom’s touch. He shifted around so that he was able to lick her thighs and pussy with long, careful strokes.

“Oh, my,” Maggie sighed under the delicious pressure of his tongue on her clit.

“Do you like it like that?” he asked.

“I love it like that. More...”

He continued to lick at her clit, his tongue strong and patient as her thighs quivered and shook. Soon her hips were eagerly meeting his mouth, pressing his face harder into her crotch.

“More...” she moaned, letting the tingling sensations overwhelm her. “Harder, faster.”

His tongue continued to work its magic as her thighs tightened around his head. With one last push against his face, she lost herself in ecstasy as an orgasm pulsed through her. He eagerly licked at her, tasting her throbbing clit while his hand pulled on his cock.

When she finished succumbing to the first wave of orgasm, she pulled his head up from her groin and kissed him fully on the lips. Her own sweet taste mingled with his and she sucked her pussy juice from his lips and tongue.

“Your turn, baby,” she said as she pushed him back on the seat. She sucked his cock with long lingering sucks until he was so hard, she knew it was time.

With a bit of maneuvering, Maggie rolled a condom onto his thick cock and she squatted on him. His cock filled her as she used the front seats to work herself up and down.

He did his part in rocking his hips. Every thrust filled her deeply, feeding her craving.

Up and down, she rode him, pulling on the seats, the car jerking side to side.

At last, the glorious shudder of orgasm engulfed her. As she cried out in joy, he let loose inside of her with a shout.

When they caught their breath, they giggled as they tried to put themselves back together.

“Getting undressed in a car is so much easier than getting dressed.” Maggie said, laughing.

“But it’s worth it,” he said, kissing her full on the lips.

Chapter Three

Changing your energy will lead to new experiences.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon, Ellie finally arrived in a cloud of vanilla and tobacco. Maggie had sat chain-smoking and cruising the Internet while she waited for her tardy friend's arrival. Her online tarot readings had been finished by eleven, and she even took the time to post a short article about the solstice on her blog. She should have known that when Ellie said "afternoon," she'd meant late afternoon, not one o'clock.

Maggie wasn't sure what Ellie wanted to do, so she didn't know how to prepare for her arrival. She had bought several boxes of different types of garbage bags for sorting, trash, donations and so on. There were markers and tape and even sticky labels in case they got really anal.

There were several cardboard boxes from the liquor store in case some stuff was to be removed and stored piled by the door.

She had even bought new cleaning supplies such as floor soap, sponges and a new mop.

Would they actually do housework? She hoped not.

As she sat idly waiting, she pulled a tarot card.

King of Pentacles.

She liked the idea of that. A man secure in his job. Financially stable. Enjoyed the finer things in life. It also meant a demanding man that could be hard to please, someone creative and sensitive. Someone who wasn't afraid to work hard.

Maybe *she* was the King that day? She was trying to bring order to her chaos, and the King suggested that her efforts would be rewarded.

Perhaps with an actual king.

But even if not with a man, she was going to find stability and growth somehow in her life.

She put the card back into the deck and shuffled them again. The cards felt firm and warm, which was always a good sign. At last, she put them on her desk and wrapped them in a velvet cloth.

She didn't dare look at any more cards. She'd stop while things were looking good for once.

At long last, Ellie was bustling through her apartment, yammering on about love corners and money corners and where to put knickknacks and fish and plants.

Maggie's head was spinning.

"Can you slow down?" Maggie asked Ellie. "This is a lot of information. I know I know these ideas in theory, but when applied to my own life, it's hard to make the connection."

"I know, honey. Don't worry. I'll make this happen if you just do what I tell you. The stars are in perfect alignment in your chart to be making these changes."

"I suppose..."

"You know as well as I that any changes you make around your birthday will follow you through the year. So a positive energy environment is sure to attract the man of your dreams. Maybe even that Virgo that Natasha was talking about."

Together Maggie and Ellie moved the sofa, rearranged tables and chairs and even undertook the mammoth job of dismantling her office area and setting it up on the other side of the room.

"See? Your back was to the window. That's a big no-no in feng shui. Your enemies can climb through the window and kill you."

"Yeah, like that's going to happen," Maggie said.

"It's symbolic," Ellie said for the twentieth time that day. Every time Maggie questioned a placement, Ellie would once again explain to her the symbols of intent in organizing the energy in her environment, which in turn would lead her to get her life

more organized.

“I just care about my love corner,” Maggie whined more than once as Ellie swept and threw away and rearranged the living room. When she moved on to Maggie’s bedroom, Maggie attempted to distract her.

“Would you like some tea, a joint, some wine?” she asked.

Ellie laughed. “Am I getting on your nerves that much?”

“In a way. This is a lot. More than I thought. And now my bedroom?”

“You know as well as I do,” Ellie said, “that the bedroom is the most important room to feng shui in matters of the heart. Not only for unexpected visitors, but for the law of attraction. If you can present a clear line and a clear intent to the universal life force, than you have a great shot at finding love.”

“Do I want love, Ellie? Love hurts so fucking much.”

“I know. I’m still pissed off at my supposed big love too. But shit happens. Things fall apart. We must move on. Hell, I’m a Cancer and I’m moving on. You Sags are made of tougher stuff.”

“I think I keep hanging on because I’m still stunned at how Sam just plain outright lied to me. It takes a lot of nerve, to lie to someone who is as open and blunt as me.”

“They do it. It happens. You can’t take it all on yourself. He wasn’t the one, so don’t let your hurt keep you from finding a new one.”

“I never let anyone keep me from anything,” Maggie blurted.

“I know that much about you. I’ve seen your tongue in action. You don’t hold back, especially if you’re pissed off.”

“Nope. I just spew it out and let the chips fall where they may. Why pussyfoot around?”

“Anyway,” Ellie said, “you need to chop off the rest of your feelings about that dickhead. And be open to the ideas of someone new. Not just your one-night stands, but someone you really enjoy. Maybe try to actually talk to him before you sleep with

him.”

“I don’t know if I know how to do that. I’m always so horny.”

“But you’re just using men to get yourself off. If you get into a relationship, it can be so much more.”

“Hey, I get off and the men get off. It’s equal opportunity fucking,” Maggie said.

“Perhaps. But don’t you lose something inside yourself when you do that?”

“Give me a break, Ellie. You’re the same.”

“I know.” Ellie laughed. “Maybe we both need to think about it all. But boy, I miss one-night stands when I’m in a relationship.”

“It’s a trade-off. I like companionship, but I like the freedom of doing whatever might strike my mood in the moment.”

“I hear you. But right now, you are ready, my dear. You are ready, more than ever before, for love of your own.”

“How do I know?”

“It’s like Natasha said. It’s your time. You may even have already met him. That Virgo? Maybe one of those flea market guys? Or maybe a new guy? The next one-night stand could stick around a while. What do *you* want?”

Maggie sighed. “Deep, deep down, I know the whole reason I can’t let go of Sam is that I miss the security. I miss having someone around. I miss sharing news at the end of the day and sinking into familiar arms.”

“Me too. Maybe I should re-feng shui my own home,” Ellie said as she sorted through the pile of clothes she had thrown on the floor from the closet.

“Now, look. Do you really need to keep this?” Ellie held up a pair of gold lamé leggings.

“They’re fun. You never know...”

“I know. You have to really be strong about cleaning out the clutter. Should you feel the need for gold lamé pants again, you can go buy a pair in the current fashionable

cut. And if you can't find them, the secondhand store on the corner or even the costume store would be able to hook you up."

"You have a point there." Maggie nodded and sighed as she stared at what she called her New Year's Eve pants.

About ten years before, she had attended a New Year's Eve masquerade event. She wore the gold lamé pants with a gold lamé overcoat that Ellie would also find, and sported sparkling gold New Year's glasses. With the coat and pants, she had worn a custom-fitted corset made from a thick gold pinstriped material and laced with glittering ribbon.

That night, she had met a dark, long-haired fireman who played guitar and wrote poetry. She spent hours watching him pluck the strings of his instrument in between reading bestsellers and occult romances. They spent many months entwined in each other's arms, sharing beds and bodies, and learning each other's secrets.

The relationship more or less faded away with their odd schedules. The fireman was always on call, it seemed, and stayed four nights a week at the firehouse. Maggie worked weekends, which further complicated the situation when he had weekends off.

Their bodies had meshed together in fiery fits of abandon that she hadn't found since. She wondered if he thought that because he was a fireman, every time he fucked could be his last, because he could die or be burned or suffer some horrific injury.

What was he doing now? Was he still a fireman?

She grinned at the idea of his six-pack, remembered the urgency of his sturdy cock pumping into her pussy as Ellie's voice brought her back to earth.

"So, you fucked a fireman in these pants. Your point?" she asked. "You running a Maggie's fuck-me outfit museum, or do you want to pare down your life to less complicated chaos?"

Maggie nodded. "I'm sorry. It's hard. You're right, it's like a museum. Seeing these things brings back memories – some good, some not so good."

"The more you can let go of your past, the more you can open yourself up to a

new future,” Ellie said firmly as she put the pants into a blue recycling bag. “To make you feel better, this will be for charity. That way, you’re not throwing them out, you’re just passing them on.”

“Okay. When you put it like that – off you go, lamé pants. And the jacket. But not the corset. My corsets are in another drawer and I’m not parting with them.”

“Corsets are fine. They’re expensive and, knowing you, custom made. It’s this off-the-rack stuff. You make decent money. You can treat yourself to some clothes if you have room to buy them.”

“I hear you,” Maggie said.

They went through her clothes vigorously, then her shoes. Maggie found it hard to part with some, but in the end rid herself of twenty pairs of boots, stilettos and sandals that she hadn’t worn in years.

“My, oh my. I’ve seen pack rats, but you’re something else.” Ellie sighed as she looked at twelve plastic bags of clothes for charity. There were four bags of papers she had deemed unnecessary and several boxes of knickknacks. The bookshelves and all other surfaces were freshly dusted. The floor vacuumed and mopped. Maggie had never seen her cozy home looking so bright and spacious.

Ellie clapped her hands and turned to Maggie. “Now, the fun begins,” she said. “We’ve moved the furniture in all the rooms. It’s time to activate the power points.”

She rolled the exercise ball into the far end of the room and set to work hanging crystals in the windows. Small darts of color refracted around the room as the setting sun beamed onto them. She rearranged some of the knickknacks and added a few others, such as balls of rose quartz and black obsidian. She placed a three-legged frog on the lowest shelf facing the door. Plants were rearranged, dried flowers removed to the garbage.

Ellie sat on the couch, exhausted and exhilarated as Maggie gave her a glass of red wine. She held her own glass high.

“You’re a sweetheart,” Maggie said, clicking her glass against Ellie’s. “I feel

much more peaceful.”

“I know. It’s a huge difference.”

“I can’t believe how much clutter I had.” She sighed while looking at the bags in her front hall. “I’m going to miss some of it.”

“Let it go. It’s just stuff. You can’t get attached to stuff,” Ellie said.

“It’s hard,” Maggie whined. “I’ve been this way my whole life. I think it’s a family trait.”

“Time to break the cycle.”

Ellie had another sip of wine.

“You need to sage the room. And do some kind of spell,” Ellie said.

“You think?”

“Oh, for sure. You have a stick over in your new herbal box. I put it there myself.”

“What should I do?”

“Just walk around the room with the stick and invite positive vibrations into it.”

Ellie finished her wine. “In fact, I’m going to leave now so you can do just that.”

She gathered up her belongings and picked her way through the bags to the front door. “Remember to keep your entryway clear of clutter.”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that,” Maggie said, laughing and waving at the garbage bags.

“Make sure you get those out today. Well, it’s too late today, but tomorrow for sure.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Maggie saluted, then she hugged Ellie in joy. “Thank you, Ellie.”

“My pleasure, Maggie. And I don’t want to see a big clusterfuck when I come over next time.”

“I’ll keep it neat, I promise.”

She shut the door after Ellie and returned to the living room.

The air felt different. It was like she could breathe again. She peeled off her clothes, anxious to feel the new vibrations of the room on her flesh. She noted a slight difference and ran her hands along her breasts as if to confirm the feeling. Her nipples were erect, and a warm tingle spread through her pussy and up her groin. She ran her hands along her body and then spread them out into the air. She closed her eyes, trying to absorb the new flow of the room.

Open heart, open mind.

She opened her eyes again and sighed. She had to be free of doubts. Her intent needed to be focused or all the rearranging would be for naught.

Her goal was to meet a man who intrigued her enough to want to be in a relationship with him for more than one night.

That was simple and easy to focus on.

Maggie found the sage stick, a ceramic bowl with sand, and her lighter. Carefully, she lit the stick over the bowl. The fire took a moment to start, then a flame grew from the burning stick. After it burned for a short time, Maggie carefully blew out the flame towards the bowl. When the flame was out, thick plumes of smoke spiraled from the stick. Maggie walked around the perimeter of the room and into her bedroom, taking care to form a full circle with no breaks.

When she was done, she ground out the stick in the sand. She checked it several times to be certain it was out before she put it aside.

Ellie had set up Maggie's altar in a different spot, closer to the window where her desk had once been. Her pentacle, candlestick and bell were still there. The chalice had been replaced, because Ellie didn't like the small chip out of the more ornate one. She had been ruthless when it came to chipped anything. Little figurines and dishes had been cast away.

"Those little nicks are carelessness. You don't want those vibes when you're trying to feng shui." Ellie's voice rang in her head.

Maggie picked up her athame and held it, letting new energy surge through her

from the metal handle.

She put it back down and wandered over to her bookcase.

A very simple love spell was in order, she decided. After she flipped through a few books, she found a spell that accommodated the items she had on hand.

She organized the stones, crushed the herbs, sprinkled sea salt, lit the charcoal and focused on the spell.

She said the words from the book slowly. She put a pinch of herb into the glowing charcoal flame. It burst brighter and she was ready to pour the goblet of water on it if necessary. Her caution proved unnecessary as the flame died back to a regular flicker. She recited another verse and sprinkled more herbs on the fire. Sparks flew up and she stepped back, mindful of her nakedness.

The smell was thick and sweet. Dark swirls of smoke hung in the air, drifting towards the ceiling. She kneeled down before the altar and raised her hands.

She said the final words and with relief, extinguished the charcoal flame with a snuffer. New black curls of smoke joined the gray ones.

Maggie ran her hands along her body. Her nipples were still peaked, rigid with the chilly air and her excitement. She played with her breasts for a moment and then double-checked the curtains.

They were closed.

She went over to her desk and turned on her computer. It started perfectly and soon she was online.

She searched for dating sites and found a couple that seemed interesting and free. Or, at least free for a while.

It took her well over an hour to create new profiles on five different sites.

If she couldn't find good dating material through one of them, then there was something wrong.

She was careful to be certain her ad showed a bit of her personality, but also was tasteful and informative. So many of the ads seemed desperate, or that the woman was

practically a hooker without pay.

Maggie wanted to be certain that she attracted only serious guys. Her previous profiles had found her lots of one-night stands, but no one of any lasting substance.

There were many Internet personalities with whom she had formed friendships. Many of them she had never met, but had exchanged flirtatious e-mails with on a regular basis. Some of them she had not only met, but ended up in some kind of one-night stand, never to hear from the guy again. And most of the time, she didn't exactly want to hear from them, either.

She wasn't about to give up her Internet friendships. She didn't know if she would if she were in a relationship. After all, Internet sex wasn't real sex. Most of the time, she didn't have a clue what the person she was talking to looked like. They just fueled each other's fantasies, no different than participating in an interactive book. Or a round-robin story with two people.

The picture she posted showed a friendly face with not too much cleavage. She knew she had to show something. No point in getting friendly with a guy only to meet him and find out she didn't have the parts he liked.

She showed a full-length picture of her taken at Halloween in a Wonder Woman outfit. Her curly red hair spilled from the crown and she held her arms up to show off her gloves and cuffs.

The outfit displayed her long legs, and since she was heavier back then, she had large breasts that spilled over her costume.

Not so much now, she thought, as she cupped the breasts that had since shrunk dramatically since her weight loss. They were still impressive, but not their former glorious size and fullness.

There was always a trade-off. It was the way of the universe.

When she was satisfied with her new profiles, she turned her attention to her e-mail. There were no new requests for tarot readings. She checked her horoscope, although she had already looked at it that day. She punched in herself with a few signs.

Since she was a Sag, she got along with almost every scenario she tried.

The message box from Bullhead69 popped up. The panel blinked until Maggie clicked on it.

Who are you today? it said.

I'm a tall voluptuous redhead with a spirited temperament.

Fiery women entice me.

Who are you?

I'm your most humble servant. Your wish is my command.

Maggie tossed her hair and grinned as her fingers flew across the keyboard.

I desire a servant. My feet are oh so sore tonight.

Let me rub them your highness. Here, I'll slip off your shoe and rub your aching toes.

That feels marvelous, darling.

Let me caress those firm calves of yours. I'm sure they're sore from walking around in stilettos all day.

They are indeed. Be careful with those fishnets. You might get your rings stuck in them, Maggie typed.

I won't snag your precious fishnets. They're too beautiful.

I was hoping you'd like them.

I like where they are leading.

Where is that?

Up to your pale soft thighs. Let me touch them.

Just for a minute.

Maggie reached for her cigarettes. She wasn't really in the mood to play with Bullhead69. She looked around her apartment and sighed. She leaned back as she took a long haul of her cigarette. The knickknacks looked so much better in their new spots. Her little frog sat happily on the bottom shelf. The coin had slipped from his mouth.

"Well, that just won't do." She sighed and slipped out of her chair to replace it.

She turned the frog so that it faced the doorway coming into the apartment.

“I swear that I had you pointed the right way. I guess I knocked you on the way by. Or I have a ghost.”

As she admired her handiwork, she turned back towards the computer.

Bullhead69 was blinking at her.

She read the scene he had written while she was fussing. With a grin, she wrote a steamy response.

The banter went back and forth for a while, growing steamy enough to entice Maggie to slip her fingers between her legs. She clicked between Bullhead69s message and some free movie clips of threesomes featuring two men and a woman.

Her fingers worked their magic in her secret spots but they weren't enough. She opened her drawer, the second drawer down, and pulled out one of her vibrators. The humming between her legs sent her into a frenzy of pleasure. She held the vibrator strongly with her thighs as she typed into the story that Bullhead69 was weaving. The tiny images of two guys fucking a girl on her hands and knees flickered in the lower corner of her screen. When her typing was done, she moved the vibrator in and out, waiting to read what Bullhead69 had to say next.

She found another video, this time of a girl perched on a bathroom sink while a largely endowed man pushed into her. The girl's face contorted as she stretched her legs wider to accommodate his massive girth. Maggie moved the vibrator deeper and faster into herself, her fingers dancing on her clit. She wondered if she could take a man that big, if in fact there really were men that big and he wasn't just wearing a fake dick.

Bullhead69's response spurred her to type another quick, moaning remark and she returned to her self-pleasure. The man had now turned the lovely young girl over so that she was leaning over the sink and he was thrusting into her doggie style.

Maggie fiddled and played with herself, ignoring Bullhead69s blinking light, and let pleasure engulf her.

Once she caught her breath, she sat back in her chair, exhausted.

Bullhead69s light blinked and she clicked on just long enough to tell him that she was signing off.

She shut down her computer and took one last look around her new living room.

She hoped that something good would come from all of this.

Chapter Four

You may meet someone very interesting on a trip.

Maggie threw several long black skirts and sweaters into a suitcase. As she rummaged through her bra drawer, she wondered if she would find reason to wear one of the fancier ones. There had been a few naughty liaisons at the fair over the years. People were in town for a couple of days and looking for a thrill. What better way than to romp with one of the witches from the annual holiday psychic fair?

The roads were icy but sanded as she drove through the windy New England hillside. A few snowflakes kept the windshield wipers steadily thumping back and forth. It was nearly sundown when she arrived at the little inn where she was staying.

After she parked her car behind the four-story old mansion, she carefully picked her way along the pathway to the front porch. There were several people checking in ahead of her and she recognized a few from previous years.

“Maggie. How are you?” A short, dark-haired woman wearing a large muumuu over her immensely proportioned body bustled over to her. Maggie leaned down to hug the woman, a whiff of strong perfume filling her senses as her hands barely reached around the woman’s ample shoulders in an embrace.

“I’m well, Charlotte,” Maggie said standing up again. She reclaimed her suitcase and they ambled into the line. “Looks like the gang’s all here.”

“Pretty much. Lots of new ones, too.” Maggie followed Charlotte’s gaze towards the doorway where a tall, dark man loomed. His countenance was poised as he glanced around the room with stern black eyes. His piercing eyes met Maggie’s, and he smiled with white shiny teeth. She smiled back and turned her attention to Charlotte.

“Who is that?”

“He’s Santana the Mesmerizing.”

“That’s why he does that stare thing, I guess.” Maggie chuckled as she watched him peering around the room. “What does he mesmerize?”

“Oh, he’s more like a performer. A street magician. Reads minds and conducts illusions.”

“Interesting. So there’s a show this year?”

“I haven’t seen the schedule yet. Might be a demonstration. I’m not sure.”

At last it was Maggie’s turn to claim her room. When she was finished, Santana was standing by the staircase.

“Hello, young lady,” he said, his lips curled up in a smirk.

“Hello, Santana. Is that your name?” Maggie asked.

“The one.”

“What brings you to Holiday Psychic Celebration? Isn’t it a bit small for the likes of you?”

“Not at all. My beginnings are humble. Santana always likes to meet new people, in big towns or little ones.”

“I like to meet people too, but right now, I’ve really got to get to my room. Nature calls. Long ride, you know?” Maggie ran up the stairs before Santana had a chance to answer. By the time she reached the bathroom, she already had her nylons pulled halfway down.

“Whew.” She sighed as relief swept through her. She laughed. Santana must have thought she was such a pig, but she didn’t care. Some things couldn’t wait for the flirt.

Her room was small but homey. She unzipped her suitcase and took out her tarot cards. As she shuffled them, she sat at the little desk and thought.

Was she ready for a true love?

The words spun around her. The comfy moments with Sam came back to haunt her and she realized that, as more time went by, she missed the idea of those days more than she missed him. Maybe that was a good sign.

Yet, she enjoyed her frequent encounters with strange men. There was a freedom in hedonism, and no strings attached meant no bullshit. She liked that a lot.

She supposed that building empathy in a truly altruistic manner was either a sign of weakness or maturity. The big picture was easy to visualize. A world with no war.

But the day-to-day, one-on-one, minute-by-minute, year-after-year closeness with another human being sometimes seemed overwhelming.

And a challenge.

Yes, she thought. A challenge. What haven't I done? I've not stayed in relationship for more than two years ever. Committing myself to a half-decent guy would be a new challenge.

She shuffled the cards some more.

No, more than a half-decent guy. A handsome guy with tons of money and no exes.

She grinned.

Open heart, open mind.

Maggie sighed and closed her eyes.

She visualized attracting a man she could be compatible with for many years.

She drew three cards and stared at them.

Page of pentacles, page of cups, eight of pentacles.

She nodded. Some workaholic dude with tons of cash. It could happen.

Or, she sighed, it means the potential is there but it's going to take a lot of work. Patience.

Patience was not her forte.

* * * *

The day went by in a blur, as her business never slowed, even for a lunch break. By the time it was six, she was more than ready to go back to the inn.

She was covering up her displays with large white sheets when Santana

approached her.

“Hey, tarot lady. Are you going to see my show?” he asked.

“When is it? I don’t have a schedule. Been stuck here all day.”

“Seven o’clock. After that, there’s some kind of dance.”

“Really?” Maggie had almost forgotten about the dance in her exhaustion. The idea of dancing, even in a small hall with only a few people, appealed to her.

“Come to my show and we’ll go for a drink after,” he said, looking intensely into her eyes. His penetrating glare made her laugh.

“Say, what sign are you anyways?” Maggie asked.

“Ah, the little witch is trying to suss me out,” he joked.

“Sorry, just force of habit.”

“Well, I’m a Capricorn, if you must know. Are we compatible? Are you going to go to the dance with me?”

“It’s okay, Mr. Magico. I’ll go. And yes, we’re compatible,” she said. “Now let me pack up so I can get there.”

“As you wish, Madame,” Santana kissed her hand and sashayed off, singing an old show tune under his breath.

* * * *

Maggie had to admit that Santana had style and charisma. He wore a white jumpsuit festooned with sequins. His act comprised of reading people’s minds and performing illusions. The crowd ate him up, cheering and clapping in admiration. His sleight of hand was very good, and Maggie was fooled a few times by some of his tricks. By the end of the show, Maggie had to admit that she quite liked the showman.

She waited with many others for him to emerge from the dressing room. After he patiently signed autographs, he pulled Maggie aside.

“Would you like to check out the dance now? If it’s even happening?”

“Sounds good.”

They walked through the hotel until they found the ballroom where the dance

was being held. About a hundred people milled around the room or gyrated on the dance floor.

Eighties disco music boomed across the room, and Santana's slender hips swayed to the beat as he headed to the bar. As he was spotted by fans, a small crowd gathered around him. He managed to buy two glasses of wine and handed one to Maggie.

He chatted to eager people, always the showman, yet the noise of the music made it hard to converse.

"I appreciate your attention," he told the small group at last, "but it's difficult to talk here and I very much would like a dance with my friend. Come by my booth tomorrow and I'll be happy to answer all of your questions. And don't forget, I have another show tomorrow night at seven!"

The ladies finally backed away and Santana was able to turn to Maggie in peace.

"You have a lot of fans," she remarked.

"I do enjoy the attention."

Meatloaf's "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad" came on.

"Finish your wine so I may dance with my pretty lady."

They danced to Meatloaf and AC/DC, Boomtown Rats and REM.

After an extended dance version of Rock Lobster, they both were laughing and flirting as they hugged each other in exhaustion.

"Why don't we go back to the inn? Have a nightcap?" he said as he tipped her face up to him.

"I would like that," Maggie said.

* * * *

They tumbled through his hotel room door. He clumsily fiddled with the light switch as their lips hungrily sought each other out. Once the bright light of the room came on, they broke apart, covering their eyes.

"Wow, that's bright," Maggie exclaimed.

“Sorry. I just don’t want us to trip on the props and stuff.”

The room was neatly organized, but there were many trunks and cases spread across the floor. Some were opened. An array of swords glittered on the dresser. He quickly hung up the three different outfits he had displayed on the bed.

“Deciding what to wear?” Maggie laughed. “I thought only girls did that.”

“No. It’s hard. Deciding what my mood is.”

“Flamboyant in every color,” Maggie said, winking at him.

“You don’t like my red pantsuit?” he asked, holding out the garment he held as he slid a hanger through it. “Very festive, you know. I might wear it tomorrow night.”

“Well, the white you’re wearing now suits me just fine.” Maggie stared directly at his satin crotch, where the outline of a growing erection pressed against the fabric. She reached out to stroke it. “That feels so soft and silky,” she purred. Her fingers teased his length, running up and down the growing firmness with mounting pressure.

“I want to press my mouth against you, but I don’t want my lipstick to ruin your outfit,” she said.

Santana sat down and unbuckled his boots.

“Help me with these, darling,” he said. Maggie knelt down and firmly held the boot in her hand. She groaned as she pulled the boot off. Santana wiggled his stocking foot.

“Oh, that’s so much better. Now the other one.”

She pulled off his other boot and he curled and uncurled his toes.

“Heaven,” he said.

Maggie took one of his feet in her hands and pressed firmly on the balls with practiced fingers. She kneaded and rubbed the bottoms of his feet, taking care to press down on the points that brought the most pleasure. Santana moaned and stroked her hair.

“You’re wonderful,” he said. “Let me kiss you.”

He pulled her up by her hair and brought her lips to his. He kissed her full and

hard, his tongue probing deep into her mouth. She ran her hand along his erection, marveling at how it had grown even larger. She stroked his pulsing flesh, enticing him larger and fuller. Her fingers traced the edges of his head and down his shaft to his balls. The firm pressure against the tight fabric of his costume gave a delicious friction that he would pay for the next day if he didn't get undressed.

He pushed her back and playfully straddled her. The outlines of his pecs and ribs accented the large mound of his package. She reached up to stroke him again, unable to resist the allure of his firmness. He unfastened the top half of his jumpsuit and slid his arms out.

Maggie was not disappointed at the pleasing cut of his biceps and the prominent display of muscle across his chest.

"Show me more, oh great Santana," she cooed as he waved his hands with a flourish.

He produced a bouquet of plastic roses. She laughed as she reached for them. He jumped off of her and quickly disrobed.

Maggie turned around on the bed to assess him. His erection was nearly full and a pleasing one it was. She licked her lips.

"I need a closer look," she said.

Santana stepped closer until his penis was in line with her mouth. She wrapped her lips around the end of it. The warm flesh felt good in her mouth. She suckled on the end, slowly working her way up and down until she had him nearly all the way to her throat. His hands clutched her shoulders as she gulped him faster and faster. Soon his pelvis was arching to meet her mouth. His firmness grew harder, his buttocks were tight under her fingernails.

"Whoa, stop." He sighed and stepped back. "There's more." He sat down on the bed. "Give me a minute. I want to last," he smiled.

"That's fine with me. I have all night," Maggie said happily. "You enjoy your one-night stands, don't you?"

“I try to enjoy every possible minute. Would you like some wine?”

Before she could answer, Santana went over to a little table where there was a bottle of wine and several glasses. He poured them each a glass of a dark red wine.

“Now, we can continue,” he said as he took a few sips and put down his glass. “You keep drinking.”

He slid down to the floor and positioned Maggie so that his head was between her legs. With firm fingers, he spread open her pussy lips and licked the warm flesh that pulsed beneath. Maggie moaned as his tongue flicked her clitoris and she drank more wine.

“That’s perfect,” she said as she edged her hips closer to the edge of the bed. His tongue danced little staccato pulses against her, sending tingling sensations throughout her body. She reveled in the feeling, throwing her head back as she drank more wine.

Her ankles wrapped around his head, pulling him deeper against her. The pressure on her groin was exquisite and she couldn’t get enough. He wormed his hand up until his finger hooked inside of her vagina. While his tongue danced on her clit, his fingers stroked the warm wall of delicate nerve endings. She quivered and moaned and put her wine glass down. She slipped her feet onto the floor so she could get more traction.

“Harder,” she cried, pushing his head against her. “Finger me harder.”

He pressed harder against her, his hooked fingers pressing on the inside while his lips sucked on her clit. She shuddered as a warm flood of fluid gushed from her. Her cries were loud and animal-like as he fingered her harder and more fluid came out.

At last she was spent and he withdrew his hand. He went into the bathroom to retrieve some towels. As he wiped his face, he grinned.

“You have a few magic tricks of your own,” he said. “I’ve never met a squirter in real life.”

“Sorry. I should have warned you,” she said.

“Not at all. It was – fun. Yes, it was fun,” he decided.

“Here, let me get you back in the mood,” Maggie said as she put down the towel she used to wipe herself off. She kneeled before him and slipped his penis back into her mouth.

She pushed him back onto the bed and slipped a condom on him before she straddled him, easily sliding his cock into her moist pussy. She slid up and down slowly, feeling every inch of his warm flesh penetrating and then withdrawing from her. She leaned over him on her elbows and met his eyes.

“Do you like it when I make your wand disappear?” she asked.

He grinned and kissed her forehead, letting her take control. “Very much.”

She increased her pace, moving her body up and down, letting her breasts slide against him. He cupped them from the side, pushing them together and apart. He pulled at her nipples and she sat up slightly so he could admire their fullness. She slid down and up again and he caught one of her nipples in his mouth. He playfully teased it with his teeth, flicking it with his tongue. She slammed down on him harder and picked up her pace. He bucked with her, plunging himself in deeper and harder with every thrust. His hands moved to her hips to slam her down harder on him. She sat up more and let him take control as she held herself a few inches above him.

His cock head rubbed against her pleasure spot and she moaned as more of the overwhelmingly exquisite sensations engulfed her. Her cries of pleasure encouraged him to thrust harder and faster. Soon she was shaking and trembling from the inside out.

“Oh God,” she cried out. “Oh, fuck me harder. Faster. Come on.” She trembled and cried out as orgasm washed over her.

Feeling her twitching, Santana slowed his pace. His forehead was beaded in sweat. Maggie looked at him and laughed.

“Oh my God, that was so good. I want more,” she said.

“More?”

“Oh, for sure. Don’t think that’s it for me.”

“You’re insatiable. I love it,” he said. He turned her over and spread her legs. He

pushed into her, his eyes locking with hers.

“How do you like that?” he asked as he plunged into her.

“I love it.”

“Good.”

He gently pumped into her, kissing her hair and shoulders. He nuzzled into her neck and sucked gently, his thrusts deeper and stronger. He reached down to her legs and flipped them up so that her knees were through his arms.

“Oh God, that’s better. Nice and deep.” He sighed. “It’s like heaven.”

He pumped her, rhythmically building the pace until his thrusts were fast and deep. He slowed for a moment to savor the snugness of her pussy and then built his pace up again. He fucked her at a rapid pace, the bed shaking beneath them.

“Yes,” he said. “Your pussy is so tight.”

“Your cock is so big. More.” Maggie closed her eyes and let him take her over the edge once more. His final thrusts were long and hard. At last, he pulled out and held his cock so that his come splashed across her breasts. His eyes rolled back as joy filled him.

“That was amazing,” he sighed as he stumbled to the bed next to her.

“Absolutely,” she said, letting her body go limp on the bed.

They rested for a while and had another glass of wine. Maggie was preparing to go to her own room when Santana caught her arm and led her back to the bed.

They spent the night together, locked in frantic fucking until finally they fell asleep in exhaustion.

In the morning, Maggie was strangely refreshed as she returned to her room to get ready for another day at the psychic fair.

Chapter Five

If you've been neglecting your exercise, today is the perfect day to get back on track.

Another night of weird dreams had caused her great irritation upon awakening. She yearned for deep, dark sleep where nothing ever happened. Pushing aside disturbing images, she headed for the kitchen. For the coffee pot in particular.

She ground a fresh batch of dark roast coffee and measured out enough for half a pot. It would be a big coffee-drinking day at the mall, so she didn't want to be too wired before she even started.

As the machine bubbled and burbled, she returned to the living room and looked at the big blue exercise ball tucked away in the far corner.

"My health corner. Fitness. Oh, how you mock me-" she sighed as she rolled the exercise ball to the center of the room. She clicked on the TV and put on music videos. Watching shiny abs gyrating while she did crunches was great incentive. She didn't care whose they were – the dance moves were fun and the costumes sometimes outrageous.

The Pussycat Dolls strutted around singing about being famous while she crunched on the ball. She used her tippy-toes so that she worked her calf muscles as well as her abs. Rolling the ball back and forth required thigh strength and allowed her to find a way to see the TV better.

She chanted the words to the old song like a mantra and a rush of energy surged through her.

A vision of a strong face, light hair, but no facial features appeared in her head.

"Go away," she said. "I'm watching the girls."

The vision was persistent, rolling from her mind until it blocked the TV screen.

"What is it?" she asked. A sense of friendly warmth filled her and just when she was getting lured into the sensation, it shifted. Longing replaced it. Sadness and despair.

That empty hole inside of her throbbed and she sat up on the ball.

“What?” she asked and the vision faded.

“Good God.” She sighed as she stood up and went over to make a cup of coffee.

* * * *

Dance to the music, create your own reality.

Maggie nodded as she read her online horoscope, sipping a steaming cup of coffee.

“That suits me just fine.”

She clicked around the Internet, checking e-mail, reading horoscopes and reviewing prospective men on the Internet dating sites. She checked for any new tarot reading requests, but none had come in since the night before.

Her messenger sang and Bullhead69 popped up. *How are you this early morning?*

Good. Why aren't you at work?

Going out soon. Thought I'd say hi. Did you have a good sleep?

Like a baby.

It's cold here. How about there?

Yes.

Can I warm you up? Maybe some hot chocolate?

Thank you.

Here is hot chocolate with loads of whipped cream. I hope you don't mind that I added some to your lovely breasts.

Do I get Jerry beads for that?

LOL. How about cherries for your nipples?

If you can get them to stick on.

They look great. Too bad I'm about to eat them off.

Mmmmm.

Tastes good. I could lick you all day but I have to go to work.

Maggie stared down at her breasts and imagined them full of whipped cream. She played with them for a moment as she clicked around a few more sites.

After she tired of her Internet games, she returned to her living room. The new look was still strange to her. The energy did indeed feel better, but she wasn't sure at all how she liked the furniture placement.

She sat in a small wooden chair and decided that she would move it after all. Mindful of how she was placing it, she slid it across the room.

It still bugged her, so she decided to banish the chair to her bedroom for the time being.

She moved the couch to a different angle and rearranged the coffee table. Already clutter was piling up, so she moved her mail and empty bags over to her desk.

Once she was back at her desk, she sorted through some of the piles and tried very hard to throw out a bunch of fliers that she really didn't need. It was hard, because sometimes it was difficult to predict if she would use a coupon or not. But in the past few days, she had thrown out piles of coupons, some from years ago, that she had never used.

The waste of throwing mail directly in the garbage disturbed her, but if everyone else did it, she should too. Ellie had assured her that everyone else threw out fliers and coupons without reading or saving them. At least she was getting her clutter issues under control.

After sorting mail and receipts and various pieces of paper she had collected over the past few days, she returned to the couch and flopped down. She was halfway through a Stephen King novel and wanted to keep reading.

She sank into Stephen King's chilling landscape of paranoia and pain. The temperature in the room suddenly dropped and Maggie reached for her comforter.

"I'm sick of the ghosts around here," she said out loud. "I'm going to move, you

know.”

The air stayed cool and a slight breeze shifted across Maggie’s body. Even the wool of the afghan couldn’t block the cold, and she went to her room to put on some clothes.

“I hate winter,” she muttered. “Can’t lie around naked.”

The idea of it itched at her as she rumbled up all her neatly folded pants in search of her old, ratty sweatpants. “I hate getting dressed before going to work. I just hate it.”

She lit a cigarette and returned to her book. The air wasn’t chilly anymore and she started to grow warm. As sweat glowed on her forehead, she pulled off her T-shirt.

“Ah, that’s better.” She picked up her book again and settled in to read further when the air grew chilly yet again.

“Stop messing with me,” she said and looked up from her book. The man was standing there. The whole man. Tall and lean, but his facial features were still blurred out. As they shifted and changed, she could catch glimpses of penetrating blue eyes and high cheekbones.

“Who are you?” she asked.

There was no response as the man stood looking at her. He turned around and faded, as if walking through some unseen door.

“Damn astral projection. Wish people would use it properly. Probably just wanted to see my tits.” She laughed.

She managed to read for another half-hour before it was time to pile on the makeup and do something with her unruly curly hair.

She arrived at her booth with just enough time to get organized before the doors opened.

It was busier today; the rush of the holiday season was evident in everyone’s faces. She sat at her table and wondered how many people would actually stop to get a tarot reading.

An hour later, the answer was clear.

Many.

She read for many people, including her regulars. She saw a lot of sadness over the holidays for her clients, and that gave her a chill. It was life, though. People died, friendships were lost, people moved, children grew up and had their own families. The older one got, the more chances there were that some holiday seasons would be more difficult than others.

She was a bit surprised when Steve planted himself down at her table late in the afternoon.

“You’ve been quite a busy lady,” he said, nodding to the line up behind him. People sat in the chairs and a few more stood patiently waiting. Some were reading, others were talking, still more watched as each client came and went.

“The price is right.”

“Yes, you can’t beat a ten-dollar reading.” He threw down his money.

“I came by last week but you weren’t here.”

“I had to do another psychic fair. Much more lucrative than here.” She winked.

“I hear you.”

“So what would you like to know?” she asked, staring into his soft blue eyes. She held the cards out to him and as he took them, his fingers touched hers.

Again the electricity flowed from him to her and back again. She thought of the temperance card, of the way the angel held the cups, pouring them back and forth into each other.

“I just want to know if I can have your phone number,” he said. “I don’t think I need cards for that.”

“Oh - well, yes.” She took a business card from the pile beside her.

“You don’t have to pay for my phone number.”

“I’m taking up your time. The line-” he nodded and stood up, taking the card.

“Thank you, Maggie.”

Maggie watched as he disappeared into the crowd. A new client sat in the chair and excitedly began to chatter at her with a thick accent. Thoughts of Steve were forgotten as she focused on the task at hand.

* * * *

The thick chords of an electric guitar wailed down the street. Maggie quickened her pace. Natasha and Ellie were going to kill her.

She paid her cover and practically threw her coat at the coat check guy.

Once inside, she bought a beer at the bar and pushed her way through the crowd until she found Natasha and Ellie. They had a table to the side of the dance floor with a rather good view of the band. At least, when the tall guy with a mohawk wasn't blocking their view.

"Sorry I'm late," Maggie yelled at her friends. Ellie tipped a beer at her.

"You haven't missed much," Ellie yelled back.

"No," Natasha agreed. "They just started."

Maggie grinned and sat back in her chair to watch what she could see of the band. If she wanted to see the lead singer, she would have to stand up, and she wasn't in the mood just yet. Maybe after a few beers.

In the meantime, she'd have to content herself with watching the lead guitarist. He was a wiry little man, with long, dirty blond hair. She liked the way his leather pants fit and the many buckles on his boots.

The waitress managed to show up at their table and the girls ordered a pitcher of beer and a round of tequila.

When the drinks came, the band was just rocking into their final song before the set finished.

"Oh, yeah," Maggie said as the tequila burned down her throat. "That's just what this girl needs."

She stood up and joined the rest of the crowd in power fisting the air. The dance floor was filled with leather clad bodies gyrating sensually to the pulsing beat of the

drum.

As the band members pumped their final power chords, the crowd erupted into applause. Maggie sat back down. The DJ spun Madonna, and people flocked to the dance floor while band fans wandered over to the bar.

“Let’s go out for a smoke.”

“We’ll lose our table,” Natasha said. “I’ll wait here.”

“If you don’t mind-” Ellie said.

“Not at all. I’m not in the mood to go back out in that cold.”

Maggie and Ellie followed a group of people out to the smoking patio. In the summer, there were tables with umbrellas, but in the cold there was standing room only as tables and chairs were stacked with tarp wrapping them to protect them from the elements.

Maggie lit her cigarette, then offered her flame to Ellie. As Ellie leaned toward the light, the guitar player from the band walked up, holding his arms out to the women with a cigarette hanging from his lips.

“Would one of you ladies mind?” he asked, leaning towards the flame.

He took a deep puff from his cigarette and exhaled. “Yes, there’s nothing like a smoke break. Zack.” he said, sticking out his hand.

“Maggie.”

“Ellie.” They took his hand one at a time.

“We’re enjoying the show,” Ellie said as she stepped closer to him.

“Thank you.”

“I like the way you handle your guitar,” Maggie said.

“Why, thank you, too,” he said, grinning. His face was lined with the wrinkles of heavy drinking and long bus tours, but he still had a charisma that followed him from the stage.

“I saw you play in New York about ten years ago,” Maggie said. “I thought you guys were fantastic.”

“New York - wow, those were some crazy times. I tell you, surviving rock-and-roll, even for a midlist band like us, takes a lot of work.”

“I bet.”

“You wouldn’t believe it. The eighties. Coke everywhere. Not to mention actually smoking in a bar. I still can’t believe it.”

“The end times are near,” Ellie said. They all laughed.

“End times or not, I gotta get back and get ready for the next set. Nice chatting with you ladies.”

“You too.”

He started to walk away and then returned. He pulled out a business card and proceeded to write on it.

“I’m having a party in suite five at the Evergreen Inn, off the highway there, after the show if you all want to drop by.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said as she slid his card into her purse. As she snapped it shut, she looked at Ellie with a grin.

“Fancy meeting some rock stars tonight?” she asked.

“Party like a rock star!” Ellie laughed. “Natasha will be pleased.”

They placed their spent cigarettes into the ashtrays and returned to the bar. Natasha was conversing with two leather-clad men. Maggie recognized one from another club. His buddy was an obvious fan, judging by his pins and outfit. His mohawk mimicked that of the drummer’s perfectly.

Natasha grinned as she saw Maggie and Ellie.

“Ladies, I want you to meet Fred and Lonny.”

A round of handshakes later, Maggie and Ellie were back in their chairs while the men made small talk.

Before long, the band returned to the stage and the men returned to the dance floor.

Maggie pulled Ellie and Natasha towards the dancers. “Let’s dance.”

“But the table.”

“Oh, to hell with the table.” She laughed.

“You’re right. We should get out there,” Natasha said as she spotted where their new friends were dancing. The trio strutted over to where the two guys were dancing with their friends and joined in. They welcomed them, never missing a beat.

Maggie kept stealing glances at Zack. Her feet kept time as she drank the last of her beer. She wove her way through the gyrating bodies to put her bottle down on a table. When she returned to the dance floor, she was right underneath Zack.

He caught her eye as he aimed his music towards her. She wiggled her hips, locking eyes with him. His part of the chorus came, and he sang with strength to the crowd, and especially to Maggie.

The night wore on, and soon Maggie’s feet grew tired in her high-heeled boots. She teetered down the stairs to the bathroom and freshened up. As she dabbed on more makeup, Natasha emerged from one of the stalls. “Where did you go?” she asked.

“I was dancing near the front. I got sort of pushed up.”

“Have a thing for that guitar player, do you?”

“How do you know? Did you see me?”

“No. I just know.” Natasha grinned. “Just like we all know so much about everyone and everything when we open our minds to it.”

“I hate knowing things when I don’t want to know. When I’m not working.”

“You should use it more. Relax and let life take you wherever it is you may want to go.”

“Like you do?”

“Hey, I never said it was easy. I struggle constantly with the concept of chillax, but in your case, you really need to. Until you let go of that asshole from your past and open up to new ideas, even Mr. Rock Star there won’t mean any more to you than a Quarter Pounder with Cheese at McDonald’s. You crave it in the moment and then once consumed, you hate yourself.”

“You’re not my shrink, you know.”

“Sorry. I just want you to have fun. Enjoy that rock star, but there’s someone else.”

“Can you see him?” Maggie asked, looking around the bathroom, checking in the mirrors.

“No. But I still think it’s that Virgo.”

“He’s not here.”

“You’re too stubborn to open yourself up to the idea of him. Or anyone who might be of comfort.”

“No. I even feng shui’d my stupid house to attract the right sort of guy.”

“No kidding.”

“Yeah, I take this stuff seriously. And I don’t want to play mind games. I don’t like other people’s thoughts popping into my heads at random. When I’m reading cards, sure. But otherwise, no way.”

“Suit yourself.” Natasha washed her hands and left the bathroom. Maggie sighed and stared at herself in the mirror.

Who was she? There were so many parts of her and she wondered if she’d ever implode in exhaustion from them all.

Maggie the tarot reader.

Maggie the sex addict.

Maggie the party goddess.

Maggie the exercise-conscious.

Maggie the lonely.

Maggie the lover.

Maggie the wife.

Maggie laughed at the last thought. That was one hat she hadn’t worn yet. Living with people was one thing, but to truly take the next step towards marriage? That was brave. And something she’d never done.

Something always went wrong somewhere. Clash of personalities. Money. Sexual issues. Gambling. There was a skeleton in almost everyone's closet and unless the skeletons were a match, there wasn't likely to be a meeting of the minds.

She applied the last bit of lipstick to her lips and smacked them at herself in the mirror.

"You look mahvelous," she cooed to herself as someone new entered the bathroom.

* * * *

By the time the band had left the stage, Maggie was exhausted. Her mind, fueled with too much booze was racing, and thoughts of Steve kept flitting through her mind.

"Do you still want to go to that party?" Ellie asked as they slipped on their coats.

"I'm kind of tired," Maggie said. "I'm not really up for it."

"I don't feel much like partying with rockers tonight," Natasha said. "I've had enough. In fact, I really just feel like going home and playing my violin now."

"Then it's settled," Ellie said as they set out into the night air.

As Maggie walked along the slippery sidewalks back to her apartment, she tossed around thoughts of Steve. He had asked for her number. It wouldn't be long before they went on a date.

She wondered how it would be.

Chapter Six

Birthdays bring new beginnings, new hopes, new dreams.

The time is right to act on them.

When she woke, she felt no different. She never did on her birthday. Her dreams hadn't cared, either. Again, they were dark and disturbing and left an aura of uneasiness about her as she left her bed.

A vague voice haunted her as she shook the last of her dream remnants from her mind.

Open heart, open mind.

The same message as before. She was having an open heart and open mind. She had feng shui'd. She was meeting lots of guys.

She went through her routine of making coffee. It was time for a change from the dark roast. She chose a mocha java and ground it up.

The rich scent filled her nostrils as she pressed the button on the coffee maker.

She left the coffee to drip and went to find her exercise ball. She flicked on the TV and put on the music videos. This time it was Kanye singing about something or another with a bunch of pretty girls jiggling and strutting. She did her sit-ups in peace. No strange apparitions haunted her on her birthday.

She went over to her computer and saw that a number of astrology sites wished her a happy birthday.

Her forecast was good. The forecast for the year was even brighter. But she always found it suspect that her birthday forecasts were always so good, yet her life never went so well.

There were many e-mails from people wishing her happy birthday. She wished that she would find one from Steve, but why would she? They barely knew each other.

There were a couple of requests for online tarot readings. She would get to them after her morning coffee.

She wondered if Steve was up already. She looked at the clock and figured he'd already been welding at the plant for a couple of hours.

She looked out the window and saw ice on all the trees. It must have been hard to drive on the slick white roads so early. At least now what could pass for a sun was out, but in the darkness, he must have been slipping and sliding all over the place.

Why did she care about what happened to him?

She poured herself a cup of coffee and settled in with her Stephen King novel.

A few hours drifted by as she drank coffee and read. At last she decided it was time to get lunch and tackle those tarot readings.

She made herself a sandwich and read through her e-mails. Several new ones had come in.

As she read more birthday wishes, she realized one had come from Steve.

Hope you're having a wonderful day.

She smiled and a gentle thrill surged through her.

The delight of receiving the e-mail carried her through the next few hours as she answered her tarot questions and tidied up the place.

As she was curled up with her Stephen King book, the phone rang, startling her from a world of dark trepidation. Coming back to reality, she was delighted to hear Steve's voice on the other end.

"Happy birthday," he said.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Your Web site."

"You're sneaky."

"No. I just do my homework."

Their talk turned to the weather and then back to her birthday.

"I imagine you already have plans for tonight," he said.

"Yes, I'm going out with some of my girlfriends."

"I should have asked you sooner. I've just been so busy with work and stuff," he said.

"Don't worry about it. We've had these plans for months. You never had a chance," she teased.

"Touché."

They bantered for a while longer.

"So, are you available any time this week for dinner?" he finally blurted out.

"Oh, let me see." Maggie pretended to flip through some kind of date book. Why was she playing games? She had no plans that week whatsoever. Yet her mouth was saying something else.

"I'm afraid I'm booked up 'til Saturday. Friends and clients and such," she lied.

What the hell was she doing?

"Next weekend is fine," he said. "I'd like that. What do you like to do?"

"I'm pretty easy. I like doing almost anything. Why don't you surprise me?"

"Fancy or casual?"

"You know what, with the holidays coming and all the fancy parties I have to go to, I think I'd prefer to wear something casual that night."

"Okay. I'll think of a casual thing we can do."

"Not a movie. I don't like movies on a first date."

"I hear you. It's hard to get to know someone when you're just staring at the screen all night. And God help you if you disagree about the movie."

"You know it. So next week, casual, no movie."

"A deal."

After they hung up, Maggie stared at the phone.

She shouldn't have been surprised, but she was.

There were numerous times that men she read tarot for had asked for her

number. Most of the time, she wasn't surprised when they didn't call for a date. Some of them continued the charade of seeing her for readings when in fact they wanted into her pants.

Very few times was she wrong about who wanted her skills as a reader and who wanted her skills in bed.

Steve wanted her skills at both. She knew that in a heartbeat.

She could give him a wild night, and certainly she would love to, but there was that stupid haunting *something more* that gave her pause to rein in for a while and let their situation unfold. It was like Natasha and Ellie said. If she could get to know him first, she could enjoy many encore performances of what might be great sex and great companionship.

She shook her head and returned to her book. She hadn't even gone on a date with the guy yet. They hadn't even had a real conversation yet and still there was something there. Something elusive she couldn't put her finger on.

At last, it was time to go out for birthday celebrations with her friends.

She wasn't certain what to wear but in the end chose warmth over fashion.

It was dark by the time she arrived at the bar. Natasha, Ellie, Veronica who was a Leo and Madeline, an Aquarius, were all waiting for her with gift bags and buckets of beer.

"Happy birthday!" They cried out to her as she entered the bar. Within minutes, waitresses had come over to sing and one held a slab of chocolate cake with a sparkler in it.

"Make a wish," Ellie said.

"Can't blow out a sparkler," Maggie said.

"Make a wish anyway," Veronica urged. "It can never hurt to make a wish."

Maggie thought long and hard about her birthday wish. She had so much and yet so little. She enjoyed her life and her routine. She knew there were very few other

places in the world she could survive doing what she did.

The only thing she was missing was a companion. Not a one-night stand. She could get plenty of those. But maybe she should try the idea of a companion. Steady and long term.

No.

Companions led to hurt.

“Are you going to make a wish or what?” Madeline said impatiently. “It’s just a wish.”

“Don’t bug her. She has to word it just so or she’ll end up in some weird alternative universe as a pig in a baby doll outfit.”

“You’re wacked.”

“Well, you know what I mean.”

The sparkler sizzled out and Maggie nodded. “I made my wish, so you can all calm down now.”

“I hope you wished for more wishes. I always do that.”

“No, I didn’t. But I’m not telling, either, or it won’t come true.”

Several orders of chicken wings and other finger foods arrived and the ladies dug in with gusto.

“I’m having something from every one of my favorite food groups.” Maggie joked. “Grease, bread, cheese, and veggies. Oh, wait, tomatoes are a fruit, aren’t they?”

The girls laughed as they dipped the crispy sticky wings into various sauces and pulled at the long strings of melted cheese oozing from fried dough.

“The best thing about birthdays is that calories don’t count. Not for the birthday girl or any of those celebrating with her.” Maggie laughed.

“Any calories mixed with beer don’t count on your birthday,” Ellie said.

After feasting on the sticky foods, Maggie excused herself to use the ladies’ room. She did her business, freshened up and reminded herself it was her birthday.

New beginnings. She came out of the bathroom and saw a handsome stranger in

the hallway.

“Why, hello,” Maggie said, smiling as she stopped in front of the lanky man in front of her. He put his hands out on the wall, more to steady himself than to block her.

“I saw you at your table with your friends. They sang “Happy Birthday” to you.”

“It’s my birthday.”

“Hey, it’s mine too.” The man grinned. His light brown eyes glazed with one part too much drink and more parts lust.

“No kidding.” Maggie said, laughing. “Now, let me pass.”

“Really.” The man put down his arms to draw out his wallet. He flipped it open and found his driver’s license. Triumphant he held it out to her.

“See? Right there.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Maggie said. “It really is your birthday, Garnet Lindor. Happy birthday.”

“I think this calls for a birthday kiss.” Before Maggie could protest, Garnet had swept her into his arms. His kiss was firm and thirsty and his eager warmth enticed her to kiss him back.

His scent was fresh with a hint of a sweet-smelling perfume. She nestled her face into the soft curls of his shoulder-length hair. Freshly washed with a dash of gel and a coat of hair spray, the various perfumes worked their magic on her senses.

Dulled with drink, she pulled back and lightly touched his chest.

“Happy birthday,” she said.

She tried to push by him once more and he caught her arm.

“Say, why don’t we go have a drink?” he asked. His forceful grip was firm enough to show intent but not hard enough to hurt her.

“Sure,” she said.

“How about a shot of tequila?”

“Fabulous.”

They made their way over to the bar and ordered four shots of tequila. Maggie leaned into him, enjoying his warmth on every level.

“Double birthdays, double round,” Garnet said as he threw down a few bills. The bartender lined up the shots, salt and lime. The ritual went fast and the tequila hit hard.

“Wow,” Maggie said. “That’s warm.”

“Boy, is it ever.” Garnet grinned as he put his hand on her shoulder.

“You’re a very nice-looking man, Garnet Lindor,” Maggie said. “Even if you are six years younger than me.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes. It’s true. I’m a decadent older woman.”

“Just how decadent would that be?”

Maggie smiled and stared into his eyes. Her groin was warm and his face was well chiseled. Youthful enthusiasm shone in his eyes and she stared at his strong firm hands. “Don’t talk, just follow me.”

This time it was Maggie leading Garnet as they made their way back to the bathrooms. She led him into the women’s and chose the furthest stall. She slid down her panties and put his hand on her crotch. “What do you say?” she asked.

“Here? Now?”

“Why not? A birthday present.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.”

Garnet unbuttoned his pants and slid them awkwardly down to his knees. While he was undressing, Maggie discreetly slid a condom from her purse.

His penis was already half erect through his bikini underwear. Maggie traced the outline with her finger.

“We need to free him,” she said as she hooked her fingers under the bikini band and popped him out.

“Yummy.” She bent over to suck him for a little while. He grew harder quickly.

She used her hand to pump the blood into him quickly as she sucked. They could be discovered at any time and the idea made her heart race in a dizzying rush of excitement.

When he was hard, she stood up and he reached for her pussy again. He rubbed her aching clit.

“Oh, that’s good,” she cooed as she kissed his ear. She wrapped her fingers around his cock, pulling on him as he fingered her. She retrieved the condom and slid it over his cock.

Maggie turned around and leaned over, one foot on the toilet while her hands pressed against the sides of the stall for support. Garnet grabbed her waist and slid his cock into her damp pussy. He pushed into her slowly and she sighed as his fullness parted her flesh. The warmth of him pulsed inside of her as she relaxed and tightened her muscles. His cock hardened more as he slowly pulled back from her. Without withdrawing, he pushed into her again. She turned her head to moan into her arm, the sound inciting more excitement in Garnet.

He held her hips firmly as he plunged into her with long firm thrusts. She eagerly met him, pushing back on him to bury him deep inside of her. He shifted so that the angle changed slightly and soon he was hitting her favorite spot.

Garnet thrust into her faster and she met him quickly.

The door to the main bathroom swung open and they stopped moving but Garnet stayed inside of her. Someone went into the stall beside them. No sooner had the door been locked when someone else came into the bathroom. A couple of girls started to chit chat. Maggie looked back at Garnet. His eyes gleamed devilishly.

“It’s our birthdays.” He reminded her.

“Damn right,” she whispered. “Fuck me.”

He resumed plunging into her and they could tell by the sudden whispers that everyone in the bathroom could hear them. They didn’t care and, one by one, people came and went.

The excitement of getting caught sent Maggie over the top and she came, almost moaning with delight, but suppressing it. Garnet came shortly after, holding her tightly to him as he climaxed. She could feel his throbbing cock pulsing strongly and then growing weaker.

As reality washed over them, they quickly pulled their clothes together and helped each other wipe smears of makeup from their faces. They giggled as they watched the used condom swirl down the toilet bowl with two flushes.

When they emerged from the stall, the lineup of three pretty ladies politely clapped. Garnet grinned and kissed Maggie.

“See you later!” he said as he hurried out the door.

When Maggie returned to her friends, they asked her what took so long. She told them the story of Garnet in the bathroom and they raised a toast to cheer her.

“You go, girl!” Veronica said.

“One of the best spontaneous birthday stories ever!” cheered Madeline.

Chapter Seven

You will make a new connection. Let the situation unfold with patience.

Maggie's heart was racing as she checked herself for the umpteenth time in the mirror. Her thoughts kept drifting to Steve's strong jaw and broad shoulders. He was so manly, yet different from other men. The idea that he was a Virgo kept distracting her, but her horoscope had been good that day. It said she would have a new connection and to let things unfold naturally. So she decided to try her hardest to do just that.

Still, could an impatient hedonistic Sag really be compatible with a persnickety health-conscious Virgo?

When the doorbell rang, it startled her although she was expecting it.

"God, I'm worse than a teenager." She laughed at herself as she hurried towards the door.

When she opened the door, Steve handed her a large bouquet of orange carnations.

"My, those are beautiful," she said as she took them. "Come in."

Steve stepped into her apartment and looked around as she hurried into the kitchen to put the flowers in water.

"I'd been hoping to find a reason to use this vase," she said. "I picked it up at the flea market not long ago."

"Then it didn't go to waste." Steve smiled. "You look beautiful tonight."

"Thank you."

He stood watching her, nervously shuffling his feet while she fiddled with the flowers. When the flowers were arranged to her satisfaction, she brought them out to the small dining room table.

"They brighten up the room," she said.

“They go with the décor, too,” Steve noted.

He looked at the array of stones and crystals lining her bookshelves. “You really like your stones,” he said.

“I try to keep as many around as possible. To suck up negative energy.”

“Is it working?”

“I think so.”

He stared at the bookcases.

“So many books.”

“I love to read.”

“Really? I never really enjoyed reading that much,” he said dully.

“Reading is so much fun,” Maggie said enthusiastically.

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘fun’ to describe reading,” he said. “It’s work, at least for me.”

“Everyone is different.”

She turned to stare at him, her heart still thumping. He looked boyishly lost as he stood looking at her.

“So, ready to go?” he asked.

“Lead the way.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure what we should do on a first date. You know. So I thought maybe we could go to one of the pubs and play some darts? Do you like darts?” he asked hopefully.

“Sure. I’m not too good at them, but I’ll play.”

She found her coat and they set off.

* * * *

The pub was rather empty as it was still early. There were a few people sharing jugs of beer at a number of tables. The billiard balls clacked from the three pool tables at the far end of the room. Several couples challenged each other in friendly banter, their laughter greeting Maggie and Steve as they headed for the dart area. There were

three boards and only one was in use. The other players were three men and three women, dressed in red and white with red hats on their heads and Team Christmas on their backs. The women wore their hair in braids tied with four large red jingle bells that tinkled as they moved.

One of the girls threw a dart and it flew through the air and impaled the wall below. She laughed as she threw up her hands and went to retrieve it.

Maggie pointed to the dart board furthest from them. "I think we'll be safer over there."

"I couldn't agree more," Steve said as he followed her. Maggie hung her purse off of the back of a chair at the high-top table closest to the dart area. Steve followed her and helped her slip off her coat.

Her furry sweater and tight jeans added a homey touch to the paneled room. The waitress came over, dressed in a black scoop neck sweater and black tight-fitting jeans. She swayed as she walked, twirling her tray on her fingertips.

"What would you like to drink?" she asked, cocking her head in bemusement at the couple before her.

"Two pints of beer," Steve requested, quickly adding a brand. "That's what you said you like, right?" he asked Maggie.

"You remembered," she said, replaying their phone calls through their head. "Thank you."

"I aim to please," Steve said as he hung her coat carefully over the chair, covering her purse.

He stood looking at the dart board. "This one's not bad. They need new boards here but it will do."

"You've played here before?"

"Usually Tuesdays. They have a special on beer and wings. So I come in and play darts. Some other guys do too and sometimes we have little tournaments." He pointed to a photocopied flier that was taped to the wall near them, under the chalk

board. "See?"

The sign confirmed his story. Jugs of beer were five dollars off with every pound of wings.

"Good deal. I'll have to start coming in."

"You know it." He winked.

He walked over to the line that was taped onto the indoor/outdoor carpet.

"You stand behind here."

"I know that much," she said. "You can keep score though. It gets on my nerves."

"Okay."

Steve walked over to the chalkboard and picked up a piece of chalk. He wrote their names and turned to her.

"So it's set." He smiled. "There's no escape now."

"I guess not," she said. She laughed as the bobbled-haired girl hit the wall again. "That poor thing. She'll never get it right."

"Some people never do," Steve said as he watched the girl pull three darts from the wall in mock shame. Her friends catcalled and raised a glass to her new low.

"Well, maybe we'll do shots every time I hit the wall," Maggie said. "But we'd get pretty drunk pretty fast."

"We'll see how it goes. I'm sure you'll be fine. If not, I'll just have to teach you."

"So, do we go ask at the bar for darts?"

"I always play with my own," Steve said as he pulled a case out of his jacket. "And I brought another set for you to use, if you like."

"Wow, you must take your darts seriously." She took the case he offered her and unzipped them. A set of red plumed darts were held in by black bands. She plucked them out, her fingers trembling.

"I'm not really a very good player," she said. "Like, really."

“Don’t worry, it’s all in fun,” he said as he adjusted the tails on his darts. “We’ll do some practice throws so you can get used to them.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can throw them all night and never be used to them. But I’ll give it a shot.”

Maggie tossed hers first and hit the board every time. Although she didn’t score, she was glad that her aim wasn’t too terrible.

The waitress came with their pints of beer and asked if they wanted a menu.

“Do you want a snack here and go out to dinner later at a better place, or do you want to stay here?” Steve asked.

Maggie looked around the homey atmosphere. The wooden tables, the dart game, the friendly bartender winking at her knowingly, as if wishing her well on her date, beckoned to her. “Let’s stay here. We can play darts and eat wings, how’s that?”

“Sounds great to me. Their wings rock.”

“I’d like that.” Maggie threw her darts again and this time scored a few points. She grinned as she took a sip of her beer.

“I’m improving. See?”

“You’re doing fine,” Steve said as he threw his darts, all hitting the bullseye except one.

“Are you ready to play a game yet?” he asked.

“I’ll never be ready. Let’s just do it.”

The game began in earnest, and after four shots of tequila, Maggie hit the wall. In two games out of three, Steve was victorious. Maggie knew winning her game was a combination of a fluke bullseye and Steve likely cutting her some slack as a reward.

Their wings and fries arrived, and they sat down to their feast with gusto. The other dart boards had players and most of the tables in the bar were full. The music was louder to compensate for the boisterous laughter that broke out every so often. Maggie recognized AC/DC and bobbed her head to it.

Steve noticed and bobbed his as well. They ate their wings, sauce-smeared faces

grinning as they watched the night kick into gear.

When the wings were finished, Maggie sat back for a minute. “That was so good. I’m stuffed,” she said, patting her belly.

“Me, too,” he said, dabbing his fingers daintily with a wet wipe.

The waitress cleared way the evidence and they ordered a jug of beer.

“We’re going to be here a while now.” Steve said.

“That’s fine by me.”

They looked around the bar and saw that one of the pool games was wrapping up.

“Oh, too bad he sunk that eight ball,” Steve said. “Man.”

“Do you want to play?”

“Sure.”

They were more evenly matched at pool, and the game flew by. Since there were people waiting for their table, they stopped after one round and Maggie was victorious. By the time they returned to their table, the dart board was taken.

“Maybe they’ll be done soon,” Steve said, eyeing the dart board impatiently.

“Maybe.”

They finished the jug of beer in relative silence as the din in the bar grew louder and the dart board still wasn’t free.

“I really wish those people would finish their game so we can play again,” Steve said loudly.

“It’s okay,” Maggie said. “If we can’t get on the board again, we’ll come back another time. Maybe on one of those dart and beer days.”

“Well, it’s just they’ve been hogging it so long.” Steve stared stonily at the foursome throwing darts.

“Shh. It’s okay,” Maggie said. “Calm down.”

Steve took a deep breath. He looked at his beer. “What do you think? Stay here or go somewhere else?” said he said when he drained the last of his drink. “If we don’t

play a game, it's pretty loud to talk," he said moodily.

"I agree. Let's go outside and see what's going on." She tried to be chipper, hoping his sour mood would change.

They put their coats back on and made their way from the pub that suddenly seemed noisy and hot, out into the quiet cool of the town.

"It's so pretty," Maggie sighed.

A light snow was falling, creating a twinkling wonderland with all the lights adorning the street lamps and trees. As Steve walked, his countenance softened. "It's like we're in one of those miniature villages," he said. He took her hand and held it firmly as they walked in wonderment.

They reached the end of a block and wordlessly crossed the street to start down the other side.

"What do you want to do? Are you hungry?" Steve asked.

"I could use a little bite of something," Maggie said.

"Let's go for coffee and dessert at that cafe on the other block."

They walked with purpose as the snow fell steadily and a crisp wind picked up.

"It wasn't so cold going the other way," Maggie sighed.

"Nope, it sure wasn't."

They trudged the rest of the way and were happy to feel the homey warmth of the little cafe. It was bright with large cases that held countless choices of decadent delights. Maggie's mouth watered as she spotted the thick swirls of cream-cheese topping on a carrot cake. "Now, that's what I'm talking about," she said.

They sat at a table and were quickly greeted by a waitress. She took their order and set off to make espresso as they took off their coats.

"What are you going to get?" she asked him eagerly, anxious to go over and study the selection.

"I'll probably get apple pie with ice cream," he said.

"Wow- you have all these choices and you get apple pie? With, let me guess,

vanilla ice cream.”

“Sorry, I like apple pie. A lot.”

“I hear you. I’m that way with chocolate. I do love my chocolate.”

“So I guess you’ll get some fancy chocolate mousse cake with chocolate icing and chocolate flakes?”

“No. Actually, that carrot cake seems to have my name on it. “

“Have the carrot cake, then. And you mocked my apple pie.”

“Boy, we’re decadent, aren’t we?” Maggie laughed. “Ah, well.”

As they dove into their desserts, Steve looked intently at her. From the look in his eyes, she knew the evening was going to turn.

“So, tell me more about Maggie,” he coaxed. “We’ve talked quite a bit, but I still don’t really know anything about you.”

“What you see is what you get is the main thing to remember,” she said.

“Really, though. Have you had many relationships? Were you ever married?”

Married. Now that was a laugh. “No marriage. Engaged, but not married.”

“What happened?”

“It was typical. All caught up in the excitement of new romance, and so that lead to an instant proposal. After a few months, co-habitation was a habit that we just fell into, and he never wanted to make the effort to seal the deal.”

“So you broke it off?”

“It wasn’t even that. Anyway, does it really matter?”

“I guess not,” Steve said and thought for a moment. “Actually, it does in a way. Matter, that is.”

“Why? You’re going to judge my character by how I interacted with someone who is very unlike you?”

“No. Not that. It’s about knowing someone, I guess. Whether you’re a love-’em-and-leave-’em or whether you’re true-blue loyal.”

Maggie ate another piece of cake.

"I'm true blue when I meet the right guy. I've been known to love 'em and leave 'em, but it's usually mutual."

"So you're into the one-night stands."

"Not as a habit," Maggie said and shoved another piece of carrot cake into her mouth. Good Lord, what had happened to her? Ever since she and Sam broke up, she'd become some sort of sex-crazed freak. Well, she knew who she was, but she also knew enough about Steve to figure out that he would not be impressed. "What about you?" she asked. "Do you have one-night stands?"

"I must confess I've had two in my life."

"Two?"

"Yes. One was when I was about seventeen on a camping trip. Never caught the girl's name. The other was, I hate to admit it, last summer with a tourist."

His face was growing redder by the minute.

"Why are you so embarrassed? Who cares about one-night stands?"

"Well, truth be told. There were - uh—was - more than one."

"Ooooh, do tell." Maggie leaned over, putting her hand on his knee.

"Three girls. And me," he said, his face so red Maggie swore he was going to explode.

"How was it?" she asked.

"You don't want to know."

"You think I'd be jealous of something that happened before I met you?"

"Well, when you put it that way."

"So tell me. What happened?"

"Well, I was tanning on the beach one day. Well, not really tanning. I was under an umbrella, but it was pretty hot and I was already a few shades darker than is healthy. So, anyway, you don't care about all that."

"Yeah, get to the good stuff."

"So I was just sitting there and this girl came over and started talking to me.

She was very pretty and half-drunk. She asked if she and her friends could sit under my umbrella. There was lots of room, so I said no problem.”

“That big of an umbrella, huh?”

“It’s pretty big. The umbrella, that is.” They laughed. “So everyone is rubbing suntan lotion on each other and we’re already nearly naked in our bathing suits.”

“Mmm, sounds like fun.”

“One thing led to another, and next thing I knew, I was in a room at the Evergreen Inn with three naked girls. It was one helluva afternoon, and night.”

“I bet.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought that up.”

“Nonsense. I asked.”

“But you didn’t expect that.”

“Believe me. Here in Hermana, all sorts of crazy things happen. Especially during tourist season. It’s part of the magic of the place.”

“Oh, please. You and your magic.”

“Hey, you came to me for a tarot reading.”

“Yes, which reminds me.” Steven reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out the locket. “Maybe you and your witchy friends can figure something out.”

“What makes you think I have witchy friends?”

“Well, you seem to be pretty witchy. I know you know some of the other psychics at the market. I’ve seen you talk to them.”

“Oh, so now you’re stalking me.”

“No, not at all. When you were gone, everyone knew who you were.”

“After a few years, everyone knows everyone, and half of their business too.”

“I’m sure. Especially if you’re psychic.”

“I’m not as psychic as some of them, that’s for sure. I’ve one friend who can paint auras. She sees the aura around you and paints it. Pretty freaky stuff.”

“How can you see an aura?”

“You look past a person and blur your eyes. Rainbows of colors shoot up from a person’s head. Their whole body, actually.”

“You can see it right now?”

Maggie sat back in her chair and stared past Steve. Vibrant flashes of color flickered up from him, although a dark gray mass swirled above his head.

“The white walls help a lot,” she said. “You try it.”

“What’s my aura?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know much about them, like what the colors mean. I see lots of orange and red in you. Maybe that’s why you brought me orange carnations.”

“Maybe. So I like orange?”

“I don’t know if we specifically like the colors that our auras are dominant in. I don’t know enough about it.”

“It sounds like you know a lot more than I do.”

“Perhaps. I do know enough to know that you have a dark gray cloud over your head.” “My own little black rain cloud.”

“It looks that way. You can’t shake that depression.”

“It’s hard,” he said as he pushed the locket on the table towards her. “It’s not so much depression as this sense of something hanging or unfinished. There is something that I need to know but damned if I can figure out.”

“I know.” Maggie took the locket and held it swinging between her hands.

“We’ll find out what it is, don’t you worry.”

“I’ve already been to several psychics. No one can tell me anything.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter if I tell you that you will know when it’s time to know.”

“That’s what they all say. It sounds like another way to say no one knows anything.”

“It’s partly that, but it’s partly that we often have things revealed to us when we need to know them. You can stare at a stone every day for years and then one day see

a face in the swirls that you never noticed before. And then once you see that face, you can never unsee it again.”

“Whatever,” he said as he finished his cake. He concentrated on scraping up the last of the melted ice cream. “I noticed that you did it again,” he said edgily.

“Did what?”

“Avoided my question.”

“About what?”

“Your past. Your present. Who you are. What do you want from a man?”

“Well, I am who I am, as I said before. And what I want from a man? That’s a good question,” she said firmly.

“What do you want? Sex? Love? Romance? A relationship? A bunch of kids?” His voice was low and urgent.

“Oh my. Every day it’s different, but one thing I do know I wouldn’t be good at is a bunch of kids. Maybe one or two, but not a bunch.”

“I hear you. Two is a good number for me. They can hang out together but there’s not a huge amount of hassle with the day-to-day chores and stuff.”

“I don’t want twins though. No twins. Ugh,” Maggie said.

“Why not? You have your two kids and everything is over with at the same time. Feedings, toddler years. All that stuff.”

“It sounds practical in theory but I would die having to juggle two kids at once,” Maggie said. “No twins for me.”

“Well, that’s fine. It’s not like anyone really has a say in it anyways.” Steve stopped talking and stared at her. He furrowed his brow, his blue eyes darkening. “You did it again. Changed the subject.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to. I just start talking-”

“So tell me about your boyfriends. Who else was there?” His tone was almost accusatory.

“I’ve had three serious relationships where, yes, I actually lived with them, and

a couple of flings. Is that okay?"

Steven nodded thoughtfully as his eyes softened. "Well, it gives me a better lay of the land."

"Ha ha, you're funny," Maggie said.

"I like to know what I'm dealing with," Steve said prissily.

"Some people you never get to know."

"And so I move on." His words were sharp and hung in the air between them for a moment. He softened again. "I want to get to know you," he said wistfully. His eyes were large, his pupils dark pits of longing.

"I like you, too," Maggie said. "Why aren't you married?"

"Ah, yes. You're old, why aren't you married?" he said flippantly.

"You like to interrogate me so much, now it's your turn."

"I've nothing to hide. I lived with someone for about three years and it all went to hell. I wanted to marry her, but as the months went by, she grew less interested. Eventually, I discovered that she was cheating on me, with my friend, no less. All those afternoons I was slaving away in thousand-degree heat, she was banging my buddy. Yeah." His face was dark again.

"That's gotta suck."

"Yep," he said stonily.

"So, how long did you know before you confronted her?"

"I don't know when I didn't know. I sensed it the very first time, I'm sure of it. When it all came to a head, as it were, they said it had only been going on a few months. But I know it was a couple of years. Almost our whole relationship."

"What a bitch."

"And an asshole. I blame both of them."

"And was that your only relationship?"

"Pretty much. I don't get out much. I don't date much. And even over the past year when I was finally over all the bullshit, my mom died and I've been dealing with

all of that after I work all day.”

“You must be tired.”

Steve perked up. “Not now. Overall, I’m tired a lot of the time, yet somehow you bring out the joy in me. When you’re not dodging my questions.”

“I feel good around you too.” Maggie looked at her empty coffee cup.

“Let’s go have a nightcap.”

They wandered back out into the cold. The lights were veiled by swirling whirls of snow cascading down from the sky. Maggie stuck out her tongue and tried to catch a few flakes. They walked along until they came to another tavern.

“Sambuca?” he asked.

“Sure, why not?” she replied as they headed into the crowded pub. They pushed their way to the bar and ordered shots. They decided on flaming and clinked their shot glasses with the crisp smell of coffee beans bubbling on top. They blew out the flame and waited a moment before downing the liquid, careful not to burn their lips on the scorching glass.

“That was great,” Maggie said. “A perfect nightcap to a perfect date.”

“It wasn’t perfect, but close.”

“Oh? Tell me, Mr. Serious, what was wrong with our date?”

“I didn’t get perfect bullseyes at darts.”

“Well, gee. I hit the wall seven times. I win!” She ordered another round of shooters. “What else didn’t you like?”

“Other than that, it was perfect, I guess. I’m glad I got to know you a tiny bit better,” he said. “Not much, but a bit.”

They wandered back out into the snow and too soon they were at Maggie’s building.

“Can I kiss you good night?” he asked.

“Of course.” She pursed her lips ready to receive his. He pressed his lips against her in the softest of kisses. As she drew away he held her shoulders and pulled her

closer. The rush of electricity that had surged through her that first day returned. The nagging little voice in the back of her head cried out that he was the one, her soul mate.

It wasn't true.

Yet there was something there.

As he stepped back from her, she looked deep into his eyes. His sorrow and longing haunted his gaze and she knew in that moment that he adored her.

She took his hand.

"I must go now. Good night," she said, her loins throbbing as she made her way up the stairs. She didn't look back to see if he was there. She was afraid that if he was still watching her to make sure she got in the door safely that she wouldn't be able to resist running back into his arms and giving him a night that even three blondes couldn't let him forget. Instead, the key tumbled the locks and the door creaked open.

She entered her apartment and tossed her purse onto the couch. Immediately she made her way to her altar and lit a candle. She picked up her tarot cards and shuffled through the deck. With eyes closed, she let the vibrations sing along her fingertips until she found the right cards. Once she had picked them, she opened her eyes and turned them over.

Two of cups, Devil, Lovers.

The devil leered up at her and she lit a cigarette while she stared into his beady little eyes. He was hiding secrets. The secret of the locket, and until it was solved, that tricky beast would always be between them.

She got up suddenly and took the locket from her purse. Staring at it, she placed it on the altar. Maybe something would come to her in a dream.

In the meantime, she was growing to loathe that locket. She wanted to know Steve, but was afraid of what his past was going to do to them.

What secret did he carry?

Did he know more than he was letting on?

Maggie hated being paranoid, and instead decided to focus on his lively eyes

and his quick smile. His sarcastic comments engaged her interest and she looked forward to his next phone call.

He was a far cry from so many of the men she'd met in recent months. With many of them, she knew little more than their names. She preferred it that way with those guys. A vibrator could be fun, but there was nothing more fulfilling than flesh on flesh.

She wondered what Steve was like. Three girls. That intrigued her. She wondered what he did, if they all piled on him or if he managed to service them all. A hand in each pussy while he fucked one in the middle. The idea of it sent a shiver down her spine.

She tried to envision it. Her Steve with three tanned beach girls. Boobs bouncing everywhere, his cock – how big was his cock? Reaching towards all those moist holes like a divining rod.

Maggie sat on the couch and unbuttoned her jeans. She played with her pussy while she thought about Steve licking one woman's juicy lips while his fingers plunged deep into another's. He probably enjoyed the many different lips alternating on his cock.

She flicked her clit, pushing her hips towards her hand as she thought of his cock plunging into one of the girls and then taking it out to have another girl lick off the come before plunging it into the next girl.

Maggie's breath grew shallow as her fingers danced faster on her clit. His penis swam before her mind, long, hard, thick, parting succulent lips of flesh as easily as a finger pressed into warm butter.

As she came against her hand, she wondered how long she would be able to wait until she fucked him for real.

Chapter Eight

Solving a mystery will be a challenge.

The house was magnificent. With snow covering the town like a picture postcard, Lucy's home surged like a monolith into the night sky.

Outside, there were wreaths adorned with pine cones, ribbons and bells. Many of the wreaths were twisted into shape from stray branches lying around the property. Miniature lights lined all the windows. A soft twinkling melody filled the night as a music box chimed from some unseen place on the porch.

Cinnamon and nutmeg permeated the air, mingling sweetly with the touch of rum and chocolate on her friends' lips as she hugged and kissed them hello.

One of Lucy's servants took Maggie's coat and she entered the foyer to join the others.

Just in time for aperitifs She grinned. What fun.

The solstice brought out the gaiety in even the quietest of the other twelve ladies gathered at Lucy's that night. Oftentimes, there were snide remarks about some of them needing to lighten up at some point. This evening, though, the entire group seemed intent on positive energy and having a good time.

Laughter mixed with a light piano music playing holiday melodies. She entered the great hall and marveled at how once again, Lucy had gone all out.

The foyer was festooned with hundreds of candles. Many were in wall sconces, zigzagging up to the mammoth ceilings. Several glass chandeliers hung down, with candles adorning each one.

Maggie figured that Lucy must go through a lot of electric candles at her parties, but it wasn't up to her to question the environmental facts at this point.

Veronica greeted her with a warm cup of cider.

Maggie hugged her and was about to push the cup away when Veronica put her hand over hers.

“No, no, my dear. Don’t you worry. There’s lots of kick in that cider.”

“I don’t want a sugar kick, Veronica, but I sure would like a grownup drink.”

“You’ll like this, trust me. It’s killer.”

“Whatever happened to no drinking before the solstice ritual?”

“Lucy changed her mind tonight,” Veronica said. “No one is sure why. The butlers and maids have been whispering all night long. Maybe she is expecting someone important to come by?”

“Maybe she has something planned that none of us know.”

“What’s not to know? You’ve been with her as long as I have. There’s nothing else to know.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Veronica. There’s plenty to know. That goes without saying.”

Maggie took a sip of the punch. “My Lord, that’s amazing.”

“See? All this fuss over what? Sometimes, Maggie—”

“I’m spirited - heh. Get it?”

“No.” Veronica wandered off to talk to Ellie.

Maggie carefully checked her face in the huge ornate hall mirror. Her makeup looked fine despite the cold wind that had battered it on her walk over.

Many of the girls had already arrived, and she made her way around the room mingling while waiting for the latecomers.

The feast was prepared in advance so the ladies had a long time to gaze at it before consuming it. Glazed meats, sweets, cheeses, and fresh breads gave off an enticing aroma.

At last, it was time to cast the solstice circle.

Lucy wore a long burgundy velvet robe. Her wild long gray hair spilled out from her hood. Each of the ladies donned a similar robe and pulled the hoods over their

heads.

Thirteen women stood in a circle along the velvet strips of ribbon lining the floor. The grooves in the carpet molded to some of the girls' feet, as they had stood in the same spot for their rituals for years, if not decades.

Candles were lit and passed around until each lady held one.

Maggie looked around at everyone. Lucy was singing a low humming prayer. When everyone had her head bowed down in prayer, Maggie tried her hardest to keep her head clear. But it was always a disaster. She could never just concentrate when it mattered most. She stared at her candle, willing her mind to clear, to be filled with song and energy.

She yearned to share her power with the others, to transfer as much energy as she absorbed during the sessions, but it never seemed to happen.

She supposed her inability to fully concentrate on anything for any length of time greatly impacted the circle's strength.

Some of the girls had intense concentration and she wondered how life was going for them.

One ran the local newspaper, another a lingerie shop; there were gifted artists and psychics all around her.

The circle's energy ebbed and flowed as the women sang their praises to the festival of light and the goddesses. They celebrated the gift of life and their precious abilities to help others.

As the circle progressed, there were rituals to be performed. This was the last private time the thirteen ladies had together before the door was opened to the townspeople and any guests who chose to pay \$35 for the burning of regrets and to share in the feast that celebrated the season.

One by one, the women placed their candles into holders on the long altar at the side of the room. They picked up pens and paper and returned to their spot to write out their regrets.

Lucy lit a large cauldron with charcoal and many types of herbs. The thick pungent scent curled through the air. Regrets were read aloud by Lucy and were anonymous, although often it was clear whose was being read.

As each regret was spoken, it was thrown into the cauldron.

There was clapping and hoots of “you go, girl” ringing through the air. By the time the last regret was dropped into the cauldron, it burned high and fiery with impatient licking flames.

Maggie loved to watch the blaze flicker at the outer edges of the cauldron as she imagine all the lost regrets swirling and spinning up to the sky and back into the universe.

Lessons learned that could now be passed on to others.

Maggie’s had been two words: *Let go*.

She knew what she meant. She had to stop thinking about all the guys who wronged her, who used her, who didn’t care who she was. She had to let go of the would-haves, could-haves about Sam. She had to let go of clutter.

Maggie felt a sizzle and pop as the flames licked her paper and devoured it. The curling smoke spiraling toward the ornate ceiling gave her great pleasure. Now she could enjoy all that the night had to offer.

The women continued their ritual.

“As a sacrifice to give to the spirit mother father, we wish to reveal our nakedness. Our inner selves as portrayed by our outer selves. Help us all to heal,” Lucy said.

One by one, the ladies disrobed.

“Nakedness is a natural state. We must come to embrace it in a fuller manner. You ladies understand this, but I need to say the words to the universe. What I say will go out through the stars and the planets and reveal a new reality that we may or may not feel capable of living in.”

The women hooked their arms around each other, feeling the press of flesh

against their own, swaying in time to the hypnotic melody that they chanted repeatedly.

At last, Lucy spoke. "It is time for the final wishes and questions."

Lucy stood at the end of the large ballroom, where her gilded throne awaited her. She carefully sat down, lowering herself with her tiny sturdy hands.

She watched the ladies as they came to her. As they curtsied before her, she dabbed their third eye areas with lemongrass. The smell soon mingled with the other enchanting smells of the evening.

"Tonight," Lucy said. "As all of you already know, we're going to attempt to find out more about this locket that Maggie has brought to us. Does anyone object to this?"

Lucy looked around the room as if she was expecting a hand to pop up. But none did.

"Good."

Lucy held the locket up high so everyone could see it. Almost instantly, a hush fell over the room as the women studied the necklace.

The locket buzzed with energy, seeming to glow from Lucy's fingers.

Maggie's head swelled with images.

A crow fluttered from one side of an empty castle turret to the other and then back again. The crow was huge and seemed to be flying aimlessly. Maybe he was looking for escape.

The locket was laid on the altar with the other pieces of jewelry and trinkets that clients had asked the ladies to decipher. The women gathered around the altar to look at the articles and maybe garner some insight into them.

There was a creepy doll that someone had brought. Maggie was loath to touch it but she couldn't help studying its mocking features. Brightly painted eyes, exaggerated mouth lines, terrible hair; the clown doll puppet thing was hideous.

The doll sat among bracelets and lockets and rings. It glowered at Maggie, somehow its creepy eyes following her no matter where in the room she stood. And she

tried to stay out of its sight.

Stupid doll. She wished she could burn it in the regrets pot, but that would not be cool.

When the time came to for everyone to focus on the doll, Maggie tried not to laugh or cry. She wasn't sure which she wanted to do, but she knew that either reaction was not the right one to make.

The doll caused great discourse among the witches. While some of them felt what she did, the malevolence, there were no messages there but greed.

The doll mocked her, its black bottomless eyes daring her to unlock its secrets. There was no peace with this doll.

Finally, the time came to hold up the locket again.

Maggie sighed with relief.

Surely one of the magical ladies could decipher the mystery of the locket.

The locket glowed and spun in Lucy's hand, the chain growing so hot that Lucy slapped it down on the table in despair.

"There's great sadness in that locket." Lucy said.

"She's dead," Maggie offered.

"Beyond that, though. The locket has a secret."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't mean it like that" Lucy said. "It's not a matter of who had the locket but what the locket means right now to people who history let slip by. Now it's time to rally around the little people. Can anyone figure out anything about this locket?"

"I feel the sorrow," said Madeline.

"Me, too," said Veronica.

"It's hard not to. Sorrow burning through my bones like nails through wood. It is there, embedded, and is going to hurt like hell to pull back out," Natasha said.

"We all feel the sorrow, right?" Lucy asked.

"His mother's sorrow."

“A woman with a heavy heart.”

“But what does that mean?” Maggie asked. “That she knew she was going to die? That she was leaving her son too soon? I don’t understand.”

“It’s not for us to know that,” Lucy said.

“I don’t want to play that game. I want to play the game where we can figure it out,” Maggie said.

“What do you have in mind?” asked Ellie.

“We have to piece together clues. We have sorrow, a dead mother, a house with endless disorder he’s been trying to go through.”

“Have you been there?” Lucy asked.

“Where?”

“Steve’s house? Have you looked around the home of this locket?”

“No, in fact, I haven’t. We sort of kind of like each other and it would be too much like a date thing,” Maggie said, knowing the words sounded trite.

“Steve, huh? What’s so special about him?” Gwen asked.

“Nothing so far. Not really. There’s something about him that intrigues me. Maybe he’s not so pushy about sex.”

“But does he treat you right?”

“I don’t know yet. We only actually went on one date and talked on the phone maybe four or five times.”

“Well, as long as he treats you right.”

“I don’t even know if I want to date him,” Maggie said. There were snickers all around her.

“Suit yourself,” Gwen said. “He’s a good catch, despite the sad locket.”

Maggie ignored her.

“What else do any of you see in there? Anything at all? Anyone?” Lucy asked.

“I’m trying to figure out things in the tarot cards. I see long lost secrets.” The minute she said it, she covered her mouth. “Sorry, I didn’t mean secrets - good God,

we just went through that. I meant there are incidents that occurred that not everyone is privy to.”

“Secrets-” Natasha mused.

“Family secrets. A brother or sister. Perhaps something to do with the mother. The father just isn’t there.”

“Sounds about right, from what he’s explained to me.”

“I see lots of trees,” Natasha said. “The twisted snarly ones like over in the grove. I think they are indigenous to New England.”

“Twinkling lights merging with stars,” Said Gwen.

“An old building looms in front of me. It has crumbling stone brickwork,” Maggie said as she fell into a trance. “Screams and wails echo from it. Despair pours from the bricks, ebbing a torment deeper than her bones.”

The windows were barred as were the fences. Ivy snaked around in such a way that it was clear that some of the doors hadn’t been used in years. Hands reached through the bars of the upper openings as ragged nails clawed at the air, angry catcalls combined with pitiful pleas tugged at her, yet repelled her at the same time.

Lightning flashed above the building.

Maggie blinked her eyes. She looked around the room as other women blinded their eyes and looked towards her.

“Did you see that?”

“The old building?”

“I wonder what it is.”

“Looked like an old jail or monastery.”

“Or an insane asylum.”

“It was so old. Maybe it was something from the Salem days.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” Lucy said. “There are lots of terrible places that still exist. Government cutbacks and funding. People are slipping through the cracks at a rapid rate.”

Maggie thought about the big old house. Could it be a clue?

“Is there anything else anyone is feeling from the locket?” she asked.

Lucy indicated for the locket to pass around the room one more time. Each lady held it and nodded, but no one had anything new to add to the puzzle.

“Well,” Lucy said. “I guess you can tell him there’s some great sorrow in his family likely related to a sibling and that there’s some nasty old building that will give him more answers.”

“I guess that’s better than nothing,” Maggie said softly. “Thank you, everyone.”

The women held hands for one last closing song. When they were done, Maggie breathed deeply.

“Can we put that doll away?” Maggie asked. “It’s so distracting.”

“Let’s do even better and try some of that feast before the others come,” Lucy said.

Lucy was expecting a large crowd that evening, so even though the ladies ate an abundance of food, there was plenty more to take its place.

Maggie sucked on the sweet sourness of a wedge of pineapple, mulling over the mystery of the locket.

The women realized the time was growing near for the public to be let through the doors, so they hurried to put their clothes back on.

Soon guests filtered through the doors. This wasn’t open to the town like Halloween and some other celebrations. This was solemn ceremony for several hundred people who would meet for an hour to burn regrets and then go around the town celebrating the festival of lights.

Soon the time came to assemble for the parade. The cider was warm in her stomach as Maggie wandered down the streets with the others, clanging on pots and welcoming the solstice. Around the town, buskers had set up and were crooning to the crowds that had gathered to enjoy the Solstice.

The parade wound around the town and ended up at the grove of trees. A

massive bonfire was created in the pit by several seasoned veterans. Fire eaters and people on stilts walked around entertaining the crowd.

Maggie watched excitement and passion unfold around her in many different forms. The puppeteers undulating long-legged on stilts, their flowing costumes catching in the wind and casting eerie shadows from the fire. Their horned hats added to the montage of twisted trees that circled the grove.

Beyond the grove were the woods. Now and again, she would notice a couple running into the woods, their feet sliding in the snow, careful to run in the footsteps of couples who had gone forth previously. Maggie had gone into the woods on the solstice before. Mating on that magical night brought excitement to a whole new level.

Tonight, she wasn't going to look for anything. Tonight was a night to reflect on what she expected from the coming year. Intent was crucial to the feng shui project.

There were several rounds of carols as people welcomed the Longest Night of the Year.

Eventually, fire breathers finished their performances and the puppeteers were gone. Musicians filtered off one by one. There was only the murmuring of people, happy to be part of the festivities for one more year.

At the end of the celebrations, the crowd thinned out and people began to filter home or to one of the nearby pubs that stayed open an hour later on such nights.

Maggie walked by several pubs buzzing with activity and though the idea of friendly people warmed her, she stayed focus on her intent.

She wandered down the streets, listening to the happy singing of people around her, excited by the pagan festivities. She knew that the night would be spent with many people sitting on their porches to admire the beauty of the lit town.

The festival of lights was only half of the holiday festivities. The rest of the lights would be illuminated on Christmas Day.

* * * *

Natasha hurried up to Maggie and took out a cigarette, offering it to her. Maggie

took it.

“What are you doing now?” She asked Maggie

“I thought I’d go home.”

“Not yet. Come with me for nightcap.”

“But I’m trying to be good.”

“You can be good and have a nightcap with me.”

Natasha and Maggie entered a small pub and headed for the already crowded bar to order drinks. As they stood with their drinks staring out at the room, Natasha spoke. “He’s a good one for you.”

“How do you know that?”

“I can see how you talk about him.”

“But I barely know him. We have nothing in common.”

“You have soul in common.”

“So what do I do?” Maggie asked.

“You should explore it. Slowly and carefully.”

“I don’t know if I know how to do slowly and carefully. Those are words that aren’t in my vocabulary.”

“Believe me, he’ll be worth it,” Natasha said knowingly.

“How do I know?”

“No one knows for sure about love, but I do know you have nothing better going on, right?”

“You sure have me pegged,” Maggie said.

“I know *I* have nothing better going on,” Natasha said.

“One day you will. Maybe sooner than you think.”

“Highly unlikely. I’ve not met anyone who really piques my interest in very long time,” Natasha said.

“Well, it can happen. Feng shui your house like I did. I have guys coming out of my ears. Hell, I have guys on messenger for God’s sake,” Maggie said.

“Everyone has guys on messenger.” Natasha laughed. “They are just for fun.”

“I suppose,” Maggie said.

They looked around the room and Maggie finished her drink.

“I’m great now. I really need to go home,” Maggie said.

“Suit yourself. You know I’m a night hawk,” Natasha replied.

“That I do know for sure.”

Maggie left Natasha in the bar and wandered down the street. She wondered if Steve had seen any of the pagan festivities, or if he had been there at all. She had half-hoped to glimpse him that night, or maybe even run into him. He didn’t strike her as the kind of man who would attend a pagan activity alone.

It didn’t matter to her one way or another. She had to attend the circle and she never knew how she was going to be after one.

It was such beautiful night. A night of new beginnings.
She wondered if the time was finally coming for her life to change.

The stars twinkled above her as the snow lightly fell.
She wandered home, warm inside from the alcohol, the locket safely tucked away in her purse.

Chapter Nine

Today you will put things into perspective.

The horoscope mocked her. She was more confused than ever.

How could she ever put so many jagged little pieces of her life together into a big picture and then put it into perspective?

It just wasn't possible. Her life was careening out of control and she wasn't certain at all how to put the brakes on.

Her constant craving for the touch of another warm body distanced her mind from the day-to-day practicality of her age and her goals. The more tongues and fingers probing her body, the more she could fall into the heady essence of lust and lose herself to exquisite sensation.

Would she ever stop wanting so much?

Could she ever find someone who could engage her mind as well as her loins?

Every time she stopped to take a chance, her aching heart was broken by disinterest or infidelity.

Trust was something she couldn't give anymore.

Sadly, she shook her head as she thought about it. No matter how much she yearned for a steady partner, she yearned for a different sensation more.

She wasn't sure she had tasted every kind of man there was to be had yet. In fact, she was sure of it.

Yet on the other hand, there was something comforting about waking up with a familiar face in the morning, the banter over coffee and the watching silly sitcoms or reality shows in the evening. There was always Saturday night to look forward to, and any myriad activities that could end in decadent delight.

It was so hard to decide what she really, truly wanted.

She went to the fridge and got a beer. As she popped the top and took a long drink, she paced back to the living room and flopped down on the couch.

The room felt brighter. The omnipresent sense of shutting down that usually consumed her after a while wasn't threatening to materialize. Instead, a sense of hope ebbed forth.

With the right partner, she could have it all. Other people did. Didn't they?

Nobody really knew what went on behind closed walls. No one knew who really cried herself to sleep while her handsome husband surfed Internet porn all night. Or how many romantic wine-toasted evenings ended in an alcohol-fuelled fiasco of broken glass and bruises. Who was cheating? Who was living a façade?

Maggie imagined that almost everyone had secrets and some were bigger than others. Marriage was a breeding ground for webs woven from lies. They start small and innocent. A wee white lie here and there until someone is caught with his pants around his ankles, banging his secretary instead of conducting a four o'clock meeting.

She knew how it would be so tempting. Married or not, experiencing another's flesh was so much fun. A mark on every human until everyone was a maze of arms and hair and tongues and mouths, sharing saliva until you tasted your own once more.

Maggie sighed and went over to her crystal ball. She lifted it off its stand and held it carefully in her palm.

"Tell me, crystal, what messages do you have for me?" she asked. She closed her eyes and let the vibrations from the smooth orb undulate through her flesh. She sighed and took a deep breath. The crystal buzzed a soft vibration that simmered in her bones and through her teeth.

She pushed her musings from her mind as she tuned into the hum of the crystal. Every intrusive thought she had she shooed away with an image of energy surging from the stone and into her hands and back again.

The vibrations from the stone rapidly surged forward in an ever-expanding circle. The room hummed with energy as the touchstones in power spots connected

with the energy Maggie released from her body.

“We are all connected. So why is it wrong that I connect flesh in flesh?” Maggie sighed. “Stupid religious ideals that corrupt our free thought. Guilt is so ingrained in our culture.”

Maggie rubbed the stone longer, her slender fingers dancing along the sheen as cold turned to warm and then hot.

“My lovely crystal. Your warmth makes me tinglier than ever. Is my sexual freedom your message?” she asked, laughing. The crystal continued to pulse and Maggie cleared her mind once more.

She fell into a reverie of slanted lines and blurry edges. Soulless eyes from plastic masks gazed at her. She was a specimen to be poked and prodded by the featureless faces. Her fingers trembled, twitching as coldness seared the tips.

The disquieting feeling of being on reluctant display merged into a soft embrace of familiarity.

“I could be many women,” she whispered to the crystal. “I could wear wigs and outfits and never be the same me twice. Then he would never get bored.”

The crystal pulsed and she nodded, her eyes still shut.

“I could just be me and do what I do and if he likes me, he’ll stay and if he doesn’t, I don’t need him.”

She waited for answer but only the steady humming pulse of the crystal stirred her.

“Is Steve the one for me?”

Within her hands, the crystal felt warmer, her palms sweaty, smearing the clear glass.

“Oh my, that’s not going to do.” She sighed as she stroked the crystal with a soft cloth from one of the drawers on the entertainment stand.

“This is what it’s all about. I just know it. Steve - it’s all about Steve.”

She wiped the crystal and held it up to the ceiling. There was nothing to see

in the clear shiny glass. Maggie drew it closer to herself and stared intently into the sphere.

“How can it be that you may or may not tell me things, yet here I am babbling on like some sort of idiot, to someone, to no one?” Steve said from the crystal.

“I don’t see you as an idiot. Not at all.” Maggie said, her eyebrow furrowed at the sound of Steve’s voice.

“Well, thank you for that.” Steve said, nodding. “It means a lot to me.”

Maggie blinked as Steve’s tiny head pulled into focus inside the sphere. “I was talking about myself.”

“I am your self.” Steve said. “We’re all parts of each other. Distant primal links that never had a chance to separate.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Each person you meet is as hungry for experience as you are. You express yourself through sex but there are other ways too.”

“I know that.”

“You know that, but you don’t do that.”

Maggie stared at the little Steve head that swam inside the ball, elongating and shrinking as it spoke in an eerie flat tone.

“I express myself other ways,” she insisted. “I do tarot. I sing. I read. I read a lot. I know all about it all.”

“You’re bored. You need different. You need routine. Something to look forward to.”

“Routine is a trap. After the trap comes complacency and then the loss of vibrancy. Who wants to live like that?”

“You want to run free forever? You’ve tasted all there is to taste. Try to taste yourself. Find out what is inside you and learn how to unleash it to others.”

Steve’s face slowly morphed into a hazy version of Maggie’s grandmother.

“Remember to dream. Dream it all and make it happen.”

“I don’t even know what to dream for anymore.”

“Love, my dear. A real love.” The words were stinging in Maggie’s head. The idea of love filled her with nausea. Her stomach lurched and she put down the stone.

Even sitting on the couch did nothing to quell the bile edging up her throat. She ran into the bathroom and vomited.

“Love,” the voice said again. “Love yourself. Love another just as much.”

Tears welled up into Maggie’s eyes and spilled down her nose and into the toilet. She was pathetic. Hanging upside down in the bathroom at the thought of sharing a love with a simple man. Maybe even a man like Steve.

She cleaned herself up, still sobbing as if a flood gate of angst had been opened and would never be closed again.

She splashed water on her face and calmed herself down to hiccupping mewls. She patted her face and stared at herself in the mirror.

The circles under her eyes were well worn. That wasn’t so hot when you weren’t even forty yet. She didn’t even have kids or a stressful career.

It was the late nights.

It was the men.

Her loins ached as she thought about going out to the club to see what she could find that night. The message from the ball haunted her, yet her achy groin was winning the battle of where the evening would go.

She knew she could call Steve and they could go out for a coffee. She even picked up the phone book and dialed five of his ten numbers before hanging up.

Talking to him would soothe her. Anxiety seared up through her as she thought about how nervous she would be to start the talking. Yet once the first few minutes were hooked in, they could talk for hours, and they had.

No, she couldn’t just call him. Not yet. Maybe another time.

She returned to the living room and retrieved the crystal ball. There was no magical warmth to it anymore. She gently tried to coax more from the ball, whispering

to it for more messages, as odd as they may be. She stared into the ball again but it was clear once more. She kissed it lightly and rubbed the smudges from it with the cloth before setting it back on the shelf.

For a few minutes she busied herself with dusting, lifting her little knickknacks as the cloth flew along the mahogany bookcases. Ellie's voice haunted her. *You have to keep the knickknacks clean. Any dust and your feng shui won't mean a thing.*

The feng shui was supposed to open her heart and mind and she supposed that in a way, it had. Now she was just disgusted with herself on one hand, yet on the other admired her tenacity for holding onto her freedom. Her terms.

Or really did it boil down to man terms?

Her string of lovers had been of her own choice. There wasn't one in the bunch of them that she ever cared to face again. There were perhaps a handful she would sleep with again both in her fantasies and reality.

Relationships suck, Maggie thought. *I'll never be able to open my heart and open my mind. I can't let him in.*

Open mind, the voice whispered.

Maggie shuddered as she felt as well as heard the raspy noise so thick she could file her nails on it.

"It's okay. I know I have to make up my own mind," she said to the corners of the room. "I know what I have to do. One day at a time. I want to be ready. Really ready."

Her confusion propelled her into a further cleaning frenzy. When the room was dusted, the plants watered, and the knickknacks rearranged once more, she sat back down on the couch.

"Magical," she murmured sarcastically.

A growing agitation blossomed between her legs but she pushed the annoyance aside as she took a deep breath. "Maybe I need to calm down. Relax more. That's what they said last night."

Still sensations nagged at her. Thoughts of Steve's worried eyes swam before her again.

“What's his secret? Why can't anyone figure this out?”

She stood up suddenly and darted into her bedroom. The locket was still on her dresser. As she picked it up, the hum of all the energy that had circled it the night before buzzed into her hand. She held the locket close to her heart, her eyes shut.

She wanted to know Steve, inside and out. His touch on her arms, her neck, his hand on her hair. Yet when she was with him in the flesh, she didn't want him to touch her at all.

Not touching her made him unlike the others.

She opened her eyes as the realization hit.

That's why she hadn't done more than kiss him yet. Even her body knew that he was special. There was something there that she needed to explore more and only time could provide the answers.

And the locket?

The chain burned through her fingers and she released it back onto the dresser. The vibrancy of the solstice activated it and if there were any secrets to be told, they would be hers very soon.

She lay down on her bed and stared at the ceiling.

“Love. Why does love scare me?”

She sighed, tapping her fingers against each other. The paneling on the ceiling swam before her eyes, the knotholes creating twisting grinning faces. As she blurred her eyes, more faces popped out, as if people were scurrying over to peer at her. The Rorschach impressions in the wood gave her hope that she was seeing more hope, more images of things that could be. Friendship and happiness.

The mouths were open in grins and leers, some toothless, some toothy. Eyes wild and dark, peering and probing into her own, daring her to set herself free. Daring her to let go of her judgments and embrace a new way.

“I don’t want to let go. I don’t want to be hurt again,” she said to the faces. They stared silently at her, and she looked over at the wall. More faces emerged from the knotholes and swirls of the woodwork. As she squinted her eyes, she could almost make out little hands and fingers pointing and waving, soothing her with tendrils of energy. Faces from her present and past swelled forth and seeped back into anonymity. Puffy cheeks and pointed chins morphed into swollen breasts and long firm cocks.

Maggie ran her hands along her own breasts, caressing her curves as the room grew hotter.

“Where can I find peace?” she asked the faces. “When will I be content with me?”

The walls of the room fell away as she entered a trancelike state. The glowing warmth of sparkling air lured her into another place. In her mind’s eye, she sat up from the bed and beheld her new spot in a ring of trees.

She was in the grove outside of Hermana, the grove that protected the city from the glare of the outside world.

Instead of the harsh wind and the swirling snow, the grove was full of emerald green moss with long swaying wildflowers sprawling up along the tall twisting trees.

Ivy snaked and swirled along the sturdy rough trunks of the trees. Limbs spiraled out, dark and winding with brightly colored leaves sprouting sporadically from quickly growing branches that twisted up to the skies.

This grove was a space of healing. Many circles were cast here. Other rituals and activities left their mark, vibrations of lust and joy, sorrow and grief mixing and melding through the sacred area. Many couples came here to reaffirm their vows. Many others, on the brink of divorce, rediscovered the magic from their past, the reasons they fell in love in the first place.

The sisters had first entered Hermana through these woods and the magic of their wonderment still burned in the ground.

Maggie enjoyed the hot beaming sun warming her skin, curling her fair arm

hair, tickling her nose. The warmth fanned across her body, her breasts, her groin, her thighs, her feet. She hummed with the steady thrumming from the trees, pitching her voice in with the rhythm of the nearby creek and the birds that chirped softly.

She walked around the circle of trees, her footsteps sinking into the plush grass, a velvety softness that reaffirmed her idea of dreaming.

With her hands held out to her sides, brushing tall stalks of grass as she walked by, she embraced the air, the sky, the earth, and let the energy roll over and through her in waves. As she walked faster, her hair lifted, small sparks spiraling from her soft tangle of curls that fell in quick pops to the ground behind her.

Beyond the trees, there was movement. A dark shadow peeking from behind the trees.

Who was it?

She kept walking in her circle, wanting to complete thirteen rounds before satisfying her curiosity. The mysterious shadow flitted from tree to tree, watching her gather momentum, watching her walk faster and faster until the air crackled and the sparks that flew from her were more like the ends of sparklers that shot out into the air.

A warm breeze from the nearby ocean flushed her face, followed by a chill. The medley of hot and cold circled within her cone of power, and she visualized a tall fortress of strength and love in the center.

The shadow person stepped out further and Maggie grinned. His face was kind and gentle. He looked very much like Steve, but not quite. His eyes were lighter and had a childlike innocence to them that Steve, in his persistent questioning, had yet to display. Maggie walked towards him and he dashed behind a tree.

“Steve? Is that you? Your soul? Your astral projection?” she called to her dream.

There was no answer and a tree branch rustled above her head. She looked up to see Shadow Steve straddling a branch and staring down at her.

“Steve!” she called out. “Come down. Let’s explore this forest together.”

The dream man emphatically shook his head no and stripped a row of leaves

from the branch where he sat. He crumpled them into his hands and sprinkled them down on her.

“Oh, Steve, you really shouldn’t hurt the tree. It’s here to protect us. It’s one of the guardians of Hermana.”

Shadow Steve frowned and turned his back towards her. Maggie reached up to him but he curled his legs up and buried his face.

She sighed. “Fine. Be like that.”

She walked away from Steve in the tree and along the path that wound through the woods. It led to the stream where she stopped at a sun filled patch along the bank.

As she sat down on the grass to stare at the water, she heard crackling behind her. She shook her head.

“No point in trying to bug me now. You had your chance,” she said, staring at the water. A shadow grew large in front of her.

“Steve, go away,” she said as she turned around. A shriek fell soundlessly from her lips as she beheld a huge bearlike animal raised on his hind legs. Long sharp teeth protruded from sneering lips.

“Oh, my God,” she said as she stood up slowly. The animal bellowed and as he raised his front paws in the air to snatch at her, she saw the fur was a shimmering burgundy sheen, almost like fish scales. His red eyes glinted menacingly in the sunlight, his giant penis swinging back and forth with every clumsy lumbering step towards her.

“Get away from me!”

The animal fell to its front paws and roared again. Maggie ran back along the back until she returned to the grove.

“I can’t believe it,” she sighed, trying to catch her breath. “What the hell was that?”

“Your fears, silly,” said a scratchy voice from the tree. She looked up, again expecting Steve, but saw nothing save a large black bird.

“That had nothing to do with my fears. I don’t even know what it was.”

“It was all that you turn from, blown up out of proportion. Go back and see,” the bird said.

“I don’t want to.” Maggie sighed. “I just want to wake up now.”

“No, not yet. Go back to the creek and face your fears.”

“And then what? Get torn limb from limb?”

“If that’s how you see it, then yes, that will likely happen. However, if you really want to create a new reality, you have to let go of the past.”

“I know, I know. You think I don’t know all that,” Maggie muttered as she made her way back down the path towards the creek. Her heart beat loudly as she anticipated the creature crashing out at her from every bend in the path, but there was nothing save the chirping of the birds and the babbling of the brook as she walked closer.

Her body trembled with an agitation that coursed through her from her feet to her head. A longing ache in the pit of her stomach caused her to rub her belly as she walked.

Moist heat from the brook incited her cheeks to glow as the sun beamed down with a harsh glare. The air was thick and stifling the closer she got to the spot where she had seen the bear-thing.

A gasp escaped her lips as she saw the giant creature lying on the bank, his vibrant crimson fur now a pale pink. The animal was panting, his eyes staring off to nowhere lethargically as he gasped and wheezed.

He lifted his head apathetically and, seeing Maggie, lay back down again with a sigh. A long woeful breath of air escaped from his lungs and Maggie wondered for a moment if the beast had died.

No. He was still breathing. One short labored gasp followed by another.

“What happened to you?” she asked as she tentatively stepped forward. The animal’s eyes were as pale pink as his scale-like fur.

“Are you fading away?” She carefully walked over to him and crouched down. She touched him, expecting hot sweaty flesh but instead felt coolness like a rock. The

animal groaned as she gently caressed him.

“What’s wrong?”

As she stroked him, his body began to shift and change under her fingers. He shrank and elongated, growing manlike for a moment, his face strong and firm then round and soft. The face of every lover she ever had flickered along his features as his color returned. The man who lay before her was broad and cut, his biceps bulging slightly as he lay curled up in fetal position. His eyes were still a startling pink, growing fluorescent as his flesh burned a ruby red.

“Who are you?” she asked, unable to keep her hands from stroking him. He turned over onto his back, his half erect and rather large penis flopping to one side. As he grew warmer in heat and color, his erection grew. He lifted his head slightly to stare at her. His face was everyone and no one at the same time.

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked, grabbing his arm. He sank his head back onto the grass and let out one last sigh. As his breath released from his lungs, his body collapsed in upon himself until he was nothing but a mound of glittering crimson dust in the sunlight. A gentle wind blew parts of him along the bank and more of him into the steady tumbling bubble of water.

“I killed another one,” Maggie said. “I’m just no good at this love stuff. At this witch stuff. At meditating.”

She was still speaking as she discovered herself once more lying on her bed in her room, the locket glimmering from the dresser where she had placed it.

“That was messed up.” She swung her legs to the floor and stood. As the blood rushed back through her, flickers of crimson flashed before her eyes and she remembered the last face she saw before he turned to dust.

“So I’m either going to do really well or I’m going to screw it up yet again.”

She glanced at the locket as she left the room.

“Enough of that self-introspection stuff for one afternoon. It’s play time.”

She sank down into her executive roller chair and leaned back, lighting a smoke

with one hand and moving the mouse with another.

Instead of checking her e-mail first, she decided to go to one of her dating sites. As she was examining her inbox, a message popped up. At first she thought it might be Bullhead69 but it wasn't. With a strange relief, she saw it was from a Cancer888. Someone new.

Hello, said Cancer888.

Hello to you.

What are you doing this sunny afternoon?

Talking to you.

A good choice. I'm sitting on my patio having a mojito in the hot summer sun.

Care to join me?

Maggie laughed as she listened to the brisk wind howling at the shingles above her. *Virtually, sure. Give me a minute to pour myself a little something.*

Maggie went into her kitchen and opened the fridge. She could make herself a mojito too but it would take too long. She opted for rum and Coke and returned to her desk.

A nice delicious rum and Coke for me.

Would you like a wedge of lime with that?

I don't mind if I do.

Here, let me put it on your glass...oops, I spilled a little on your white bikini top.

That's all right, I'll just take it off.

Oh, but you still have a wet spot just above your left nipple.

You'll just have to lick it dry.

I'm going to use my long soft tongue to lick off all that nasty Coke.

Did you get it all?

Just missed a spot there on your nipple...there, all done.

Maggie took a drag off her cigarette and sipped on her drink. It was very tasty, that rum and coke. She was glad Cancer888 had suggested it.

Do you want me to rub some suntan lotion on your back?

Sure, she said.

I'll hold it in my hands to warm it up before I smear it onto your burning pale flesh.

I burn easily, so make sure you do a good job.

I'm rubbing it on your shoulders and across your shoulder blades. I'm rubbing it along your back and down to your hips.

I like the feel of that lotion on your hands.

Is it soothing? I can rub my hands in little circles if you like, or I can push them into you really hard. Get out those creaks and cracks.

You can do it all. Give me the works.

Maggie wiggled her back in her chair, imagining a strange man rubbing her in her most sore and tender spots, paying close attention to the big knot at the base of her neck. She wished Mr. Cancer888 was there in the flesh giving her that back rub. She didn't care what he looked like.

In looking back at the screen, she realized she had missed responding to a few lines and quickly typed a short sentence.

What do you look like?

I'm your romantic fantasy man. Not tall but I'm muscular with strong thighs and a tight ass. I work hard to keep my looks so I don't mind bragging a bit.

Brag away, Cancer888.

I will confess I squandered the looks of my youth at the local donut shop. Chocolates and jelly buns were my demons and my friends. By the time my friends were all leaving for college, many with football scholarships, I was too big to get out of bed to say good-bye. My mother bought a charm in Hermana and brought it home to me, to make me thin. I held it and prayed to it and after I lost 165 pounds, I moved here.

You live in Hermana?

Yes. I've lived here for over ten years. I share my secrets with everyone.

Do I know you? Maggie closed her eyes and tried to “see” Cancer888 in her head. She cleared her mind, pushing away the last shadows of crimson dust, and visualized at first a beautiful man sitting at the keyboard of a white computer in a white room with glass tables and white leather loungers. He wore a white dressing gown over a tiny g-string. By his desk was a set of weights and an elliptical. On the far side of the room was a giant screen TV.

You may know me. You might not.

Do you know me?

I think I do. We’ll leave it at that. ;)

Maggie sat up straight. Well, it could certainly be an old lover, even someone she had previously dated on the service and who changed his handle. It could be someone at the mall or even the guy in the booth next to hers. What did it matter?

Do you like kinky things? he asked.

Depends what you mean by kinky.

In this case, I mean a bit of light bondage, some ropes and a flogger.

I’ve played before, in New York, Toronto and Montreal.

A woman of the world.

Hardly the world. Maybe the East Coast.

What did you do at these places?

I experimented a bit, but mostly watched.

What did you like best?

Maggie sat back and thought about it. There were so many things she enjoyed seeing at fetish parties that she didn’t know where to begin. The clothing, the shoes, the bare breasts and the apple-cheeked bottoms being paddled. Some of the equipment was fun to explore. Some of the shows were outrageous – a woman with a grinder blazing her dildo at a crowd of leather and PVC-clad people, people wrapped in cellophane or stuck with pins. Candle wax and latex paint. What did she like best?

The people. It is fun to see so many people expressing themselves. They are free

to be whoever they want to be for a night.

What else? The sex?

I've been to places where there's sex. We all like sex, don't we?

Most certainly. It's my favorite pastime.

Maggie sat back as jolt rushed through her and in her mind a new image flashed. Instead of the handsome man in the white room, she now could barely make out the monstrous pale mound of flesh that typed earnestly on his laptop. Beside an enormous leg, within jiggling arm's length, was a box of jelly donuts. Four half-broken ones remained of the original dozen. On his nightstand were several empty cups of chocolate and many more had fallen to the floor. The man wheezed, and breath spurted inconsistently through his half-open mouth, wrestling to find a passage to oversized lungs.

Maggie shook her head.

Cancer888 was still the fat man. He never lost all that weight. He was a recluse locked in a room somewhere.

When did you last have sex? Maggie typed.

I don't kiss and tell.

I mean in real life. When did you last touch a woman?

I don't feel a gentleman has the right to betray that fact. Let's just say I'm a very sexual creature and when I don't have the pleasure of the company of a lady friend, I make do with what I've got.

What do you have? Maggie coaxed.

You would love to see my seven-inch uncut heritage of a long lineage of big dicks.

You have me curious now. Are you hard?

I'm getting stiffer by the minute.

Maggie fought to imagine the first image of Cancer888 again, that blond-haired dude in the pristine white room. Not some poor, overfed, chemically imbalanced lonely

guy in a trash-ridden room.

Maybe he was someone in between.

There was a banging at her window and she jumped. At first glance, she thought it was a shutter that had come loose. She stood up, one arm awkwardly trying to hide her breasts from any prying eyes and as she pulled shut the window, a big black bird hopped into the room.

“What the hell?” Her heart pounded as the bird strutted around the living room, cocking its head at the shiny knickknacks, its black soulless eyes absorbing every glimmer and glint of gemstones. Maggie instinctively covered both her breasts, alternating hands over her groin. She held very still.

“Go on,” Maggie said firmly as the bird’s long curved beak reached for the shiny gold coin in the toad’s mouth.

“No! Leave it alone...That’s my money luck!”

She jumped in front of the bird and just as quickly flung her hands over her face and breasts in indecision in case it chose to attack. It watched her with seeming amusement for a moment and stared up at the bookcase. It looked once more at the coin.

“No,” Maggie said as if speaking to a dog. She had now crossed her legs over each other and had her face hunched down into her hands while her elbows pressed against her nipples. It surely had to be angry by now. She waited for a flapping of wings or a screech. Instead, it turned its back to her and sauntered into the bedroom.

“Oh, shit,” Maggie said as her gaze found the locket the same time as the bird. They both sprang for the shiny treasure and after a flurry of wings and claws, the bird flew through the door and back out the window in triumph.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Maggie moaned. Her stomach lurched and roiled, bitter bile creeping up her throat. “This didn’t just happen. It just didn’t. Another dream. Please be another dream.”

She curled herself into a ball at the foot of her bed and wept.

“I can’t believe I lost his locket. Oh my God - what the hell-”

“Please be a dream...please,” she moaned, ignoring the dinging of the messenger as she tried to piece together what had just happened.

The sting of her wounds where sharp claws had torn at her face, neck and hands snapped her out of her misery and she headed to the bathroom. After disinfecting and placing small Band-Aids where necessary, she returned to the keyboard.

Her rum and Coke was empty, so she returned to the kitchen to pour another one. Maybe she was just drunk. Maybe she had really had ten rum and Cokes and just had a bad hallucination. Even though people don’t really tend to hallucinate birds stealing necklaces when they’re drunk, but it could happen.

Although she only had one drink.

Maybe after meditation and dream channeling, booze hit her harder than usual, and since she was already in a trancey mindset, she just imagined that black bird from her dream coming into her reality and ruining her life.

She marched into the bedroom, convinced that she would find the necklace there.

A string of curses flew from her mouth as the affirmation of the truth could not be denied.

She returned to finish making another drink, pouring an extra shot in to obliterate, for the night, what she had to face at some point. Likely sooner than later.

How the hell was she going to tell Steve?

She downed the drink and poured herself another one. After tinkling the ice cubes around the glass for a few minutes, she took the new drink and settled back in front of the computer.

Cancer888 was gone.

In his absence was string of messages, asking where she was and finally saying good night.

In a way she was relieved. Her uneasy feelings about him and the freak incident

that had just happened were enough to convince her to change direction for a while.

She hopped over to a few message boards, reading about movies and books and LOL Cats as an ache that sank from her stomach spread into her loins. Every time the idea of the thieving bird crept into her consciousness, she pushed it back down again.

She was warm and tingly. Her hand strayed down to between her thighs. She was glad she hadn't bothered to dress.

Nimble her fingers clicked the mouse through a series of links until she found something that caught her eye. Images of beautiful people fucking filled her monitor. The seductive, secretive and joyful face of the female, intensity of a job done well on the male. When bored of the glossy, pretty people, she moved over to role playing. Teacher-student was one of her secret lusts. The sight of those young ladies in their plaid skirts bent over the desk for a swat with a ruler sent her thoughts spiraling about things most decadent.

Links led to more links, clicks on one picture lead to more pictures and more movies. Images of people bound by rope and electrical tape dominated her view. She was particularly intrigued by one clip where a man was fucking a woman on a spank bench. She was shackled hand and foot, bent over so that belly and face lay flat against the leather padding. He held her hips, alternately slapping her firm yet jiggly ass and smashing her against his groin.

Maggie clicked on to more vanilla images as her hand snaked down. A series of a couple doing it in the shower, the countertop, the toilet seat. She rubbed herself a little faster and harder.

Another teacher had a student face down on his desk, his hand gripping her hair while his penis parted her fleshy cheeks.

Cheerleaders and school bus passengers led Maggie to dig out her vibrator from the side drawer on the desk.

To the hum of the vibrator, Maggie clicked and watched, licking her lips to moisten her pussy, dreaming of all the sex she was going to have again one day. Maybe

even that day.

Her hips bucked up, ramming her toy deeper inside of her. She twisted it so that the curved feature could work its magic. It didn't take long until she was moaning, pulling at her own nipples with one hand, thrusting the vibrator at that just certain angle with the other.

At last she shuddered and after several moments, realized she couldn't take any more. She put the vibrator aside and clicked off the porn.

As she wiped the vibrator with special lotions, she thought about how weird sex was. It never ceased to amaze her how she could go out night after night craving the feeling of cock in cunt when all she had to do was use her little friend.

But it wasn't that easy. She loved the thrill of the chase. The hunt. Some were easier than others. In the end, what did it matter? It was just a hum between her legs.

Her messenger binged on. It was Cancer888.

Are you there?

Yes.

What happened?

Long story. I'm here now.

Do you want to meet for a coffee?

Maggie furrowed her brow. Who was this guy? He couldn't possibly be the handsome hunk she first saw but if he was the other guy, how could he meet her? Maybe he was going to say he was going to meet her to set her up and never show up. There were some people in the world that enjoyed sweet odd revenge for imaginary petty contrivances.

Dora's?

Okay.

How will I know you?

Close your eyes. Imagine the man of your dreams. That will be me.

Don't you want to know who I am?

No. I will know when I see you. I think I will recognize you from some of your pictures.

Maggie couldn't believe that she was going out to meet a man for a coffee when she had planned to do nothing.

It didn't take long to whip into the shower and get ready. She pulled away the Band-Aids and was glad to see the scratches were barely noticeable. A bit of foundation covered the wound.

At the appointed time, Maggie sat at a table and watched the men coming and going. There were a few that she tried to catch the eye of, but aside from garnering a few winks, no one approached her.

At last, a tall, dark-haired girl entered the room. She paused in the doorway glancing around, her hair piled high in a mesh of curls and long black feathers. Black netting swirled along her head, accenting the dark velvet evening gown that hugged her rather ample curves. Her eyes were black as coal and an oversized feather boa comprised of ostrich feathers and whatever else hung from her arms and hugged her bosom. The woman reached her hand out towards Maggie and took it into welcoming clasp.

"I'm Cancer888," she said.

"Oh, really? And here I was thinking you were a man."

"It's my online fantasy. In real life, I'm all woman." She held her hands out to show her voluptuous yet shapely body pushed into and around a black corset,

"So are you a lesbian, then?"

"I do have a strap on that I enjoy using on the ladies very much." She winked.

"Do you have a name?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Of course. It's Jo."

"Well, that's ambiguous."

"Kind of like me."

The waitress took their order and Jo continued on with her chatter as she

nervously played with one of her long ringlets.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Jo asked. Maggie shrugged.

“No. I’m just surprised, but I don’t mind. Yet.”

“Some girls actually hit me when they meet me. But I still love to see how the first few minutes of a date is going to go after the surprise is digested.”

“Where do you think it’s going to go? After all, this isn’t what I expected at all.”

“Just what did you expect? What’s the difference if a night of toe-curling orgasm is with a man or a woman? Pleasure is the greatest gift humans can share.”

“The gift that keeps on giving.”

“In more ways than one,” Jo agreed. The waitress brought their drinks and Jo lifted her glass. “Here’s to new beginnings.”

Maggie clicked her glass with Jo’s and then turned to her.

“I don’t have bi clicked on my profile. What makes you think I want to date a woman?”

“Come on, you know you want to. Hell, you probably have. All that fetish stuff. Come on.” She grinned, reaching for Maggie’s hand.

“It’s not your business.”

“Why are you upset if you don’t care? Are you ashamed of your past? Your lady friends?”

Jo fixed her with a beady stare and Maggie gasped. “My past. Why is it all about catching up to my past today? I hate this introspection stuff. Gets on my nerves,” Maggie muttered.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing. Sorry. I’m sure I’m just babbling like an idiot. I don’t mean to. It’s just been a hard couple of weeks. Well, more than a couple of weeks, a lot of weeks.

“Do tell.”

“I’d rather not,” Maggie said, hugging her stomach as she leaned over the menu for the evening.

“So are we still on for dinner?”

“Why the hell not?”

Chapter Ten

What was lost is now found.

It was slightly past seven when Maggie arrived at the café. She was a bundle of nerves as the time drew nearer for her to tell him the crazy story about the bird and the necklace. She'd searched all around the house, the yard, and even the down the street several times over the past few days.

She'd put up handmade fliers on the poles with her number on the off chance that the bird was real and had dropped it.

In the end, none of it mattered. She was meeting Steve and had no locket in hand.

What the hell was she going to say?

A larger-than-life smile passed her lips as she settled down to greet Steve, who was reading at a table. "What's that?" she asked.

"I thought I'd read a little horror story," he said. "I heard some of the guys talking about *Pet Cemetery*, so I thought I'd check it out of the library."

"It's a good one," Maggie said as she sat down. "I'm reading *Duma Keyes* myself."

The waitress brought over a mochaccino with whipped cream.

"Oh Lord - whipped cream. You're evil," she said to Steve as she picked up a spoon and scooped some up.

"That's so good." She smacked her lips, widening her eyes at Steve. "You have no idea what mocha coffee and real whipped cream does to this girl. Throw in a piece of chocolate mousse cake with dark chocolate shavings and I'm yours for the night." Maggie laughed.

Steve's mood changed as he thrummed the table impatiently. Maggie tried to

ignore his intense stare by playing with her whipped cream. At last he spoke. "So, Maggie, when was it you came by?" he asked. "I don't know how I missed you."

"When?"

"When you returned the locket."

Maggie's heart skipped a beat as she stared at Steve.

"I never returned the locket," she said.

"Well, I mean, I don't know who returned it. I just found it on my doorstep."

Maggie breathed a sigh of relief. "Now, that's doubly freaky," she finally said.

"It was just sitting on the porch? Not in a bag?"

"Nope. I nearly stepped on it. Don't know how it got there. I must say, I'm not too happy that I found it lying on the ground."

Maggie took a sip of coffee. "That damn bird."

"Bird?" He leaned in.

"Yeah. A bird got into the house and took off with the necklace. I didn't know how to tell you. Yet somehow, it ended up back in your hands."

"You didn't take very good care of it. I trusted it to you." He was angry. "That's all I have that I really care about, you know?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

"Are you always so careless with other people's stuff?"

"No, I - please don't be mad at me."

"Well, I am mad. I can't believe you didn't take better care of it."

"I told you I did nothing wrong. A bird flew in and grabbed it. It's not my fault."

Steve's mouth pursed to say something more but he stopped. Maggie stared earnestly at him, her eyes welling up with tears. His shoulders dropped as his voice softened.

"That's really weird," Steve said. "A bird stole my necklace and brought it back to me."

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment.

“Let’s look at the cards,” Maggie said as she slid a small deck from her purse. She shuffled them up and lay them out face down in a pile. She waved her hands over them, closing her eyes to block out the noise from the cafe.

She had her ideas about what had happened but she wanted to know what the cards had to say.

When she had picked three and turned them over, she opened her eyes again.

She studied the cards, letting the pictures wash over her. This deck wasn’t the one she usually used. This one was much smaller and the pictures were very different.

“What’s the Lovers?” Steve asked, pointing to the card.

“Lovers can be...well, lovers. Balance, harmony, companionship, partnership, business ventures and things like that. The caution of the card is to keep our self grounded when we team up with someone else, no matter the type of relationship.”

“Grounded-”

“You know, don’t become a chameleon with your partner. Be true to yourself.”

“That’s probably half my problem. I try to be true to myself. Some types of girls prefer men who sugarcoat everything.”

“Nothing wrong with being direct, but a little sugar can get you amazingly far,” Maggie said, sipping on her mochaccino.

“I don’t play head games. If I don’t like something, I’ll say it. It’s too bad if I piss people off, but why doesn’t my opinion count for anything?”

“I think that everyone should learn to stand up for themselves.”

Steve leaned towards the cards again.

“So, what do the cards say? What’s the deal with the bird?”

Maggie stared at the cards, rubbing her arms as she shivered. Forms took hold in her mind’s eye that she couldn’t quite articulate. A sense of unease shifted through her. It reminded her of when she went into haunted houses and the spirits would attempt to push her out.

She’d been to this café many times and had never encountered a ghost.

“Someone is here. Maybe your mother?”

“Maybe she was the one that brought the locket back?”

“You’re probably right.”

“You know, it doesn’t really matter,” said Steve in defeat. “I don’t want you to work when we’re supposed to be on a date.”

“Okay.” Maggie put away her cards. They finished up their dessert and set out into the chilly night air. Steve suggested a movie and they drove over to the theatre.

During the show, Maggie was only half watching as she turned over the clues in her mind of what her friends and herself had seen at the circle. She wondered about the building. And the cries. And Steve’s temper.

After the movie was over, Steve drove her home.

“I have an early job tomorrow,” he said. “I’m sorry to cut the night short.”

“No, that’s fine,” Maggie said. “I had a great time.”

She stared at his face, his eyes sparkled in the street light.

He leaned over to kiss her and she met his lips eagerly.

“Good night, sweet Maggie,” he said.

“Good night,” she said, sighing.

Chapter Eleven

Peace on earth, good will towards men.

Maggie went to Ellie's to celebrate Christmas Day. They exchanged good luck trinkets and ate the feast Ellie had prepared. They finished their meal with snifters of brandy by the fireplace.

With the brandy still warm in their bellies, they braved the night air. It was still and crisp with the occasional snowflake drifting lazily from the sky. The pulse of the ocean grew louder as they walked towards the beach. The frothy waves undulated with vigor as the women approached the entrance to the main strip of beach area.

Maggie surveyed the huge empty lot. Two lone lifeguard chairs reached into the night. "Boy, it sure looks different when there's no one around." She sighed. "So lonely."

"It's quiet and comforting too. No one to bump into you. Lots of room to spread a blanket."

"Pretty damn cold to spread a blanket," Maggie retorted.

Ellie grinned as she patted the oversized bag on her shoulder.

"Oh please," Maggie said. "Don't tell me we're going to have a picnic now in the freezing cold."

"No, not a picnic. Just going to hang out for a bit, that's all."

"I don't want to hang out at all in this weather."

"Oh, I think you'll be happy we did. Besides, it's a Christmas ritual."

"Maybe for you. I've never frozen my ass off on the beach on Christmas Day in my life."

"A first for everything. Besides if we're here long enough, we can join in the midnight celebrations." Ellie grinned.

They walked towards the water and along the shoreline for a ways, stray waves licking at their boots. They rounded the first curve of the beach and Ellie headed towards a small cluster of trees. In the summer, they were sought after for welcome relief in the blistering sun. For now, they seemed naked and fragile, dark limbs jutting from the rocky snowy landscape, like fingers searching for the sun.

They arrived at the patch where sand and rock split and Ellie lay down the blanket. As she smoothed it from snow and dirt, she patted the spot beside her. "Come on, Maggie. Come join me."

Maggie stared at the plaid motif, ridiculous on the beach in the snow. She laughed. "Sure. Merry Christmas."

She plopped herself on the blanket and stared out at the rolling water. Despite a calm breeze that added more bite to the air, it was soothing to be outside and away from the confinement of the walls. The vastness of the ocean added to the wonderment of universal questions that were often considered on this day of peace and blessing.

She closed her eyes, losing herself in the crashing swell of the wave's rhythmic song. Visions of a baby in a manger flooded her head. A poor dirty newborn, mud clinging to sticky straw as tiny mouth pursed for his mother's touch. A young lady so poor and hungry, legs shaking from recent labor, traces of blood still clinging to her legs as her husband held her to greet the throngs of foreign visitors beneath the glow of a star.

All over the world, churches swelled in song, voices rising and falling in the crashing of the waves around her. She could hear the glory and the joy in those waves.

"Excuse me?" A male voice disturbed her from her thoughts. She looked up and saw a thin, wiry man with blond hair and blue eyes. He pushed his round wire glasses back up his nose as he studied the two ladies on the blanket.

"Yes?" Ellie asked, batting her own eyes at the man before them.

"I'm looking for Second Street. Can you tell me where that is?"

"It's just over there," Ellie said. "You're looking for the bed and breakfast?"

“In fact, I am,” he said. “Chris Stanford.”

The ladies shook Chris’s hand.

“Arriving rather late,” Ellie remarked.

“It’s a long story.”

“Why are you on the beach?”

“I like beaches. Even though it’s freezing out here, I wanted to walk along it.”

“You must travel light, then,” Ellie said, gesturing to a backpack strapped to his shoulders.

“I don’t see the point of carrying a lot of crap around with me. I never end up using half of it anyway.”

“Maybe you don’t,” Ellie said, then laughed. She stood up, brushing dirt and snow from her body. “You’re right, it is cold. We’ll walk you over to Second Street.”

Maggie folded up the blanket while Ellie got cozy with Chris. She took his arm, leading him off down the shoreline while Maggie gathered up their belongings.

“This is Maggie,” Ellie said as Maggie caught up to them. “She reads tarot.”

“That’s cool. I mess around a bit with the cards myself,” Chris said. “Sometimes I’m right on. Other times, I just can’t figure it out.”

“Well, some days are hit-or-miss, there’s no denying that,” Maggie said.

“Are there any bars open around here?”

Ellie and Maggie laughed. “Do you think we’d be sitting on the beach if there were any bars open?” Ellie said.

“Silly question, I guess,” Chris laughed. “Sorry.”

“No, this town is way too small to be worth it to open on Christmas Day. Everyone has stuff to do no matter what religion they practice.”

“Is there anywhere to eat?” Chris asked.

“I’m sure your bed and breakfast will have something for you. But if not, you can come to my place for a bite. We just had turkey with all the trimmings and there’s

plenty left over.”

“That sounds great.”

“Why are you here? Are you meeting anyone?”

“I am now,” Chris said, and laughed.

“Who are you seeing?”

“Actually, I’m just trekking through New England, just going up and down the coastline for about a week before I head back to Florida.”

“Why here?” Ellie asked.

“I’ve heard about Hermana my whole life. Just wanted to see some of the magic for myself.”

“How much you see depends on how long you plan to stay,” Ellie said. “Not much is going on today and tomorrow. There’s a candle lighting later on tonight followed by warm cider and treats.”

“That might be cool.”

“You probably have enough time to check in and get freshened up before it starts.”

“What about your meal?” Chris asked. Ellie looked him up and down.

“A skinny thing like you needs to eat. Come, we’ll go back to my place first.”

* * * *

Ellie and Maggie sipped on large glasses of ruby red wine while Chris devoured turkey, potatoes, and broccoli. He shied away from the dressing and opted for wine instead.

“That’s how the skinny stays skinny. No dressing even on Christmas Day,” Ellie said.

“It’s not about being skinny,” Chris laughed. “It’s about not being too fond of dressing.”

“How do you know? You’ve never tried mine.”

“I just don’t like the greasiness. I can feel it to my pores.”

“My dressing isn’t greasy.”

“You use butter, don’t you?”

“Naturally,” Ellie said.

“Then there’s grease. My stomach can only tolerate so much fat.”

“And that is how the skinny stay skinny!” Maggie said. “It all comes around to the same thing.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’d love to have some chocolate. A fine girl like you has to have some chocolate kicking around here on Christmas Day.”

“Why, there is a Santa Claus,” Ellie said as she hurried over to the tree. She returned with five boxes of chocolates, all of the finest Belgian quality. “Light, dark, filled, liquor, truffles...They’re all here.”

“Do you have champagne truffles in dark?” he asked eyeing the selection.

“I had one earlier, in fact, so they’re already opened,” she said as she produced an entire box of assorted flavored truffles. He plucked one out with long slender fingers.

“You know,” Ellie said boldly with a sidelong look at Maggie. “If you want to wash up here from the trip, I don’t mind.”

“Really?” Chris asked.

“Bathroom is that way.” She pointed. Chris took another truffle and gathered up his belongings. As the door of the bathroom clicked shut, Maggie looked at Ellie.

“What are you up to, naughty girl?”

“I was thinking, maybe we need a Christmas present too.” She winked.

“Oh, my. We just might get our stockings stuffed after all.”

Quickly the girls rushed around, first to Ellie’s room where they used her small bathroom to freshen up and reapply their makeup. Ellie found them each a lacy nightgown with matching thong. Even though Ellie was much shorter than Maggie, it didn’t really matter when it came to lingerie. Maggie admired Ellie’s large breasts and shapely hips, the contours of the fabric hugging her gently.

“You look great,” Maggie said. She ran her hands down her own silk-draped

body and tossed her hip. “What about me?”

“You look marvelous, dahling,” Ellie said.

“We’re the bomb. He has to want us.”

“If we play our cards right, we can get laid and still make the candle lighting.”

“I like how you think,” Maggie said.

Banging noises came from the bathroom as the shower switched off.

“Oh, he’s done.” Maggie said, and giggled.

“We’d better get back to the living room.”

The girls scurried down the stairs, trying not to land on the creakier boards.

Maggie retired to the sofa in a long-legged Cleopatra pose, her wine poised in one hand. Ellie hurried to the kitchen to get more wine and lower the lights. She had just finished lighting the last of three candles when Chris reappeared. His eyes glowed in the flicking flames.

“What’s all this?” he asked, placing his knapsack by the stairs.

“We just thought we’d get a little more comfortable since there’s time to kill before festival,” Ellie purred. “Would you like some more wine?”

She poured more of the dark rich wine into his glass. He grinned.

“Fine wine, fine ladies. What’s to complain about?” he asked.

“No complaints here,” Ellie said. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Chris sat on the couch and Ellie planted herself on his lap. “This is how it should be,” She said as she kissed him on the mouth.

He kissed her back without question, his fingers irresistibly drawn to the lace that lined the edging of her very short nightgown.

As they kissed, Maggie made her way over the couch and sat beside them. Ellie turned her attention from Chris to Maggie, kissing her full on the mouth. Chris watched with his own mouth hanging open as their lips explored each other.

“That’s beautiful,” he said. “I love watching women kiss.”

Ellie brought Chris’s face towards their and the three of them took turns kissing

each other. Lips suckled and pulled at other lips. Soft and full, thin and dry, textures and moistures were pressed and passed from one to the next.

Ellie ran one hand along Chris's chest and the other one along Maggie's. She cupped Maggie's breast through the lacy cup and held it firmly. Her other fingers flicked Chris's nipple through his T-shirt.

The kissing grew hot as their breath grew heavy and more hands wandered. Ellie slipped off Chris's lap and pulled at his T-shirt.

"I wouldn't have gotten dressed again if I'd known..." Chris said as he stripped off his jeans. His penis was already half erect.

"My, look at what we have here," Maggie said as she held his penis in her hand. At her touch, it swelled a bit larger. Ellie stroked the head with her long red nails.

"Delicious," she said as she bent over to kiss the tip. "Very nice."

She took him in her mouth as Maggie held him like an offering. Chris moaned with delight. "Who knew I would find such a great Christmas present on the beach?"

The women took turns licking his ever-growing cock. They rubbed their breasts in his face and teasingly didn't let him touch them at first.

Finally, he was able to pull Maggie towards him and buried his face in her crotch. She wiggled excitedly, lifting a leg up on the sofa arm to allow him deeper access.

Ellie still sucked him, taking him deep into his throat.

Chris slipped a finger into Maggie as he licked her, his other hand finding Ellie's breast.

Ellie stood up and, after slipping a condom onto Chris's cock, maneuvered herself onto him. She sighed longingly as she moved herself up and down on him.

Maggie stepped back and massaged her breasts and clit, while kissing Chris full on the mouth, Ellie bobbing between them.

After Ellie had bounced for a while, she slipped off of him. "Your turn," she said to Maggie.

“I like this,” Chris said. Maggie leaned over one of the couch arms and Chris stood behind her, slipping his cock into her hungry pussy.

“That’s so good,” Maggie moaned as Chris moved quickly in her. “Harder. Faster,” she cried.

Ellie stood behind Chris, cupping his swaying balls with one hand, flicking his nipples with her other. Chris held Maggie’s hips firmly as he pumped in and out of her.

“More,” cried Maggie as Ellie’s fingers and Chris’s cock spurred her on with excitement. Chris met her demands and soon she was crying out with pleasure.

When she was finished, Ellie lay on the couch and Chris plunged his cock into her. She gasped with his thickness and soon was squealing with delight as he pushed into her. Maggie spanked him lightly on the ass a few times, urging him on.

“Fuck her. Make her come,” she commanded. Chris fucked Ellie hard and fast and before long she was crying out.

“I’m coming!” she cried. “Oh, God, I’m coming.”

As soon as her moans subsided, Chris pulled out, tore off the condom, and shot his come across her tits.

“Yes!” he cried out. “Oh, God, yes--”

The threesome lay on the couch for a moment, catching their breath.

At last, Ellie sat up and looked over at the clock. “Hey, guys. We can still make the ceremony if we hurry. You want to go?”

“Why not? Christmas only comes once a year!” laughed Maggie.

Chapter Twelve

Let the vibrations of the day relay their secret messages.

Maggie knocked on the door loudly. She heard Steve's voice from the other side and rushed inside.

"It's cold out there," she said, shivering in the hall.

"You'll warm up soon. I put on a fire." He pointed to the cozy living room where a fire crackled merrily. His Christmas tree was still up. It was adorned with silver balls and silver tinsel. The star on top was silver and glittered prettily in the twinkling lights that wound through the branches from top to bottom of the tree.

"Oh, your gift." She held out a gold gift bag and presented it to Steve. "Nothing fancy," she assured him, smiling.

"Thank you." He took the bag and placed it on the wooden table by the door. Maggie marveled at how everything had a place. A pen and notepad were on the table by the door. A wooden key rack screwed into the wall filled with keys. A mirror had pegs for hats and there were actually hats on it. His shoes and boots were neatly lined up on a rug lined shelf and she put her boots on the end.

"They still have snow on them," she said woefully, watching the sludge of the sidewalk drip down.

"That's what it's for," he said. "There's not much."

He helped her off with her coat and hung it in the closet. She peeked quickly to find a limited number of coats and jackets. And nothing else, save a couple of cardboard boxes on the rack above.

He led her into the living and she sank into one of the white leather sofas.

"I could get used to this," she said.

"After being on my feet all day, I like to come home and lie here watching TV."

Sometimes I even sleep here.”

“I can see how. This is better than my bed.”

Maggie lay her head back and closed her eyes. He was nervous and that made her nervous.

“Would you like a glass of wine or some beer, or I can make a mixed drink?”

“How about a beer? I’m too thirsty for wine.”

“Beer it is.” He left and returned with two frosted mugs of beer. She took hers and he raised his glass.

“Cheers,” he said as they touched glasses.

“Cheers.”

They drank their beer and Steve turned to look at her.

“I have a gift for you, too,” he said. “Do you want it now?”

Maggie laughed. “You didn’t have to.”

“Nonsense.”

She opened the little rectangular box and found a set of shiny new darts. Red and black flies were vibrant in the velvet lined case.

“Thank you,” she said and hugged him.

“You’re welcome. I also got you these.” He presented a box of dark Belgian chocolate.

“My favorite,” she said. “Do you want one?”

“Maybe later. They don’t really go with beer.”

“You’re right. We can have some with coffee later on.”

They sat for a moment in silence. Maggie studied the room. His CDs and DVDs were all in alphabetical order. She noticed there were no books to be found.

A lifestyle magazine on the coffee table was the only reading material in his whole living room.

“Would you like the tour?” he said.

“Oh, wait. I have to give you my present.”

He pulled a small box out of the gift bag and lifted the lid. Inside was a large piece of tiger eye and a hematite bracelet.

“What are these?”

“The tiger eye gives you strength and courage. The hematite bracelet is a good stone for Virgos. It heightens analytical abilities and sharpens the memory.”

“That’s cool.”

He put the bracelet on and held the tiger eye in his hand.

“It feels like it’s buzzing. Like it’s alive.”

“That’s a good sign. You will do well with it.”

“What do I do with it?”

“You can put it on one of your bookcases, or carry it around, or whatever you want.”

“I’ll put it on my desk.” He stood and walked over to the large wraparound desk. On it was a computer, a pen holder, and a pad of paper. Maggie admired the gleam of mahogany and, even more, how there was nothing piled on it.

“You’re amazingly tidy.”

“I like to know where things are. I hate spending time rooting through mountains of crap.”

Maggie grinned as she thought of her own piles of papers and whatnot scattered around her apartment.

“Yeah, nothing like having to root through mountains of crap.” She laughed.

He put the stone under his monitor.

“That looks good there. Now I’ll remember to have courage with every e-mail I send,” he said.

“Do you talk on the computer a lot?”

“Here and there.”

“I see you have a webcam.”

“Yeah, I use it for chatting.”

"I see," she said. She herself didn't have a webcam. She found it just a bit too invasive. She didn't want people watching her type. Half the time she was at the computer she was just getting up or going to bed, sitting around naked or wearing a robe if it was chilly. She didn't want anyone seeing her like that.

"You have a webcam?" he asked.

"No."

"Too bad. We could chat on it."

"We're chatting right here and now and I'm a lot clearer than I would be on a webcam."

"You have a point there."

Steve returned to his spot on the couch. He held his arm out in front of him, admiring the bracelet. "So this makes me smart?"

"That's what they say. Not that I don't think you're smart."

"Well, I'm not the brightest bulb in the box when it comes to reading and that sort of thing, but I'm good with people. I can tell you all about people."

"I think that reading people is often helpful," Maggie said

"I don't mean in a spooky way like you do it. Just body language and such."

"What am I thinking right now?"

"You're thinking I'm an idiot and should just shut up," he said as he drank from his mug.

Maggie laughed. "Of course I don't think you're an idiot. I wouldn't be here if I did."

"Yeah, but you have university education and I barely have a high school one. You actually enjoy reading while I like looking at pictures."

"What difference does it make? Isn't it boring to always be with someone like yourself?"

"I suppose."

"I've been with plenty of well-educated men, and let me tell you, it's what's

inside that really counts.”

“In the long run, that’s what I’ve figured out for myself. I’ve been with some knockout gorgeous girls, and they were the worst kind of nightmares.”

“Well, here we are then. Ready to take a chance?”

“I am if you are.”

They clicked their mugs together again and this time their eyes locked.

The energy between them had thickened, and the longer they sat beside each other, the more comfortable Maggie felt. Being around Steve felt natural and familiar, as if she had been with him always.

Gazing into his eyes, she knew she would be seeing a lot more of him. Her lips trembled with an ache to kiss him, yet she didn’t let herself. As much as she wanted to lock her lips with his, she resisted the urge and tried to keep grounded.

The air around her shifted, and cold chilled her until goosebumps popped out along her arms. The presence around her was apprehensive, friendly but distant.

Flashes of images raced through her mind. Images of houses and dogs and landscape of places that had no place in her own history, but were likely part of someone else’s, flickered past. Pangs of sorrow mixed with cautious joy.

“I’d like to hold the locket again,” Maggie said. She stared at Steve, expecting him to say something about the sudden chill in the room. If he felt it, he didn’t say anything. Maybe he had grown used to the chill that accompanied his mother’s presence.

“Sure.” Steve hopped up and retrieved the locket from his bedroom.

Maggie held the locket carefully between her palms. The air throbbed expectantly around her. She closed her eyes and switched her mind into blackness. Slowly she let her head fill up with pictures and ideas. At first the images poured in at a quick pace, but soon they slowed.

A young woman held a newborn baby in a blanket. The baby was crying and she bounced him up and down. Her face was blurry, but sadness ebbed from her. A young

teen mother faced with difficult path.

The girl held the baby and put him down. She picked up another bundle and again bounced a baby.

The mother's face was worried as she put a baby down and picked another one up.

One baby was beautiful.

The other had something strange about his face.

Maggie couldn't quite see the images clearly.

Something different...

And then she realized what it was.

Twins.

"Do you have any candles?" she asked. "Any kind of candles at all? They will help me focus."

Steve lit a few candles, watching Maggie's face expectantly.

"Show me your mother's papers," she said. "That box you told me about?"

He brought the box to her and she held it for a few minutes. She couldn't feel anything at all. "That's not it."

"Well, that's what there is," he said impatiently.

"Shh. Don't get frustrated. Wait."

The candles flickered wildly as she picked up the locket once more.

"She's going to show us."

The locket pulsed between her hands as chronic whispering took up residence in the back of her head. She walked very slowly across the room. The shushings grew loud and impatient when she ventured too far away from the intended path. The feelings guided her through the bedroom and down the hall, past the guest bedroom to a storage closet with many shelves.

"What's going on?" Steve asked. "I don't see..."

"It's okay. Relax."

“I don’t...”

“Shhh...”

Maggie stood before the storage closet, staring at it. Her arms were peppered with goosebumps.

“In here, somewhere,” Maggie whispered.

Hidden behind a secret sliding door, at the back of one of the closet shelves, was a box. Inside the box were several papers.

“This is it,” Maggie said firmly.

They pored through the papers. Birth certificates for twin baby boys. A diary written by a teenaged mother distraught over her difficult decision to put one of her sons into an institution. The baby was born crying. He never stopped. As he grew older, his crying turned to rages. And he seemed to *see* things.

“He’s just not right,” the diary revealed. “Not even two years old and his temper tantrums are worse than a grown man’s. I can’t control him anymore. He’s too strong and too unpredictable.”

Papers for an asylum. Brochures. Flyers. Bills. Receipts.

So many pieces of the puzzle suddenly flipped into place.

Steve was pale. His eyes blazed with anger.

“I had a twin brother,” he finally said.

“Yes. One who wasn’t well.”

“Well, shit. Why the hell wasn’t I told?” he asked angrily.

“Your mother said right here...”

“Oh, stop it. There’s no excuse. Who the hell lies like that?” his blazing eyes were brimming with tears.

“It’s over, Steve. She’s gone. There’s nothing you can do.”

“But, goddammit.” He threw the diary and the pages flew across the floor.

“Steve, calm down.” Maggie watched him, wondering if she should leave.

Steve raged around the room, swearing and throwing anything he could get his

hands on. Maggie stood speechless until at last he collapsed on a chair, sobbing with his head in his hands.

She went over to him, patting him on the shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” he snapped, shoving her hand away.

“It’s okay. Let me help you.”

“I want to be alone.” He cried.

“No, you don’t.”

“Oh, God!” he screamed. “It hurts.” He clamped his hands around his head. “It hurts so much.”

“Your head?”

“Of course, my head.” He rocked and howled. “Dammit, when I get mad, I get these headaches.”

Steve moaned and cried as his headache swelled. Maggie watched him as the pain surged through him.

“Here, let me try something,” she said.

“Don’t touch me,” he cried.

“Yes, I’m going to touch you. I know what to do.”

Grudgingly, Steve let her come to him. He stiffened as she put her hands on his head, choking back sobs.

“Don’t fight me,” she said softly. “Just take a deep breath and relax. Cry if you have to.”

She closed her eyes and imagined the good light and spirit filling him as his sobs filled the room. The energy surged from the eternal light of the universe through her fingers and into Steve. The angry erratic buzzing through her hands at last subsided into sporadic pulses. Finally he stopped crying. His energy became more stable beneath her fingers.

“I wonder if he’s still alive,” he said softly.

“I know he is,” Maggie said firmly. “We just need to find him.”

He looked at her, his eyes clear. "My headache is gone."

They cleaned up the room, organizing the papers and throwing away broken knickknacks. At last, they were ready to continue to look for more clues.

They read more of the papers and, not finding any death certificates for his brother, they determined he was still alive.

"Well, I guess we should do a Google search on this place," Maggie finally said.

"Maggie?" Steve said, pacing.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry. I have a bad temper and I'm sorry." He turned to her, his face tear-streaked.

"It's all right."

* * * *

As they leaned over the computer screen, Steve's hand brushed against her shoulder, sending electric tingles down her back. She adored his fresh scent and his firm hands. She imagined him dressed in his welding outfit, and in a strange way, the idea of the mask and the uniform aroused her.

"Do you wear goggles or a mask at work?" she asked as she Googled the hospital.

"Both. Well, I should say either or. It depends on the job."

"I would wear every mask in the world. I can't imagine getting a spark in my eye and going blind."

"It happens. You can even go blind just from the flash of the light."

His hand strayed to her hair and played with a curl as they leaned towards the monitor.

"Here's a list" she said. "It seems more complete than the others. Maybe it's one of those."

"That one looks right." He pointed at one.

They pulled up the hospital and Maggie shuddered as she stared at the huge old

building she had seen in her vision, complete to the crumbling bricks and twisted trees.

“That’s it,” she said.

They clicked around the site, confirming the address and learning more about the institution for the mentally unsound.

Finally, Steve sat down on a chair across from her.

“Now what?” he sighed wearily.

“I guess we get to go meet your brother.”

Chapter Thirteen

Remember the past but live for the future.

Maggie waved from her window and ran down the stairs. The snow was coming down in a steady regular stream, even at this early hour. A distant blush of dawn leaked through the trees, but the sky above still was a swath of black velvet with snow. When she looked into the sky, she was reminded of a snowflake obsidian, the stone where you can figure out the patterns of your life. The roads would be slippery at some point, but they had a mission now and not much time to explore it.

“I called and they have visiting hours until five. We should be able to make it,” she told Steve.

“I hope so.”

His car surged along the roads and out to the highway. Maggie settled into her seat. She was never totally at ease in the hands of another driver. Although she almost always trusted the person driving was just as likely to get hurt as she was, she knew that some people had a death wish. So far, Steve’s driving was a tad fast for the conditions, but he hadn’t taken many sudden turns.

Maggie turned to look at him. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses and a hat warmed his head. His jaw was set in grim determination.

“What do you think about being a twin?” she asked.

“It’s shocking. But the more I thought about it, the more so many things made sense.”

“Like what?”

“I’d get these dreams. Dark, dreary dreams with faceless people and sounds of crying and wailing. It doesn’t sound like much, but inside the dream it feels, well, different from other dreams.”

“Like you’re really somewhere else.”

“Something like that,” Steve confirmed. “It’s like I’m watching a movie but I’m in the movie seeing through someone else’s eyes. But those eyes are mine.” He laughed. “I sound crazy.”

“No. Most people have crazy weird dreams that often sound benign in the telling but are in fact labyrinths of amazement and despair. Some dreams creep into your bones and wind around them. A dull ache follows you all day, because you can’t shake off the dream.”

“And it’s always dreams that make the least sense. It’s not like you can say, ‘oh, that tree represents my third grade teacher because he’s sturdy and set in his ways yet knowledgeable.’”

“Dreams are strange things,” Maggie said.

They drove in silence for a while.

“And my mother,” Steve continued. “She always seemed a bit distant. Sad. There always seemed something in her that I couldn’t reach. I sensed it as a child. As I grew up, I just figured that was who she was and what she was and there’s was nothing I could do about it.”

“Now you know,” Maggie said.

They put on the radio and drifted into their own thoughts.

Finally, they had reached the town where the hospital was located.

The building was halfway up a mountain. The little car did well revving up and down the winding roads. Snow continued to fall and before long, the sun turned the sky into a dull grey backdrop for a dreary winter day.

Maggie didn’t mind the weather. Could be worse, could be better. She stared at Steve and enjoyed the mysterious look he had. “You’re a rock star,” she blurted out.

“Pardon me?” he asked.

“Your glasses. They’re so big and dark. Rock star glasses.”

“Yeah, that’s me. Joe Rockstar,” Steve said as he continued to drive.

At last they arrived at a massive set of gates. Large bricks of pale stone formed high wide walls that wrapped around the grounds.

In the afternoon sun, the wall stretched out forever.

“So, we’re here,” Maggie said as they stepped inside.

No sooner had Maggie walked into the room than she felt a hunger invade her body. A hunger for sex and food and love and blood and pain.

Steve went over to the reception while Maggie sat in the waiting room. Her head screamed with opposing messages, lost thoughts hanging around the waiting room. The ghostly chattering got to her, but she didn’t know how to block them all.

A cloying sense wrapped around her body. There was a sensation of fingers stroking up and down her arms and across her thighs. Her hair was lifted and dropped by gentle unseen hands. She looked around at the other visitors but no one asked as if anything had happened in particular. There was tugging at her coat, as if she were being beckoned to go somewhere.

The air thickened even more and she found it hard to breathe. A heat pulsed through the room, tendrils of it reaching and gliding until it had passed through and down the hall. More shifting rolling puffs of energy followed through the room, some stopping to roam around a particular person and then move on.

Maggie wondered how much the other waiting people could sense this agitated energy that filled the hallways in a constant stream. *Maybe that’s why some people hate hospitals*, she surmised.

As Maggie grew used to the moaning souls cascading by her and down the hall, she rummaged through the coffee table stack of magazines.

She picked a women’s magazine and set to work reading about how to make sure you’re with the right guy.

Sagittarius and Virgo weren’t such a good match, according to the article, and Maggie sighed. She wasn’t even sure what she was doing here. She barely knew Steve. Yet somehow his problems had grown on her, and out of a sense of curiosity, duty and

growing infatuation, she had gone to see if she could make sense of the situation.

Virgos were creatures of habit and set in their ways, while Sags like to have freedom, especially when it came to sexual self-expression, the article explained.

Sagittarius always had to be on the go, loves travel and change and meeting new people. Sags prefer party time to real-life time, and will seek out opportunity to talk to other people.

A hand cupped the back of her neck. She looked up, expecting to see Steve. But when she looked up there was nothing there. She shuddered and pretended to read the magazine even more than before.

More of the damn ghosties.

Virgos were careful and cautious. Sometimes they were health freaks and almost always had to eat properly and at certain times, or they would become unbalanced. Virgos were good at listening, despite their sharp tongues and critical views. Virgos were loyal friends and could be surprisingly kinky in bed.

Maggie raised an eyebrow. She wondered if that last sentence was aimed at the Sags reading the article so that they wouldn't run screaming from Virgos.

At last, Steve returned and told her they would have to wait for a bit until the security guy was off of his break.

"Yeah, wouldn't want to interrupt him from his job while there are actually people here," Maggie said.

Soon the hospital was prepared to receive its newest visitors. It was like going through the airport, with all the security precautions. They had to remove their coats and put everything into a locker. Metal detectors checked for every type of threat. Maggie wasn't allowed to bring her purse. Even Steve's sunglasses were put away.

"Anything can upset the patients," the security woman said with an emphatic nod of her head.

"So, are they behind bars, or free, or what?" Maggie asked the woman.

"Depends where you go. What floor are you looking for?"

Maggie told her the section and the woman nodded.

“They aren’t restrained there. Most of the time, they hang out in the TV room. TV keeps everyone pacified.”

After they passed through the security ritual, they headed for the elevator. It was old-fashioned, and both Maggie and Steve paused before pushing the button.

“I’m not so sure about this,” he said.

“Me neither.”

They stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the sixth floor. The doors groaned shut, and the car jerked and squeaked up and up.

“I think I’d rather be stuck on a ship at sea than ride this thing again,” Maggie said, holding her stomach. “Jeez.”

The car rumbled while ’30s elevator music tinkled out during the ride. Maggie stared at the wooden paneling.

“No mirrors in here,” she said.

“It’s a hospital, not a hotel.”

“Still, it’s good to have mirrors. That way you can keep track of who’s on the elevator with you.”

Steve nodded as the car lurched to a stop. The doors creaked open with a screech and they stepped off.

The hallways were dimly lit. Dull grey walls lined the white tiled floor. A line of red duct tape marked a specific path for people to take to somewhere.

“How depressing,” she said. A sign located in front of the elevator indicated the proper direction to the reception area.

“I guess he can’t be that bad. They didn’t send anyone with us,” she said.

“I don’t know. Maybe they find lost people all the time, wandering the halls.”

Steve clutched at Maggie’s hand as they approached the reception area. A tired-looking middle-aged nurse looked up at them from her chair behind a large desk. “Can I help you?” she asked.

Steve gave her the information.

“Just a minute,” she flipped through the charts and chuckled. “My, you’re the first visitor in a over a year.”

“Visitors? Who comes?” he asked.

“Only his mother,” she said sadly. “Poor boy.”

Steve nodded.

“I wonder why she stopped seeing him. Maybe it’s just too far.”

Steve didn’t say anything. The nurse pointed the direction for them to take, and they continued on down the hallway.

The community room reminded Maggie of a scene right out of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. A dingy area where there were a few card tables set up with some folding chairs and assorted simple board games. A couple of men played dominoes, and still a few more appeared to be playing cards. They all wore white hospital gowns and appeared bathed and somewhat groomed.

A large screen TV burbled from one end of the room. Before Maggie had a chance to get jealous at the monstrosity, she noticed the purplish hue of a picture tube fading.

One lone person sat playing Nintendo.

He was Steve’s mirror image. Almost.

“Ben?” Steve asked.

There was no response, only the soft beeps of Mario jumping mushrooms.

“Ben? I’m here to see you.” Steve spoke in a low controlled voice but still Ben didn’t seem to comprehend anything.

“Ben?” Steve said again. His voice was tinged with disappointment. Maggie slipped her hand into Steve’s and squeezed it.

“Maybe he can’t hear you. Maybe he’s deaf.”

“No deaf,” a man beside them said. “No deaf Ben.” The man clapped his hands and nodded. “No deaf.”

He clapped his hands again and enjoying the sound, ran over to the other side of the room to show his friends his clapping noise.

Maggie tugged at Steve, attempting to pull him away from Ben. Steve stubbornly stayed. Maggie stood beside him. Steve watched the men beside him play dominoes in a slow, painstaking manner.

At last, Ben turned his head towards Steve. His eyes lost their milky distance and transformed into a deep blue. More piercing than Steve's, more vibrant and penetrating than almost anyone's eyes she'd ever seen. That blue haunted her from her dreams.

Upon hearing Maggie gasp, Ben turned his attention towards her. He smiled. "I know you." Ben said. "I've seen you many times."

"I've never been here before."

"Not here. In my mind. I'm crazy, you know. I see things."

"It doesn't make you crazy. To see things."

"It made me crazy. I've always been crazy. There's too much to see." His eyes grew wide and he looked across the room. He nodded towards the man clapping his hands quietly between his legs. "He's screaming in his head again. He's screaming 'Mommy, don't hit me, please' and soon he'll get up and make a scene."

Maggie looked at Ben closely. The resemblance to his brother was uncanny, although his chin was grotesquely long with some sort of tumorlike deformity. His lower lip was swollen and the teeth grew like a warped picket fence. They made his speech slurred but his intonation was just like his brother's. The drugs probably make his speech slurred.

"Ben?" Steve said. He approached his brother, his arms out.

"Wait," Ben put up his hand. The clapping man began a series of whoops and soon, he was running across the room, swiping at the dominoes that the others were playing with.

"Go away," one of the men called out. "You're wrecking our game."

The man whooped again and got up on a chair. He ranted nonsensically, his voice rising higher and louder until he was screaming.

Orderlies rushed into the room and quickly subdued him.

Maggie and Steve watched as the man was dragged away, the effects of a needle already coursing through him.

“Now, we can talk. Until the next one,” Ben said.

“Do you know who I am?” Steve asked.

“Of course I do. I’ve seen you my whole life. You’re my twin brother. The one that isn’t insane.”

“Does that bother you?” Steve asked.

“It did. When I was young. I would cry and scream with Mama to let me out and put you here. I didn’t think it was fair. Me in a cage and you being with Mama.”

“What did she do?”

“She came to see me. But she doesn’t anymore. They’ve not told me, they will never tell me, but she’s dead. I know that.”

“I don’t think they know” Steve said. “I didn’t know to notify them. I didn’t know you existed until a couple of days ago.”

“I know. Mama kept it secret. But once she died, she was so uneasy. We worked hard to let you know about us. We knew Maggie would be good for you.”

“How did you know?” Maggie asked.

“I don’t know how I know or what I know. I just know things. I see things.”

“I still don’t see how that makes you crazy,” she insisted.

Ben stood up and limped over to them.

“Too much happens inside here.” He tapped his head. “Too much.”

“Maybe sometime when the weather gets nice, I can take you for a ride.”

“No. No rides. I don’t leave this place. Ever.” Ben’s eyes grew wide at the thought of it.

“But maybe we could help you.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the dominoes players arguing over who was winning. Ben hobbled over to one of the furthest windows and looked out.

“No. No outside.” He gazed out across the trees and White Mountains.

“It might be fun. Go for lunch.”

“No!” Ben shook his head like a dog refusing to give up a chew toy. Maggie went over to him and touched his shoulder. Ben stiffened as a spark flew between them. She pulled her hand back, rubbing her stinging fingers.

“Don’t touch me,” he cried and dropped to the floor. Maggie stood back in shock, staring at her hands and how the tips of her fingers had darkened.

Ben curled up into a ball, held his head and screamed. “Don’t, it burns. It burns. It burns,” he wailed, crying.

Maggie and Steve stared helplessly at him until the orderlies returned with their needle.

As they plunged the medication into the screaming man, one of the orderlies turned to Steve. “He goes through this many times a day. If he’s touched, if the sun shines wrong, if someone says something he doesn’t like, he’ll collapse into a fit.”

Steve nodded, speechless.

As the orderlies led Ben away, Steve shook his head and looked down at the floor in dismay.

“I’m so sorry,” Maggie said, still staring at her throbbing fingers.

“It’s not your fault,” Steve said. “Who knew?”

“He’s magical,” she whispered. “It’s too bad we can’t teach him how to use his powers.”

“We can’t or he wouldn’t be here though, right?” Steve said, grumpily.

“He burned me,” she said, holding out her hand to Steve. “I mean, when you and I touched, we had sparks, but they didn’t burn. But this...”

Steve held her hand and kissed her fingers. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Oh, nonsense. We didn’t know. But it’s going to be interesting to figure him out, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know...” Steve sighed. They both stared out the windows at the snow coming down into the abandoned gardens below.

“Now what?” Steve said sadly.

“I guess we go home,” said Maggie. “This is his life, and we’re the ones intruding on him.”

As the little car chugged back down the mountain trails, tears fell from Steve’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Maggie said as she touched his arm.

“It’s not your fault. In fact, if it wasn’t for you, I would never have known about my twin brother, and that’s something I’ll always be grateful for.”

The rest of the way home, Steve was silent.

When they finally turned down the road leading back to Hermana, Maggie turned to Steve.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked.

“I guess,” he responded. “Everything happened so fast. All at once.”

“See? Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it,” Maggie said.

“Yeah, I can understand that now.”

Steve turned down the road that led to his house.

“Do you mind coming over for a snack and a nightcap? After all this driving, after all you’ve done and all this stress, the least I can do is give you some food and drink.”

That sounds like a great idea,” Maggie said.

* * * *

Steve brought them each a mug of beer and sank into the couch. He held his head in his hands while Maggie rubbed his back.

“Don’t worry. Everything will be okay.”

“It’s all too much. Too much to understand.”

“I know.”

“I have a twin brother. Yet he’s not like me ’cause he’s deformed and crazy but he is like me ’cause I’m his twin. We both have bad tempers. It blows my mind.”

“Twins have always freaked me out. When you think about two coming from one.”

“My life would have been so different if I had known I had a twin brother. In an asylum or not.”

“Would have been cool,” Maggie agreed.

“I don’t know what would have happened if there had been two of us. Normal us. Mom was so young when she had us, and so poor. No dad. Nothing.”

“You might have been put up for adoption, I guess. I mean, what else can you do with twins when you have no one?”

Steve put his hand to his head. “I feel that confusing sensation I get in my dreams. A scratching texture like someone clawing to get at my brain.”

“Right now, you mean?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Maybe he’s trying to reach you. Maybe finally meeting and learning about each other has unblocked your twin connection.”

“Shh. Let me listen.”

Steve sat up straight in his chair, cocking his head. He closed his eyes, his hands growing limp. The air in the room grew very cold and then hot again, hotter than the fireplace could make it.

Maggie sat and stared at the fire, letting the ghostly sensations meld through the room as Steve communed with something.

At last, he was done and opened his eyes as he turned to her.

“I can understand him, sort of. Not in real world way but in a kind of visual way.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me it wasn’t my fault. He said no one understands how he is or what he

is. There are outbursts, as we saw, and he has no control.”

“Poor guy.”

“What a way to live.”

“It’s his karma. And yours,” Maggie said patiently.

“So now what do I do? Leave him there? Go visit every week like my mother did?

“Visit him often. He must get so lonely there.”

Steve nodded.

“Thank you so much for helping me find him.” Steve turned suddenly to Maggie and kissed her softly on the lips. When he pulled back, his eyes were glassy with tears.

“Don’t cry again,” Maggie said. “I’m happy for you. At least you have some closure now. Your mystery is solved.”

“And it’s thanks to you.” He pulled her close. Maggie tentatively put her arms around him. Why was she so afraid to wrap her arms around his broad muscular shoulders and feel the strong curvature of his back?

“I’m so glad you’re in my life now, Maggie.”

His mouth found hers again and she let herself sink into his kisses. His body, pressed against hers, was warm and hungry. He pushed her back, holding her face, kissing her repeatedly.

Her hands stroked his strong arms and met his mouth over and over again. His body, writhing against her, was firm and she surrendered herself to his control.

Without a word, he took her hand and led her into the bedroom.

Slowly, in silence, he undressed her, his fingers carefully unbuttoning and unzipping, moving fabric away from her until she stood before him naked.

He stared at her, his eyes wide with appreciation.

He peeled off his own clothes and, once naked, pulled her close. Again, his mouth pressed against hers.

He’s the one, the nagging voice in the back of her head said. This time she didn’t

push the thought away.

His hands roamed across her body, carefully cupping her breasts, gently stroking her thighs. She ran her hands along his broad back. So strong and muscular.

Her body ached to be with his. Their kisses grew stronger and longer as the stress of the day slipped away with each passing minute.

They lay on the bed, their arms and legs intertwining as they kissed and caressed each other longingly.

Longing gave way to urgency and Steve rolled Maggie onto her back. He took a condom from his nightstand and unrolled it onto his penis as she watched expectantly. He sighed softly as he entered her. She spread her legs to accommodate him, savoring the sensation of his flesh pushing apart her hungry warmth.

His strokes were slow and deep, his kisses tracing her lips, her forehead, her neck.

He pushed into her harder and faster. She bucked her hips up to meet each quickening thrust.

Soon, they were rocking together with no thoughts but the heady thrill of sensation their joined bodies brought to them.

Steve pushed himself up on his arms, plunging deep inside her, staring into her eyes.

She stared into his and saw behind the lust, not sadness, but love.

He thrust into her again and her body welcomed him with warm wetness.

Maggie came with a glorious rush. As Steve came after her, her body throbbed with the ecstasy of finally knowing love.

Chapter Fourteen

Ring in the New Year with loved ones.

Maggie opened the door for Steve.

“You look stunning,” he sighed, and she did.

Her black evening gown clung to all the right places. She carried rhinestone-encrusted stilettos to put on at the party. The afternoon she had spent at the beauty parlor had left her with curls piled high upon her head and set with tiny rhinestones that caught the light when she moved her head. That day she had even let the stylist put on makeup for her. Heavily mascaraed smoky eyes batted at him while her deep crimson lips pouted sensuously.

“I’m glad you appreciate me,” she said as she took a faux fur coat from her chair. He helped her slip it on and they set off for the party at Lucy’s house.

“I can’t believe it’s New Year’s Eve already,” Steve said. “Another year gone.”

“The older I get, the faster the years race by.”

“Do you have any resolutions?” he asked.

“I always have resolutions. This year I vow to be more organized.”

“Stick with me. I’ll whip you into shape.”

Maggie laughed.

“What about you? Any things you want to change?”

“I have to get back to the gym and start eating right,” Steve said.

“You look simply fine to me.”

“Maybe for now, but all this fine food and beer will catch up to me. Then I’ll look like every other beer-bellied middle-aged man walking around.”

“Well,” Maggie said. “I would be most encouraging of you going to the gym. Heck, I’ll even go with you if you like.”

“I’d like that.”

“But you have to do something for me.”

“What’s that?”

“You need to read one book a month. It can be anything but I think you’ll really find it will broaden your horizons.”

“I have read a book this month. Two books, even. I got a Sylvia Brown book about dreams and it was really good. Even better than ‘Pet Cemetery.’”

“Wow, you are full of surprises.”

* * * *

They arrived at Lucy’s front entrance, and Steve let her off at the front door. He parked the car in the huge parking lot and came back for her as she was fastening her stilettos.

“Just in time,” she said as she stood up. In her shoes, she was slightly above eye level with Steve.

“You’re tall today. I like it.”

“Good,” she said, as she snaked her arm through his.

They checked their coats and headed into the grand ballroom. A quintet was playing classical music. Maggie spotted Natasha playing the violin. People milled around, chatting and watching the musicians. The ballgowns were stunning and Maggie stared enviously at several of them.

Ellie came over to greet them.

“So this is Steve?” she asked, reaching her hand towards him. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Steve kissed her hand. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“There are a lot of people here tonight. And more to come,” Ellie said to Maggie.

“Anyone you’re waiting for?” Maggie asked.

“Perhaps. I did meet someone but I don’t know if he’s my type. I’m hoping he’ll

show up and we can explore things a little further.”

“That would be great way to start the new year.”

“I see you two don’t have any drinks. Come to the bar and we can chat there.”

As they made their way to the bar, they added Madeline and Veronica their little group. When the musicians finished their set, Natasha joined them.

Natasha was pleased to finally meet Steve. She gave a knowing wink to Maggie as she whispered to her about a man she had met earlier in the evening, someone named Gus who seemed as well mannered as he was handsome.

Maggie sipped a glass of red wine and stood with her friends for a moment watching the dancers.

“Another year gone by. So much has happened.”

“And yet so little.”

“And there are so many possibilities.”

Steve led Maggie to the dance floor. They fell into each other’s arms, swept away by the grandiose waltz piped in through the speakers.

Ellie and Natasha were also dancing. Maggie smiled as she sized up Gus and wondered if he was who Natasha might fall in love with.

Steve led Maggie out to the back patio. The air was refreshingly cool on their flushed skin. They shared a cigarette admiring the night sky. Several other couples were also enjoying the cool air. Steve turned to Maggie and held out a little box.

“For me?” she asked.

“Most definitely,” he said. “A little New Year’s Eve token.”

She opened the box and took out a charm bracelet. There were little figures of a pentacle, a broomstick, the word “Hermana,” and a heart.

“These are all things that remind me of you, of our first few weeks together,” he said.

“I love it,” she cried, putting her arms around him. She kissed him lightly on the lips. “I can’t smear my makeup just yet,” she said. “But there’s a big juicy kiss with

your name on it later on.”

Maggie held out her wrist while Steve buckled on the bracelet. She held it up, watching the silver charms catching the light. “I’m so glad we met.”

“Me too.”

Maggie’s body tingled and a rush of warmth swelled through her. The little voice in the back of her head was whispering again.

“He’s the one,” the voice urged. Maggie shrugged and fought the urge to speak back. Steve was holding her hand, his warm energy spreading through her and taking root. Their connection vibrated and she never wanted to let go of him. When they touched, it was as if they were two souls that had been apart and had now finally found each other again.

Yet he had a brother to share that connection with. The thought made her frown. As if sensing the change in her energy, Steve looked at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just worrying about the future.”

“Why waste time worrying about the future? Enjoy the here and now.”

“I am. I’m definitely savoring this magical evening. And to think it’s only just begun.”

“I’m hoping that we’ve just begun. Tell me, Maggie. Are you ready to let me in yet?”

“I’ve let you in,” she quipped.

“Not that. I mean in your heart. Your soul. Your mind. I want to get to know you, the real you, all of you, but if you keep your guard up, I’ll never feel like we’re really together.”

“I’m going to try,” Maggie said. “Open heart, open mind.”

The music stopped and the crowd grew hushed. Lucy stood at the microphone on the small stage.

“We have one hour until the countdown, ladies and gentlemen. Eat, drink, dance. Forget your regrets and welcome in this New Year with open minds.”

The crowd clapped and the music switched over to a DJ. The lights were dimmed so that strobe lights could flash on the dance floor.

Steve took Maggie's arm. "Let's dance."

They went to the dance floor and, before they knew it, an hour had slipped by. Lucy was back on the stage as her staff distributed party hats and blowers.

"We're ready for the final countdown. Are you ready?" she asked the crowd. People cheered and blew their horns, snatching glasses of champagne from the many trays that servers held around the room.

"Ten, nine, eight..."

Maggie's legs twitched with excitement as her stomach knotted. The anticipation of a new year filled her with great hope and trepidation.

New beginnings.

Steve squeezed her hand and suddenly it was New Year's.

He turned to her and they kissed long and lustily, all thoughts of spoiled lipstick forgotten. When they broke away, Steve stared into her eyes breathlessly.

"Happy New Year, darling," he said.

"Happy New Year," Maggie said, and smiled.

THE END

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