

Hidden Magic

Written by Ashlynn Monroe

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Human

Once again, Alexia was going to be late. By this point in her life, it should come as no surprise that she was not a timely individual. Rushing like a crazy person, she tripped over the shoes strewn at the foot of the bed. She found the rush of getting ready after oversleeping extremely frustrating! She was a responsible person. It just seemed that the clock was always jumping ahead of where she thought it should be.

Georgia was going to kill her. Her brother's wife was like a sister to her. Georgia was the most prompt and organized person ever born and Alexia's habitual lateness was a constant source of irritation for her sister-in-law. Alexia knew that if Georgia did not love her as much as she did she would have given up on her long ago.

Today was Little Tony's big day at the zoo and Alexia had promised to help chase after him since her big brother was away on business. She loved her nephew more than the sun and the stars, but he could be quite a little monster if given the opportunity. As if the fates felt the need to give Big Tony and his wife an apology for Little Tony's wild streak, their next child was the most mellow and mild little creature.

Three year old Virginia was her little doll; she loved the preschooler as much as she had ever loved anyone else in her life. When Tony and Georgia had told her they were having another baby, Alexia immediately asked about names. Georgia had proudly declared she was naming the girl after her grandmother, Virginia. Alexia wanted to smack her brother for allowing such a travesty. Unable to hurt her friend by admitting she thought the name was awful, she called the girl Dixie

instead. It became a family joke because both baby and mother had southern state names. Georgia seemed to accept the baby's nickname and Tony decided it was cute. It really helped that Little Tony, who was only two when his sister was born, could not even get close to saying Virginia properly. He could say Dixie almost correctly. The nickname stuck and Alexia was glad for it.

Big Tony sold restaurant equipment and supplies and his job supported his family well. Unfortunately, he traveled a lot. She and Tony had lost their parents as children so they were very close. At fourteen, Tony went to a different foster home and Alexia did not see or hear from him for four years. When he turned eighteen, he was able to get custody of her and took care of her until she went to college. Alexia felt as if she needed to step up. The kids were totally without a grandmother as Georgia's mother had died when she was only twenty.

Alexia spoiled and loved the children more than the typical aunt would spoil them. She was only twenty-five and had no plans to settle down in the near future so spoiling the kids gave her a much needed baby fix. Just thinking of how much work they were made for fabulous birth control! It was nice to be the cool aunt because when they got too wild, she could bring them back to their mother and return to the single girl in the city life style. This arrangement suited her just fine.

Steeling herself, Alexia knew she would have to face the most fearful and terrible creature in existence. Georgia would be a real beast after waiting for thirty-two minutes! Taking a deep breath and opening her car door, she fearfully stood up and went to find her waiting family. She figured she would

bribe her way out of trouble. Zoo gift shops must love guilty people. It took her awhile to find the snack bar, which was where they had planned to meet. Georgia was really going to be furious. Alexia considered going back to her car and calling her to say that her car had a flat tire. That would certainly buy her the time it would take Georgia to cool down.

When she found them, a mime was performing for everyone at the snack bar. Georgia was not cross. She had not even noticed the time as she and the children were so engrossed in the impromptu spectacle. Alexia wanted to kiss the mime that had saved the day.

Dixie and Little Tony grabbed her around the legs and screamed, "Aunt Al, Aunt Al, can we go see the monkeys. Take us to the monkeys!"

Laughing, she picked up Dixie and hugged her. Alexia tried to kiss Little Tony but he used his magical little boy powers to avoid the dreaded auntie kiss by crawling under the table. Georgia begged him the entire time not to ruin his new blue jeans.

Alexia was only vaguely listening as her dear friend rallied against the manufacturers who make children's clothing. She was convinced it was a conspiracy that the knees in boy's jeans never lasted for more than a month. Nodding and agreeing at the appropriate times, she pretended to try to catch her nephew as he darted under the table and between the chairs. Dixie clung to her neck the entire time. Overhead the sun was warm and bright; the weather was perfect. She had avoided the scolding for being late and was just all around content. It left her intoxicated and exuberant. Georgia noticed her mood and lightened up on the jean issue.

“Let’s go see those monkeys!” Georgia announced.

They started to get up. The mime had left almost as soon as Alexia had arrived so there was no reason just to sit at a snack bar when monkeys waited to be seen. Smiling down at Dixie, Alexia resigned herself to the fact that her arms would be very tired because the girl showed no sign of letting her aunt put her in the stroller. Little Tony had his stuffed dinosaur riding in his sister’s place. After he checked that Mr. T was okay, he let his mother push his beloved toy.

A sudden whoosh of smoke and loud clapping brought Alexia’s attention back to the center of the patio. Instead of the mime, a tall very good-looking man stood in the clearing smoke. He had raven black hair and piercing blue eyes. His body looked like he lived in the gym. Just looking at him was entertaining enough, but Alexia loved magic. She knew it was just an act, yet she loved watching the tricks and trying to figure out how they worked. For her, the fun of magic was the knowing. She loved to be in on the secret, the joke, or whatever had everyone else confused or mystified. She hated surprises with a passion.

“You are going to want to watch this aren’t you?” Georgia asked warily. She knew how Alexia was with magic. “Just don’t spoil it for the kids, please.”

Alexia just smiled and they went closer for a better view. Dixie clung to her aunt, not caring about what was happening. On the other hand, Little Tony was very excited.

“Aunt Al, is he going to saw somebody in half?” It was a very five-year-old kind of question and Alexia could not stop her honest laughter. She must have been louder with it then she had intended because when she looked up, the magician was

staring at her. She lowered her eyes quickly. If he was that easily distracted by laughs, she guessed the act would probably stink.

Dixie's little rag doll hung down her back, adding warmth on the very sunny day. When she tried to sit the girl down, she began to cry. Again, the magician gave them a strange look. Alexia quickly picked her niece up to keep from having a scene, but she was getting a little annoyed with the performer. She noticed many other children whining and crying and people talking and laughing. He did not need to take his stage fright out on them. If he gave them another dirty look, she promised herself that she would give Mr. Magic the finger. Georgia would certainly be scandalized, but she knew she could do it without traumatizing any small children. She was a master at flipping the bird. If only they gave out a trophy for that! She would be so proud!

He gave some preliminary and boring information about himself and his magic. Alexia was not paying any attention until he suddenly levitated a crying child. She saw what appeared to be genuine panic in the face of the mother. Everyone else was watching the child, but the mother's panic and the magician's expression distracted her. He looked a little too gleeful at the child's screaming and the mother's fear. Alexia knew that for a big trick like that, they usually had the prearranged compliance of the participant. However, she knew that no mother would let some street magician terrify her child for kicks and giggles. He was really starting to rile her up!

No one else seemed to notice that his act seemed odd, so she relaxed a bit. To the mother's relief, he finally set the child down. Then he made a woman's wedding ring disappear and

then reappear in an ice cube out of one of the vendor's ice machines. Alexia found herself a bit impressed by that trick and it seemed very benign compared to the first. She let herself relax and enjoy the show.

It was interesting that he was able to guess cards and that he was able to reassemble torn money. He did a few small tricks like the money and Alexia whispered quietly to Dixie how she thought the trick worked. Dixie looked at her and smiled, then she looked at the performer before laying her head back down on Alexia's shoulder. She was not the least bit interested in what was happening.

He then made another child disappear and the panicked daycare employee began to scream for the police. Alexia came to full attention; it was obvious by the tears and cries that the child's disappearance had not been part of the show. Noticing the honest terror, the crowd became agitated. The air filled with the rabble of many conversations happening at once.

Alexia made eye contact again with the performer and she was sure she saw a malicious gleam in his eyes. A crash across the patio brought everyone's attention to a metal garbage can that suddenly tipped over. A very smelly little boy who looked to be about seven rolled out. With jubilation, the daycare provider ran to the boy, her chain of children in tow. Alexia knew that was not part of the act. No one would want to explain to a parent that had worked hard all day why their child smelled like rotten hotdogs!

Alexia grabbed Georgia's arm and said, "Let's get out of here. This guy is off and he's giving me the creeps."

They grabbed the children and stroller and started to leave. Suddenly, the magician made himself appear in front of Alexia.

She was startled and honestly afraid for her niece and nephew's safety. She casually gave the performer the finger and said, "Excuse me. Your show stinks and we want to leave. Please get out of our way!" The word please pushed through her teeth with menace.

A strange light entered his eyes and Alexia immediately regretted letting her temper get the best of her. While she was not surprised that her temper was causing her trouble again, she regretted it anyway. He looked down at the almost sleeping Dixie and Alexia panicked. Gripping the child tighter, she tried to run, but the crowd had blocked her in. Georgia and Little Tony found themselves pushed to the back of the crowd, everyone wanting to see what would happen next. Alexia saw him feeding on her fear, enjoying it. Reaching around them, he yanked the doll away from the girl and held it up to the crowd.

Alexia whispered, "You better not damage that or I'll sue your ass, buddy!"

He looked at her and this time his eyes held humor instead of anger. He spoke to the crowd. "I am going to make this doll live by giving it part of this child's spirit!" Alexia heard the collected gasp followed by the obligatory rabble.

"I don't think so pal!" She spoke with her full force of girl power while raising her knee, attempting to make contact with his groin. Unfortunately, this magician also had fortune telling skills because he had blocked her movement and she kneed his thigh instead. He laughed and then became scary intense. Alexia heard him whisper in a strange lilting language she had never heard before. Suddenly, she felt her niece stiffen in her arms and go limp. Dixie's little arms dangled as Alexia struggled with the dead weight of the child.

Alexia motioned for the bystanders to back up and give her room. Somehow, they managed to accommodate her, even with the crowd pressing in on them. Alexia laid her beloved niece on the hot asphalt of the patio and felt for a pulse. To her relief the child was alive. Tears of fear and suffocating sorrow flowed from her eyes as she tried to revive the girl. She began to call for help. In the distance, she could hear Georgia screaming. She looked up, about to plead that he stop whatever he had done.

Her breath caught in her throat and she could not breathe as she saw the most horrific thing she could possibly imagine. Little Raggedy Ann began to move all on its own. It held out its little arms to her and she could hear it trying to talk. Its little stitched-on mouth would not move so the pathetic cries and words sounded muffled.

Alexia fought for consciousness; she felt bile rising in her throat. If her niece was somehow in the doll, she must feel so helpless and afraid. Scooping up the lifeless child, she stood toe to toe with the monster. He was at least six foot four, and compared to her five foot three, he was a giant. However, she was not about to let him get away with damaging innocent children. Alexia let her fearsome temper escape!

“How dare you do this to an innocent little girl? You are an evil pig! Make my niece whole immediately! You coward, picking on children must really be a challenge! Make this right and I might not hurt you!”

To her complete outrage, he threw his head back and gave a resounding laugh. It was so loud that the crowd all took a step back in unison. Alexia was terrified. This man was not a normal illusionist.

Finally, Georgia had reached them. Mercifully, the crowd had let her through realizing she was the mother. Little Tony was sobbing. Georgia took her damaged daughter from Alexia's arms and she stood back, afraid and unsure how to end her child's suffering.

Alexia was fixated on the gruesome little doll as it attempted to reach for her. She was terrified of the doll. Yet she knew that if somehow her niece was in it, she was probably even more afraid. She fought every primitive response that told her to run and held out her hands. It almost leapt into her cautiously outstretched hands.

Georgia shied away from the doll, as did the rest of the crowd. Tears obstructed Alexia's vision until she could barely see, but she looked up at the monster and saw the strangest look of confusion on his face. Suddenly, the doll went limp.

Alexia looked up and the magician was gone. A sense of total grief and terror overwhelmed her. She turned to Georgia who was crying in relief as Dixie opened her eyes and began to sob. Alexia wanted to hurt the magician! Dixie held her chubby little arms out to her aunt and Alexia held her tightly, weeping into her hair and repeating how sorry she was over and over again.

Several bystanders asked if the doll thing had been set up before the show. Looking up with her tear-streaked face, she replied more harshly than was necessary, "What do you think?"

Deciding that the monkey exhibit would have to wait for a different day, they decided to leave. Alexia was angry and wanted to yell at the zoo's management. Georgia, still weepy, just wanted to get her children home. They stood next to her car talking.

Alexia asked, “Are you going to take Dixie to the walk-in clinic? I think she should be seen.”

“What will I tell the doctor? Hey, doc. Is the dolly still possessed by my daughter? I’m sure they would give me a prescription instead!”

“I guess you’re right, but wow that was crazy! Is Tony still coming home tonight?” Alexia asked with concern.

“Yes. Why? Do you think that crazy man will bother us again?” Georgia seemed truly terrified at the prospect.

“No, no I don’t. I just don’t want you to be alone tonight. It has been a bad day for you and the kids. Knowing Tony is there will make me feel better, that’s all.”

Georgia did not look entirely convinced by her words, but they exchanged a quick hug through the open van window before she drove off.

Alexia was still fuming that the zoo would have let that child-hating maniac perform. She went up to the information desk and demanded to speak to the manager. A nervous looking teenager called on a walkie-talkie for the manager. Alexia stood waiting, unable to restrain her tapping toe.

After what seemed like forever, a thin tall woman approached her. She was well dressed and possessed an air of authority. *Definitely the manager*, Alexia decided.

“May I help you miss?” The manager asked in a professional yet slightly nervous voice.

“My niece was assaulted by one of your workers! I want that man fired!” Alexia lost the battle to sound professional and gave into her desire to yell.

“Oh that is terrible! Where did this alleged assault occur?” Obviously trying to avoid a lawsuit, the manager was careful

with her words.

“I have many witnesses so it’s not alleged. It is a fact, and it happened in the middle of the snack bar patio. That magician must actually hate children! We did not even get to see the zoo the kids were shaken up so badly! I don’t have any idea who hires your entertainment, but they really need to be fired too!”

“I am so sorry. He is not one of ours. We had him banned from performing a few weeks ago. I have no idea how he keeps getting in, but the zoo actually has a restraining order against him. It seems he has some kind of vendetta against the zoo.

“Please take these season passes, there are six here. If you see him when you return, let a member of management know right away. We are doing our best to keep him out, but he must be a great magician to get past security. Also, take these complementary zoo cups. You get free soda refills all summer for you and the children.

“Please come back again. I promise we are working to keep that man out. All of the other acts are approved, but we no longer allow magic of any kind on zoo premises.”

Alexia took the freebies and thanked the manager. Her steam vented, she felt sorry for the nervous looking woman, and she could hardly blame the zoo for the psychopath’s actions. It did sound like the zoo was also a victim of his manic magic.

Exhausted, Alexia walked to her car. She regretted her vain choice to wear her new heels. They were cute, but her feet were killing her. After all the drama and trauma, her body felt drained. Just as she started sliding into the car, she spotted someone in the distance, staring at her. It looked almost like the magician. She quickly locked all the doors and rolled up the

windows, but saw no one when she looked up again.

Sighing over her too active imagination, she reached into her purse for her keys and was devastated to realize her wallet was missing. As if anything else had to happen to make this the worst trip to the zoo ever! She found the keys and began the drive to the police station to report the theft.

While she sat waiting to speak to an officer, she called her credit card companies to report the stolen cards. She was glad she had thought to program the numbers to the credit card customer service into her cell phone for just such an emergency.

After the grueling process of filing a complaint and canceling her cards, she just wanted to go home and drink a glass of wine in a hot frothy bubble bath.

Georgia had left a message on her home phone that Big Tony was home from his trip. Alexia was relieved.

She did not have to work in the morning and had planned to go out with a friend, but after the horrible day, she called Regina and begged forgiveness.

“Hi Regina, its Ally. I am so exhausted that I am going to stay home. I know that we have been talking about going to the club for a month, but today was really and truly a complete disaster.”

“Oh Alexia, you have got to come out! You are such a party pooper! You promised me that you would dance tonight and everything!”

Her friend’s pouting tone almost broke down her defenses, but she decided to be selfish and relax. “My wallet was stolen and worse my niece was attacked at the zoo by a magician of all

people!”

“Oh my God, Ally. I am so sorry. How is the little sugar bug doing? What did the bastard do to her?”

“Georgia and I have no idea how he did it. I think it was some kind of hypnosis but he made her unconscious and made it look like her doll was alive instead. Uber creepy and she was so scared, the kids did not even get to enjoy the zoo! I am really pissed. The zoo said they have banned him, but somehow he keeps popping up. Weird.”

“I am not taking my kids to that zoo again! You tell Georgia that I am thinking about her and give that sugar bug a kiss for me. I have a sitter so I am going out with or without you. I will post all of my awesome fun on Facebook and write on your wall about how much you suck for not coming!”

“I promise to feel really bad and feel totally left out!”

“Love you girl. See you later!”

“Have fun, be safe, and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

Laughing, she hung up the phone and sighed. The magician had really wrecked her day! She was just glad that her sweet little niece was all right and that no permanent damage had been done.

Spa time was her favorite way to unwind. She lit the scented candles in her bathroom and turned on soft music. Grabbing a big fluffy towel and a new book, she piled them next to the small tub that was filling with freesia-scented bubbles. Her bath pillow positioned just perfectly and her apartment just the perfect temperature, it was now time to unwind in the homespun spa!

Sighing in contentment, she let the hot water relax her body into a fabulous state of Zen. It was hard to stay awake. She was

so exhausted and the wonderful smelling bubbles made her feel light and comfortable. Laying her head back on the bath pillow, her eyes fluttered, fighting to stay open. Losing the battle, her eyes slowly closed.

Alexia had no idea how long she had been asleep in the tub. A noise startled her and she pushed herself up, causing her book and wine to plop into the now cooled water. Swearing in a nasty string of choice phrases, she plucked the book out of the tub and tossed it onto the carpet. Water had sloshed onto the candles when she tossed the book, causing them to go out with a hiss. Even her magical spa moment suffered complete obliteration by the foul luck she had been having all day.

She pulled the drain plug; the water and wine mixture gurgled its way down the pipes. Standing up and grabbing the fluffy towel to wipe the bubbles off her wet skin, she regretted falling asleep in the tub.

A movement in the hallway caught her eye and she held her breath, fear keeping her immobilized and naked in the tub. For a long moment, she waited. Nothing was there. Feeling foolish, she wrapped the towel around herself and stepped out onto the bathmat. Her long hair lay damp against her back. It was getting cold and she wanted to crawl into her flannel nightshirt and go to bed.

When she felt for the nightshirt, it was not there. Alexia knew she had left it hanging on the doorknob before she had gotten into the tub. It was a ritual to lay everything out for the bath the same way every time, a comfort. She never would have forgotten where she had put it down.

Shivering, she stayed wrapped in the towel and slipped her

feet into big, fluffy slippers. At least her feet were comfortable; the rest of her body was freezing. She always turned on the heat for a bath, even in summer, so she was surprised that the apartment felt so cold. It was a very warm late spring day. She had never expected the weather to turn cool, and in fact, the local weatherman had proclaimed a heat wave all week.

Going to the thermostat, she was mystified to see the air conditioning was on instead of the heat. Something was going on and it was freaking her out!

She picked up the phone and debated calling Tony or the police, but what would she tell them? *Hello officer. My home was invaded and all they stole was my nightshirt. But they got hot and turned on the air as they left.*

Shaking her head at her foolish idea, she turned the heat up and went into her bedroom to look for something different to put on.

Casually she flipped on the light switch and went to her mirrored dresser, rifling through the drawers. She noticed a big blur in the mirror and simultaneously noticed her missing wallet was lying on the top of the dresser.

Alexia's breath caught as she swung her body around so quickly that she gave herself mild whiplash. She had to grab onto the dresser to steady herself. Terrified, she panted, unable to catch her breath as her throat closed off from the intensity of her absolute panic!

Sitting cross-legged on her bed, the maniac magician smiled at her calmly as if he had ever right to invade her home. Paralysis had held her frozen in place for a very long moment, but as the shock gave way to fury, she felt her body release its tension. She was finally able to let out a blood-curdling scream

that would make any B movie actress in a slasher film proud! His smile faltered for a second and he looked at her with his head cocked to the side, as if he were confused, squinting his eyes as if he could make her stop screaming by adjusting his sight.

Throwing all caution to the wind, Alexia managed to sputter, “How dare you come into my home, into my room, and squint your beady little mean eyes at me! I am going to call the police and you are going to leave right now!”

Grabbing the telephone off her dresser, she began to dial 9-1-1 but the phone flew out of her hands, surprising her. Her grip on it had been so tight that she was amazed it did not disintegrate into dust. His hand had flicked at the moment the phone flew. He had either anticipated her calling for help and rigged the phone, or he really could do some type of telekinetic thing with his mind.

Swallowing her fear, she quickly stepped back out of the room and slammed the door shut; grabbing a chair, she slammed it under the door handle causing him to delay his pursuit. She grabbed her cell off the kitchen counter, yanking it, charger and all, out of the wall.

Still wrapped in the fluffy towel, she ran from her apartment and dialed her brother. She was too freaked out to rationalize that the police should have been her first call.

“Anthony Douglas Todd, you get your butt over to my apartment and bring the gun you use for hunting. I have a crazy man in my apartment!” She screamed the words at her brother, never stopping for a moment as she ran down the street almost naked.

“Sis, are you ok? Where are you?” Big Tony’s voice was

frightened and a little angry.

“I am running down Kingston Street in a towel. I have no idea if he is behind me, or still in my place, but I’m not going to stop to see!” Panting the words, she ran like her feet had wings in her adrenaline-fueled flight.

“Is it the man from the zoo?” Alexia was sure Tony was angry as she listened to his tone.

“Yes,” she replied quickly.

“Don’t stop and don’t call the police; this is a family matter. I will find you Al, don’t stop!” He had never sounded more intense and it really was making her head spin.

She kept running, never bothering to end the call. What could he mean by a family matter? What did he think he was...the mafia? Yes, she hated the monster that was terrorizing her, but the police made more sense than her salesman brother and a hunting rifle. She would never even have called him if she had not been so terrified that her brain had stopped working properly. Judging from the fact he never seemed to kill anything when he went hunting, she guessed that he was a lousy shot anyway.

No more than five minutes had elapsed when Tony pulled up in his car and opened the door. He did not even stop, but rather screamed at her to get in. Numbly, she hopped into the slowly moving car and was horrified as her towel was stuck in the door. Tugging desperately, she heard it rip.

Swearing she mumbled, “Great this is my whole wardrobe at the moment.”

Tony tossed her a sack with a t-shirt and a pair of sweat pants. She shimmied into the clothes as quickly as she could. Alexia was glad that her brother was covering the side of his

eyes with his hand. He obviously had the same ill feeling as she did about her being naked in his car.

Being in the clothes felt odd, but it felt much better than the towel. Looking down at what she was wearing made her realize again that he had made it to her in impossible time. In good weather with no traffic, speeding even, his drive should have taken at least fifteen minutes. That did not include the time it would have taken him to gather the clothes. Getting to the clothes and then the car should have taken as long as she had waited for him. How had he erased fifteen or twenty minutes of driving time, or had she been in such a state of shock she was confused about how long she had been running? Considering her gym pass had become dusty and she hated to run, especially in bare feet, she doubted she had run for fifteen or more minutes straight. It was doubtful she could have walked that long considering her current fitness level.

Before she could ask her brother to explain, they were at her apartment building and Tony was yanking her by the arm. Forcing her out of the car in a manner that was very unlike him, Alexia was unable to process the bizarreness of it all. In stunned silence, she followed him back into the danger zone. He had no weapon, but he looked ready to take on anyone who wanted a piece of him. She had never seen her brother look like he did now. He was acting so out of character that she was more than a little afraid he had ingested something illegal, or had suffered a head injury.

Countless scenarios of why he would go so crazy filled her head. She had a responsibility to Georgia and the kids not to let him kill himself for some vengeful vendetta. Alexia grabbed his arm and when he looked at her, she gasped. She could have

sworn she saw a purple misty hazy in his eyes.

Shaking her head, she rationalized that the extraordinary circumstances were making her hallucinate. Choking back her tears, she followed her brother into the apartment. It was quiet, just as she had left it, except that the chair she had pushed against the door as a barrier was shattered into zillions of fragments.

Sighing sadly, she looked at the destruction. She had really liked the antique chair; it had been off white with cracked finish, pink roses and vines twirled artfully painted as if they were climbing up the legs. It was one-of-a-kind. A moment of clarity made her want to laugh. She and her beloved big brother were in grave danger and here she was mourning over a broken chair. Alexia realized that she was a sick woman with extremely skewed priorities!

Tony grabbed her and pushed her behind him when they entered her living room. Lounging as if he were an invited guest, the magician sat comfortably with one arm draped across the back of her couch and his ankles crossed, his long legs stretched out. He took up a lot of space in her little living room. It was intimidating. She feared for her brother, but still hid cowardly behind him. It amazed her how confident Tony seemed to be. When she was little, he had always protected her but the dangers had never been as real as now.

Alexia glanced around her brother to see if the magician had any sort of weapon other than his creepy illusions. She was relieved that he did not appear to have any sort of physical weapon, but remembering the zoo and the phone, she hissed under her breath, "Tony watch out. He's tricky and he has had time to rig up some kind of illusion or trap or something."

Tony reached back to her, grabbing her arm he gave it a comforting squeeze. For a long time, he and the magician just stared at each other like two alpha male animals trying to intimidate each other. Finally, Tony spoke.

“Darrian, I thought I told you to stop crossing onto this side of the border. I will kill you for what you did to my daughter! You knew she was one of us. How could you attack a bound youngling?”

Bound youngling? What in the good Lord’s name was her brother saying? She knew her eyes were growing wider with each word out of his mouth. If he did not shut the weird up, her eyes would explode!

Laughing without humor, the magician, Darrian, barked out at Tony with malice. “You, hallowed leader, should get used to the border being crossed! Our people resent that you have chosen to live on the human side of the border. Your desertion of your rightful place has caused nothing but intrigues and misery. You return, but then you leave again and time is different on our side of the border, as you well know.

“We sicken of waiting for you to outgrow your preoccupation with your pet humans.” He smiled cruelly at the expression on Tony’s face. “Oh, I see I hit a sore spot. I meant family, not pets! You need to return to our people, Anthony! You need to lead. Humans are nothing to our kind. We can easily over power and enslave them. If you want this plane, all you need to do is gather the army. Many have long wished to rule all and ignore the pact we made with the ancient peoples.

“Humans have forgotten us; they have gone onto a new age and no longer know of our world and our kind. We can have it all now if we wish. They would be no match for us now that

they have lost their magic and replaced it with easily stopped bombs and bullets. Leave the humans and be what you were born to be!”

“Darrian, I am half human. I will never help you destroy the humans. I know that you lost everything that mattered to you during the great destruction, but it has been fifteen hundred years. You need to let go of your hate. I am young compared to the rest of our people. However, my youth has given me fresh eyes to see why things need to change on the fae side of the boundary. I will not give up my humanity. Many of our kind were once half-human. Now all but my family has shed that humanity. It was what made our kind capable of reproduction and enjoying art, music, and passion. The fae have become a dusty bitter race and I refuse to become that.”

Alexia’s eyes were bugging out of her head! Had she hit her head in the bathtub and this was all just a result of some kind of brain injury? What did Tony mean? Who were the fae and where was this border? Anthony was no leader; he was a traveling salesman for goodness sake! He was her whole-blooded brother and she was as human as human could be. Was Tony humoring the crazy man so he would leave without harming them? What would she do if the crazy was contagious?

Darrian spat his next words out hatefully. Hot-but-crazy was looking into Tony’s eyes with an angry intensity that made her grab her brother’s arm as if to protect him from the hatred.

“You have been holding out on your people. How have you kept a sister hidden all these years? Your people should know their princess. Do you think any single fae would condone leaving one of our kind’s powers bound into adulthood? You should have brought her home to learn about

her people and what she is instead of leaving her to wither and die as a human. She probably has no idea who she is.

“When your mother left our people, your grandfather, the greatest king our people has ever had, let it break him and allowed himself become mortal and die. He made his choice and it was selfish. He had given us so much and to have his daughter destroy it was wrong. What you have done is worse. Your mother accepted being mortal and as the first fae woman in five hundred years to have a child, we accepted what she did. Your uncle has never made a good regent and the court’s intrigues grow with your absence. You know what you are and yet you refuse to accept your birthright. No fae can straddle the boundary as you do for as long as you have without it damaging them. I have come to get your attention and I have it. Now listen and return!”

Alexia had heard enough and she shouted at her brother and Darrian, the insane magician. “I have no idea what is going on, but I do not want to hear any more of this craziness! I want everyone out of my home, now!”

Darrian laughed but with more humor this time. “My dear girl, I will never leave your side. I am sure big brother has told you nothing, but our families have a union covenant. We are married. I had no idea of your existence or I never would have let my bride live in this world, with no magic, withering a little more each day. Your brother must not love you or his children very much. He had the power to bring you home where death cannot touch you unless you allow it.”

He moved suddenly, like a snake striking its unsuspecting prey. Alexia gasped and tried to pull her body away, but it was too late. Darrian grabbed her forearm in a vise grip. Suddenly a

bright light emanated from his hand and spread up her arm, moving rapidly through her body. It stung as it spread deep into her body. She fell to her knees, tears welling in her eyes.

Tony was on the floor, by her side. He gathered her in his arms and kept whispering how sorry he was. It sounded to her ears as if he was saying goodbye. Was she dying? In her tear-blurred line of sight, she could see Darrian looking down at her with an oddly sad expression. He looked intensely interested in what was happening to her, but she sensed remorse. Screaming as the pain became too much to tolerate, the inky blackness of unconsciousness claimed her.

Fae

When Alexia woke up, she was not in her apartment. Painfully, she sat up.

“Tony, where are you?” she weakly called out.

“I see that you are awake. I am sorry about your pain. Having had your magic bound so long made it very difficult to unbind. With our essences merging as well, it was a lot to go through at one time. I apologize, but it was necessary.” Darrian paused. “This is your home now. Feel free to explore it as you wish, but I have shielded it from your brother coming and from you leaving. I will not allow you to escape your bond with me.”

Alexia let his crazy words sink in. He was a lunatic. She was not his bride or anything other than an average young woman going about like a single girl in the city. He was going to be massively disappointed because she had no plans to start pulling rabbits out of hats!

She was on a large bed with white sheets, blankets and pillows. It was a poster bed and each post had been wrapped with white drapes across and down. She had never seen such a large and spacious bedroom.

A beautiful mosaic-tiled floor lay below her feet as she stood up, wobbling. Three of the walls consisted mostly of glass French doors that lay open to a beautiful garden. A soft fragrant breeze blew in, ruffled the curtains on the bed, and made her realize she was close to an exit. She would see just how trapped she was!

Darrian spoke to her just as she was about to make a run for the doors. “You will find a bathing room and wardrobe through those doors. I had my servants ready this room for you. It has

been a very long time since a woman was in this house. If anything dissatisfies you, all you have to do is ask and it will be as you desire. What is mine is now yours. I want you to feel at home here.”

He turned to leave, and Alexia took off running. Her body still hurt but adrenaline gave her the ability to run faster than ever. Bursting into the garden, she was alarmed when the sky over her head was bright lavender instead of blue. It was not a stormy looking sky. She could see and feel the bright sun; it was orange instead of yellow. All the wrong colors made her pause, but only a moment. She saw a stone wall; it was low enough that she should have been able to jump and pull herself over it. Picking up speed, she rushed to vault over the wall to freedom. She knew her brother would be frantic. Her fingers grabbed the top of the wall. She pulled herself up and began to hoist her body over the wall.

As she let go of the wall to drop off the other side, she felt like she had hit an invisible trampoline. She felt herself pushed back through the air into the garden. It was surreal. If Darrian had not caught her, she would have hit the ground very hard. Dazed and annoyed, her startled eyes blinked up into his face. His expression was one of bemused humor. He set her down on her feet and left.

Sitting down on a bench in the garden, Alexia began to let the information overload sink in. It was all too much and she began to weep. How could she fight someone magical? As she cried, she noticed that each of her tears that hit the ground created a flower.

Gasping, the surprise made her stop crying. The last tear on her face fell from her cheek and when it hit the ground, she was

sure it was her tears that had created the strange, yet lovely, flowers. Looking down at her body, she noticed that she was still in Georgia's sweatpants and t-shirt.

Alexia stood up, her body aching from all the recent abuse. Walking back inside, she found the room that Darrian had mentioned; there was a large open wardrobe full of clothing. It seemed that each garment was made of sheer shimmering fabric. The clothes were not her usual style, but she pulled out several pieces and tried them on. She was surprised that they fit perfectly.

Walking further into the room, she discovered that it held a huge pool of steaming water. Beautiful and inviting, the pool reminded her of pictures of ancient roman baths that she had seen in a history book. She turned to see a mirrored wall stretching the length of one wall. Something she noticed in her reflection made her cringe. She could not resist going forward for a closer inspection.

Gazing in utter confusion at her reflection, she noticed that her eyes had the hazy misty purple swirls that she had sworn she had seen in her brother's before the confrontation with Darrian. Unable to stop herself, she let out a blood-chilling scream that echoed in the cavernous room.

Almost the second the scream began, Darrian was at her side. He held her for stability as her knees buckled from the force of her denial. She had been irrevocably changed against her will. Darrian had done something to her. She knew it the moment he was at her side, concern etched on his handsome face. His presence brought her a strange measure of comfort when it should have made her uncomfortable or just plain angry.

With her words shaking as they tumbled out she wailed, “What is happening to me? What are the fae?”

“You have had your powers released. We bind the magic of newborn children to protect them from abusing it before they know how to control it. At a child’s coming of age party, usually their fourteenth, although some parents will wait until the fifteenth if the child does not seem mature enough, a child’s magic is unbound. They begin formal instruction on the magical technique and responsibility of our people.

“You lost your magical parent and your brother never unbound you, so your magic turned on your body when you tried to escape. That is why it hurt you so much to be unbound. Prince Anthony made his choice and the damage is done. If I could have spared you, I certainly would have. I had no other choice if I wanted to free you.” He looked into her eyes.

“You and I.... we are fae. Humans call our kind fairies. Stories of stolen children and little winged creatures are all that is left of their knowledge of us. Once fae and human co-existed as two magical races sharing the Earth, but humans were fearful barbaric tribes that sacrificed their own kind. They had no understanding of why they had their magic, which is why they lost their magic.”

“Free me? I am your prisoner. If you want to free me, return me to my brother!”

He raised her chin up so that he could look into her eyes. She noticed his eyes were also swirling with haze, but the color was more of a smoky gray.

“I do not want to keep you against your will, but I need you to have time to accept who you are. We will have war with the humans; many of our people share my view. Most of our

people have lived in fear since the great destruction when man still had magic. They sought to destroy us out of fear that our kind would mingle with theirs and create children like you and your brother. I am one of the few pure fae left. Most of our kind were as you and your brother are, but after centuries of separation from human kind, all have let the humanity fall away until only their fae remains.

“It is unhealthy to do what your brother has chosen to do, bouncing between the worlds regularly. Time is different in our world. As a result, your brother stops aging when he comes to this side and then starts again when he goes to the human side.

“His son will be prince. He will be our king one day and your uncle will step down from the regency. He is only a placeholder for your brother. You are the only female child of your mother so you are our princess, and any son you bear will be next in line for the kingship after the son of your brother. Girl children cannot rule, but as your mother was the only legitimate child of our great king Axel, your grandfather, his foster son stepped into the position until your mother could produce a male child that was of age. Unfortunately, when we found him at fourteen and unbound him, he resisted accepting his role and left his despicable uncle in the regency. I am the last of my line; we were the most loyal Lords of the fae.

“King Axel promised any female child of your mother to any male child of my father as proof of our alliance. Therefore, you are mine as I am the last of my line. All of my older brothers and their families died horrible deaths during the great destruction.

“I had just married when the war began and I had no interest in warring until the night that humans came into our city and killed everyone within its walls. My wife had just given birth to

our twin sons Lucian and Luxian; they were hours old when they were murdered. I had been away on a diplomatic visit to the human tribes trying to get some kind of truce of peace organized in service to your grandfather. I had not wanted to leave my wife so close to her time for birthing. Yet I wanted the world to be safe for her and our children.

“I had no idea until I returned and found everyone dead that we had twins. I only know their names because of a note my wife wrote on the wall in her own blood as she lay dying. I became a warrior that day. I will never again be a man of peace as peace brought me nothing except misery.”

Tears welled in Alexia’s eyes. How awful to have lived with such loss! She understood how it would make someone eternally bitter, but she also knew that the humans who had done that were long dead. When she reached out to touch his face, he stood very still and closed his eyes, accepting the comfort. But the moment was short lived.

Darrian pushed her hand away and said, “You reek of your humanity. Let it leave you; accept this world and your magic will make you whole fae.”

Her eyes must have clearly shown him her horror as he gave her a disappointed look and left.

When he was gone, she took off the borrowed clothing and walked carefully into the pool of perfectly warm water. Finding a built in bench in the pool, she sat down. Soap and a cloth appeared instantly. Alexia had no idea if she had made it happen or if it was something that the room was enchanted to do; she just accepted that it was available and enjoyed soaking her physical and mental pain away.

When she was out of the bath and dry, she picked out a two-

piece outfit that was a color she could not describe or name. It was so beautiful it made her want to stare at it forever. Looking at her reflection in the mirrored wall, she decided that the design reminded her of a cross between a genie costume and an Asian kimono. It was like nothing she had ever seen, but she had to admit she liked it.

Before she could leave the room, a beautiful girl appeared in the doorway and curtsied in an old fashion manner.

“Princess, I have been sent by Lord Darrian to assist you in dressing your hair and to show you around your new home, if it pleases you?” She looked a little worried and desperate as she said the last words.

On a normal day, Alexia would have just combed her shoulder length hair, but she decided to keep the girl out of trouble and cooperate. “I would be happy to let you work on my hair, and I would very much like a guide if you have the time.”

Looking relieved, the girl smiled and curtsied again. Without a word, she directed Alexia to a vanity table and had her sit on the bench in front of it. Alexia was surprised at how quickly and gently the young woman had her hair styled in a graceful up-do.

Smiling at the girl’s reflection in the mirror she said, “You are very talented. I can barely manage a ponytail! What is your name?”

Flushing at the compliment, the girl said, “My name is Flora and I was your mother’s lady servant. I would be pleased to serve you princess.”

“You knew my mother? You have to be younger than I am. How could you have known my mother?” Words gushed out of Alexia in her desperate desire for knowledge.

“Time is different here. I am young, but also old. I knew your mother. She was the most wonderful person I have ever known and I considered her my friend. She was a princess, but she never treated me like less of a person because I was not. You are from a different kind of world so you have no idea how rare that is here.

“You remind me of her. You have her look, but also her kind spirit. I see it in your eyes. I am sorry for what Lord Darrian is doing, and I will help you if you want it. We have to be careful. He is on guard expecting for you to attempt escape, but in time he will forget that you want to escape. When that happens, if you still want to leave, I know a way that you can do so.” She spoke very quiet and quickly.

“I don’t want you to get in trouble for helping me. I would like your help very much. But only if you are sure it will not put you in danger.” Alexia spoke honestly.

Flora smiled and lovingly patted Alexia’s shoulder. “You are your mother’s daughter and I am sorry you did not know her. She would have thought of my safety before her own as well, and that is why I want to help you. I owe her much and I have worried for you since your birth. If you would like to know your mother and why you are in this position now, let me show you through my eyes if you are willing to see.”

Marveling at the cryptic offer, she nodded her head yes. Flora raised her hand with the palm up and the fingers spread wide. Alexia understood that if she put her palm to Flora’s she would be able to see her past through Flora’s eyes. Maybe it was genetic memory, but she went with her feelings and put her nervous sweaty hand against Flora’s cool dry one.

A flash blinded her and she fought not to pull away. Another

flash and then another and then millions of flashes assaulted her. She scrambled to make sense of it all, and then it stopped and a picture began to form in her mind. She realized the flashes were some crazy magical rewind of the past.

As the picture came into crisp focus, she saw her mother. She knew it was her mother only because she was in someone else memories and had their knowledge of the memory. She saw her mother and Flora as friends; saw her mother's sorrow as her people lost their humanity and became stagnant, living for nothing and no longer caring for each other as they once had. They had stopped reproducing children because they became content to exist without purpose. Giving away their strong emotions left them empty, without being able to feel or realize it. No longer able to stand the endless cycle of their world, Gillian, her mother, left with her trusted friend Flora. She had left her father a note telling him why and that she would return one day.

Flashes of time passed and then Alexia saw her mother fall in love with a human man, her father. Gillian loved him because he loved life as much as she did. She loved him because he was flawed, but he wanted to be the best man he could be. She loved him because he was handsome, not in the perfect flawless fae way, but in a rugged wild human way. She loved him completely and he returned that love.

Gillian became pregnant and rejoiced, having thought it impossible. Tony was born. More rapid flashes of time passed in her mind. Gillian was pregnant again seven years later. Alexia felt the warmth and love her mother had for her as the family prepared for her arrival; felt her father's joy and love for his family. Tears welled in her eyes upon realizing just how

much she had lost never having had her parents' love growing up, but she was so glad she now had the chance to feel the truth of it.

Tony had told her how much their parents had loved them, but she had never really understood it until now. More rapid flashes tumbled before her eyes and periodically stopped for her own first words and steps, picnics in the park and holidays. Her first year of life passed with nothing but happy memories. Then, she saw strange men coming for the family. They killed her father, but Flora helped Gillian and her children to escape.

Gillian's heart was broken, her will to go on was gone and she made Flora promise to take her children away and raise them as humans. She made her promise to never unbind their powers and to let them live in the human world. Tony held onto his mother, begging her not to die, but she did right there in his little arms. No wonder her brother was so intense about staying human.

Flora tried to make good on her promise, but the fae guard sent to bring the king's daughter home pursued her continually. Flora knew her friend wanted to keep her children human more than anything. She put them in a foster home, enchanting them so that no harm would come to them and each foster family would love them and cherish them as their own children. She cloaked them so that she was the only fae who could ever find them.

She ran for years until she got careless and they caught her and brought her back. Having heard of his daughter's death, the king died almost immediately and his foster son gleefully assumed the leadership. The malicious regent wanted Flora killed. Darrian stepped in and convinced the court to allow her

to serve his house, condemned to never leave by her own right. She was an eternal prisoner.

Many rapid flashes blinded Alexia. Years and years passed until Flora realized it was Anthony's fourteenth birthday. She knew that his uncle could not stay on the throne. She decided to break half of her promise.

She spoke to Lord Darrian and told him she could bring the fourteen-year-old prince home if he allowed her the freedom to go and bring him home herself. After careful consideration, he allowed her to do it her way. She found Anthony and Alexia, and enchanted the foster family to think that the state had placed him with another family. She told him that he had to go to his mother's people, but that they could never know about Alexia. If he loved his mother, he would keep his sister's life a secret.

Tony cried and clung to his sister, whom did not waken as her sleep was enchanted. He begged Flora to allow her to come as well. She cried as she magically wrenched him away from his sleeping sister and returned them to Darrian.

Tony was terrified but he never let one word of Alexia's existence slip. He found out that if the imposing human hating fae Lord knew of his sister, she would be magically bound to him for life. It terrified and angered him. He did as he always had and protected her.

He vowed to rule, but refused to take the throne completely, for if he did the human plane would be forever lost to him. The treaty from the time of the great destruction clearly forbade the fae king from stepping onto human soil. Tony could not accept never seeing his sister again, and so he straddled the two worlds, trying to do the right thing in both.

Alexia realized his hunting and business trips were a ruse to hide his secret life.

Flora released her and her mind only held her own thoughts and feelings. For a long time, the two women only stared at each other. Then they both burst into fits of sobbing. Alexia was grateful for all that Flora had done and understood it all now. This new knowledge made her feel stronger and whole.

In the days and weeks that passed, Alexia fell into a routine as she began to accept her imprisonment. Each day she learned more about her mother's world and her magic.

Darrian had hired a private tutor for her, an ancient looking fae elder whom she quickly grew to love like a grandfather. He delighted in her quick mind and rapid progress. Darrian had hired the same man to tutor her brother. He had guarded her brother against assassination, trying to mold him into a human hater who would follow his agenda. Tony had disappointed him by never wavering from his love of humanity. However, Darrian was pleased that he loved the fae as well.

One day while Alexia was working with her kindly old tutor, she discovered something that worried her. "Elder, you told me that Darrian took a very active hand in Tony's education. Why do you think he did that?"

The old man laughed for a moment and then became serious again. "Young woman, you are too astute for your own good. It must be all that human curiosity. Lord Darrian wanted to know all of young Anthony's magical weaknesses. Magic is like anything else we do, it takes time and talent to master. Lord Darrian was very keen to know all of the prince's struggles. He wanted to make sure that the prince would be able to defend

himself, mostly from your uncle. He also wanted to know exactly how he matched the young prince magic for magic.

“He spent much time with me analyzing what he knew in comparison. I know for certain that he worked to develop himself in the areas that young Anthony struggled most. I am a very old man and I did not want to start a feud so I did not tell the prince of my suspicions. After young Anthony was older, I did confide my troubled mind to him. You are much like your brother. I did not have to explain what Darrian was doing to the boy, he already knew.”

The tutor paused. “He lived here for what would amount to thirty human years. It was only four years in your world, but he is not unaware of where he stands with his lordship. Please do not think unkindly of Lord Darrian. He cares very deeply for your brother, but he wants what he feels is best for the fae. This hatred of his was born so very long ago. It is very unfortunate for him and for your people. Lord Darrian is the most respected fae male in the realm, and he has served his people with everything that is in him.

“Your brother is a child to our people and that fact will always trump the love and respect of the people. They listen to Darrian; they trust him. If your human world allowed a teenaged president, do you think the people would ignore the aged and trusted advisors of this president?”

Alexia thought over his words and revelations for a moment before she replied. “I see what you are saying. Can Darrian truly mean to have a war? He has seen how much pain war brings. How can he want to be the cause of that kind of pain?”

“His lordship hates war. In his heart, he is and has always been a man of peace, but he has fear. Even if the humans know

nothing of our kind any longer, even if they would not believe that we even exist, he fears that one day one of your kind will remember and will bring the magic back to the human tribes. Strip away the technology of your world, and your people will revert back to the primal ways within. You have to admit that disasters in your world have shown how humans will kill each other for as little as a drink of water.”

Alexia nodded. “I have heard of such atrocities. Despite the worst disasters and hardships, I also know the love and kindness that we can show each other. I am human, magic released or bound, I am a human woman and I know that I would not want to see harm come to the fae or to the human race, even if I was not one of you. If the human realm discovered you tomorrow, I do not believe that they would attack you.”

Laughing, her tutor patted her on the head like a small child and replied to her words. “Child, you are a gem. I am sad to say that you are very wrong. I admire your belief in the goodness in human hearts, but if they had the opportunity to take from another race and gain wealth or power by taking, they would do it. You are a sweet child, but you have not lived long enough to know the truths of the world in either realm.”

They began to work again and she knew that her mentor was wrong, but she also knew that she could not change the mind of someone who had made his mind up long ago. Thinking of Darrian planning the possible defeat of her brother made her angry, but her anger battled with her gratitude that he had protected her brother against danger. Flora had admitted that more than one attempt on her brother’s life had been made even when he was fully skilled in the use of his magic and had

reached full adulthood. It frightened her to think of Tony in danger.

Darrian was a dark and troubled man, but he had a good heart. She saw him as he was. It might have been the bond he had forced on her, but as the weeks fell away she forgave him and understood his need to do what he had done. She wanted to take his pain away, but had no idea how to do it.

She found herself drawn to him. He was not the monster she had thought him to be. He wanted to protect his people, but had lost his way trying. He was a man of peace under all of the pain and anger.

Alexia knew that Anthony had tried to get her released, but he found his hands tied by the magical covenant; if he broke it, Darrian would be able to have his war. As he was bound to serve Anthony as the true king, he had to keep his army in wait for the day the covenant was broken or that Anthony allowed him to have his war.

She missed Georgia and her brother, but she missed Dixie and Little Tony the most. If time was different, she worried that by the time she was free, they would be grown adults. She and Darrian suffered friendly hostility and at times she wondered if he had forgiven her for being half-human. Other times, she could only see his anger.

One night, Darrian and Alexia sat in the garden enjoying wine and cheese with fruit and bread. As always, the weather in the garden was mild and just right. Alexia wondered if it was just Darrian's garden or the fae's entire world had the habitual forecast of perfect. Being a fae weatherman must be the realm's most boring occupation.

Her wistfully sarcastic thoughts distracted her mind and Darrian must have noticed. Gently lifting her chin, he stared into her eyes. Handsome as always, his smile brought her attention back to him and she could tell he was not a man who tolerated being ignored.

They began to talk and soon she was focused on his charming company again.

Alexia began telling him about Anthony's children and his wife. Darrian listened to the stories with interest and she could tell he genuinely did like her brother, even if he disagreed with his view of humans. He laughed at one of her stories about the children getting the best of her brother.

She stopped; the sight of Darrian relaxed and happy made her catch her breath. He was lounging on his side on the blanket they had laid down to sit on. She was amazed that she had never really appreciated that he was the most handsome man she had ever seen.

He stopped laughing when he noticed the way she was looking at him. They were sitting very close to each other. He leaned over and before she realized his intent, he kissed her.

It was wrong to call it a kiss. In that moment, his lips were oxygen and sunshine, nourishment and hope. His kiss became the universe and she was helpless against her need for it.

Drowning in him, she could not think past her desire for him. Then, just as quickly as he started, he pulled away and disappeared. He left so abruptly it was as if she had bit him. He never said one word and hurt washed over her in waves.

She checked her breath and even sniffed delicately at her armpits. She did not stink as far as she could tell. Had she done something wrong? She was no blushing virgin, but she also had

never kissed a fae man, maybe fae males did it differently? Out of sorts, she began to clean up the picnic.

Flora rushed out to do the chore, but Alexia tried to waive her away. When Flora saw her expression she ran to her and enveloped her in a maternal embrace trying to comfort her.

“What did he do to you?” Flora asked, anger rising in her voice.

“Do I smell or something because I’m part human?” She asked, feeling foolish but desperately wanting to know.

“You smell fine honey. Did he tell you that you smell?” Flora asked, perplexed.

“He... We were kissing each other and he just disappeared. Do fae men kiss differently than human men?”

Flora chuckled. “Fae men and human men are both men and when it comes to that, they are completely the same! Now sit down. I have noticed a change in him. You soften him. I think he is terrified of you.”

Waving her hand at the mess, she magically removed it. Alexia was still used to doing everything the human way so the magical clean up unnerved her.

Looking at Flora she exclaimed, “No one could be terrified of me!”

Flora chuckled deeply. “Alexia, he has bonded you to him, but I don’t think he ever expected that he would love you. A bond does not promise desire or love, just permanence. Your heart is free. No one could force you to love, not even with magic. I have seen love on human Earth and on fae Earth, and you two are definitely falling in love!

“He has been alone for longer than you can imagine. I think his feelings for you make him feel like he is betraying his mission

of vengeance. He has forced you here and no matter what you may think, I have known him a very long time and he is a very noble man. He would never want you to feel forced in love matters.

“Give him time to heal. You have started to stitch a very old and long wound. It will take time.” Flora hugged her quickly and left her to her thoughts.

Time passed mysteriously as it did in the fae realm. Alexia began to lose track of it completely. Darrian had not tried to kiss her again. So she let it go, even though she longed for him to try again.

One afternoon, Flora and several other servants were magically redecorating a room. Alexia got inspired to decorate her white room, but she wanted to do it the human way.

She conjured paint, brushes, and tarps, then happily began the project. She wanted to show Darrian that humans could do something wonderful when they got creative. She was good at painting scenes of nature; it was something that she was proud to be able to do.

Alexia decided to paint some human nature on the walls of her white room. She started with the wall that was opposite of French doors. Soon, she was so engrossed in her work that she forgot about everything else. Standing high on a magical ladder, she painted clouds on the bright blue sky of her nature mural. Up so high, she did not hear Darrian come into the room.

When he saw such a human thing on his home, he yelled out at Alexia. “Why are you defiling my home?”

Startled, she leaned back and a scream tore out of her

throat. She heard the sickening crunch of her head hitting the mosaic tile and felt the pain radiate through her skull. Crying out, she lost consciousness.

Darrian was pacing next to the bed when she opened her eyes. She tried to sit up. Groaning, she let her head flop back down to the pillow. It hurt so much; the pressure in her skull was unbearable.

Darrian swiftly moved to her side and took her hand. “I am so sorry sweet one. I did not mean to frighten you. I thought you were dead; there was so much blood. Our kind forgets the mortality of a human, even one who is part fae is not impervious to injury. Until you shed your humanity, you are mortal enough to die.

“You may paint anything you wish, but I ask you only to keep your feet on the floor.” His voice was soft, his concern very real.

“Do you like it? I wanted you to see something beautiful about being human,” she said softly.

It seemed to take him a moment to realize what she was asking him. He smiled gently and said, “Yes, your mural is very nice, even if it is very human. You do not have to convince me that some human things are nice. Just being with you has let me see this.” He frowned a moment.

“It does not change my plans, but I no longer resent that you choose to allow your humanity to remain inside of yourself. Rest for me sweet one. I have many walls for you to paint when you are healed again.”

He smiled down at her tenderly as he stood to leave. He noted her surprise and it amused him.

She lay in the bed for far longer than she wished. Finally, the fae wise elder in medical concerns gave her permission to get up and go about life again.

Darrian watched her get up with wary eyes. She could tell he thought it was too early and she heard him arguing with the elder as the man left. She went to the bathing pool and enjoyed relaxing in the soothing water.

He had come looking for her. He had no idea that she had gone into the pool. Briskly, he entered the room and then he caught sight of her. He quickly turned to leave, muttering an apology.

Alexia called out to him, “Darrian, please don’t go. Sit with me for a moment and tell me why you were looking for me.”

She made big pink soft bubbles appear to cover her from his view. He came over and sat down next to the edge of the pool. She playfully splashed at him and he smiled slowly, but said nothing.

“So why are you looking for me?” she asked.

“I wanted to tell you that I think you should still rest. Humans are fragile and your body needs to heal completely. I do not want to worry like that again. You cannot age or become ill here, but you are still half-human and could be injured and die. I care about you more than I should, more than is wise for me.” His voice was soft and Alexia knew saying those words had cost him dearly.

She moved closer to him and pulled his face down to hers, initiating the kiss. It started sweet and slow but suddenly he pulled her to him, half dragging her towards him so that he could kiss her as he wished. Her feet were no longer touching

the bottom as he held her, but she was focused so completely on Darrian's lips that she barely noticed.

He started to pull away and she tried to hold him to her.

When he spoke, his breathing was ragged. "If I do not stop now, I will not be able to. I must leave you."

"No, don't stop, please." Her voice was a quiet plea and it broke him down.

The final break in his restraint came when she magically removed his clothing so that they were both naked. With a groan, he resumed the kiss.

The kiss gave way to the most intense lovemaking Alexia had ever experienced, the pleasure so intense it became pain and made her cry out with ecstasy over and over again. She had been with human men and she had experienced orgasms; but

Darrian brought her to the ecstasy of orgasm again and again, until she wept, overcome with the experience. She screamed his name. When she thought she would die if he took her to the edge of pleasure even one more time, she tumbled over the edge. She heard him cry out her name as he tumbled with her.

They lay on the cool floor for a quiet moment, trying to breathe normally again. She touched his face and he kissed her tenderly.

He disengaged himself from her arms and without even a single word, left her alone. She had noticed he looked troubled, but as he was not one for words, she hoped that it did not mean he was angry with her for pursuing her desire to feel him inside of her.

Getting dressed in the most flattering of her fae clothing, she could not stop her smile, glad that they had made love. It had

been perfect, wonderful, and beyond anything she had expected. After finishing her bath, she went to find him but he was gone.

Day turned into night, then another and another and before Alexia knew it, she had not seen Darrian for a week. That week turned into a month, and then that month became another. Her heart was bleeding and she was very angry.

Flora was just as trapped in the house as Alexia, but she talked to the other servants and discovered that Darrian was staying at another of his homes.

Alexia was beyond hurt by his actions.

Flora kept her ears open and what she heard made Alexia go cold. Darrian's army was preparing to move against her brother and attack across the human border.

Panicked for her brother and for Darrian, her emotions were torn. She did not want either of them to be hurt. No matter how much Darrian had hurt her, she had admitted the truth to herself. She loved him. His hurtful actions did not change that.

Her brother was her hero and she adored him; she loved his wife and children beyond words. The thought of Anthony being hurt made her feel sick. She wanted a truce between them. She also had another reason for her desire to keep Darrian well and whole.

Even if time did not follow normal cycles in the fae realm, her body did and she had discovered that she was pregnant with Darrian's child. Her child would be more fae than human and that worried her, but she would cross that bridge when she had to.

Alexia confided her news and fears to Flora, and they

worried together.

One morning Flora cautiously approached her and asked, “I promised you escape once. Do you still wish for it?”

“Yes, I need to warn my brother and stop this insanity. Can you help me? If you are discovered helping me, what will Darrian do to you?”

“It does not matter, Alexia. I will help you. Darrian is a fair man. His treatment of you is the worst behavior I have ever seen from him. No one will know it was me who helped you.”

She led Alexia to the back of the house where the servants lived. A little door in the pantry opened to reveal stairs.

Flora winked and said, “His enchantment will not work on you here because he did not anticipate you trying to escape from under the house. You cannot go over the walls or out of the door, but you can go under the house.

“This leads to the plaza. If you follow the main road, it will take you to the palace and I know your brother is there. Hurry, you do not have much time. I will cover for you and keep your escape secret for as long as I can.”

Alexia hugged her friend and then rushed down the stairs.

The dusty dark corridor was full of cobwebs. She hated spiders so she magically removed them and their webs. Flora had been right. She was able to leave and walked into the fae world unprotected for the first time. After her long sequestering, it felt wrong to walk around freely.

Making her best effort to be unnoticed, she hurried towards the palace that she saw in the distance, just as Flora had promised. She never noticed how deserted the streets were as she focused on finding her brother; never noticed that all the windows and doors appeared closed up and abandoned. She

focused only on saving her brother and her husband from each other. She never noticed the air of fear that surrounded the village.

When she reached the palace, a guard refused to admit her. She told him who she was and demanded to see her brother. The guard told her that the Prince had left to stop a war.

Gasping, she demanded more information and the guard complied.

“Rebels who want a war with the humans have challenged the prince’s right to rule as he is half human. In response, the prince has demanded his sister’s return, your return, and that Lord Darrian and his army are outlawed and banished from the fae realm. They stand at the boundary as we speak.”

Tears flowed down Alexia’s cheeks and she asked, “How quickly can I get to the boundary?”

Looking surprised, the guard answered, “All you have to do is want to be there and you can. You really must be the human raised sister not to know that!”

Alexia gave him a dirty look and closed her eyes, willing herself to her brother’s side.

Darrian and Anthony stood next to the gate that would take them to the human realm. They each held what looked like balls of light and were poised to throw them at each other.

Alexia appeared right between them in the line of fire. In surprise, they both lowered their weapons, but they still held on to them, neither one of them trusting that Alexia was really there.

“Please stop, this has to end!” She shouted, glancing at both of the men she loved.

“That is not Alexia. She is unable to leave my villa,” Darrian stated flatly.

“I escaped by going under the house. Darrian, you cannot do this because there is something you do not know that connects you to humans. I want to talk to you in private.” She hated how desperate she sounded as she spoke.

“There is nothing connecting me to humans, not even you.” Darrian’s voice was cold, but after his treatment, Alexia had not expected him to be different.

“Are you alright Al? Did he hurt you?” Concern was evident in Tony’s voice, but he never took his eyes off his nemesis.

“I am fine. For most of my stay, Darrian treated me well. Please do not hold anything against him. He broke no laws and I am not broken.” Her heart was broken, but she did not want the men and their armies to know that.

“Please pause your chest thumping for me to speak to Darrian, and then if you both want war, I’ll step back and let you have it. Anthony, just promise to me that Georgia and the kids are going to be alright.”

Tony made eye contact with her briefly and nodded gravely. She was relieved to know that their family was safe.

Speaking quietly to the man next to him, Darrian left his men and grabbed her arm roughly, steering her to the side. Alexia did not miss the anger in her brother’s eyes at Darrian’s roughness with her.

“Alexia, what are you trying to accomplish by threatening me?” Darrian asked in a tired and annoyed voice.

“Threatening you? I never did that!” Alexia found his question bewildering.

“Your cryptic assertion that I have a tie to humanity sounded

very much like a threat to me. I have no tie to any human. You are half fae or I would not feel as I do for you! I refuse to acknowledge your humanity!”

It was clear to Alexia why he had stayed away. He did have deep feelings for her and it had made him rethink his war.

“I’m going to have a child.” Alexia nervously stated.

“How long have you been able to leave the villa? How many times have you gone back to the human realm?”

“Not once. Are you not listening to me? I am going to have a child, our child. You have not been home so I’ve not been able to tell you.”

He looked hurt and undecided. “No fae has produced a child except your mother and brother, and they conceived with humans. I did not think it was still possible for a fae male.”

“I am half human. I am not a stagnant creature, but a growing changing being. You are the father of my child. Anthony has two children, why did you assume I could not have a child?”

“Anthony had his children with a human wife. I am fae and I have never been even half-human. I did not think that the fae were capable of reproduction anymore. We are immortal. It only makes sense that nature would evolve to prevent the over population of our kind.” She could hear him considering the situation as he spoke.

“That makes no sense at all. I love you Darrian. This child will need its father. Please do not war with the humans, let our child be born into peace and not war. This time it is entirely your choice to be a man of peace or a man of war.”

For a long moment, he looked into her eyes. She changed them so they were her human eyes and not the fae swirling

hazy lavender. He looked at her face once more, and then pulled her to him in a crushing kiss that took her breath away.

Family

Alexia loved the villa that she shared with Darrian, but she still kept an apartment in the city for when she needed to be human for a while. Darrian hated it when she took their daughter, Hally Lynn, to the human realm. However, Alexia insisted that their daughter needed to know both sides of her heritage. Georgia and the children would go with them back to the human side of the border, and that usual helped ease some of Darrian's anxiety, but not all of it.

When war had been imminent, Tony sent his most trusted guards home and had them bring his wife and children to the fae realm, and there he had finally told them the truth. Georgia had been shocked, but she had only been angry over the hidden truth of who her husband truly was. It had been two and a half years in human time since Alexia had gone missing, so Georgia was overjoyed when she found out that her sister-in-law was alive and well. While angry that her husband had let her worry, she was still happy beyond words! He had worried that Georgia would run screaming from him and never want to see him again. However, she loved her husband and understood that they had to live in the fae realm so he could have his evil uncle dethroned.

Rejoicing and peace soon followed.

Darrian gave up on his desire to war with the human realm, as he was far too busy being the most over protective pain in the ass that he possibly could be! Alexia loved him entirely too much, and she doubted it was healthy to love another being as much as she loved her husband and their daughter. She loathed that he was always trying to keep her protected in a bubble

wrapped bubble. He had actually tried that once! Luckily, she was learning to control her own magic, which was making him crazy, as she was quickly getting to be almost as good as he was.

Anthony insisted she was better at magic than his brother-in-law, but Alexia knew he was just an overly proud brother. The men still had a few issues that had been left unresolved, but they accepted the tenuous truce that had begun between them.

It was wonderful to understand who she was and to have her family together and safe. She knew that those who had stood by Darrian and wanted war still wanted war, but for now it was not going to happen.

Anthony was watchful, but now the fae knew that if they accepted their emotions again, they could have children. Children brought a new kind of energy and joy to the realm. Fae, who had before refused the cross into the human realm, began to cross again. Anthony had to send his guard across to clean up a lot of mischief, but it was good to see the fae feeling again.

Alexia knew that the peace would not last forever, but she knew she would enjoy it for as long as she could. If the time came, she was ready to defend the world of her birth.

Darrian came running into the room with Hally Lynn on his shoulders. Dixie and Little Tony were chasing him and as they rushed past Alexia, she noticed the toads that the children carried looked suspiciously like their parents. She hoped that Darrian was not teaching Hally Lynn magic again. They had bound her powers, but she had so much natural talent that her magic leaked out and she could do some frighteningly amazing

things. Alexia was not looking forward to her daughters fourteenth birthday. For now, she would just enjoy the wonderful life she had and forget the troubles of tomorrow. She stood ready to preserve what she had today.

Laughing, she rushed after the children and Darrian to see if she needed to restore a couple of toads back into the king and queen that she adored. Growing up, she had always wanted an exuberant loving family. Now she had one and it kept her busy.

Alexia knew she would never be that ordinary girl again, but she could not be happier with how her life had become magical. Her hidden magic was now found and she could make her world as wonderful as she could imagine it.

~*~ The End ~*~

About the Author

Ashlynn Monroe is a busy wife and mom. She enjoys writing about anything and everything paranormal while maintaining a career as a full time customer service professional. When she is not lovingly raising her young family, she is dreaming up her next tale of romance. She'd love to hear from you at ashlynn.monroe@live.com.