

*Miniature
Rose*

Fairy Rose

Bewitched By Fate



LEE
MORRISON

**Bewitched By
Fate**

By

Lee Morrison

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Bewitched By Fate

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Dedication

To the warlock of my dreams, because you found me—and
helped me smile again, my husband, Steve,
Heart and Soul Baby.
AML,

Lee

Lucas frowned. He hadn't expected this. The beautiful witch who'd haunted his dreams for the last year stood right in front of him, staring at him with clear green eyes as though she recognized him too, but it couldn't be.

Right here? In the conscious world?

"Hello. Have we met?" He thought he was going to melt right there on the street when the lilt of her voice slid over his senses.

I'll be...

She extended a delicate hand. Long slender fingers opened in front of him in greeting. A lock of deep auburn hair fell across her forehead as she smiled.

His heart dropped to his stomach. It *was* she. She was real, and she was here, in flesh and witch's blood. But how?

His jaw tightened. "No. We haven't met."

"But I thought for sure..." Recognition flashed over her stunning features. Her cheekbones were strong and high, her nose was straight and small, her lips were provocatively full and luscious, and her eyes were beyond stunning. Eyes that twinkled like emeralds captivated him to the point of speechlessness. He'd thought witches with the bright green eyes of a cat were made up for mythical stories—until now.

"I..." He cleared his throat. "I said we've not met. Now if you will excuse me."

He sidestepped her and prayed he could escape, but she stopped him in mid step with a voice every bit as magical as the beautiful witch who visited his dreams.

"How can you lie to me like this?" Her incredulous

tone did nothing to mar her magic. "I'd know you anywhere."

He nearly tripped, hesitated, and then kept walking. His heart rose to his throat. He wasn't ready for this yet. He thought of Kaitra, his wife who had passed on to the afterworld five years ago, but as it had been doing so often over the last year, the image vanished into thin air and left him grasping at the shadows. He clung to the memory that remained like a drowning person would cling to a life preserver. It was time to let go, but he couldn't. Not yet.

"Can you look in my eyes and deny you know who I am?"

Her presence alone stirred his male instincts. He felt like a traitor. It was bad enough that his unconscious thoughts were beyond his control, but the spirits of destiny added insult to injury when they hijacked his conscious thoughts as well. His jaw clenched in determination, but the woman's charismatic demeanor was like an anchor on his emotions, plunging his control through the darkness of deep unknown waters. He was powerless to stop it.

He paused with his back to her, struggling to compose himself. How could he have known she would be present here at Leto Island for the Halloween Fest? Had he known it was probable? He cringed thinking that some part of him had wanted to meet this woman in person. No. The Festival drew witches and warlocks from many nations. He couldn't control who came and went from the activities any more than he could have looked into the future to foresee this complication. Well, he *could* have. But he hadn't, and it was his own fault.

He, a warlock of living legend status, had turned his back on his talents, every single one of them, including his ability to see the future. And now, when he could have benefited from his gifts, he was paying the price for it. If he had only known, he'd have stayed away. Or would he? His brows drew together and he cursed his weakness.

He swallowed the lump in his throat and turned to

face his unwanted fate.

"I can honestly tell you, Miss, that I am unable to connect with you."

She studied him through narrowed eyes before responding. "I think it would be more accurate to say that you are *unwilling* to connect with me."

"You have no right to speak to me this way. We have nothing further to discuss."

"Why do you feel guilty for enjoying my company in our dreams? You've done nothing wrong."

He let out a small gasp. He'd been away too long. He'd forgotten to guard his thoughts, and she'd had the audacity to help herself by reading him.

"I'm not reading you deliberately," she defended. "I don't do that sort of thing. It's against my morals. It's simply fate. We're connecting on a spiritual level that neither of us can control. You can't fight it and neither can I."

He'd felt the spirits moving him in this direction for a year, but he'd done his best to fight it. She was correct. He'd done nothing wrong, and yes, he could feel her—*God, he could feel her*—but he was still angry at the spirits for taking his wife, and he was one stubborn warlock when it came to anyone, even the spirits, taking control of his destiny. He'd been happy. They'd given him a wonderful wife, let him fall in love with her, and then pulled the rug out from under him. He wasn't about to let his destiny be controlled again. Why should he trust the spirits this time?

"You have no right to be so familiar with me. You don't know me, except in our dreams..." He broke off, wincing as his body reacted to the memories of the moments he'd already shared with this woman in the dream realm—the history he was already developing with her. "And as you said, that isn't something either one of us can control," he said more sharply than he'd intended.

"I can see you're going to need time to accept this." She moved closer, inches away, but didn't touch him. "In

the mean time, I want you to know that I'll wait for you. If you are more comfortable keeping our relationship in the spiritual realm for now, I'm ok with that."

"Of all the presumptuous, insolent..."

"Presumptuous?" She shook her head. The hypnotic melody of her voice seeped into his soul and warmed his body. "Might I remind you, that *you* are the one who found *me*?"

"We both know the spirit world comes and goes freely in our unconscious world."

"Yes," she agreed. "And we both know that the spirits of fate are much stronger than both of us. You and I are destined to love one another. Though how we get to that point is beyond me."

They stared at each other in silence.

After a moment of serious scrutiny, she said softly, "You seem much different in person."

Was she criticizing him?

"Good day, Miss."

He left her standing in the town square where everyone gathered in the courtyard for the annual Halloween Fest. His guard firmly in place so she wouldn't be able to read his thoughts, he made his way through the crowd to find his daughter. Why had he agreed to bring her here? He spoiled the impetuous sixteen-year old beyond reason. He was having major second thoughts about this entire journey and he was feeling like a bear that had been jolted from hibernation as he stalked through the crowd. Angry, tired, restless, and unable to accept reality, he held back a thunderous growl as he searched for Erin, who was signing up for the activities and workshops she would be attending during the upcoming week.

By the time he found her an hour later, he'd been stopped by at least half a dozen people who recognized him and asked for his autograph, thrilled that they'd spotted the famous warlock. He'd managed to recall his manners, and compose his temperament for the most

part. It wasn't right to take his frustration out on others. When he saw Erin, her face glowing with excitement as she spoke with a group of girls, his heart turned over. Maybe returning home to Leto Island hadn't been such a bad idea, at least where his daughter was concerned.

He'd turned his back on Leto Island when his wife had been taken five years ago, but he couldn't keep Erin from her ancestral home forever. He sighed. It wasn't fair to her and it was high time he faced it.

On earth, he'd kept her secluded. They were peaceful there. They lived each day making their own fate, with their own choices, and their own decisions. They didn't have magic to strip the joy from life. Well, they had it if they wanted it, but he forbade it. At least until recently when it became obvious that Erin would no longer ignore the talents she'd been gifted with from birth.

He'd been teaching her how to use magic properly for the last two years, but only in limited amounts. He wouldn't even have allowed that much but he didn't feel it was right to take her heritage completely away from her. Whether he liked it or not, it was part of who they were, but he'd be damned if he'd let it ruin their lives as it had for ten years of his life with Kaitra.

He'd seen the future then. He'd known all along that she was going to die, and he'd lived a tormented life with her knowing that he was going to lose her. It had stripped him of the contentment in his heart, and had shadowed the pureness of their love with an insidious misery that had tortured him endlessly. Each and every day his heart had been ripped open. With each passing day, he'd died a slow death, knowing that he was going to lose his wife. His hands clenched into fists at his side as he lived the agony yet again in his memory.

In the registration area in front of the Grand Hall, he watched his daughter laugh in animated pleasure. If only he could find the happiness to light her spirit that way on earth.

Balloons, flyers, witches and warlocks young and old

milled about. Cats walked beside their mistresses, and dogs trotted beside their masters. Some of the younger witches carried their brooms and chatted about the upcoming annual *Broom Boom*, a cross-town race that would kick off the festivities of the week that evening. A group of warlocks followed closely behind them, ogling from a discreet distance.

It almost hurt physically when, despite his dark mood, Lucas couldn't fight the smile that lifted the corners of his mouth. He didn't *want* to smile.

Music leapt to life from a band that levitated above the town center, pumpkin bread samples floated among the crowd on self-propelled trays, and various spices left a delectable scent lacing the air. An autumn breeze, much like the ones on earth, swept the leaves into swirling circles on the sidewalks, and magic brooms worked among crowd to keep the streets clean.

"Dad!" Erin leapt forward as soon as she saw him. "Everyone, this is my Dad, Lucas Black." The girls giggled. Several thrust note-pads at him, asking shyly for an autograph while blushing profusely. This was another part he hadn't been prepared for. It had been awhile since he'd been in the limelight, but when he looked at the pride beaming from Erin, he dug deep and found the strength within to don his public persona.

"Thanks Dad," Erin said later as they strolled across the town square. "I knew you were well known, but I had no idea you were *famous*."

"Want to grab some dinner?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Sure. You won't believe all the terrific things that are happening here this week."

"Try me."

"This is so exciting. Guess who's giving a three day workshop?"

"Who?"

"Ashley Stevens." Excitement lit her face.

Lucas didn't recognize the name but it warmed his

heart to see her coming alive again. She'd become increasingly withdrawn over the last year and he'd been working hard to figure out how to help her.

"It's called *Magic With Honor*, and she will be talking about some of the principles you and I have already discussed at home, Dad. She's a gifted witch and she's becoming famous here on Leto Island. I got the last spot in her class."

"Really? That sounds very interesting. I'm glad you found a place in the class."

Lucas made a mental note to investigate Ashley Stevens and determine if her lessons were something he wanted his daughter emulating. He had to admit, it sounded promising.

Monday morning dawned with an orange sky over the Leto Mountains in the east. He stood on the balcony of the Renaissance Theatre Hotel and marveled at the beauty of his home world. It was an independent nation. Totally self-sufficient with its own sun, two moons and an assortment of stars; it was a world invisible to all but true witches and warlocks. Leto Island levitated as an island nation within the protection of the Black Hole of the Earth people's universe.

It was the perfect place to exist, safe and snug, within the layers of blackness. Not one Earth person, for all their efforts, or any other universe creature for that matter, had ever found them. They were protected from all sides and his people had lived here peacefully for millions of years.

Lucas rubbed tired eyes and tried to focus on the morning news. He snapped his fingers and the micro-screen that had been hovering in front of him sprang to a full size hologram, moving with him as he paced.

News of the Halloween Fest was on every channel. His brow raised in amusement as his photo was shown, touting the legendary return of the warlock of all times. He was hardly that. His father and grandfather would

easily have taken that title.

He took a hot cup of coffee from the complimentary tray that hovered beside him and waved off the buffet table waiting patiently behind.

It had taken everything he had to stay awake last night. He'd nodded off once and despite his best efforts to remain within his body, he'd immediately gone to visit the bewitching woman with the deep green eyes.

She'd been waiting for him, just as she'd promised. Open arms greeted him and he was wrapped in an overwhelming sense of peace, love and warmth. He'd never felt anything so seductive and pleasurable. He cringed. He'd refused to give in to the spirits. He'd dug his heels in deep and hard and had pulled himself back to the conscious world, where he'd remained the rest of the night.

He showered and dressed in time for Erin to come bouncing into his suite with exuberance. He'd get through this week for her. She needed this week, and all the culture bonding that came with it, and he intended to let her embrace it. He pulled his shoulders back and drew in a breath. *And I'll be damned if fate will interfere with anything from this moment on.*

Lucas agreed to meet Erin at noon for lunch. She had a full day planned and she'd already chosen a decent group of friends to accompany. Lucas had some plans of his own. He'd insisted on having a copy of her itinerary and he intended to check out each and every activity she'd signed up for. He might be a bit overprotective, but he wasn't willing to take any chances with his daughter's well being. He eyed a group of young witches and warlocks that gathered in the courtyard. The giggles and flirtatious behavior took him back to the days when he'd been a young warlock.

He'd been reminded many times over the last year in his dreams of what the powerful rush of physical attraction could do to a male, and he was old enough to

supposedly have some semblance of control. He'd hate to think what the red head from his dreams would have done to him as a teenager. From nowhere, a rush of emotion slammed into his being. It almost knocked him off his feet.

The breath was sucked from his lungs. His heart drummed in his chest. Warmth spread over him like honey, and every nerve in his body flared in reaction to her presence. Without even turning around, he knew she was behind him. It was the first time he'd connected with her spiritually while he was awake, and he'd left himself wide open for it.

"Good morning," she whispered as she passed him.

The mischievous grin she wore was no match for his present state of mind and he had a feeling she knew it. She smelled faintly of fresh lilacs as she leaned close to him.

"It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, isn't it?"

She winked and her smile lit a fire in his groin that felt as though it could have heated an entire universe.

As she continued on her way without waiting for a response, Lucas was left struggling to compose himself once again. He couldn't remember ever feeling as vulnerable to a woman in his entire life as he felt with this maddening enchantress.

Lucas spent the morning checking out the various events on Erin's itinerary. In particular, he was especially pleased with the news he'd been hearing around town about Ashley Stevens. She'd built quite a reputation with her philosophy and her dedication to teaching young witches and warlocks how to use magic responsibly.

As far as he could tell, Erin had made what seemed to be a wise choice. He'd read through some of the information about her and found that everything she seemed to believe in was exactly what he'd been striving to teach Erin, with one exception...*he* believed that sometimes magic could be a curse.

At the restaurant, Lucas discovered the delectable

aroma of old fashioned witch stew had teased him long enough. It had been too long since he'd had some authentic Leto Island food and his mouth watered as he perused the menu while waiting for Erin.

"What can I get ya sweets," a woman with a native accent asked. The closest thing he'd heard to it on earth had been what he considered a blend of an Irish and Italian accent laced with eighteenth century pirate dialect. It was strange and beautiful at the same time. Aside from the mysterious woman of his dreams, though her speech was far more cultured, he'd not heard it since he'd left Leto Island five years previously.

"How is the witch's brew today?"

"Quite tasty if I do say so. Try the special of the day why don'tcha." She leaned in slightly and whispered. "I made it meself. It's apple with a dash o cinnamon twist."

Lucas smiled. "Then I must have a glass. Lots of ice please."

"Aye, 'tis the only way, Sir."

Her pen wrote obediently on the note-pad at her side while she set the table. When she was done, she held out her hand and the pen and note-pad settled onto her palm. It was then that she saw the pamphlets peeking out from Lucas's jacket pocket.

"Oh, are you a fan of Miss Ashley's, Sir?"

When she nodded toward the literature Lucas realized whom she was talking about. "Oh, well, I don't know. I may be, from what I've read so far. My daughter is signed up to take a class with her this afternoon."

"Indeed? You couldn't be placing your daughter in better hands I tell ya. Miss Ashley is a real gem, inside and out."

"That's good to hear. It makes me a bit more comfortable to think that she will be in good hands."

"The best sir. Haven't you heard? Miss Ashley has become the most sought after witch when it comes to her work with the children. She's set many a would be criminal back on the straight and narrow with her

philosophy. She makes the children care about who they are, and how they treat others. Don't know what my two scoundrels woulda become without 'er. She set them right, she did."

Lucas smiled, nodding without a verbal response. He'd make up his own mind about Miss Ashley Stevens.

"Are you going to attend as well?"

"I don't have a ticket. Her class is filled."

The woman's face lit in toothless triumph. Her nose was a bit crooked as though it had been broken, but when she smiled, her eyes warmed and it was easy to see she had a kind heart.

She reached into her apron pocket, dug around a bit, and pulled out a small envelope.

"Here you go. Been waitin' for the right person to give this to. Cruella back there won't let me out o me shift to attend the class, the wicked..." She broke off and swallowed the rest of her words on a grumble. "Um, anyway, I want you to go with your daughter and see what I'm talkin' about wi' Miss Ashley. You'll see what I mean."

Lucas was stunned. She left the ticket on the table and whirled around to head back to the kitchen, a light bounce in her step despite what he suspected her age must have been approaching.

Erin finally arrived and by the time they'd eaten their lunch and managed to escape the increasing recognition Lucas was getting, it was time for the workshop.

"Oh Dad, you're going to love Miss Ashley. That's what everyone calls her. I got to talk to her this morning with a group of other witches. It was very informal and she is sooo nice. Did you know she has a Ph.D. from Harvard *and* Leto University? You'd never know it from how regular she is."

Lucas laughed as he listened to Erin gush about her new mentor. The closer they came to Hulton Tower, where the workshop was about to begin, the more goose

bumps began to rise on his skin.

Something was amiss. He surveyed the building as they made their way to the classroom and took their seats. He scanned the crowd for the only woman who could make his body react this way, but she was nowhere to be seen—until the door at the front of the classroom opened and in walked the most beautiful witch he'd ever laid eyes on.

She was Ashley Stevens? He could feel the color draining from his face. He fought to regain composure and decided that one Miss Ashley Stevens had wreaked havoc on his body for long enough.

With everything he had, he pulled himself together. He made sure his guard was up and veiled his face with bland indifference. He was here because of his daughter, nothing more. He refused to allow her identity to sway his emotions. It didn't change a thing. He still wasn't ready for a relationship. It didn't matter if fate was throwing them at each other or not, he refused to comply.

He sat through the class with stoic apathy. At least on the outside. On the inside, he was a bundle of mixed emotions. The more he watched her, the more beautiful she became. Her every move was graceful like no other woman he'd ever seen. Her words drifted over him in that melodious and magical voice that left him feeling like he had a warm blanket draped around him.

The wisdom in her words was astounding, to say the least. Though he wasn't prepared to admit it openly, he found that by the end of the class she had elicited a deep respect from him that he was unable to ignore.

When class was officially dismissed, Erin dragged him by the hand to meet Ashley. She was every bit as charismatic as she was in the dream world, but there was a veil firmly in place in the depths of her eyes that he hadn't seen before. He was quite sure she had her thoughts guarded with her magic but he wasn't about to test his powers to find out. It would be unethical as far as he was concerned. Apparently they agreed on several

topics if her lecture was anything to go on.

“Please Miss Ashley,” Erin begged. “Come to dinner with us will you? I’d love to spend time with you and I’m sure Dad would too. I’ve told him all about you and everything you talk about is exactly what he’s been teaching me at home.”

Lucas watched as Ashley’s brows arched a fraction of an inch. Approval?

“I’m sure she has other things she’s busy with sweetheart, especially this week with all the activity going on for the festival.”

The light of challenge lit Ashley’s eyes as she stared coolly at Lucas. “Hardly, Mr. Black. I’m quite prepared at this point in time. All I need to do now is show up for the classes. I’d love to have dinner with you both, if you don’t have anything else keeping you busy.”

Erin practically jumped for joy as she screeched in delight. “Yay! Come on Miss Ashley, Dad and I are having dinner at Chalet de la Luna tonight. I’m sure we can get you in with us, right Dad?” The particular pleading look his daughter applied on him always won him over and he chuckled in defeat. He may have lost the battle, but he would still win the war.

During dinner, Lucas locked gazes with Ashley more than a few times. They both pretended it didn’t happen each time and moved on with their conversation. Erin was bubbling over the fact that they were all sharing time together and was even bold enough to suggest that Lucas should ask Ashley out on a date at one point.

Lucas gave his best warning glare but Erin knew him too well, and Lucas knew that she sensed there was something going on underneath the surface between Ashley and him, but he could also tell that she didn’t quite know what it was.

“So tell me dear, when you get the urge to use your magic at home, what do you think about?”

They were sitting at the candle lit table, enjoying the most delicious dinner Lucas had tasted in ages. Erin

simply pushed her food around and considered Ashley's question carefully before answering.

"Well, I think about how I'm not supposed to use it." She glanced nervously at Lucas. "But sometimes it just happens. It feels so natural, especially when I feel strongly about something."

"It's natural to want to use your magic." Ashley threw Lucas a challenging look. "But when you get the urge to use your magic, it must always be under controlled circumstances. An emotional witch and magic can be a lethal combination. You need to consider all your options before you resort to magic, especially when you're emotional."

Lucas felt his heart squeeze. Had he really done the right thing by isolating his daughter from the society she belonged to? This was her heritage. What right did he have to take it away from her?

"What has upset you enough to use magic?"

Erin looked away. "I don't know, Dad. Just stuff. Sometimes I just feel so alone."

Lucas caught his breath. What was he doing to his daughter?

When Lucas failed to respond, Ashley leaned forward and took Erin's hand.

"Honey, look at me, please."

Erin complied and tears welled up in her eyes, spilling over her cheeks silently. Ashley took a deep breath and sat back in her chair. She reached behind her neck and unclasped a necklace. A smooth crystal pendant was attached with a gold loop to a leather string. It was polished to a shine and the coral tinted crystal changed colors several times while Ashley held it.

After she had studied it for a moment, she lifted her gaze to meet Erin's.

"This is a communication pendant. We call them "care crystals" because of the purpose we use them for in our group."

"What group?"

“Yes, what group,” Lucas repeated. His eyes narrowed in suspicion, but Ashley ignored him, speaking directly to Erin.

“I helped to organize a group a couple of years back for teens who are going through a tough time. It doesn’t matter what it is. If you’re struggling with a problem and you need to talk to someone, there is help here for you. The group is called SOLS. It stands for Sisters of Leto Support. I want you to wear this and keep it close to your heart. If you should ever feel as though there is something you can’t bear, hold this in your fingers and say these words, ‘I need a friend’, and I promise you, someone will come to help you, no matter where you are.”

Lucas was moved deeply as his daughter accepted the pendant. He’d seen a group of volunteers for SOLS in the market square earlier in the day and had made a mental note at the time to take Erin there before they returned to Earth. He was speechless over how this woman had reached out to Erin.

For Erin’s sake, he had been tolerant and made the best of an awkward situation when a dinner guest had been sprung on him, but by the end of the evening, it was plain to see that the situation may have gotten the best of *him*.

His fingertips rested lightly at the arch of Ashley’s back as he escorted her, with his daughter, through the market square. She was intelligent, funny, kind-hearted, gorgeous beyond all description, and totally likeable in more ways than he was willing to think about.

There were still people out and about. Some still wore costumes as they went to and from various parties; some were simply strolling under the beautiful star-studded sky for a breath of fresh air.

At the entrance to Ashley’s hotel, she turned to Erin and gave her a hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow, dear.”

“Goodnight Miss Ashley. Thank you for everything.”

Lucas watched as Erin clung to Ashley in a tearful embrace.

"Don't worry, darling. Things will work out the way they are meant to."

Ashley turned to Lucas and offered her hand. He took it this time, touching the smooth skin on the back of her hand with his lips.

"Thank you."

She simply nodded and moved through the double doors two bellmen held open for her. Lucas thought he'd never seen a woman with as much grace and class as Ashley possessed.

That night Lucas fell into a deep slumber. He awoke feeling rested the next morning, but he was surprised to find that he also felt a sense of disappointment. He hadn't seen Ashley in the dream realm, and he was surprised that he had wanted to.

He was forced to admit that Ashley intrigued him. As much time as he'd spent trying to avoid her, he suddenly wanted to seek her out. A twinge of guilt stabbed at him, but it wasn't as strong as it had been even a few days ago. He felt renewed in another way as well. He felt as though someone had breathed life into his dying soul and he knew exactly who that someone was. He couldn't quite understand it, but somehow, he felt as though his soul had been reborn.

He walked to the balcony and looked out over the town as he took a swig of his morning coffee. The morning was beautiful. He had forgotten how lush and truly picturesque his homeland was. The air was clean and crisp. The foliage was brighter than any he'd seen on Earth. He rolled his head back and breathed in with nostalgic contemplation. The sky was even a deeper blue on Leto Island. He was sure of it.

Lucas showered and dressed, even dipping into the cologne he carried with him but rarely used. He spent the morning meandering around town with Erin. He couldn't help but think that he'd made a breakthrough with her the previous evening, and he wanted to spend some time

with her and keep the lines of communication open.

A rush of appreciation swept over him as he watched Erin move from one area to the next. A sense of peace emanated from the inside out, lighting her with a glowing beauty so lovely it took his breath away.

"There's something different about you Dad."

"Like what?"

"Like, I don't know. It's like you're...happy."

Her words stung and uplifted him at the same time. He was beginning to realize how difficult he must have been to live with for the past five years. Being back on Leto Island, talking with his own people, catching up with news, even chatting with a few old friends had made him realize he'd lost himself.

"Has it been that bad, sweetheart?"

Erin looked at him with a wary expression. "You're not the easiest person in the world to get along with, Dad. You haven't been ever since Mom died. You used to be so much fun. I know I'm not enough to replace her, but I do what I can to make things easier for you."

Lucas felt as though he'd been punched in the stomach. He was crushed to think that Erin had been carrying his burden for the last five years. He thought he'd been a good father, but he realized now that he'd failed her miserably. Tears stung the back of his eyes. He gathered Erin in his arms.

"I'm going to do better now sweetheart. I promise."

They held each other for a moment and then Erin looked up at him. "Come on Dad, we're going to be late for class."

Over the next several days, Ashley gave everyone in her class assignments to work on. Lucas was amazed, not only at what a gifted witch she was, but also what an inspiring teacher she was.

At one point in a lecture, she called for everyone to choose a partner and led them through an exercise in spiritual communication. Incense candles scented the air

with sage, sandalwood, and orris. Juniper berries in a thick resin bubbled over a warmer, and the scent that filled the room was soothing and sensual. The exercise required all guards to be dropped. Each person held their partner's hands and after breathing deeply, counting to ten, and holding eye contact for a few minutes, it was possible to open communication wavelengths on an astral level that transcended the physical element.

Lucas was stunned to realize that it was possible to feel his daughter's emotion. Not simply empathize and imagine. He *felt* her emotion. He knew her happiness at being on Leto Island, where she felt accepted among her own people, he knew her joy at having Lucas present with her to attend the class, her loneliness on Earth, her sorrow over missing her mother, and the love she carried in her heart for her father.

He was shaken to the point of speechlessness over knowing and feeling his daughter's true emotions. It was quite different than simply understanding. He wished he could erase her pain, wipe away her sorrow, and fill her with the happiness he wanted for her.

"Dad, it's part of life to have all these emotions. It's okay. I feel yours too. It's amazing, isn't it? Ashley says this is what makes us who we are. The ability to feel the emotion and react to others. If we didn't feel the entire spectrum of emotions, we wouldn't be whole."

Lucas closed his eyes. His body shook with the deeper meaning of what all of this meant. Not only did everything he and Erin had been through develop them as individuals, but it deepened their character, taught them valuable lessons in love and life, and opened their hearts to living through experiencing the pain of dying. He swallowed the lump in his throat. A gentle hand rested on his back.

"This is what life is all about, Lucas," Ashley whispered in his ear. "It's not for the faint of heart to handle. Only those who are strong can bear the burden, as well as the joy, that life has to offer. Others wilt away

under the enormity of the emotion. Not you. And not Erin. You are both strong. Survivors. That's a good quality, but life isn't just about surviving. It's about living each moment to the fullest. It's about enjoying each other while you have the opportunity. It's not about wasting the time in fear. It's about embracing the gifts in joy."

Lucas looked into her eyes and was completely overwhelmed at the amount of love this woman had in her heart to give. He could feel it. She opened herself to him and with her hand on each of them, formed a trio where they all shared the most beautiful moment Lucas had ever experienced.

"Ashley," he groaned.

"Shhh. Take your time, my love. I told you I'd wait for you. I'll wait for both of you."

Erin looked at Lucas and Ashley as though she were in awe of the entire situation.

"Dad, does this mean what I think it means?"

Lucas grinned. "I'm a little overwhelmed right now honey, but I think it's safe to say we've had a major break through on several things this week. Wouldn't you agree?"

It was the most enjoyable week Lucas could remember in a long time. When he wasn't in class with Erin and Ashley, he was spending time with both of them in some other way. Father and daughter alike were completely bewitched by Ashley. Lucas because he'd found in her a warm, loving, intelligent, well rounded companion who also managed to shoot fire through his veins with simply a look or a caress. It had been years since his male desires had been awakened to the point of an exhilarating rush of lust. But there was much more beyond the lust he felt for her. Much more that he wanted to explore, if only he wasn't too late.

On the final night of the Halloween Festival, Erin was still glowing from the week's activity and all of the important lessons learned, but she was also a bit subdued, and Lucas thought he understood why.

They were prepared for the Grand Ball, and they were to meet Ashley at seven for dinner. Lucas took his daughter's hands into his and held them.

"You look beautiful, sweetheart. You've been absolutely glowing with happiness this week."

"I love it here, Dad."

"I know."

She looked away, but not before Lucas saw the sadness that shadowed the eyes that were so like her mother's. He'd do just about anything for the well being of his daughter. He wanted her to know her heritage, and to be comfortable in her surroundings. He wanted the best education possible for her, and for her to make good choices in life. More than anything, he wanted her to be happy.

"I've been doing some thinking this week, sweetheart."

"About what, Dad?"

Erin brought her attention back to him with an attempt at a smile. For the first time in five years, he was able to look directly into her eyes without feeling the sting of pain that reminded him of his dead wife, but rather he saw Erin as her own person, a gift that had certainly been given to him from Kaitra, but entirely individual.

He'd learned this week that he could choose to spend the rest of his life in agony when he looked into his daughter's eyes, or he could choose to spend the rest of his life being grateful for the time he'd had with her mother, and also for the opportunity to have Erin with him, lighting his life like a beacon every day, his beloved daughter who he'd been given another chance with.

He'd be forever grateful to Ashley for helping them to finally find closure over Kaitra's death. He felt refreshed. Alive. More alive than he'd felt in years.

"I've been thinking that maybe it would be a good idea to finish your education here on Leto Island, our home."

The shriek of joy nearly split his eardrums. "Oh,

Daddy!”

Erin threw her arms around his neck and jumped up and down in excitement. “Do you mean it? Are you sure?”

She stepped back to look at him as though she were making sure this wasn’t a cruel joke.

Lucas smiled. “I’m sure, sweetie.”

“I can’t wait to tell Ashley.” Erin’s smile lit the room. “Have you told her yet?”

“No. I wanted to talk to you first, but I see there wasn’t much to convince you of.”

“Of course not, I’m so happy I could burst.” She laughed and twirled around the room. “Can we tell Ashley tonight at dinner?”

“Certainly.” He paused. “Actually, I was hoping she would agree to see us on a regular basis when we get back.”

He gauged his daughter’s reaction, not wanting to thrust too many changes on her at once, but he knew, without a doubt, that he could no longer deny the emotion that was building in his heart for Ashley. He’d begun the week adamant about resisting her charms, but had done a complete about face as he’d gotten to know her. She was a beautiful woman, inside and out, just as everyone had said. Thanks to her, he’d finally been able to come to terms with life as it had been dealt, which also helped him to help his daughter move forward. Now that he’d come this far, he wanted to reach out and accept all of what life was offering. He only hoped that still included Ashley.

He hadn’t seen her in the dream realm all week. He wasn’t sure what to make of that, but she seemed friendly enough during their interactions. The truth be told, he had to admit that he was a bit nervous about whether she had given up on him. What if he’d had his revelation too late? She’d said she would wait for him, but that was when she still thought he was opposed to opening up to another relationship. Maybe she had taken him seriously after all and moved on with her life.

“Dad, just ask her.”

Lucas snapped his attention back to Erin.

“You were reading me?”

“No Dad, you were wearing your emotions on your sleeve. Your feelings were pouring out of you and I couldn’t help but catch them.”

He chuckled. He had some brushing up to do in the legendary warlock department, but the amazing thing was that these days, he *wanted* to again.

Erin slapped Lucas on the arm in a playful gesture. “It’s funny what a little case of love can do to a person huh, Dad?”

Lucas blinked in momentary confusion. Slowly, realization dawned on him. He shook his head in disbelief.

“Indeed.”

Erin hit the nail on the head. He, master of his own destiny, keeper of his heart, and ruler of his own pigheaded kingdom, had fallen in love with Ashley Stevens.

She was the most breathtaking woman he’d ever laid eyes on. One smile from her luscious full lips had the same effect as a shot of whiskey. It melted the entire length of the distance it traveled, all over his body. Being near her was better than any magic he could imagine.

“Hello, Ashley.”

She raised an eyebrow at the sultry tone of his voice, and met his gaze with a smile in response.

“Hello, Lucas.”

She took the hand he offered and Lucas could see that she recognized something had changed. She looked questioningly into his eyes for an answer, but he merely let his eyes roam over her exquisite face and brought her hand to his lips, lingering for a moment to enjoy the satin of her skin, and then pressing her hand lightly against his cheek.

He let all the warmth he was feeling shine through his eyes. Letting go of his emotion was like opening a

dam. The force behind the flow of passion was unstoppable. Her evening gown was tailored to the perfect curves of her body. He drank in the sight of her like a lovesick schoolboy, but the desire she ignited was that of a full-grown man. She wore her hair in a loosely flowing thick cascade of shiny auburn waves. The emerald of her eyes matched the satin of her gown, and as he committed every detail of her to his memory, he was overcome with a sense of symbiosis and harmony that he'd never experienced with any other woman. The raw power of the sensation almost left him speechless.

"You look ravishing, my dear."

"Thank you."

"Shall we be on our way?"

"Of course. Where is Erin?"

"She is already at the ball. I dropped her off with a group of her friends and she will meet us when we arrive."

Ashley nodded and tucked her hand into the arm Lucas offered.

The evening sky was perfect. Both moons were full in the inky cosmic twilight. The stars were vivid and danced in the sky with the energy of the universe surrounding them, and a refreshing cool breeze lifted the leaves on the trees.

"Would you mind taking a stroll through the courtyard gardens before we join the Grand Ball?"

"That would be lovely."

They walked silently for a few minutes, enjoying the atmosphere of the Festival. They entered the open circle in the center of the courtyard, and beneath the moons of Leto Island, Lucas took Ashley into his arms and held her. She was warm and soft. Her skin was like velvet, and her hair was as smooth as silk. He lowered his head to her hair, breathed in the scent of her, and knew he would always remember the way she felt in his arms at this moment.

"It's been a long road for me the last five years. I've made it longer by behaving like a stubborn mule. But you

helped to change that for me. You are more than I could ever have hoped for in a woman.” He traced a finger along her jaw. “You told me you would wait for me. I’m ready. Will you still have me?”

She stretched her arms up around his neck and stood on her toes, nuzzling softly into his neck. After a moment, she tipped her head back and looked deep into his eyes.

“Open to me Lucas.”

Lucas opened his soul to her, without hesitation, without guilt, and with more passion than he’d ever felt in his entire life.

The result swept them both away. He met her on a spiritual level that only two people truly meant for each other could achieve. It was better than lust, and it was better than any physical passion he’d ever shared with a woman. It was a deep spiritual bonding that only true love could support, and the natural magic between them lit a torch that would burn into eternity for them.

Lucas took her in a kiss that seared their souls with a bond that would never be broken for as long as they existed.

His breathing was ragged as he pulled away long enough to ask, “Will you have me, my love?”

She laughed and her charismatic magic wrapped him in warmth. He knew he was right where he needed to be.

“We are blessed by fate, Lucas.” She dropped a feather light kiss on his neck. “Of course I’ll have you, my love. Now and forever.”

Lucas felt the flicker of hope in his heart leap into the promise of a joyous future.

“I can’t speak for you, but as far as I’m concerned, I feel as though I’ve been *bewitched* by fate.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “It’s magical and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”