



SAMHAIN

the
Importance
of Being
Emily

Robyn Bachar

Magic, matchmaking and murder...

Lord Willowbrook's spring ball is supposed to be a magical celebration, but Miss Emily Wright is bored. The only outlet allowed for her magic is matchmaking—for others, not herself. Why bother? The only man she wants, Michael Black, is a man she can never have.

Suddenly the guests are abuzz with news of a young sorceress found drained of blood in the parlor. The mystery calls to her, and since she is the only available seer in all England, she jumps at the chance to prove herself.

Michael has spent his life preparing for his ritual death, when he will join the Order of St. Jerome as an immortal chronicler. Now that dream hangs in the balance, his mentor accused of the murder. Worse, gentle Emily, the woman he silently loves, is walking into a world of horrors beyond her imagination.

Torn between duty to the order and desire to keep her safe, Michael fights his growing need for a love that can never be his. All the while the real killer stalks the shadows of Willowbrook Hall, homing in on the next victim.

Warning: This book contains a tough but tortured seer, a hero with an expiration date, scandalous kisses, scheming vampires and bloody corpses.

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The Importance of Being Emily

Robyn Bachar

Dedication

To Diana, Karrin and Rebecca, with all my love and thanks. You ladies rock, and I am blessed to have you as friends.

Chapter One

I found my soul mate the night that Miss Amelia Morgan was murdered. It seems a strange thing that such a terrible event could lead to the most important discovery of my life, but such is the existence of a seer.

I have no control over my visions and can only suffer them as they appear—and I have on occasion suffered greatly because of them. Terrible headaches, fainting spells, recurring nightmares... My life would be simpler if I shut myself away from the world and cut off all contact with others, but it would also be boring, and the curiosity that comes with being a seer would never allow it. Said curiosity is the proverbial devil on my shoulder that gets me into trouble, suggesting that I poke my nose where it does not belong, but it was not my fault that the party was dreadfully tedious until the murder happened, and I wanted something constructive to do.

One moment I was sitting with my three younger sisters, Sarah, Mary and Josephine, listening to their endless chatter about their children and husbands, and the next the buzz of excited conversation began traveling through the ballroom like a cloud of invisible bees. Naturally I assumed it must be something scandalous—no magician gathering would be complete without some sort of scandal—and I watched the progression of the news with interest. Aside from my matchmaking attempts, hearing the latest scandal made attending the gatherings interesting. The news finally reached our corner of the room via Mr. Green, whose owlish brown eyes were even wider than normal behind his spectacles as he approached.

“Ladies, do not be alarmed, but Miss Morgan has just been murdered,” he whispered loudly.

My sisters gasped in collective horror, and I glanced at them with disdain. “How?” I asked. Knowing how foolish young Miss Morgan could be, it was entirely possible that she had slipped on the stairs and broken her neck, and knowing Mr. Green’s flair for the dramatic, he was making something out of nothing.

“Emily!” Sarah gasped. Sarah was two years younger than I, and always the first to reproach me for my inappropriate behavior. “Isn’t it awful enough without asking for gruesome details?”

“I did not ask for gruesome details. I merely asked how it happened,” I said. “Are you certain it was a murder, Mr. Green?”

I felt their irritation like the brush of flies’ wings against my skin, but I ignored it. As librarians their magic made them naturally curious, but as gentle ladies they had the good manners not to ask about such a terrible event. Unlike my librarian sisters, I was born a seer, and mine is a curiosity that is never sated. While a librarian seeks to make a record of an event in magician society, a seer needs to know the

motivation behind it. I always wish to know more, no matter the topic. I simply cannot help it, for the desire is in my blood.

“Yes, quite.” Dabbing his face with a white handkerchief, Mr. Green helped himself to an open seat on the couch next to Mary, much to her dismay. “She was found alone in the parlor, where she bled to death.”

Worrisome, but not unexplainable. “Perhaps she fell and cut herself,” I suggested.

“She has clearly been bitten, and there is no blood to be found in the room. Her blood must have been *consumed*.” Mr. Green drew out the final word with ghoulish glee.

My sisters shuddered, as Mr. Green no doubt intended them to, but I frowned in confusion. There were no master necromancers—or vampires, to use the rude term—in attendance that evening. No one of our social circle would ever be vulgar enough to invite any necromancer, master or apprentice, to a gathering, because as practitioners of death magic, necromancers were unwelcome in polite company. They were especially unwelcome to the celebration of the vernal equinox, meant to honor the return of spring. But how could Miss Morgan be drained of her blood if a master necromancer wasn’t involved? Perhaps one had slipped in and out through the shadows? I had heard a rumor once that old master necromancers could travel such a way, and Willowbrook Hall was filled with dark corners and suspicious shadows. Or perhaps there was an insane alchemist in our midst, stealing the blood of defenseless girls to be used in some diabolical potion... How exciting!

Of course it was awful of me to think such a thing, because a murder should never be thought of as an amusement, but since the tragedy had already occurred it was logical for me to use my abilities to help. Until then my magic had accomplished little that evening. Despite speaking with several young magicians, I had not made a single match. At the very least I should have been able to find one young couple at the party who were compatible in magic, spirit and temperament. It was spring, and young hearts were supposed to be filled with thoughts of love and new beginnings. That was the unspoken purpose of gatherings such as this—to allow young magicians to meet and be matched—and usually I was quite successful. The magician population had grown over the last two centuries, but we were still quite outnumbered by the nonmagical majority. Every marriage was celebrated, and every child cherished, but either my abilities as a seer were slipping, or the young magicians in attendance were too immersed in their own importance to be matched with anyone else.

“So Miss Morgan’s death is a mystery then,” I said. “Has a guardian been sent for?” Guardians enforced the laws of magician society, and I knew none were in attendance.

“Yes, but the killer has been apprehended. There is a chronicler in attendance, so he must be the culprit. He is being detained while they wait for the guardian to arrive.” Flustered, the gentleman removed his spectacles and began wiping the lenses with his handkerchief.

The wrongness of his words hit me as though I had been slapped. “But why would a chronicler do such a thing?” There were some similarities between master necromancers and chroniclers, namely the need to drink the blood of living magicians as sustenance to continue their immortal existences, but chroniclers were noble and well respected. They were members of the Order of St. Jerome, ageless librarians trusted with keeping magician history, and they were not in the habit of draining flirtatious young tarts like Miss Morgan to death. Or anyone at all to death for that matter. It was simply ridiculous.

“Well, I assume they will learn his motive through questioning him. You ladies shouldn’t be concerned. They have him locked in another room. He won’t hurt anyone else,” Mr. Green assured us. Despite the finality of his words, the situation did not sit right with me, and it made my skin itch.

“It’s just awful. Her mother must be so upset.” Josephine smoothed her hands over her stomach, and I fidgeted with the fingers of my black silk gloves as I fought back a pang of jealousy. Josephine was pregnant for the second time, and it was petty to be jealous of it, just as it had been petty to be jealous of her blonde ringlets and bright blue eyes while we were children. She had been gifted with beauty and temperance, and I had been cursed with dull brown hair, slate grey eyes and what was widely agreed to be a disagreeable disposition. I knew I should be grateful for Josephine’s happiness. I should be grateful for the happiness of all my sisters, and their loving husbands, and their adorable children...

I shouldn’t hate them for it, but a small bit of me did anyway.

With a slight shake of my head, I checked the buttons of my gloves. The gloves served a dual purpose—in addition to being fashionable, black silk dampened magic. I always wore them in the company of others. Even a careless touch could trigger a vision. I wanted more information on this murder, and because Mr. Green would not have any, I rose from my chair and straightened the skirts of my dark green gown.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Sarah asked.

“To powder my nose.” Determined, I began to walk away.

“You mustn’t get involved in this,” Sarah called after me.

“I’ll only be a moment.” I waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t be such a worrywart. It’s bad for your complexion.”

Ignoring Sarah’s further protest, I left the room. I paused in the hallway, uncertain of where to go next. If anyone was investigating, surely it would be at the scene of the crime in the parlor, unless her body had been moved. Anxious, I chewed my bottom lip as I peered down the long hallway for signs of activity. At first it appeared empty, but a flash of silver caught my eye. Looking closer, I spotted a man in the shadows stroking his mustache as he watched me, the flash of silver created by the large ring he wore on his index finger. It was Mr. Farrell, and I frowned when I recognized him.

Until recently I had never had a suitor, despite being the eldest of my sisters, but now I had the attention of Mr. John Farrell, a sorcerer. Unlike a seer or librarian, a sorcerer values power above

knowledge, and so the idea of being a sorcerer's wife did not appeal to me. The idea of spending my life alone, however, was equally unappealing. My parents were of the opinion that a sorcerer was better than no husband at all, and so I entertained the idea of marrying Mr. Farrell. Because seers are often looked upon with fear and suspicion, I was not considered to be desirable marriage material. He was likely to be my one and only suitor, and if I rejected him, I knew there would be no other chance at a new beginning for me. Unlike the young magicians I matched who were full of hope and promise, I no longer entertained the dream of a bright future. For me this equinox would be no different from the others that came before, or would come after.

Mr. Farrell had left the ballroom earlier to join my father at cards, and I wondered what he could be doing lurking in the hallway. I shivered. There was something unsettling about the look in his eyes.

"Emily."

He whispered my name, though it was so quiet that I wondered if I had imagined it. I started down the hall toward him, but before I reached him a door burst open and a man rushed out. I stepped aside as he stormed past without pause or notice, and anger and despair rolled off him like a thundercloud. The emotions hit me like a strong gust of wind, and I gasped and placed one hand against the wall for support. Though distracted, I recognized him as Mr. Michael Black, a librarian I was very well acquainted with. Struggling to keep the energy at bay, I managed to turn and watch as he disappeared into the library and slammed the door behind him. I glanced back at Mr. Farrell, but he was gone.

After a few deep breaths I followed Mr. Black, drawn to his disquiet like a moth to the flame. Without knocking, I opened the door to the library and slipped inside, shutting it behind me.

"I have no more answers to give you," he said. I spotted him seated in a chair in front of the fireplace, his head in his hands. His shoulders were slumped as though the weight of the world was upon them, and my heart ached for him. He was a good man, and I considered him a true friend. He was a chronicler's apprentice, and with a sinking feeling I realized that his mentor, Mr. Simon St. Jerome, must be the one accused of the murder. How awful, and completely impossible.

"Are you all right?" I asked gently.

He looked up, surprised. "Emily. What are you doing here?"

I paused for a moment, because he had never called me by my name before, but I rather liked the sound of it and did not reproach him. "I want to help you," I explained.

Mr. Black smiled and shook his head. "I appreciate your concern, but I don't think that you can."

"Of course I can. I am a seer, and I am capable of more than matchmaking. If you tell me the details of the situation, I'm sure I can help you resolve it." Holding my head high, I crossed the room and took the chair across from him.

Because he was a confirmed bachelor I had never had the opportunity to match him, and it was a shame, for he was quite handsome and good-natured. Most men paid me little mind unless they were

seeking information, such as their match, but for the past few years Mr. Black and I had often sat together at gatherings such as this one without any agenda for personal gain on his part. He seemed genuinely interested in conversing with me. His company also had the benefit of being a benign association—at the time neither of us had any marriage prospects, and we were uninteresting enough that we could speak without setting tongues wagging. Well, perhaps only fewer tongues than usual, for magicians do enjoy their gossip.

“I don’t doubt your abilities, but I’m not sure that would be proper.” Mr. Black glanced at the door. “Does your father know where you are?”

“I assume he’s still busy at cards. Unless the murder interrupted the game, though I doubt it. Nothing short of an act of the gods would distract them from their play,” I said dryly. Father spent his time at gatherings immersed in some game or another. “Please let me help you. I can read the energy of the room where the incident took place. I can determine truth or falsehood in the answers of someone being questioned.”

“I wouldn’t want to inflict a harmful vision upon you.”

“I have seen many things that are inappropriate for a lady. Visions do not organize themselves according to a seer’s sensibilities. Besides, if the higher powers believe I am capable of seeing such things, who are we to argue with them?”

His brow furrowed as he considered my argument, and then he nodded. “You have a valid point. But if your father berates me for involving you, I am placing the blame squarely on your shoulders.”

I smiled. “That is usually what happens. I am quite notorious, as you know. Now, your mentor is accused of attacking Miss Morgan?”

“Yes, and Simon would never do such a thing. They are condemning him solely because he is a chronicler.” Anger surged from him again, and I took a steadying breath. He was affecting me too easily, and I centered myself to regain control.

“Were you with him when she was attacked?”

“No, I wasn’t. I was speaking with Mr. Castle at the time. Simon was alone.” Mr. Black sighed and ran his fingers through his short black hair. It gave him a charming mussed look, and I folded my hands in my lap to fight the sudden urge to straighten it.

“Does he have any enemies in attendance?” I asked.

“Not that I’m aware of. I’ve never seen him quarrel with anyone, but he must have some. Three hundred years is a long time to go without stepping on someone’s toes.”

“Well then. I would like to see the body before the energy of the room is too disrupted to be of use.” I squared my shoulders, seeking to appear as confident as I sounded. I had never attempted anything like this before, but I was certain I could do it. What sort of friend would I be if I didn’t do everything in my power to vindicate his mentor?

“Very well.” Mr. Black rose and held his hand out to help me to my feet, and I smiled up at him. Though I usually avoid touching people, even with my gloves on, I trusted him enough to take his hand. As I stood I was distracted by how tall he was, followed by how lovely his dark eyes were in the soft light of the library, but then the familiar but unwelcome dizziness of a vision shoved its way into my thoughts. My body jerked as I was blinded by a flurry of images, sounds and emotions, but I knew two things with absolute certainty before I was overwhelmed: Michael Black was my soul mate, and he would be dead within a year.

Chapter Two

I stumbled down a darkened hallway, drawn by the sound of a child crying, and I emerged into a vast, dimly lit library, the likes of which I had never seen before. Aisles of bookshelves stretched ever onward until they vanished into the shadows. There was no sign of the child, but its screams grew louder and more urgent, and I broke into a run. The skirts of my gown were heavy, weighing me down, and I struggled against them. My breath burned in my lungs as I ran past endless rows of shelves. Finally I tripped and fell, sprawling awkwardly across a hard wooden floor. When I looked up I spotted Michael standing a few feet away, his attention focused on the open book in his hands. Behind him was a cradle, and I winced at the wails emanating from it.

“Why didn’t you see to the baby?” I asked as I struggled to stand.

“This is more important.”

Cursing the idiocy of men, I hurried to help the child, but when I reached the cradle it was empty...

“Miss Wright?”

My head throbbed, and I struggled to catch my breath. Sadness weighed my chest down, as though my heavy cat Thomasina had decided I was the perfect place to nap atop again.

“Miss Wright, can you hear me?” Mr. Black repeated.

I opened my eyes, and when I blinked the room into focus, I discovered I was once again seated in the chair I had attempted to vacate. Mr. Black knelt before me, patting my hand with a worried expression. “Are you ill? Should I fetch one of your sisters?”

“Only if you wish to make me feel worse,” I muttered in reply, scowling at the idea. Wouldn’t that be perfect? Sarah would take such delight in the news that my soul’s perfect match was already spoken for by the Order of St. Jerome. Another woman I might have a chance against, but the Order? All librarians dreamed of joining the Order and spending eternity surrounded by books as they recorded magician history.

“A witch, then? You’re very pale. Someone should have a look at you,” he said.

“I am always pale.” Though not as pale as he would be once he became a chronicler and could no longer stand the sunlight. I studied his face, imagining his complexion changed by the pallor of death, and tears sprung to my eyes. Frustrated, I caught his hand and held it tightly in mine. “Why did you never ask me to match you?”

He blinked, obviously surprised by the question. "I never considered it. I've always wanted to become a chronicler."

"But you're *my* match. Oh, this is just awful." My voice cracked, and he stared at me, dumbstruck.

"Your match?" he stammered.

"My soul mate," I clarified.

"Are you certain?" he asked, and I glared at him. "Of course you are. I apologize."

"And your apprenticeship is almost over, isn't it?"

Mr. Black nodded. "It is. It will end on Samhain."

My shoulders slumped in defeat, and I covered my face with my hands, hiding my sorrow behind a wall of black silk. I knew that the higher powers could be heartless and that having a soul mate did not guarantee happiness or true love, but this... I would have been much happier continuing through life believing I did not have a soul mate, rather than living with the knowledge that my soul mate was a man I couldn't have.

"I am sorry. You know that I am very fond of you, but..." He trailed off. Dropping my hands, I shook my head, certain that crueler words had never been spoken.

"Don't bother. I understand. Your work is important to you." I smiled weakly. I had heard it often enough from my family, when they could not be bothered to spend time with me or listen to what I had to say. As a seer I recognized their obsession, but I didn't understand it.

"Surely there must be some way," he began again, but before he could continue he was interrupted by the library door opening. I glanced toward the noise and spotted Lord Willowbrook, the gathering's host and owner of the estate. He stepped into the room and frowned at the scene before him as I hastily wiped away my tears.

"Mr. Black, what is going on here?" he demanded.

Mr. Black rose and stepped away, and I fished through my handbag for my handkerchief.

"Forgive me, Lord Willowbrook," I spoke up. "I was momentarily ill from a vision, and Mr. Black was concerned about my welfare. But I feel much better now." The lie twisted my stomach, but I dabbed at my eyes and put on a brave smile. I looked up at Mr. Black. "If you would be so kind as to help me up?"

"Of course." He eyed me warily as he helped me to my feet, and I took hold of his arm. Though I did not want more contact with him, my legs were weak and wobbly beneath me and I needed the extra support.

"Mr. Black was about to escort me to Miss Morgan's body so that I may examine it. Would you lead the way please, Lord Willowbrook?" I suggested.

Mr. Black's gaze pricked my skin as he peered down at me, but I kept my focus on our host, intent on the task at hand. There was no point in dwelling on foolish things when there was a serious matter to resolve.

Lord Willowbrook's bushy white eyebrows knit together as his frown deepened. "You wish to examine the body?"

"Yes. To determine the events that caused her death. It is important to do so as soon as possible while the energy remains." Though my tone was reasonable, from the burning of my eyes I probably appeared a hairsbreadth away from hysteria.

"You'll do no such thing. This is not a matter appropriate for a lady to investigate." Lord Willowbrook shook his head as though he considered the matter closed, but I continued.

"I am afraid I must insist. I do understand that you would prefer to work with a male seer, but there aren't any in all of England. The interests of justice supersede those of propriety in this case. You wouldn't want one of your guests wrongfully accused of murder, would you?"

It was risky appealing to the honor of a summoner, considering that as magicians who consort with demons they are not known for it, but Lord Willowbrook turned a bright shade of red and nodded shortly. "Very well. This way."

"That was brilliant," Mr. Black whispered as we crossed the room.

"Pray that it works," I whispered in reply.

I clung to his arm as we followed Willowbrook down the hallway, and I stared at the back of our host's head and tried to regain my control. I knew I must have looked awful, but there was no remedy for that. My personal shields were in shambles, allowing stray thoughts and emotions of the party guests to flit about me like insistent butterflies. Fear was chief among them—fear that a monster had slithered into their safe celebration.

We drew to a halt outside the door, and I stepped away from my escort. The two men watched as I took a deep breath, centering myself. Once all the fluttering concerns were silent again, I nodded.

"I am ready."

Lord Willowbrook opened the door. I followed him into the room and glanced about. It was a pleasant enough sitting room, though like the rest of Willowbrook Hall the furnishings were several years out of fashion. Two men stood inside, one of whom I recognized as Mr. Oscar Gryphon, a member of the prominent sorcerer family of the same name. He was fair haired and bad tempered, and I rather disliked him. Mr. Farrell was also in the employ of the Gryphons, though he was a member by allegiance instead of blood. The other man was a stranger to me, and he knelt next to the couch. From this angle I couldn't see the body, but from the spill of golden curls over the arm of the couch I assumed Miss Morgan must be laid upon it.

"What is she doing here?" Mr. Gryphon asked.

"Miss Wright intends to use her abilities to aid the investigation," Lord Willowbrook informed him.

"We already know what happened here," he countered.

“Obviously you don’t,” I said, “and I would prefer that you leave. You are interfering with the residual energy.”

“Amelia is my cousin, I will not leave her.” Mr. Gryphon folded his arms across his chest. I quirked a brow—interesting. Miss Morgan was a sorceress, but I didn’t know she was related to the Gryphons. If I remembered correctly, like many sorcerers their family did associate with necromancers. Perhaps she knew her killer...

“Then as her cousin I’m sure you want the right person to be punished for her death,” I replied.

“We know who did this!”

“Simon could not have—” Mr. Black started, and I held my hands up.

“Gentlemen, please,” I interrupted. “If you must argue, do it in the hallway.”

“I am not leaving,” Mr. Gryphon repeated.

“Fine. Then please stand over there and be quiet.” I pointed toward the door, feeling a bit like my mother ordering my sisters about. Her iron will must have rubbed off on me, for Mr. Gryphon did as he was told. That only left the gentleman kneeling next to the couch, and I frowned sternly at him. He appeared to be about my age, perhaps a bit older, with neatly trimmed red hair and vibrant green eyes. Healing energy radiated from him in a soothing wave, and I realized that he was the most powerful witch I had ever encountered. Impressive.

“I don’t believe we’ve met, Miss Wright. I am Dr. Bennett.” He rose and approached me, extending his hand in greeting, which I stared at suspiciously. The doctor spoke with an odd accent—American? It would explain his poor manners.

“Forgive me, sir, but I prefer not to be touched,” I informed him. “You determined the cause of death?”

He winced. “I did, yes.”

I nodded, words failing me as I forced myself to walk toward the couch. It was high-backed, upholstered in pale blue fabric and trimmed in dark wood. The pleasantness of the piece added to the strangeness of seeing Miss Morgan lying upon it. At first glance she appeared to be sleeping. Her head rested upon the arm of the couch, and her heart-shaped face was turned toward the fireplace, her eyes closed, her lips slightly parted. One arm was bent above her, as though reaching to rearrange her hair, and the other hung lifelessly off the side of the cushion. Two clear puncture wounds pierced the side of her exposed throat, but there was no evidence of blood.

I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly dry, and I clasped my hands in front of me. My sight shifted, allowing me to read the auras in the room. Miss Morgan did not have an aura, and the lack of it was jarring. Her life’s energy was gone. I had never tried to read a corpse before, and I was not prepared for the experience. Nausea gripped my stomach, and I quickly looked away. My gaze travelled over the four men near the door, recognizing their auras in turn—summoner, sorcerer, witch, librarian—but I stopped when I

reached Mr. Black. A silver cord stretched between us like a tightrope, connecting our auras. Would I have noticed it before if I had read his aura in the many times we spoke together in the past?

Ignoring the question, I continued my investigation. The rest of the room was quiet, subdued. It was probably too much to hope for blatant evidence of a spell, that perhaps a demon had ripped a hole into the room or a faerie had left a trail of mischief. There was an impression of anger left where Mr. Gryphon had been standing, and a general sense of shock permeated the air like the moment after a hunting rifle is fired.

“Do you see anything?” Mr. Gryphon asked.

I fought the urge to glare at him and returned my attention to the body. “Her spirit did not linger, if that gives you any comfort.” Not that I could communicate with her if she had. Spirits of the dead fell into the study of necromancy, and seers could only speak with living spirits, such as elementals.

Though Miss Morgan was devoid of energy, the couch around her seemed to retain something, which was odd. With her body in the way I couldn’t tell if it was a spell or an emotion, and I tugged my right glove off and placed my hand against the upholstery, expecting to feel the fading remnants of it. Instead, I foolishly triggered a vision as a rush of pure lust traveled up my arm and through my body. My eyes blurred, and as I struggled to focus, the sound of Miss Morgan’s voice startled me. She moaned in a very inappropriate fashion, and my cheeks burned bright red as the image formed to reveal a scene that no proper lady should view. Alarmed, I stepped back and spotted her undergarments piled on the floor next to her and the skirts of her gown hiked up around her waist as her lover...

“Oh my,” I whispered. I knew I should look away—it was the right thing to do—but I needed to get some idea of the man’s identity. Dark hair, the back of a dark vest, white shirt sleeves...

Miss Morgan moaned again and I jumped, but this time she breathed a name. *John*. I took another step back and bumped into the coffee table, and the vision ended. Thank the powers.

“Oh my,” I repeated. My face burned as though it was aflame.

“Are you unwell?” Dr. Bennett asked.

“I am fine. May I speak with you, please?” I stared down at the floor and the hem of my gown, and noticed that the undergarments I had seen in my vision were not there. Her lover—her killer—must have redressed Miss Morgan, perhaps in an attempt to hide their activities. John was a very common name, and there were at least a dozen men with it in attendance, perhaps more. It was a pity the man didn’t have a more unique moniker.

Worry creased my brow as I wondered if Mr. Farrell had left the ball to rendezvous with Miss Morgan instead of joining my father’s card game, but it only lasted a moment. Mr. Farrell might be a bit distant, but he couldn’t possibly be a necromancer, much less a master. I would have noticed the change in his disposition.

The doctor joined me, and I tugged my glove back on. "I believe," I began, and then lowered my voice to a scandalized whisper. "I believe if you examine Miss Morgan again you will find a second set of bite marks. On her inner thigh."

Dr. Bennett blinked at me as his eyebrows rose to his hairline. "Are you certain? Her family will be upset if I examine her and you are mistaken."

"Oh, I am not mistaken. I witnessed her in the midst of...a passionate embrace." I was quite certain that my face was indeed on fire, and I expected to smell smoke, but I continued. "She appeared to know her killer very well."

"You saw him?"

"Yes, but I did not see his face. He was...otherwise occupied."

"Ah. I understand." Dr. Bennett nodded and glanced back at Mr. Gryphon, who was speaking in hushed, angry tones with Lord Willowbrook. "I will speak with Mr. Gryphon for his permission to perform a more thorough examination. Did she seem enthralled to you?"

I frowned. "Enthralled?"

"A blood drinker can weave a spell over his prey that clouds the person's judgment and weakens their will to fight," the doctor explained.

"A necromancer, you mean," I corrected.

"Chroniclers can do it as well."

"Why would one need to?"

Dr. Bennett chuckled. "You must come from a family of librarians."

"Yes, why?" I asked, feeling insulted for some reason.

"Not everyone holds chroniclers in such high regard, Miss Wright. They do on occasion go rogue." His expression was grim, and though I could scarcely believe him he seemed sincere.

"I see. I think I will take the air while you continue your investigation." Flustered, I crossed to where the men stood glaring at each other near the parlor doors.

Lord Willowbrook turned toward me. "Did you find something?"

"I did, yes. Dr. Bennett should be able to confirm it," I said.

"Did you see the murderer? Was it St. Jerome?" Mr. Gryphon asked.

I winced. "No, Miss Morgan called him John. I did not see his face, but I should be able to recognize him." I hoped. More accurately I should be able to recognize the aura of a master necromancer, if he was still in attendance. "Have you checked that all the guests are still in attendance? The murderer may have already fled."

"I believe so." Lord Willowbrook nodded and clasped his hands behind his back. "I have reinforced the wards around the estate, and I have men patrolling the grounds. We will find the culprit."

"I am not convinced it wasn't St. Jerome," Mr. Gryphon said. "You may have misheard the name."

“If I can speak with Mr. St. Jerome, I can confirm whether he is telling the truth.”

“I will take you to him.” Lord Willowbrook reached for the door, intending to lead me away, but I held a hand up.

“Wait! I would like to take the air in the garden first. That was very difficult for me.” I blushed, embarrassed to admit any weakness, but I needed a reprieve to clear my head before continuing.

“I will escort Miss Wright.” Mr. Black turned to me and offered his arm. “I can take you to Simon when you are ready.”

I hesitated, for Mr. Black was the very last person I wanted to be alone with at the moment, but I nodded reluctantly.

“Very well.” I kept my hands folded in front of me and swept from the room.

Chapter Three

The night air held a damp chill that was blessedly soothing after my skin had been seared by the bonfire of embarrassment. Though I knew I would regret not stopping for my wrap within a few minutes, I closed my eyes and enjoyed it. For a moment everything was cool, quiet and peaceful, and then Mr. Black interrupted my calm.

“What did you see?” he asked.

Sighing, I opened my eyes and looked up at him. “I would rather not discuss it. I assume it was not your mentor, but I cannot say for certain. I did not see his face.”

Not eager to continue the discussion, I walked deeper into the garden. Some of the braver plants had begun nosing their way from their beds, but for the most part the barren clutches of winter still gripped everything around us. The potential hummed beneath the surface, waiting impatiently for a few warm days to free it. In summer everything would be lush and green again, but for now bed after bed was empty.

Like the cradle. An empty cradle for my empty life.

Shivering, I rubbed my arms above the tops of my gloves. Without a word Mr. Black removed his coat and draped it over my shoulders. It was warm, but it also carried a strong impression of him—his thirst for knowledge, his dedication to his studies and his loyalty to his mentor. The corners of my mouth twitched as I pictured him as a very tall Labrador dog. If only Mr. Farrell shared a few of Mr. Black’s honorable qualities.

“Thank you,” I said. He stood close to me, and I hesitated, torn between moving away and staying still to see what he intended.

“Simon would never do this,” he assured me.

“I believe you. Once I am able to prove that, we can focus on finding the true killer. With your tight schedule I’m sure you are anxious to return to your studies.” I winced, feeling guilty for my unkind words. It wasn’t his fault that his dreams for the future were so very different from mine. What could the higher powers be thinking by connecting us?

“I apologize for involving you in this.”

“Well it has certainly been revealing, but don’t be silly. I wanted to help you. Your mentor was not...acquainted with Miss Morgan, was he?”

“No, I don’t believe they ever met. Why?”

“That will be in his favor then. It appeared that she knew her...” I trailed off, searching for the right word, “...*companion* well.”

“Oh.” Mr. Black’s eyes widened at the implication.

“I shouldn’t have been so blithe earlier about being unconcerned about the subject matter of visions. But it was necessary to help vindicate your mentor.” I shrugged, and the hem of his coat rustled against the skirts of my gown. If I rejected Mr. Farrell, it was likely that the vision was the closest I would get to experiencing that sort of passion. Unbidden, my mind whispered that when Mr. Black became a chronicler, he could bite me, and I could feel the same lustful pleasure for myself...

I shook the thought away and hastily removed his coat. “We should go back inside,” I said as I returned it to him.

Michael shrugged the coat back on. “Wait. I want to discuss what you mentioned earlier.”

“There is nothing to discuss. In a few months you will be a chronicler, and I will still be a matchmaker. Our paths are star-crossed.” This time I held tight to my control, afraid of falling apart again, and I turned to walk back to the manor. He caught my hand and pulled me to him, wrapping his arms around me. I gasped and shook my head.

“Please, don’t do this,” I whispered.

His lips hovered above mine. “Don’t you want to know?”

Yes. Every fiber of my seer’s body wanted to know more. Why were we meant for each other? How could we possibly make this work? What would it be like to share his life? To finally know the happiness that I found so often for others? “But you are spoken for,” I blurted.

He frowned. “By whom?”

“The Order.”

Michael laughed. “The Order is not a jealous wife. There are no rules prohibiting relationships, or even marriage.”

“No? What sort of marriage could we have? Should I offer you a vein instead of bringing you tea, until I fade away while you remain unaging? Immortal?”

“But we would be together.”

I sighed, thinking of my family’s definition of togetherness—in general it involved them poring over an old, moldering text while I looked on in irritation. It was not what I wanted in a marriage, though I supposed at my age I could not afford to be particular. In December I would be twenty-seven years old, an age my sister Sarah assured me was positively ancient. “But I am spoken for.”

Mr. Black frowned. “You’ve accepted Farrell’s proposal?”

“No. Not yet, but I should.” Shaking my head once more, I began to pull away, but he stopped me with a kiss. At first it was little more than a stalling tactic, a light brush of the lips meant to distract me from escaping, but then he drew me tight against him. Michael’s hand slid up my back and cradled my

head, his thumb caressing the line of my jaw. He kissed me again, and my hands clutched the lapels of his coat for balance.

I must confess, I had been kissed before, though that was many years ago. Most of the appeal of that kiss had been in sneaking away from the Yule celebration and doing something forbidden, but this...was amazing. Everything that I expected a kiss should be—warm, soft and completely intoxicating. Closing my eyes, I abandoned myself to the experience, and he seemed happy to lead as I slid my arms around his neck. In the back of my thoughts a voice of reason lectured the need for caution. Being close to him had already triggered a flurry of visions, and I should be wary of more of them. A strong vision could incapacitate me for hours, possibly even days if it was very traumatic.

Like a fool, I ignored it, even when I began hearing his thoughts. My senses brushed against his as easily as our lips did. I caught a flash of a memory of the two of us sharing a quiet moment together at a previous gathering, and the impression of how much he enjoyed speaking with me. Mr. Black thought I was beautiful, and he had wanted to kiss me for a very long time.

“Why didn’t you?” I murmured.

He quirked a brow. “Why didn’t I what?”

“Kiss me before now, if you wanted to,” I explained. He seemed confused, but then he blushed.

“I see you have recovered,” he said dryly.

“I apologize. My control is suffering this evening,” I explained in a rush. “It isn’t true, what they say about me. I can’t really read the thoughts of everyone around me. Reading thoughts is quite difficult, and in all truth I try to avoid it as much as possible. It is unsettling.” I watched his reaction closely, my stomach twisted into knots as I searched for signs of fear. Many magicians were afraid of me because they wrongfully assumed that I could read their inmost thoughts as clearly as though printed upon their faces. Mr. Black stepped away, but he seemed amused instead of upset, and I was grateful for it.

“I understand. We should return, before they send anyone to find us.”

“This doesn’t change matters between us,” I warned him. “A kiss hardly solves our problems.”

“Perhaps not, but I do know one thing.” Mr. Black offered me his arm, and I tilted my head as I looked up at him.

“What is that?”

“I would like to kiss you again, Miss Wright, when the opportunity arises.” He smiled, and I blushed.

“Emily,” I said, and his brow rose. “Please call me Emily. It pleased me when you did earlier.”

“Very well. You must call me Michael then.”

I nodded, blushing again as we walked away. The noise from the ballroom was still hushed when we returned to the house. There would be no more dancing this evening, only mourning. I hoped that the guests were safe in there and that a killer did not lurk among them. It was a large estate, and whoever he was, he could be hiding in any number of empty rooms or outlying buildings.

We proceeded up the stairs, and as we turned down a hallway we spotted two men guarding a door. They appeared more bored than alert, which did not bode well for the safety of anyone.

“Lord Willowbrook is expecting us,” Michael informed them.

I stepped into the room and was instantly stifled by the negative energy, like a thick cloud of smoke that stole all the air and stung my eyes and nose. Blinking rapidly, I tried to shut it out as best I could as I looked around the room. It was a guest bedroom, decorated in an elaborate floral motif—perhaps that was the source of the energy, for the wallpaper was truly hideous.

Mr. Gryphon paced back and forth beside the bed, wearing a path into the carpet that glowed with malice. Dr. Bennett and Lord Willowbrook stood next to the fireplace, and the lord’s arms were folded across his chest as he frowned down at a man bound to a chair.

My brow rose at the sight of the ropes. “Is that really necessary?” I was certain that if Simon St. Jerome had a mind to leave the room, it would take much more than rope to stop him.

“Yes. I can assure you that he is a murderer,” Mr. Gryphon growled. The venom in his voice startled me, and I tightened my grip on Michael’s arm.

“That is what we are about to determine,” Lord Willowbrook pointed out.

I peered at the chronicler, curious, for I had never met him before. Michael had made numerous mentions of his mentor, but he always seemed to be off speaking to someone else on mysterious business at the gatherings. Mr. St. Jerome was pale, his face framed with long auburn hair that was neatly tied back, and his light blue eyes regarded me with cool interest. He wore all black, from his cravat to his boots. Though he sat still and calm, blood trickled from the side of his mouth.

“You struck him?” I asked, horrified.

“Mr. Gryphon lost his temper,” Mr. St. Jerome explained.

Frowning, I pulled my handkerchief from my purse and approached him. Mr. Gryphon moved to block me, and I nimbly dodged the hand he tried to place upon my arm.

“He is dangerous,” he warned.

“He is innocent,” I replied.

“You can’t be certain of that.”

“I am quite certain. He is not the man I saw in my vision. His hair is too red and not dark enough, and his clothing is different. And as I mentioned before, Miss Morgan called the man John, not Simon.” Stepping around him, I continued to the chronicler. “May I?” I nodded at the blood.

“Please,” he said.

The men watched me closely, as though they expected Mr. St. Jerome to snap his bonds and devour me like a sweet peach before anyone could intervene. Instead he continued to sit, serene and unaffected, as I dabbed at the sluggish trickle of blood. It looked wrong somehow, too dark, a reminder that he wasn’t quite normal. Unliving, as Michael would be in a few short months.

For a moment I was gripped by the wild idea that I could lie, that I could tell Lord Willowbrook that Mr. St. Jerome was the killer. Michael would be safe and we could be together...but the idea of lying was abhorrent to me. I would tell the truth, no matter the consequences. The bleeding stopped and I stepped away.

“Thank you,” he said politely.

“So well mannered for a cold-blooded killer,” Mr. Gryphon disparaged.

Michael cleared his throat. “I have never heard of a chronicler killing anyone, but I have heard of hundreds dying during sorcerer power struggles.”

“You watch your tongue, whelp!” Mr. Gryphon threatened.

“Control yourself,” Lord Willowbrook warned, but the younger man ignored him.

“This man murdered my cousin. I don’t know why you are entertaining the fancies of this charlatan.”

“Are you questioning my abilities?” I asked, deeply offended.

“Yes. If you had any real power, you would not be wasting it playing at matchmaker.” Mr. Gryphon sneered at me, his words stinging like a slice through my skin, and I fought back the petty urge to shove my way into his thoughts to find something to embarrass him with. “Are we to trust her based on a few moments of a *vision*?” He spoke the word with derision, and I stood a bit straighter, my head held high.

“Miss Wright was correct about the second bite mark,” Dr. Bennett said.

“Anyone could have guessed that. How can we be certain she is telling the truth? Everyone knows she is fond of Mr. Black,” Mr. Gryphon argued. “She is only concerned with helping him, not with finding justice for Amelia.”

“How dare you!” My hands clenched into fists at the insult. “If you knew anything about seers, then you would know that we are dedicated to seeking the truth. I would not lie for my father, and I have a lifetime’s worth of fondness for him,” I informed him archly.

“That’s enough,” Lord Willowbrook interrupted. “Mr. Gryphon, because you are grieving I will excuse the insults to my guests, but I warn you not to do it again. I have faith in Miss Wright’s desire to determine the truth. We will proceed with the questions.”

“Yes, sir,” Mr. Gryphon replied reluctantly.

I flexed my fingers and primly brushed at my skirt. “Thank you.”

I glanced around the room for a second chair but did not see one. Instead I made my way to a wooden chest at the foot of the bed. “May I sit, please?” I asked Lord Willowbrook, and he nodded his permission.

I perched atop the chest, smoothing my skirts and then primly folding my hands in my lap to keep them from shaking. This was my first practical attempt at determining truth. I had honed the skill reading my sisters’ auras, without their knowledge, in attempts to discover important truths such as who had eaten the last biscuit or borrowed my shawl without consent. The theory of spotting a lie was the same, though the subject matter was far more serious. I stared past Mr. St. Jerome, allowing my vision to shift, but when

his aura appeared it was faint and anemic. The hues were washed out, bleeding into each other like watercolor paint. Confused, I turned to glance at Dr. Bennett and found his aura as strong and vibrant as it had been in the parlor.

“Is something wrong?” Lord Willowbrook asked.

“His aura is unique. I have not encountered anything like it before. I may need a few test questions to acclimate to reading it,” I informed him. “Yes or no questions are simplest.”

Lord Willowbrook nodded. “Very well.” He paused, probably wondering what to ask, and then he began. “Is the year 1857?”

“Yes.” Mr. St. Jerome sounded as weary and drained as his aura, and I felt sorry for him.

“Are you a member of the Order of St. Jerome?”

“Yes.”

The energy remained steady for both answers, and I nodded my approval. “Perhaps a falsehood next?”

Lord Willowbrook nodded again. “Is your name Simon St. Jerome?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

This time the energy flickered like a candle in a drafty room, and I frowned. I took it as the mark of a lie, but that did not make sense.

“You were supposed to answer falsely,” Lord Willowbrook chided him.

The chronicler sighed, and his aura flashed red with annoyance. “I did. It is not my true name.”

“What is your true name?”

Again his aura flashed with irritation, but he dutifully answered the question. “Lord Simon Augustus Wroth.”

His aura blazed in recognition of his true name, and I nodded.

“Were you acquainted with Miss Amelia Morgan?”

“No.”

Mr. Gryphon shook his head. “Unacceptable. He could have killed her without having been properly introduced.”

“Did you kill her?” Lord Willowbrook asked.

“No,” Mr. St. Jerome replied. His aura stayed steady and even, and I knew he spoke the truth.

“That won’t suffice either. He could be convinced that she died of complications from the blood loss and consider himself blameless,” Mr. Gryphon said. “I will ask the questions. Have you fed this evening?”

“Yes. From my apprentice,” he clarified. His aura did not change, but my heart skipped a beat at the admission. Of course I understood that such a thing was necessary, but my reaction was understandable after having seen Miss Morgan’s erotic bite. Surely not all bites were so...salacious.

“Have you ever bled anyone to death?” Mr. Gryphon asked.

Mr. St. Jerome hesitated, filled with an emotion I couldn’t identify. “Once.”

“You see, I told you he was a murderer,” Mr. Gryphon exclaimed, but his triumph was short-lived.

“Being drained to the point of death is part of the ritual to become a chronicler,” Mr. St. Jerome explained. “There is a chance that the apprentice can die as a result. I believe it is also required to become a master necromancer, though I am not familiar with their ritual.”

“Does that happen often?” I asked, my voice strained. Fear iced my veins as the horrible realization that perhaps I hadn’t seen Michael’s transformation in my earlier storm of visions—perhaps I had seen his true death. I suddenly regretted my earlier decision not to lie about Mr. St. Jerome’s involvement.

I shivered when Simon St. Jerome turned his attention to me. “Not often, but it is a risk. Do you have further questions, or have I satisfied you, Lord Willowbrook?”

“It has to be him,” Mr. Gryphon argued. “Amelia’s blood was drained. No one else could have done it!” His outrage blazed so brightly that the outline of his body was burned into my vision, remaining a ghostly afterimage as I shielded my eyes with my hands. A hand touched my shoulder, and I felt Michael’s concern even as I tried to blink the pain away.

“Obviously someone else did,” Michael countered. “You should be more concerned with finding that person before someone else is injured or killed. Anyone could be at risk.”

“The killer is likely a newly turned master necromancer. Someone who has not yet learned to properly control the amount of blood he takes, or someone whose mind was damaged by the transformation,” Mr. St. Jerome said. “Such a person could be very dangerous.”

Lord Willowbrook shook his head. “There are no necromancers of any variety in attendance, and no one could have passed the wards without an invitation.”

“There are no necromancers that you know of,” the chronicler pointed out. “I did say newly turned. You may have invited him without knowledge of his change in condition.” The room fell silent, and I opened my eyes again to find Mr. St. Jerome watching me. “Could you recognize the aura of a master necromancer?”

“I believe so. I have never seen one before, but I assume I could through process of elimination if I examined the other guests.”

“How do we know it was not you?” Mr. Gryphon peered at Michael.

“Me?” he said.

“Mr. Black is still an apprentice,” his mentor replied.

“You could be lying to protect him.”

“But he has a librarian’s aura,” I said.

Mr. Gryphon scowled. “You could also be lying to protect him.”

“She isn’t, and even if she were, I have an alibi. We already established that I was speaking with Mr. Castle at the time,” Michael pointed out.

"That is true." Lord Willowbrook squared his shoulders. "Mr. Gryphon, you will accompany me to inform my men of the new development. We will begin searching the rooms, and Miss Wright will read the guests in the ballroom."

I frowned. "Surely he has fled by now."

"Are the carriages all accounted for?" Mr. St. Jerome asked.

"Yes, as are all the horses."

"Then he is still in the house or on the grounds. He could not risk traveling by foot and being caught without shelter when the sun rises," the chronicler explained. "He will look for somewhere to hide until sunset. Somewhere without windows most likely."

"Like your room, no doubt," Mr. Gryphon muttered.

"Sunlight bothers the young and the weak. It does not bother me," Mr. St. Jerome replied archly.

"We must focus on finding the killer as soon as possible," Lord Willowbrook said.

"Now, am I free to go?" Mr. St. Jerome asked.

"Yes, of course."

Michael stepped forward to unbind his mentor, but the chronicler stood and the chair beneath him snapped like kindling. He brushed the ropes and wood away as easily as he would a bit of dust, and everyone stared at him in stunned silence. "I would apologize for the chair, Lord Willowbrook, but your hospitality has been lacking."

"I understand," he said slowly. With a strained nod he left the room, Mr. Gryphon close on his heels.

"May I speak with you for a moment, Miss Wright?" Dr. Bennett asked.

"Yes, of course." I refused the hand he offered and rose on my own. "If you will excuse us."

"I would speak with you as well, after your word with the doctor," the chronicler said. I nodded, though the idea made me nervous. Whatever Dr. Bennett wanted, I was sure that it would be easier to discuss than speaking with Mr. St. Jerome.

Chapter Four

Dr. Bennett and I walked slowly down the hallway toward the stairs. “As you may have guessed, I am visiting from the United States. England is only the first stop on my journey.”

“Where else are you traveling?” I asked, curious.

“I’m on a bit of a tour of Europe. I’ll be visiting Paris, Venice, Berlin and Vienna, to name a few cities.”

“That sounds lovely.” I never understood why my family could be so enraptured by reading about faraway places without wanting to see them for themselves. I dreamed of seeing the world.

“It promises to be quite an adventure. I must admit, I did not expect to meet a seer. I had almost thought you mythical.”

“Not quite. I have never met another one of my kind. I believe the closest seer lives in Italy.”

“You primarily use your abilities for matchmaking?”

“Yes. Do you wish me to match you?”

“No, thank you.” Dr. Bennett chuckled at the idea. “Do you find your work fulfilling?”

I hesitated, considering my reply. In all honesty, I often found it stifling, but it would not be appropriate to admit that to a stranger. “There are aspects of it that are rewarding.”

“As rewarding as bringing a killer to justice?”

We paused at the top of the stairs, and I bit my bottom lip. “I suppose it depends on your point of view. There are those who would not see the value of finding happiness for others, but those I have matched value it greatly.”

“I see. But if you had the opportunity, would you be interested in using your talents in the pursuit of justice more often?”

“How so?” I frowned in confusion.

“I aid a guardian in New York City, Miss Justine Dubois. She and I have solved a number of crimes together, and I can say with certainty that with some training you would be a marvelous investigator.”

For a moment my heart soared at the idea, but I shook my head at the sheer impracticality of it. “That is kind of you, but my father would never allow such a thing.”

“Do you need his permission?”

“Well...no, not legally. But I wouldn’t want to create ill will with my family. I cause enough trouble as it is,” I admitted sheepishly.

“Perhaps I could convince him? I know this appears forward of me, but I can assure you that my intentions are honorable. Miss Dubois comes from an old, respected family of guardians, and you would be safe and well cared for in her employ. She owns a large home, and I’m sure she would be happy to have you stay with her.” He sounded very sincere, and I sensed no deception or trickery from him.

“I’m not certain—”

“Will you at least think on it?” he interrupted. “Seers are so very rare, and there is so much more you could be doing. To waste your abilities...it is almost criminal.”

I blushed. “I do not disagree, but it is not that simple. I would like to do more, but I have always been bound by the expectations of propriety.”

“I understand. Miss Dubois often voices a similar complaint, though there are few who will openly argue with a guardian. Please consider my offer.” He smiled, and I watched him as he turned and walked down the stairs.

Indeed it was something to consider, and the matter would require some research if I wished to pursue it. I wasn’t about to sail on the next ship to New York in search of a new life, but a part of me was thrilled by the idea. Aiding a guardian in solving mysteries—how exciting! And far better than marrying a sorcerer, but Father would never agree to let me go. It was as unlikely as the hope of having some sort of life with Michael.

Turning, I looked down the empty hallway. Aside from the promise of a second kiss, I had no expectations of anything from him. There was no future for us...there may not even be a future for him at all. My stomach sank, dropping like a stone to the bottom of a pond, and I forced myself to return to the room I had just left. Visions of the future were malleable. If I warned Michael and Mr. St. Jerome of the danger, perhaps they could take additional precautions during the ritual.

I knocked lightly before entering, and found Michael and Mr. St. Jerome standing before the fireplace. Neither of them looked happy, and from the tension in the air I knew I had interrupted an argument. I paused, uncertain of what to do.

“Thank you for your aid, Miss Wright,” Mr. St. Jerome greeted with a polite bow.

“I am happy to have helped.”

“Are you?” he asked. The question startled me, and I glanced at Michael. Had he told his mentor about my discovery? I folded my hands, choosing my words carefully.

“Well, of course I am not happy about Miss Morgan’s unfortunate fate, and I would like to see justice done for her and her family. If my abilities can be of use in doing that, then I will do my best to help.”

“That is very diplomatic of you. I imagine you do not often use your abilities in such a manner in your role as a matchmaker.”

Though his tone was neutral, I could not shake the feeling that he meant it as an insult. I frowned, uncertain of how to reply.

“Emily is a woman of many talents,” Michael said.

“So you have mentioned. My apprentice speaks very highly of you, Miss Wright, and quite often.” Mr. St. Jerome peered at me, and though I felt a chill from his gaze, my heart soared at the idea that Michael spoke of me often. “I must admit, I have not met a seer in many years. The last one I knew served as an advisor to the king of France. He was a very powerful man.”

His words made me feel small, but I squared my shoulders. “I’m sure he was. My work may be more domestic, but it is important to those I have matched.”

“I suppose a woman would consider romance a worthy goal.”

“I suppose a man would belittle its worth,” I retorted hotly. “I have found three people their soul’s mate, and I can assure you that they consider that knowledge priceless.” I regretted the words the moment I spoke them, for I realized that my record had changed. “Four,” I corrected. “Four people.”

“You found someone’s soul mate this evening?” Mr. St. Jerome sounded surprised.

I nodded, attempting to swallow my misery and chase it away with a deep breath, but I was unable to hold back tears. I turned away as the first traitors slipped down my cheeks. I hated myself for having proved that I was as weak and foolish as the chronicler assumed, but I hated him more for being part of the obstacle blocking me from my soul mate. I also hated that I had ruined my only handkerchief with his blood, rendering it useless to dry my tears.

Michael touched my shoulder. I flinched, and he offered me his handkerchief. After I took it, he wrapped his arms around me. Though his presence was comforting, I could also sense his conflict—a mix of guilt and regret.

“I assume there is a detail of your evening that you neglected to mention,” Mr. St. Jerome commented dryly.

“You didn’t tell him?” I asked.

“No, I had not gotten to that matter yet,” Michael replied.

“Oh.” I turned to glare at the chronicler. “So you are naturally this unpleasant? Here I thought you were being cruel out of jealousy, believing that I am stealing your apprentice’s affections.”

He ignored the comment and continued to peer at me with a guarded expression. “You are certain of this?”

“If I hear that question once more tonight, I will scream. Yes, Mr. St. Jerome, I am quite certain that you are unpleasant.”

“Emily!” Michael said disapprovingly.

Though I might have imagined it, I thought I saw the corners of Mr. St. Jerome’s mouth twitch in a smile. “You are not the first to accuse me of such, and you may call me Simon if you wish. I am indebted to you for campaigning so strongly on my behalf. Is there anything else I should be aware of?”

I nodded, and then looked up at Michael. How could I tell him? I supposed there was nothing to be done to soften it, so I blurted my reply in a nervous rush. "When I saw that we were soul mates, I also saw that you would be dead by the end of the year, but I assumed that it was only the end of your apprenticeship, because I did not know that there was a possibility that you could truly die. That's why I asked if your apprenticeship was almost over. But there must be something you can do, can't you?" I turned to his mentor. "Precautions you can take? Perhaps healing potions? I know a very talented alchemist—"

"There aren't precautions, per se, but there are steps that can be taken now that we know this," Simon interrupted. I nodded, a bit relieved. "Are you recovered enough to read the guests in the ballroom?"

"Yes, I should be." I dabbed at my eyes once more and returned Michael's handkerchief. "Will you walk with me? It is difficult to walk and read auras at the same time. It would be a great help if you could steady me. I fell flat on my face at a party once, and Sarah has never let me forget it."

"Of course."

I took Michael's arm and we proceeded to the ballroom. Simon walked behind us, cold and silent. I was beginning to understand why Mr. Gryphon seemed so convinced that Simon was capable of murder, but I couldn't imagine Miss Morgan flirting with him. She preferred her men dapper and animated, and no one would accuse Simon St. Jerome of being either of those things. We found Lord Willowbrook waiting for us outside the ballroom.

"The rooms are being searched, though that may take some time. Are you ready to proceed here?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," I said. "What should I do if I spot the master necromancer?"

"I have not announced your intention. If you are discreet, no one will suspect what you are doing, and if you spot him, remain silent," Willowbrook instructed. "You can inform me of it once you are outside the room, and we will decide how to handle it best."

"Very well." I nodded. It wasn't a very reassuring plan, but I felt safer knowing that Michael would be accompanying me. We stepped into the ballroom, but before I could begin my reading I spotted my father making a beeline for us, red-faced and puffing like a locomotive. "Oh no," I murmured.

"Emily! Where have you been? Your sisters have been worried sick over you." Of course he made no mention of worrying about me himself. If the game hadn't ended, I doubted that he would have noticed my activities at all.

"Miss Wright has been aiding Lord Willowbrook," Michael informed him.

"Oh she has, has she? Well that nonsense ends now. Go sit with your sisters," he ordered.

"Your concern for my welfare is very touching, Father. Did Miss Morgan's unfortunate demise interrupt your game?"

"It did, if you must know, and my luck was just about to turn for the better."

Of course it was. Father suffered under the delusion that one more hand at cards would completely change his fortune. “Perhaps you should have a drink.” I glanced in the direction of the refreshments. “I will speak with the girls and set their minds at ease.”

Father followed my gaze, and his determination wavered as he spotted the wine, as I knew it would. Spirits were a close second to cards on his list of favorite diversions. When his attention returned, he frowned at my new companion. “What is your purpose here?” he asked Michael.

Before he could answer, I patted Michael’s arm affectionately. “Oh we’ve been making mad, passionate love in the library. It’s very scandalous, everyone will be talking about it for weeks,” I said flippantly. Michael made a sound very much as though he was choking.

Father merely sighed and shook his head. “You and your tales, Emily. I suppose you’ll compose a sonnet about that as well. Go on, comfort Jo before she gets so upset she delivers her babe in the middle of the room.” He walked away, and I looked up at Michael, who was blushing quite handsomely.

“I thought seers always spoke the truth?” he said.

“We are devoted to the truth. But that wasn’t a lie, it was a flight of fancy, and I knew he would dismiss it as such,” I explained. “Are you brave enough to face my sisters?”

“If we can avoid any further flights of fancy, yes.” We started in the direction of my family. “A sonnet?”

This time I blushed. “I write poetry. It’s a bit of a hobby.”

“Really? Would you let me read some of your work?”

“I...I suppose so.” The request surprised me. Other than Josephine and my mother, no one had ever asked to see my work. On occasion I considered attempting to publish it, but the idea was too daunting.

When we approached the sitting area I had left my sisters in, I saw that their husbands had returned and were standing guard. I pitied the murderer if he came near them, for they appeared to be spoiling for a fight—or as much as a group of librarians could be. As a rule, librarians are not known for prowess in battle.

“Where have you been?” Sarah asked.

“I have been helping Lord Willowbrook.” I spared Michael the indignity of another story.

“Are you all right? You look unwell.” Concern was etched on Josephine’s pretty face, and her husband, Thomas, stood behind her, appearing worried as well, but likely more for her sake than mine.

I felt guilty for worrying Jo, because I was closest to her, and I smiled sheepishly. I probably looked a fright by now. “It was difficult, but I am fine.”

“Miss Wright has been very brave,” Michael assured them.

“Have you been looking out for her or leading her into trouble?” Thomas asked.

“He has been looking out for me. I am quite safe in Mr. Black’s company.” They appeared comforted by my words, though I wondered what they would say if I shared the news about finding my soul mate. “Have you seen Mr. Farrell?”

Mary nodded. “He was here earlier, but he complained of a headache and returned to his room.”

“I see,” I said. It was just as well. He would be safer there, and it kept him from witnessing me on Michael’s arm. “I have a few more matters to attend to. I will return later.”

“Father wants you to stay here,” Sarah said.

“Well, then Father can speak to Lord Willowbrook about it,” I countered. “In the meantime I will continue with my task. If you’ll excuse us.”

I nudged Michael insistently, encouraging him to leave, and we walked away. I chose a spot along the wall and drew to a halt. “We will start here and do a slow circuit through the room.”

“Is there anything I can do to aid you?” he asked.

“Mainly prevent me from tripping. It may help if we talk as we move through the room, as it will look less suspicious, but please keep the topic simple. Nothing that will distract me.” Now was not the time to discuss our future, or lack thereof.

“Of course. Whenever you are ready.”

I nodded and stared out at the crowd. Everyone had arranged themselves into small groups, mostly by their breed of magic but with a bit of crossover. As a rule, magicians did not marry outside their group—alchemists married alchemists, sorcerers married sorceresses, and so on. It was the main reason I had no marriage prospects before Mr. Farrell, for no magician wanted to risk that his children would be seers like myself, even though that was a very slim risk. One that Mr. Farrell was willing to take, in exchange for exploiting my abilities for his gain. I knew it was not fondness that drew him to me, but greed, practical and calculating.

The room bloomed with color as my vision shifted, bright and riotous like an overgrown flower garden. A giddy wave of lightheadedness bubbled through me. I’d never attempted anything like this. Fear seemed the dominant emotion in the room, and the chill of it made me cling a little tighter to Michael’s arm.

“Lead on,” I said softly.

“What did you discuss with Dr. Bennett?” he asked.

It was hardly what I could consider simple conversation, but I shrugged as I examined the auras of a group of alchemists. “He offered me a position in the employ of a guardian in New York City.” I did not see his reaction, but I could feel how surprised he was by the news. “I told him I would consider it.”

“Are you?”

“Yes, I am. I doubt that it will be possible, but it is an intriguing offer. I have always wanted to travel, and it would be an opportunity to use my abilities for more than matchmaking.”

We wound our way through a sea of sorcerers, and I stumbled as dizziness attempted to trip me. My feet were heavy, as though weighed down by layers of mud caked to my shoes. I frowned, and I stopped near the refreshments. "I feel odd," I admitted.

"Do you think you're being interfered with?" he asked.

"No. I think I may be overtaxing myself. It may help if we pause for a moment... I think I would like a glass of wine."

"Won't that interfere with your abilities?"

"One glass won't. Three would. Though by the end of the evening I may need a bottle of it." I smiled weakly. "Perhaps I can sneak one back to my room."

"I will fetch you a glass. Wait here."

My gaze wandered over the crowd while I waited. Everyone's aura was alive with color. The master necromancer could not be among them. It may have been a wise tactic for him to hide in plain sight, but he was more likely seeking refuge within the empty rooms of the estate. Perhaps even his own room, if he was indeed a guest.

Michael returned, a glass of wine in his hands and worry in his aura, and I blinked it away. My eyes were tired, as though I had strained them concentrating on my needlework for too long, and a headache twinged behind them.

"I am told this is a sweet wine. I was not sure what you would want," he said.

"Thank you. Is something wrong?" I doubted his distress was caused by the wine.

"I don't like the idea of you going to America."

"No?" I sipped at the wine, watching him over the rim of the glass. "There is sense in it. It might be easiest for us to be so far apart. Running into each other at gatherings like this one would be awkward." And painful, I added silently. I pictured myself old and gray, still matching other couples while my own soul mate stood across the room, cold and ageless. Shivering, I took a longer drink.

Michael frowned. "It wouldn't solve anything."

"Is there an alternative you have in mind?"

"We could be married."

I nearly dropped the glass. "What?"

"That is what most soul mates do," Michael replied matter-of-factly.

"Yes, but our situation is unique. Most soul mates do not have one half of their partnership considering immortality. Your path is already set. And though the Order may not be a jealous wife, I would be. I've spent most of my life being ignored by my family while they buried their noses in books. I would rather not spend the rest of it being ignored by my husband."

"Have I ever ignored you before?"

"No," I admitted reluctantly. "But you would. It's in your nature. As you said, you've always wanted to be a chronicler. Your mentor does not strike me as a shining example of...well of anything, really."

Michael winced. "Simon does not excel at social graces, but he is an excellent teacher."

"Haven't you ever wanted more?"

"More?"

"More than this." I waved my free hand at the crowd. "More than the same faces, the same gatherings. Always the same stale gossip."

He glanced away, peering pensively at the assembled magicians clustered into their tight-knit factions. "I don't usually pay attention to them. I prefer paying attention to you." Michael smiled, and my irritation melted away. "Do you truly want to move to America, or is it the opportunity for change that appeals to you?"

"Opportunity itself appeals to me. Everyone treats me as though my life has ended because I haven't married, or they pressure me to marry Mr. Farrell because I will not get another offer at my age." The sweetness of the wine soured on my lips, and I set the glass on a nearby table. "We should finish our task," I said brusquely.

"If you could have your perfect life, what would it be?"

I paused. No one had ever asked me that. Glancing at my sisters, I watched as they chatted with their spouses. They were not soul mates, but they were happy. I had matched each of them with their husbands, and though I knew they were quite compatible, it was not a guarantee for a successful marriage. The majority of the matches I made were based upon suitability of the couple and how harmonious their magic was, but problems were always possible. Yet each of them had managed thus far, persevering with determination and hard work. Both of which I assumed I would need to build a life with Michael. If that was what I wanted.

"I would like to travel. Even if it is only for a short while, as long as I could say that I had an adventure once and saw something marvelous. I want to do more with my magic than matchmaking, perhaps publish some of my writing. And I want a family of my own," I said. Michael nodded, and I hesitated before taking his arm, afraid to hear his reaction, for I knew he didn't want any of those things. "What would your perfect life be?" I asked, curious.

Michael looked away, avoiding my gaze. "I haven't thought about it. I try to focus on practicalities instead of flights of fancy," he replied dryly.

"Typical librarian. I'm sure your dreams are filled with books." I turned away, focusing on the auras as the room bloomed with color once again. Each person I read stole a bit of my strength, and by the time we finished our slow journey through the room my entire body felt heavy, and it was difficult to move. I leaned on Michael for support as we stepped into the hallway, and I spotted Lord Willowbrook conversing with Simon, Mr. Gryphon and Dr. Bennett.

“Did you find anything?” Lord Willowbrook asked as we approached.

“All of the guests within are very much alive,” I informed him. “I was able to recognize the aura of each person. The necromancer must be elsewhere.”

“If it is a necromancer,” Mr. Gryphon muttered sullenly.

I turned to chastise him, and a wave of dizziness nearly stole the floor from under me. I gasped, my lashes fluttering as dark spots clouded my vision. Michael tried to steady me, and I clung to him for balance.

“Miss Wright? Are you ill?” Lord Willowbrook peered at me with concern.

Dr. Bennett stepped forward and placed his hand against my forehead. His touch was cool, and I wondered why I was suddenly so warm. “She’s exhausted,” he pronounced. It seemed an obvious diagnosis.

“As I understand it, reading that many individual auras in one evening is almost a herculean effort,” Simon spoke up. I glanced at him—had he just complimented me? “Miss Wright should be allowed rest before you ask anything further of her.”

“I’m sure I only need to rest my eyes for a bit,” I said weakly. “Perhaps I could return to my room.”

“You shouldn’t be alone,” Michael advised.

I shouldn’t be with you either, I thought sourly. “Josephine can sit with me. She shouldn’t be in that room in her condition.”

My eyelids heavy, I leaned against Michael while my family was fetched. In addition to Josephine and Thomas, I also acquired the aid of Mary and her husband, Charles, forming my own little parade back to my room. The men stood guard while my sisters helped me out of my gown, and I was immensely happy to be able to breathe and walk unencumbered. I intended to lie down for a short while, enough to regain my strength, but when my head hit the pillow, I drifted asleep to the sound of Jo’s knitting needles clicking as she sat in a chair next to my bed.

Chapter Five

I stumbled through the darkness, drawn by the sound of a child crying, until I finally reached a long, shadowed hallway. At the end was a half-open door, a slash of light in the chill gloom, and I hurried through it. I was surprised to discover myself in a nursery, bright and lovely. Sunshine streamed through the open windows, and lace curtains blew lazily in the warm breeze.

"There now. See, no need to fret, your mother is here," Michael said. Turning, I spotted him standing next to a crib holding a wailing bundle in his arms. He looked up at me and smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, dear. I tried to comfort her, but she'll have none of it."

Nodding, I stepped forward and took the baby from him. Her face was red and tear-streaked, and she continued to howl furiously, but my breath caught as I looked down at her—she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Michael put his arm around my shoulders and brushed an affectionate kiss against my hair. The baby began to quiet, and I smiled up at him, so happy I was sure that I glowed with it. This was the scene I had always wanted, that I dreamed of having for myself. A husband who loved me, a child of our own...

"Michael." Simon stood in the shadows of the hallway I had left, just shy of the sunlight. His icy eyes were bright in the darkness as he watched us with annoyance. He held an hourglass, and the sand glinted as it relentlessly slipped away. "Don't forget."

"Are you all right?" Josephine asked.

Rubbing my eyes, I groaned softly. My head still ached dully, but I did feel better. "Did I fall asleep?"

"For nearly four hours," she said, concerned. "You were whimpering. Are you in pain? You are very pale."

"I am always pale," I murmured in reply.

She laughed, smiling. "I suppose that is true."

"Have they found the murderer?"

"No, they are still looking for him. Thomas says they think he is hiding somewhere on the grounds."

"Has the guardian arrived?"

"No, he isn't expected until morning. Well, now that you are awake, would you like me to send for some tea?"

"If you would like some, yes. Why are you still here? You should be resting yourself," I scolded her.

“Mary promised she would sit with you next, if necessary, but I feel well. Though I noticed that you still snore.”

“I do not,” I protested.

She smiled, teasing, and I eased myself out of bed. Josephine poked her head into the hall and spoke to someone—probably Thomas, guarding my door—while I donned my dressing robe. When she returned to her chair, she regarded me thoughtfully.

“What has changed between you and Mr. Black?” she asked.

“Is it that obvious?”

“To me it is. Sarah noted it as well.”

“I wouldn’t say that anything has changed between us, but I did discover that he is my soul mate.”

Josephine’s eyes widened. “Really? What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing. Well, perhaps I may cry a bit more, but I feel that is justified,” I said, weary of the subject. I clutched the garment tighter around me, feeling a chill.

“You should marry him.”

“Don’t be foolish. How happy would you be if Thomas decided to join the Order? Would you want to be a chronicler’s wife?”

“No, I suppose not. Still, there must be some way you can resolve that situation. Many wives struggle to understand their husband’s profession. The higher powers must have some plan in pairing you together,” she argued.

“Perhaps.” I couldn’t imagine what that plan could be, or how we could manage it. “Dr. Bennett offered me a position in the employ of an American guardian.”

Josephine coughed, appearing appalled by the idea. “You aren’t considering it, are you? We would never see you again!”

“I know. I would enjoy never seeing Sarah again, but I would miss your company. It is an excellent opportunity to use my magic to do more than matchmaking.”

“Couldn’t you do that if you married Michael? I’m sure the Order would be happy to have your aid.”

“I had not thought of that.” The Order was devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, and as a seer I would have a unique method of obtaining it. However, the idea of working with Simon was less than appealing. Would I be expected to feed him my blood like an apprentice did? The image of Amelia and her lover flitted through my mind, and I blushed, but it did remind me that I had a question to ask. Though our sister Mary was the gossip of our family, Josephine might know details of Miss Morgan’s associations. “Do you know if Miss Morgan had been doting on anyone in particular as of late?”

“Well, I don’t wish to speak ill of the dead...” she said hesitantly.

“Please. It may aid us in catching her killer.”

“Amelia has—had—spoken of several gentlemen lately, but before that she was quite taken with one in particular for several months. Mr. Farrell.”

“My Mr. Farrell?” I asked, incredulous.

“Yes, but I’m sure matters ended between them before he began courting you,” Josephine assured me. I nodded in agreement, though I was unconvinced. Could he be Miss Morgan’s murderer? He was dark-haired like the man in my vision...but wouldn’t I have recognized the change in his condition? Shouldn’t it have been glaringly obvious to me, a seer, that he was no longer among the living? But I had never had cause to examine his aura closely, so I could not know that something was amiss with it.

Our tea arrived, and it proved an excellent distraction. I was surprised by how famished I was. It was all I could do to avoid greedily gobbling down the biscuits like a child left unattended with a plateful. To my credit, I had worked up quite an appetite. This was more magic than I had ever attempted before.

A knock interrupted us, and Josephine rose to open the door. She spoke with someone quietly, and then turned and frowned at me. “It’s Mr. Black. He wishes to speak with you.”

“Let him in then,” I said.

My sister gasped at the idea. “But you aren’t dressed!”

“I am not undressed, either. I doubt he’ll attempt to ravish me while you and I are having tea.”

She frowned in exasperation. “Mother would have a fit if she were here.”

“I suppose it is good that she stayed at home then.”

Shaking her head, Josephine opened the door and allowed Michael into the room. He paused after a few steps, blushing, though it seemed silly to me. The gown that I wore earlier showed far more skin than my current ensemble. He may have been embarrassed by my hair, which was a bit wild at the moment, having been let down from its pins.

“I apologize for the interruption. Are you recovered enough to rejoin the investigation?” he asked.

“I doubt I could read another roomful of people, but I could manage a few things. Why, has something happened?”

Michael waited until Josephine returned to her seat before continuing. “I am afraid there has been another murder. Mr. Gryphon was found dead.”

“That’s terrible! Though I doubt there will be trouble creating a list of suspects, considering his unpleasantness. They don’t suspect your mentor again, do they?” I asked, shivering.

“No, Simon and I were with Lord Willowbrook at the time.”

I doubt it would be a comfort to Mr. Gryphon, but I was glad to hear of it. Well, mildly glad, for in truth I would not be too grieved if something unfortunate happened to Simon. “Wait outside. I will join you in a moment.”

Nodding, Michael left the room, and I rose to search for something to wear. I had no intention of putting my ball gown back on, as the garment was dreadfully heavy, and instead settled on the simple dress

I had intended to wear while returning home. I couldn't wear my long gloves with that dress, however, and I was forced to go without. Without them I would need to be more cautious about what I touched, but I could manage that. I added a shawl, in case we stepped outside, and I frowned at my hair in the mirror. There wasn't time to properly style it again, and I twisted it into a simple knot.

"You should go to bed," I said to Josephine as she sipped her tea.

"You don't want me to wait for your return?"

"I do not. I want you to rest. I will send for Mary if I need anything. Or Sarah, if I want to be miserable." I smiled dryly.

"Then I will go to bed once I finish my tea. Please be careful, Emily."

"I will do my best." I stepped into the hallway and found Michael speaking with Thomas. "Jo has agreed to retire after finishing her tea. I expect you to hold her to that," I informed her husband.

"Gladly." Thomas turned to Michael and glared sternly at him. "You will look out for her."

Michael nodded. "Of course. Shall we?" I fought the temptation to take Michael's arm and folded my hands in front of me as we walked away. "Did you rest well?"

"I had strange dreams," I admitted. "But that's not unusual for me."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

We turned a corner into an empty hallway, and after a few steps I paused. "Don't be." I looked up at him, feeling that I should say something but without any idea of what.

"Why, were you dreaming of me?" he asked, his tone teasing. I nodded, and he blinked in surprise. "Really? Something lascivious, I hope. Another flight of fancy?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "Sorry to disappoint, but no. It was something quite ordinary, but lovely." My face heated with a blush, and I looked away. "And unexpected."

"Emily, I know this isn't the right time, but I need to explain—"

"You don't need to explain anything to me."

"Yes, I do. I need you to know. I have always focused on my studies because my studies were all I had. I have no family or fortune to speak of, and nothing to offer a wife. Especially not a woman of a good family, like you. I knew I couldn't offer you anything other than conversation, and that is why things have always remained as such between us."

"Why are you telling me this now?" I asked.

Michael grimaced. "Because that fact hasn't changed. And because you might refuse to speak to me again after you see Mr. Gryphon's body. It is much worse than Miss Morgan. I argued with Lord Willowbrook not to involve you, but he insisted that you examine the scene."

I paled, but then I forced a brave smile. "Then I will count on you to catch me should I faint."

"Of course." He offered his arm and this time I took it, glad for the strength of his presence. There was a weariness about him, as though the air was heavier, weighing him down.

Lord Willowbrook was waiting for us, along with Simon and Dr. Bennett, two people I was not eager to see. They watched me closely, and I felt distinctly like a mouse being eyed by a group of hungry cats.

“Are you prepared to proceed?” Lord Willowbrook asked.

“As much as I can be.”

He motioned for us to follow him, and he led us around a corner. The smell hit me first—blood, an overwhelming amount of it. My visions are almost exclusively sight and sound, and because scents are never included I knew this was not part of one. It was real. My suspicions were confirmed when I spotted Mr. Gryphon’s body. For a horrified moment I stared at it, but then I stumbled and turned away, unable to continue. I tried to catch my breath, but the stench of blood overpowered me, and I fought back a dizzy wave of nausea. Michael held tightly to me, probably assuming I was about to faint as I warned I might, but I remained on my feet.

“Are you all right?” he asked. I nodded, afraid to trust that my voice wouldn’t crack if I replied aloud. “Do you want to return to your room?”

“No,” I whispered. A flicker of movement caught my attention, and I looked up to meet Simon’s gaze as he stood near me. Those calculating blue eyes studied me, and I straightened, imagining him belittling my skills and complaining of the inadequacies of female seers. “No,” I repeated, regaining my voice. “I am well. I will continue.” I patted Michael’s hand to reassure him, and then turned my focus to the investigation.

The scene was gruesome, the stuff of nightmares, but I could not allow myself to be distracted by that. Though the blood turned my stomach, I looked past the gore for any signs of magic or any detail that might be helpful. I stepped closer, clutching the skirt of my dress and lifting it to keep it out of the dark pool. There was so much of it...obviously the necromancer had not drained him as he had Miss Morgan. Her death might have been an accident, but this was brutal and deliberate. It almost appeared as though Mr. Gryphon had been mauled by an animal, his throat torn open and ravaged.

Mr. Gryphon’s body was as devoid of energy as Miss Morgan’s had been, but a cloud hovered above him. I stepped closer to examine it. The energy wasn’t familiar, not a spell or emotion. I hesitantly stretched out my hand to touch it, and I jumped at the indignant rage that burned my fingers. The cloud moved, as no residual energy should, and buzzed around me like a swarm of angry bees. I gasped and stepped back, and it followed as I bumped into Michael.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I think it may be Mr. Gryphon’s spirit,” I guessed.

“Can you speak with him?” Lord Willowbrook asked, and I frowned at him.

“Only a necromancer can speak with the dead,” I replied matter-of-factly.

The cloud moved again, this time rolling away toward a nearby door. I followed as it disappeared through it, and I opened the door. In retrospect, that was probably foolish of me, for the master

necromancer could have been waiting on the other side. Thankfully all I found was a servants' stairwell, narrow and dimly lit. The spirit—if that's what it was—hovered near the wall. There was the glimmer of a spell there, and I touched it. My hand was burned, and I snatched it away with a hiss of pain. I caught the impression of what had happened. The door had been open, the creature waiting within the shadows for Mr. Gryphon. It was afraid...afraid that he knew something, a damning piece of information. It sprang forth as Mr. Gryphon passed, and he tried to defend himself with a fire spell, but it went wide and splashed against the wall.

I returned to the hallway and relayed the information to Lord Willowbrook, and when I glanced back the spirit was gone. Hopefully it moved on to what lies beyond, though I had no way of knowing its fate.

"Did Mr. Gryphon say anything to you before he parted your company?" I asked.

"No, unfortunately." Lord Willowbrook frowned.

"I hesitate to mention this, for I don't wish to make any accusations, but until recently Miss Morgan was fond of Mr. John Farrell. He was not in the ballroom during the time of her murder, and he was not in attendance when I read the auras of the guests there. Perhaps if we spoke with him I could read his aura and confirm whether he remains a sorcerer."

"I will see that he is brought to you," Lord Willowbrook said. "First I need to make arrangements for Mr. Gryphon's body, now that we have determined what befell him."

"Our rooms are near here," Simon spoke up. "Mr. Black and I will keep Miss Wright company while you see to that."

"Is that acceptable?" Lord Willowbrook asked me.

"Yes, that's fine." I was not thrilled at the idea of more time spent in Simon's company, but I trusted that I would be safe with him. Something pricked at my curiosity, and I peered at Willowbrook. "Where did you move Miss Morgan's body to?"

His bushy white brows rose at the question. "The wine cellar, for the time being."

I chewed my bottom lip—it seemed a logical place to store a body, but it also seemed a good place for a master necromancer to hide. "Has the wine cellar been searched for the killer since then?"

"I'm sure it has been."

"Would your men have been able to spot him, if he was hidden in the shadows?" I asked.

"Don't worry, Miss Wright. I can assure you that they are very thorough."

I nodded, but unease settled in my mind, and I was plagued with the feeling that there was something I should be doing or had forgotten to do. I took Michael's arm and let him lead me away, and my distraction continued as I entered Simon's room. The suite had a small sitting room, and I fidgeted with my shawl as I perched on the edge of a chair.

"You seem unsettled, Miss Wright," Simon commented.

"It feels...wrong somehow. It is difficult to put into words."

"The wine cellar concerns you?" he asked.

"Yes. The impression that I had was that the necromancer was not merely lying in wait for Mr. Gryphon, but that he was actually *within* the shadows, as though concealed by magic. If that is true, how could anyone see him without unraveling the spell first?"

The chronicler nodded. "It is within a necromancer's power to do so. That would explain why no one has had success in locating him... You might be able to do it."

"Me?" I repeated.

"Yes. You may be able to see the energy of the spell or his aura beneath it."

"You can't be suggesting that she search for the murderer," Michael said, his tone incredulous.

"Miss Wright may be the only one able to see him," he countered. "But we will wait to hear from Lord Willowbrook. Perhaps we will be fortunate and find that Farrell is the master necromancer, and he is asleep in his room." Simon smiled dryly, and it was not a comforting expression. "If you wish, I will leave you for a moment. I'm sure you must have matters to discuss."

"Yes, please," Michael replied. I frowned up at him, for it was not at all appropriate—though that seemed to be a theme for the evening—and Simon left the room.

I rose, my anxiety demanding that I pace and wring my hands, but I was distracted by Michael's nearness. I took a deep breath to say something brave and encouraging, but instead I gave in to a need for comfort and wrapped my arms around him, burying my face against his chest.

"That was awful," I said, my voice muffled.

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

"I feel most sorry for Mr. Gryphon and Miss Morgan. Their deaths were senseless."

He stroked my hair, and I closed my eyes and tried to banish all thoughts of blood and murder from my mind. Unsuccessfully. I looked up at him, morbidly curious. "I realize that a master necromancer is quite different from a chronicler, but does it bother you? The thought of drinking blood? It seems so...distasteful."

"I suppose I have gotten used to the idea. I have never had a problem with giving my blood. It's quick, simple and painless. Just a bite at the wrist."

At least it sounded civilized. I glanced in the direction of Simon's door, feeling a bit better. "Why would they have suspected Simon of killing Miss Morgan, then? There was nothing quick or simple about it."

Michael blushed. "I have never experienced it myself, but as I understand it a bite can be intimate, under the right circumstances. But as you noticed, Simon isn't very social. He isn't the sort to make love to a woman he's just met at a gathering. That's more the style of a master necromancer. They are reckless with their immortality. They have no purpose."

“And purpose is important to the Order.” I smiled weakly. “I know that only librarians can become chroniclers, but do you think the Order would be interested in my aid?”

“Perhaps. It hasn’t been done before that I know of.” He brushed a lock of hair from my face. “I don’t know what to do, Emily.”

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

His answer was to kiss me, and it was a reply I approved of. My worries slipped away, replaced by contemplation of the taste of his lips and the feel of his fingers caressing my hair. I shivered—not from a chill but from the sheer delicious wickedness of it all. It suddenly made sense to me why so many young women risked their reputations for a few moments spent alone with their lovers. If only our situation was less dire, and we had more time...

Time. Don’t forget.

I drew away, intending to tell Michael of my dream. I knew it had been more than wishful thinking, for it had the feel of a vision about it, and I felt he had a right to know. Perhaps we could convince Simon to postpone the ritual, and we could have a short while together. Even if I couldn’t keep him, the shining happiness of that one moment in the nursery would be worth it.

“I need to tell you something,” I began, but before I could continue we were interrupted by a knock at the door. We parted, both looking guilty, and Michael crossed to open it. Simon rejoined us before the door opened, and from the quickness of his response I wondered if he had been listening to our conversation.

Lord Willowbrook entered, frowning darkly. “Mr. Farrell was not in his room.”

“And there was no sign of him?” Simon asked.

“None.”

My heart sank. It had to be Mr. Farrell...or perhaps the necromancer had killed him on the way back to his room after leaving due to his headache. It was less likely, but easier to accept. Less painful than believing that the only men who had ever expressed interest in me were both ambitious to become the living dead.

“Miss Wright thinks that the master necromancer may be concealing himself with magic. If so, she may be the only one who can find him,” Simon replied. All eyes turned to me, and I resisted the urge to hide behind Michael.

“I’m sure the guardian could. When he arrives,” I pointed out.

“Are you willing to risk the possibility of another death in the meantime?” Simon asked.

“No. However, I would like to avoid my own as well. I have no defensive magic.”

“Which is why we would ensure that you are well guarded,” he replied. “I think I may also have a way to aid you in spotting Farrell, but I would prefer to discuss the details of the spell privately.”

I grimaced, not liking the sound of that, and I turned to Lord Willowbrook, expecting him to reject the idea. Instead he nodded slowly, and I wondered if Simon had some sort of mind-control magic I wasn't aware of. Surely Lord Willowbrook could not be agreeing to endanger my life.

"Where do you wish to begin searching?" Willowbrook asked.

"The wine cellar," Simon said.

"We will wait for you there."

I watched in shock as he left the room, and then I turned to Simon. "I did not agree to lead the search for the killer."

"You are uniquely qualified to do so. We can see that you are protected."

"How? Does Lord Willowbrook have a spare suit of armor lying about?" Anxious, I stroked my throat and shivered.

Michael touched my shoulder. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"I don't want anything to happen to you either." His mentor, on the other hand, I might not mind falling victim to an unfortunate demise, though Michael would be upset by it.

"Then I suggest we resolve the situation quickly so that everyone is safe," Simon said.

I sighed in defeat. "What did you wish to discuss?"

"I think I may be able to aid you in spotting the master necromancer, or at the very least be able to view him as well, with your help."

"What sort of help?" I asked.

"Your blood."

"No," Michael and I said at the same time.

"If you'll allow me to explain—"

"No." I stepped away for emphasis, and Michael placed himself between us.

"A small amount," Simon continued, undaunted. "Chroniclers feed upon the magic within blood, not the blood itself. As such it is possible for a chronicler to borrow the abilities of the magician they feed upon. Temporarily. I have had some success with it in the past."

"A small amount?" Michael repeated.

"Yes, of course."

Michael turned to me, and I knew he was about to convince me to allow it. I hid my face against his chest and held out my arm awkwardly to the side. "Fine, but do it quickly before I come to my senses."

He patted my hair, but this time I felt little comfort, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I tensed as cold fingers brushed my wrist, pushing my sleeve back.

"It's all right. It only takes a moment," Michael assured me, but I flinched when the fangs pierced my skin.

To be honest, it did not hurt. In fact it didn't feel like much of anything at all, as though my wrist had been numbed. There was a bit of an odd sensation as his mouth pulled at my skin, but it wasn't bothersome, and it was over quickly, as promised. But before it was, a tingle of energy traveled up my arm—not Simon's doing, but instead it was an impression of him. He was terribly lonely, more than anyone I had ever met before, and I saw that Michael was the first friend that Simon had had in decades. I was struck by the realization that Simon was just as afraid of losing Michael to me as I was of losing Michael to him, only for different reasons. I felt quite sorry for him. It explained why he was unpleasant toward me.

When my wrist was free again, I pulled away from Michael to examine it. There were no marks, not even a hint of a bruise, and I was surprised by that.

"Do you feel well?" Michael asked.

"I feel fine." I glanced at Simon, but he was quiet and expressionless.

"See, nothing to worry about." Michael smiled. Only a murderous master necromancer hidden somewhere within the house, a vision of Michael's death hanging over me and the impossibility of a future with my soul mate. No, nothing to worry about at all.

"How do you feel?" I asked Simon.

He frowned. "I was expecting a stronger reaction."

"Reading auras is quite complicated. Unlike most magicians I did not have the luxury of a teacher and learned how to control my abilities on my own. The best advice I can give you is to look past your target and allow your eyes to relax. After a few moments you should catch a soft glow around everything. Living things, mainly, though some objects or areas can hold the aftereffects of energy for a time. Like a teacup, or a chair," I said. The chronicler nodded, and I explained further. "Auras don't extend very far. Perhaps an inch or two, depending on how powerful the magician is." I held my palm just above the sleeve of Michael's coat to demonstrate. He smiled at me, and I blushed and turned to watch Simon as he stared at his hand.

"I don't see anything," Simon murmured.

"I wouldn't begin with your aura. You're very dim," I replied. He looked up and scowled at me, and I winced. "I meant your aura isn't as bright as a living magician's." To confirm this I examined his aura again, and to my surprise it was brighter than it had been before. Still not as bright as mine or Michael's, but its strength had improved.

"You are more vibrant now than you were earlier," I commented. "I suppose the difference has something to do with feeding."

"Vibrant enough to pass for a living magician?" he asked.

"No. Even if it was, you're...unrecognizable. You don't have a librarian's aura, yours is something else entirely. Remarkable. Mr. Farrell's aura should be similarly so—it may not match yours, but it will not match anyone else's either."

Simon stared in our direction, and then he nodded briskly. “Ah. Yes, I see it now.”

“How long will the borrowed magic last?” Michael asked.

“Not very. We should hurry.”

Chapter Six

We prepared for battle in the hallway, and all I could do was stare with growing dread at the door to the wine cellar. I knew the necromancer was in there with a certainty that went down to my bones, and I prayed that it wasn't Mr. Farrell, more for my sake than his. Creeping tendrils of death slipped like fog from under the door. It was evil, plain and frightening—I'd never experienced anything of its like. And I was expected to walk into the dark heart of it, with only the dubious protection of my librarian soul mate and his mentor.

To keep my hands from shaking I folded them tightly, though a slight tremble traveled up my arms. I wanted to cling to Michael for support, but I didn't want to distract him. He had enough to worry about as it was, for librarians were not known for defensive magic. Really he had no business in a fight such as this—like myself—but he insisted on accompanying me. Worry creased Michael's brow, but Simon, on the other hand, seemed nonplussed by the situation. Upon arriving at the wine cellar he had removed his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and politely asked Lord Willowbrook for a sword, which we were now awaiting the arrival of. It was difficult to decide which was more worrisome, the murderous master necromancer or a chronicler with a sword.

When the weapon arrived, Simon drew it, examining the blade's edge before belting the scabbard on. "Do you want Farrell killed or incapacitated?"

"Killed," Lord Willowbrook replied. "I would rather not risk him healing his wounds and attacking other guests. I do wish you would take more people with you."

Simon shook his head. "They wouldn't be able to see him, and unless there are any shapeshifters in attendance, I am the only one who can match the speed, strength and resilience of a master necromancer. Even a young one will still outpace any of your volunteers."

Lord Willowbrook was less than pleased by that idea, but he did not argue.

"Keep the door shut until the deed is done. I don't want him escaping past us."

"Understood." Willowbrook handed Michael a lantern, and Simon led us into the darkness.

The wooden stairs groaned as we walked down them, and I clutched my skirts with sweating palms, my heart pounding. The lantern cast a small circle of light, and it was an anemic comfort. Fear made my vision slow to shift, but once it did I was able to see the auras of my two companions, though the rest of the room remained dark. Or at least what I could see of it—it felt like a large space, with shadows that

stretched on forever. Simon moved to the right, and we followed, out of obedience and the fear of being left behind.

“It was an accident,” a voice hissed from the shadows.

I jumped, my gaze darting all around us, but I saw no sign of the speaker. It didn’t sound like Mr. Farrell, but that was difficult to judge from the sibilant words.

“Miss Morgan’s death may have been. I doubt Mr. Gryphon tore his own throat out,” Simon replied.

“Oscar would have been a problem. The Gryphons were all problems.” The phantom voice growled, and the sound echoed. “They never appreciated my talent. They wouldn’t let me have Amelia. Said I wasn’t good enough for her. But you, Miss Wright, were acceptable.”

There was no denying his identity now. I felt foolish for not seeing it before, but perhaps I didn’t want to see it. It was easier to believe in the façade. Shivering, I stepped closer to Michael and the imagined safety of the lantern’s light. Long rows of wine racks filled the room, reminding me of the endless aisles of books in my vision. Lord Willowbrook did have a large estate. I suppose he would need to stock a great deal of wine for the gatherings he hosted.

“Why become a necromancer?” I asked, curious.

“Because this is true power. I won’t be denied anything again.”

We reached the end of the first rack, and more rows disappeared into the dark. A few feet away a table leaned against the earthen wall, and Miss Morgan and Mr. Gryphon’s bodies had been laid out upon it. Their corpses remained as blank as before, but an oily black shadow stood next to them, its head tilted as it stared down at Amelia.

“He’s there!” I exclaimed, pointing at the figure.

“Where?” Michael asked, but Simon darted forward.

“Next to the bodies,” I replied.

Simon struck the shadow, and it snarled and hissed, lunging at the chronicler. The two became a dark blur, and I wrinkled my nose at the scent of freshly spilled blood. Michael stepped in front of me, and I peered around him to watch.

“I still can’t see him,” Michael said.

“But he’s right there.” I pointed again for emphasis.

“To me it looks as though Simon is fighting thin air.”

Worried, I frowned as I focused on the shadow. It had Mr. Farrell’s height and build, but his features were obscured by the darkness. I expected Simon to draw the sword he had requested and attack with that, but instead he fought hand-to-hand. Or rather claws-to-claws, for they both had sprouted wicked, deadly claws from their hands like great hunting cats. There was something feral and frightening about their combat, and I gripped Michael’s arm as I tried to keep track of their progress.

Suddenly the shadow darted down an aisle, and Simon froze. “Where did he go?”

“To the left,” I said. “Didn’t you see him?”

Simon shook his head and set off where I had instructed. Michael and I followed, but there was no sign of Mr. Farrell. When we reached the end of the aisle Simon paused, peering in both directions. He turned back to face us, and I saw movement to the side.

“There! To the right,” I ordered. Simon looked to his right, and I pointed frantically in the other direction. “My right, my right!”

Mr. Farrell lunged at me and I screamed, but Michael shoved me behind him. Unbalanced, I tumbled to the floor as Michael took the blow intended for me, and he grunted with pain. Simon grabbed Farrell and threw him into the nearest wall, and their fight began again. Terror gripped my throat as I stood up, staring at the blood staining Michael’s shirt. It gleamed in the weak light as the lantern swung back and forth in his shaking hand. Claw marks tore through the fabric in a long swipe.

“I’m fine,” he assured me.

“You’re hurt.” I took the lantern from him. I tugged off my shawl and pressed it against the wound. “Hold this tight against it to slow the bleeding.”

“Emily!” Simon called out to me. He was alone again, and I hurried to help him. The area was empty and silent. I stood close behind him, holding the lantern as high as I could.

“We should get Michael to the doctor,” I said.

“I’m fine,” he repeated.

“Our task isn’t finished,” Simon pointed out. “Though your borrowed magic seems to be.”

“Lovely,” I muttered. “Lead on, I will point him out.”

We walked forward, passing row by empty row, until we reached the end of the room. A dark glow moved in the corner, and I shouted, “There!” Simon tore off after him, and I continued to direct him as we ran toward John. “To the right, he’s headed right.”

The chronicler was much faster than we were, and Michael and I were almost to the end of the row when we heard a terrific crash. I slowed, attempting to locate the source of the noise, but then Michael shouted, “Look out!” He pushed me hard and I flew forward, dropping the lantern as I fell. The light died as the lantern broke, and another crash sounded behind me, a deafening mix of breaking glass and splintering wood.

When I regained my breath I pushed myself to my feet and turned, only able to make out auras in the darkness. Michael lay still, pinned beneath the fallen rack, and I screamed.

“No! Lord and Lady, no,” I sobbed. I knelt beside him and took his hand. He was warm, and though his aura flickered, it remained bright, living energy. I drew a breath to call for Simon, but a hand clamped over my mouth as I was yanked to my feet. A small squeak was the only response I managed as I was dragged away.

“Be silent,” Mr. Farrell ordered, a harsh whisper beside my ear. “I need your aid. This is all a misunderstanding. Tell Willowbrook that St. Jerome was the killer. That he attacked us. I will pay you any reward. I can give you whatever you want.” I knew it wasn’t true, for what I wanted most at that moment was Michael. “Will you help me?”

I shook my head, and there was an irritated sigh, followed by fangs piercing the side of my neck. This time the bite was not polite or civilized, and a haze of drowsy pleasure coursed through me. I knew I should fight it, but I couldn’t. My thoughts slipped away as soon as they were formed, leaving me helpless.

A white light flared to life and blinded me, but when I blinked past it I saw Simon standing a few feet away. He held the sword in his hand, and the blade blazed with magic.

“Let her go,” he ordered. Mr. Farrell refused, continuing to drain my blood. “There is no escape for you. If you truly meant no harm to Amelia, let Emily go. She is innocent in this.”

Finally he stopped, and blood trickled down the side of my throat when he drew away. “Innocent? She helped you hunt me.”

“Because it is in her nature. Just as the need to feed is in yours. At least she can control herself,” Simon countered. I was surprised by the praise, and my senses began to sort themselves out, returning to normal.

“It was an accident!” Farrell howled.

“That will not buy you mercy. You will either die at my hand or at the guardian’s when he arrives.”

“I can’t surrender. You know what happens to our kind if we die.”

Simon smiled slightly. “Chroniclers do not share your fate. If you feared burning in Hell, you should not have studied necromancy.”

My head cleared enough for me to act, and I stomped on Mr. Farrell’s foot as I elbowed him in the ribs. It was enough to distract him and allowed me to break free of his embrace.

“Get down!” Simon yelled. I dropped to the floor, and a wave of magic rushed over my head and knocked Mr. Farrell back. Simon leapt forward and stabbed the blade through Farrell’s chest, pinning him to the wall. After a moment he crumpled, and Simon withdrew the blade. “Don’t look.”

I considered arguing, for I wanted to see Mr. Farrell dead, but the bloodthirsty desire vanished at the sound of a pained groan from Michael. I scrambled to his side as Simon struck the final blow, severing his opponent’s head. Blood still flowed from the bite on my neck, but I ignored it, focused entirely on Michael. He moved weakly, and in the pale light cast by Simon’s sword I could see that the top of the rack had dragged along the wall, preventing it from crushing him completely beneath its weight. But he was pinned beneath it, and clearly injured.

“Go,” Simon ordered. “Tell them Farrell is dead and bring the doctor.”

“The lantern is broken, I can’t see the stairs.”

"Here." He withdrew his pocket watch, and it burst into the same white glow that covered the sword. I wondered what manner of spell accomplished that as I took it from him, clutching the chain tightly, and then I rose and hurried away. The stairs whined in protest as I charged up them, and I banged on the door.

"Mr. Farrell is dead! Please, open up!" I shouted. The door swung open, and I squinted in the flood of light. "Dr. Bennett?"

"Let me help you." The doctor reached toward the bite, and I batted his hand away.

"No! Help Michael," I insisted. Ignoring my protest, he tried again, so I grabbed his hand and hauled him after me down the stairs. Healing energy travelled up my arm, a reminder that Bennett was a powerful witch.

"Miss Wright, slow down," he warned. It was a sensible request, and I tried to comply. After all, Dr. Bennett wouldn't do anyone good if he fell down the stairs and hurt himself. When he spotted Michael, he dropped my hand and hurried to his side.

"Doctor, I can lift the rack if you can pull him out from under it," Simon said.

"Of course. Miss Wright, please hold my bag," Bennett replied.

I nodded, and he handed me his leather satchel. Clutching the bag to my chest, I struggled to catch my breath. My heart pounded fast and anxious, and the pocket watch swung back and forth in my trembling hand, doing little to keep back the darkness. Simon took hold of the wine rack and lifted, and the wood groaned, popped and snapped as it moved. Dr. Bennett grabbed Michael's shoulders and dragged him free, and I gasped at the sight of his bloodied body. He rolled Michael onto his back, and Michael groaned again, my shawl still clutched to his chest. The doctor took the bag from me, opened it and picked through it for spell components.

"No," I sobbed. Had I been wrong? Was Michael meant to die tonight and not during the ritual to become a chronicler? Oh, why had I let him accompany us? If he had remained upstairs, he would be perfectly fine...though it might be me crushed beneath the fallen rack. Michael had saved my life.

I tried to kneel at his side, but Simon caught me and stopped me. "Let Bennett work."

"But—"

"The doctor will heal him. Let him work," Simon repeated. I struggled for a moment, but then I relented, unable to do anything other than watch as the witch cast his spells. My vision shifted, and while Bennett's aura blazed with power, Michael's fluctuated. It was as though I could see his struggle in the fitful sputtering of his energy, and he remained determined to live.

"He is stable enough to move. Can you carry him?" Dr. Bennett asked Simon.

"Yes."

"We will take him back to his room for proper treatment."

Simon bent and picked Michael up as easily as he would a child, and I blinked in surprise. I supposed it shouldn't have been shocking, considering all the unusual abilities Simon had displayed, including the

ability to grow claws like a shapeshifter. The doctor and I followed close behind as Simon walked away, and our arrival in the hallway caused quite a commotion.

“What happened?” Lord Willowbrook demanded.

Simon and Dr. Bennett ignored him, leaving me with the awkward task of explaining. “Michael was injured during the fight. Dr. Bennett is going to treat him in Michael’s room,” I said over my shoulder.

“You are also injured,” Lord Willowbrook pointed out.

Raising my hand to my neck, I felt a warm trickle of blood. “Oh. Yes. I suppose the doctor will see to that too. You may wish to send someone to see to Mr. Farrell’s remains. Someone with a strong constitution.”

Lord Willowbrook blustered a bit, but he was soon left behind as Simon unerringly continued onward. We reached the rooms that Simon and Michael shared, and I hurried to open the doors. I followed them into Michael’s room, ignoring the sensible voice that scolded me for so boldly entering a gentleman’s bedroom, and watched as Simon laid him atop the bed.

“Out, both of you,” Bennett ordered. “I’ll yell if I need assistance.”

“I don’t want to leave him,” I argued.

“Michael will be fine. We will wait outside.” Simon took my arm and led me away, leaving no room for argument.

In the sitting room again, I stood frozen, unsure of what to do. I stared at the closed door, oblivious to Simon’s presence until he touched the bite and I flinched.

“I can heal that,” he said.

“Oh. Please do.”

The skin tingled as he ran his fingers over it, and the wound stopped bleeding. “We should clean up as well,” he suggested. “Michael will be quite upset if he sees you like this.”

Nodding, I followed him into his room. I glanced into the dressing mirror and was startled by the amount of blood that coated my skin and stained my dress. There was nothing I could do about the dress at the moment, but I cleaned what I could in the washbasin. Simon looked politely away as I did, and I watched his reflection in the mirror.

“There must be some way we can share him,” I blurted.

“Pardon?” Simon turned to me, seeming surprised by my outburst.

“I meant, there must be some way that Michael can be both your student and my husband. I won’t ask him to give up his studies or his work with the Order. I can’t deny that I would like to, but I know he would not be happy. Though I do not share the obsession, I understand a librarian’s need for his studies. I have been surrounded by them all of my life.”

"I see. You do realize that if he remains with the Order, there will come a time where you will be parted from each other. Michael will surely outlive you, and losing one's soul mate...he may die from the grief of it."

"Soul mates or not, many people are overcome with grief at losing a spouse. What matters is having someone to aid in overcoming that grief. You will help him, won't you? You are his mentor."

Simon nodded slowly. "That I am."

"Then it is settled." I rose, squaring my shoulders. "I understand that you do not care for me, but I am willing to be civil if you will do the same." I extended my hand to shake his, something I would never do under normal circumstances, and after a moment's pause he clasped my hand.

"Very well." When he released my hand he peered at me, and then crossed to his wardrobe and produced a jacket. "Here. I believe your shawl may be beyond repair, and you look cold. We should also send for something for you to eat. You may feel some ill effects from your blood loss."

"Thank you." Surprised by his concern, I slipped the jacket on. I returned to the sitting room while he cleaned up as well. My fingers were numb as I folded my hands in my lap, and I watched Michael's door. The mumbling chant of spellwork sounded within, but there was little other sign of activity. Witches relied upon spoken spells, a little like summoners did, but with more variety—and less dangerous consequences, of course.

A knock sounded at the door, and since Simon was still within his room I decided to answer it. I discovered my father in the hallway. Stepping aside, I allowed him to enter. "Dr. Bennett is seeing to Michael—Mr. Black," I corrected, my face flushing slightly. "Mr. St. Jerome is currently seeing to his wounds."

"What are you doing here?" Father asked.

"I am waiting to hear of Mr. Black's condition."

"Is that blood?"

I glanced down and noticed that though the majority of the stain was hidden beneath my borrowed jacket, a bit of it peeked from between the lapels. "Yes, it is. I was bitten by Mr. Farrell, but I feel quite well now."

"Why would Mr. Farrell bite you?"

"Because he was the master necromancer. But Mr. St. Jerome killed him, and everyone is safe now."

Father was not comforted by my calm demeanor. His eyes widened in horror, and he shook his head. Exasperated, he ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Emily...I cannot believe that you involved yourself in this. You recklessly risked your life. How could you do such a thing?"

"I had to. I was the only one who could see him."

He shook his head again. "Well, now the matter is finished, and you should return to your room. Your sisters are worried. Let us go."

“No.”

“No?”

“I am staying here until I know that Michael is safe,” I insisted.

“We can see to it that a messenger updates you on his condition. It isn’t appropriate for you to remain here.”

“I don’t care. I’m not leaving.” To emphasize my point, I returned to my chair and sat down. “You’re welcome to join me, if you wish.”

“You would risk your reputation—”

“I love him,” I said simply.

The admission startled my father, but it settled in my heart with bittersweet contentment. I loved Michael. I had grown fond of him while we sat together discussing silly things like the finer points of properly storing spell books, and that fondness turned to desire at the first brush of his lips against mine. But knowing that he would fight for me—that he would put himself in harm’s way to save me—made me love Michael. I wanted to fight for him in return. For a chance at a future with him, even if that future could only be a few short years in the sun before I lost him to the night.

I took a deep breath, and then smiled bravely. “Honestly, Father, Michael is the only one interested in marrying me now. I doubt he will be scandalized that I demanded to wait to hear his condition.”

He blinked. “Marrying you?”

Simon’s door opened, and he stepped into the room. “Indeed. I believe Mr. Black will be asking for your blessing to marry Emily as soon as he recovers. You’re welcome to wait with us now, or if you would prefer it, he can speak with you in the morning.”

“This is quite a development. You have no objection to your apprentice marrying my daughter?”

“None at all,” Simon replied. I resisted the urge to see if he told the truth and decided to trust his words. “They are soul mates. It would be wrong to separate them.”

Father rubbed his eyes wearily. “I think I will wait to speak with him in the morning, and you can explain the entire story then. I fear I am too tired to comprehend it now.”

“Thank you, Father.” I smiled.

“Just please return to your room when you can, before Josephine sends Thomas to hunt you down, throw you over his shoulder and carry you back.”

“I will do my best to avoid that,” I assured him. Father kissed my hair affectionately and retreated from the room.

Simon and I sat in silence that was strained but amiable—we were both concerned about Michael’s welfare. I almost wished for something to occupy my hands like knitting or needlework, but I hoped that I wouldn’t wait long enough to need it. When Dr. Bennett finally emerged from Michael’s room, I tried not to pounce on him for answers.

"Mr. Black will be fine. He endured a number of cuts and bruises and broke several ribs, but thankfully no organs were punctured. He is resting now, and should rest tomorrow as well," Dr. Bennett proclaimed. I sighed in relief, and Simon nodded. "Do either of you need attending to?"

"No, thank you," I replied.

"I am well. I assume that I will not be able to feed from him while my apprentice is recovering," Simon commented.

"I would advise against it."

The chronicler frowned slightly, but he nodded. "Very well."

"You may speak with him now, but not for too long. He needs as much rest as possible. I will return and check on him in a few hours. Please send for me if you feel his condition is changing for the worse."

"Of course. Thank you, Doctor," Simon said.

"A quick word, Miss Wright?" Dr. Bennett asked. I nodded, watching Simon leave. The doctor glanced in the direction of Michael's room and quirked an eyebrow. "Am I correct in assuming that you will not take me up on my offer?"

"Yes. I thank you for it, but it appears I have other plans."

"I will wish you good luck then." Dr. Bennett bowed, and then left, freeing me to rush to Michael's side.

He looked pale against the mountain of pillows, as did his hands where they were folded atop his chest. I assumed he wore a nightshirt, for it was a different color than the shirt he wore earlier. Most of his body was concealed beneath the coverlet, but his eyes were bright when he spotted me, and he smiled. I hurried to his side and sat on the edge of the bed, placing a hand over his. Michael moved so that my hand was between his, resting above his heart.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I am," I assured him.

"I'm afraid your shawl is dead," Michael informed me, and I laughed.

"That is fine. It met a valiant end."

Simon stood next to me, staring down at his apprentice. "How do you feel?"

"Fortunate to be alive. And glad that it's over. It is over, yes? Farrell is dead?"

"Farrell is dead," Simon confirmed.

"Good. What happens now?"

The chronicler placed a hand upon my shoulder, and I glanced up at him. "Well, in the morning I suggest you speak with Mr. Wright about gaining his permission to marry his daughter."

My face heated with a blush, and I turned my attention back to Michael, whose eyes widened in surprise. "Are you releasing me from my duties?"

“No. Miss Wright and I discussed it, and I feel we can *share* you, as she put it. We can postpone your ritual for a few more years. There is no need to rush into it. After all, you are several years younger than I was when I became a chronicler.”

“I don’t have any money to support a wife or a family,” Michael said. “Where would we live?”

“I have money. Not much, but it would be enough to start a life with,” I informed him.

“You could continue to live with me, in my house. As you yourself have noted, I only use the library and my own room.” Simon looked down at me with a slight smile. “Michael called it ‘a shocking waste of a perfectly respectable home’.”

I nodded, considering his words. It wasn’t quite the home I pictured, but it would suffice. It would just be rather like living with an ill-tempered, demanding uncle. One who happened to drink blood.

“I’ll leave you two to discuss the matter further. But not for too long,” he scolded. “Remember what your father warned about your sister’s husband.”

“Yes, of course,” I replied. “Rest well.”

He nodded and squeezed my shoulder in what seemed to be actual affection, and then he left us alone.

“Your sister’s husband? Thomas?” Michael guessed.

“Yes. Apparently if I stay much longer, he may seek me out and drag me back to Josephine to keep her from worrying.”

“Then I won’t keep you long. Are you sure you want this, Emily? I feel as though I have so little to offer you.”

I looked down at our joined hands. “All I ask is that you offer me your heart.”

Michael smiled. “You already have that. I love you, Emily. You are the most remarkable woman I have ever known.”

“I love you too.” Leaning over, I kissed him gently, and then gave in to the urge to straighten his mussed hair. “You should rest now, and dream sweet dreams.”

“You never did tell me of your dream earlier.”

“It was lovely. You were standing in a nursery, holding a baby. Our daughter,” I corrected. “She was crying, and you were trying to comfort her. You handed her to me, and she was just beautiful. Breathtaking. We were so happy.” I smiled at the image, and Michael squeezed my hand.

“Beautiful like her mother, I imagine,” he said softly. “Do you think it was the future?”

Don’t forget.

I wouldn’t. But I also wouldn’t live in fear of the dwindling sands of the hourglass, and I silently promised that I would make each moment of our time together count.

“The future is hard to predict, because it is changed every moment by our decisions, but in this case, yes, I do.” I smiled at him again. For the first time I saw a future where I was not alone, where I was loved and happy, and I was ready for it.

About the Author

Robyn Bachar was born and raised in Berwyn, Illinois, and loves all things related to Chicago, from the Cubs to the pizza. It seemed only natural to combine it with her love of fantasy, and tell stories of witches and vampires in the Chicagoland area. As a gamer, Robyn has spent many hours rolling dice, playing rock-paper-scissors, and slaying creatures in mmorpgs. Currently she lives with her husband, also a gamer and a writer, and their cat.

You can learn more about her at www.robymbachar.com. Robyn can also be found on Twitter at www.twitter.com/RobynBachar.

Look for these titles by Robyn Bachar

Now Available:

Blood, Smoke and Mirrors

Even a bad witch deserves a second chance.

Blood, Smoke and Mirrors

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Wrongly accused of using her magic to harm, the closest Catherine Baker comes to helping others is serving their coffee. Life as an outcast is nothing new, thanks to her father's reputation, but the injustice stings. Especially since the man she loved turned her in.

Now the man has the gall to show up and suggest she become the next Titania? She'd rather wipe that charming grin off his face with a pot of hot java to the groin.

Alexander Duquesne has never faltered in his duties as a guardian—until now. The lingering guilt over Cat's exile and the recent death of his best friend have shaken his dedication. With the murder of the old Titania, the faerie realm teeters on the brink of chaos. His new orders: keep Cat alive at all costs.

Hunted by a powerful stranger intent on drawing her into an evil web, Cat reluctantly accepts Lex's protection and the resurrected desire that comes along with it. Lex faces the fight of his life to keep her safe...and win her back. If they both survive.

Warning: This book contains one tough and snarky witch, one gorgeous guardian, explicit blood drinking, magician sex, gratuitous violence against vampires and troublemaking Shakespearean faeries.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Blood, Smoke and Mirrors:

For the entertainment portion of our evening Lex bravely—or perhaps foolishly—decided to teach the faeries how to play Texas hold 'em poker. The only cards I own are Tarot cards, but he'd brought a deck of playing cards with him in his gym bag, and we used pretzels and chocolates as poker chips. The man displayed the patience of a saint as he tutored my cousins in the basics of the game—I'd learned it when we'd dated, though we'd bet clothing instead of snacks.

Tybalt was enthralled, but Portia was slow to warm to the idea until she figured out how to cheat by magically marking the cards. Poker ended soon after that, and we turned to the Game Show Network for entertainment. Few things are quite as entertaining as watching millennia-old frost faeries shout "No deal, Howie!" at your television screen.

It was a welcome break, and I could almost imagine this was a normal night of fun with my cousins. The addition of Lex didn't hurt, but it added to the strangeness. He was acting like the Lex I remembered—funny, caring, charming. I wanted to stay angry with him, but having him stand steadfast by my side today made that difficult. He was there when I needed him, which felt weird after what had occurred between us in the past.

A little after midnight I kicked the faeries out and sent them home so Lex and I could get a good night's sleep before our big day tomorrow. Not that I predicted being able to sleep with the cold dread

that'd settled into my stomach, but I was willing to give it a try. I gathered up the empty drinking glasses and the bag of chips we'd devoured, and brought them into the kitchen. When I returned to the living room for the second round of mess, I found the lights had been switched off. Barely visible, Lex stood at the window, staring into the night as he held the curtains aside.

"You need to see this."

"What is it?"

"Might want to put your shields up in case they try to take a shot at you," he advised as I crossed the room. With a deep breath I put my shields in place, feeling the energy snap around me and then continue its new odd habit of stretching to include Lex.

"How are you doing that?" I looked up at him, confused.

"Doin' what?"

"You keep getting through my shields."

"Huh. Probably 'cause your subconscious knows I'm not going to harm you, so there's no need to keep me out. Those vamps outside, on the other hand, they're probably not here to play cards." Lex pointed into the darkness, and I looked out the window.

"I don't see anything." Squinting, I pushed my glasses up on my nose and strained to see what he indicated. My eyes slowly adjusted to the rainy night. The streetlights had been doused, and this time it wasn't my fault.

"There." Stepping close to me, he gestured again. "Two in gangways across the street, one behind that oak tree." Following Lex's lead, I managed to spot three figures hiding in the shadows, and they were definitely not my neighbors.

"What are they doing?" I asked, my voice dropping to a tense whisper.

"Waitin'. They can't get in, so they're waitin' for us to come out. Sooner or later they'll get impatient and figure out a way to force their way in. In fact, I'm surprised they haven't tried to set your building on fire and smoke us out."

"They can't, I have a ward against that too. Fire here can't grow any bigger than a stove burner."

"Damn, you are good. Still, with those vultures outside it's not safe here anymore, Cat. You'll have to stay somewhere else from now on." With his point made, he let the curtains fall back into place, plunging the room into darkness, with only the light from the kitchen to see by.

"You're right," I reluctantly agreed.

"You could come stay with me."

"With you?" Surprised by the suggestion, I turned to look up at him. We were standing so close I could feel the heat of his body and the light brush of his breath against my face. Nervous, I took a deep breath and unintentionally inhaled the familiar, unique scent of him. My heartbeat drowned out the steady patter of rain against the windows. With an amazing display of willpower I resisted the urge to bolt,

knowing I'd only trip over something (like the cats that were still standing guard over Lex) and break my neck. Instead I took a slow step backward. "Why, you think it'd be easier to babysit me on your own turf?"

"I'm not babysitting you. Really, I'm protecting them from you," he teased. Grinning, he reached up and tucked a stray lock of hair that'd escaped from my braid back into place behind my ear.

"Thanks, that makes me feel so much better," I joked, a blush heating my face.

"I try. But seriously, Cat, I'll be here as long as you need me." Lex looked down at me, seeming sincere, and I shook my head at him.

"Don't, Lex. You're only here on orders. You'll be gone and on to the next as soon as this assignment is over."

"What if I don't want that?"

"What if I do? I'm all for the life-saving thing, but I don't want you in my life again."

"Are you sure of that?"

Scowling, I took a steadying breath and prepared to launch into an explanation of the myriad reasons why I wasn't about to go through another round of heartbreak with him, but before I could speak he leaned down and brushed a kiss across my lips.

A warm tingling suffused my body as soon as our lips met, the sort of electric reaction I usually associate with casting magic, but much, much better. He was hesitant at first, probably afraid I'd slap him or zot him with a spell, but when I didn't object he slowly began to deepen the kiss. My knees went weak as my good sense vanished, and I slipped my arms around him to steady myself. Lex held me close as he continued to kiss me, and I leaned into him. I'd forgotten how well we fit together. He sighed, as though my lips were delicious and he savored them.

"This is a bad idea," I murmured.

"No, this is a good idea." Lex nudged me back toward the couch, and I sat down in a less-than-graceful flop. Next he joined me and drew me into his arms.

"Oh yeah? How?" My hormones were obviously happy to see him, but I still had a little bit of brainpower left, enough to be skeptical of the situation.

"Because letting you go was a bad idea. I don't want to make that mistake again." His voice was low and strained, and I wished it wasn't so dark so I could see his expression. I sighed, a mix of old pain and new uncertainty, but he kissed me again and I stopped arguing.

I relaxed into the embrace, returning the kiss passionately. I felt better instantly—safe, warm, desired. Lex stroked my braided hair and let his hand rest at the small of my back. I ran my own hands up and down his back, debating whether or not it would be a good idea to tug his shirt off, but then I felt him unhooking my bra. My pulse jumped, and my magic decided to take that opportunity to wreak havoc on a pair of unsuspecting table lamps. With an electric sizzle followed by two sharp pops the light bulbs flashed and

exploded. Startled, we jumped apart, the mood broken. We stared at each other, and I felt a guilty blush heat my face.

“Cat—” he started, and I held a hand up to stop him before he could say anything further.

“I don’t want to hear it. I’m going to get some new bulbs, and we’re going to pretend that never happened.”

Life is cheap. So is death.

Maiden Lane

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Richard and Rose, Book 7

With Rose expecting again, it should be a joyous time for her and Richard. Yet old enemies and new come out of the woodwork, seemingly intent on using whatever means possible to destroy their happiness. Not only is the legitimacy of their marriage called into question, a young man steps forward claiming to be a by-blow of Richard's dark, wild past.

Closer to defeat than he has ever been, Richard musters all his friends and allies to defend against this attack on his own ground. However, no amount of incandescent lovemaking and tender care seems to keep Rose out of harm's way.

Then a mutilated body turns up on their doorstep—and all fingers point at Richard. Rose has no choice but to emerge from his near-smothering concern to do what she must to save the love of her life. Even if she must appear to work against him.

As she lays her heart on the line, Richard fights to keep the violence that marks his past from claiming her life. For if he loses Rose, with her will go his humanity.

Warning: Rose gets her mad on, and Richard gets turned on. Contains married love, married sex and married fooling about. And pink coats with lace ruffles. And swords. And wicked goings-on.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Maiden Lane:

Later that day our carriage drew up outside a small church in the City—one of the number designed by Gibbs after the Great Fire. I'd heard rumours about Gibbs and the churches, that he was involved in nefarious activities, superstitious nonsense that fuelled the mob. Today the church contained a vicar, Richard, myself, Gervase, Ian, my brother James, his wife Martha and my sister Ruth, together with Richard's parents. So that was why Ian hadn't come for breakfast. I grinned at him as I walked up the aisle, my hand resting on James's arm.

Unlike the last time, I wore something comfortable but still pretty, in pink and green. Instead of a priceless parure of diamonds, I wore a set of pearls that Richard had bought me, and I had a wide brimmed bergère hat on my head, instead of an elaborate hair ornament of butterflies and flowers. Last time I wore blue and silver, and I entered Exeter Cathedral with most of polite society watching us do the deed. Richard had slept with half of them—the female half—and he'd wanted our highly public wedding to serve as a statement of intent. They'd have to find another stallion. I hadn't realised he meant that at the time, but it hadn't taken me long to understand.

This time it was almost the wedding I'd wanted. Just people I cared about, although I missed my sister Lizzie. Ruth scowled at me. I was tempted to scowl back just to show her how unlovely the expression looked.

I felt almost dreamlike, a weird sensation of repeating my actions but not quite—I wasn't sure I liked it. But when I saw Richard's encouraging smile, everything returned to its proper place and I walked up the aisle to him considerably faster than I had the first time.

And this time I listened to the words. Before, my trepidation and sheer terror had removed much of the experience from my mind, but now I knew what awaited me, and I could say the words in the full knowledge of the happiness that awaited me. Hopefully nobody waited outside the church with a pair of pistols, ready to remove us from the picture. That had been on the instigation of Julia and Steven Drury, and they had since relented, or decided to take another route to personal power.

When Richard said his vows, he looked at me and only me. Anyone watching would see what I meant to him. I swallowed back my tears, not wanting to mar the occasion with inappropriate emotions, but I knew I'd weep later from pure joy. A tear must have escaped because he lifted his hand and gently brushed my cheek. I saw the liquid on his forefinger before he brought it to his lips and kissed it away.

I had taken my ring off on the journey to the church and transferred my ruby betrothal ring to my right hand. Now he put the wedding ring back. I caught a glimpse of the engraved message inside, known only to Richard and me, and then I gave him my right hand, to remove the ruby and replace it where it belonged. I slid his ring on his left hand after I made my promises. Not all men wore wedding rings, but Richard had elected to do so.

After our previous wedding, Richard had led me to the vestry, where he took me in his arms and kissed me. His reticence at that time would have made him uncomfortable to show such emotion in public, even in such close company as we were now, but today he showed no such disinclination. His kiss was no polite kiss of greeting, but he crushed me close and took my mouth with all the abandon he showed in the bedroom. Except, of course, his hands remained sedately around my waist. I felt his heat and I wanted him.

But for James clearing his throat I might have been the one to take matters further. As it was I found that I'd put my hands around his waist, under his coat, ready to slide them under his waistcoat at the back and drag his shirt clear of his breeches. My lamentable desire to seek skin had led me astray more than once. But only one man's skin, only one man's touch, could ever satisfy that need.

Richard drew away with a laugh and without embarrassment, took my hand and led me to the vestry, where we signed the parish register. James and Gervase followed us to witness our signatures. Richard only let go of my hand so that I could sit down to sign the book, while he explained to the vicar, "If our first marriage remains uncontested, then this service is an affirmation of our vows. If not, then you may be required to show the register as proof of our marriage." The clink of gold coins followed and the vicar's

unctuous assurances that the register would be carefully guarded and shown to any official who required it, but not to the casual passerby.

Richard helped me to my feet after leaning over me to add his signature to mine. Unlike the first time, my name flowed from the pen and I marvelled at how accustomed I had become to it. At one time I had considered becoming Richard's mistress, when I thought there was no other way I could have him. His hand pressed my shoulder before he raised me up, and once again, heedless of the squawks from the religious behind us, kissed me with the same fervency he'd done before. This time I regained a semblance of my sanity and drew away first, to see his softened, fond smile. The one I saw most mornings now.

"I am so glad," I said. He didn't need to know what I meant. He knew it already.

"I will marry you again and again, if need be. I think my mother saw the glimmer of escape, but not my father. He sees the advantage of the bird in the hand." He released me but slipped his hand into mine.

The plan: Kidnap H.G. Wells. Definitely not part of the plan: Falling in love.

Stealing Utopia

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A Silk, Steel and Steam Story

The year is 1897, the place, a Britain that could have been, but never was. H. George Wells is helping lead Britain into a new Golden Age, driven by technological advances and discoveries of the human brain. Then one night a beautiful woman abducts him at gunpoint, and she seems to despise everything he's worked for. Despite his outrage, he can't help but be intrigued by this adventuress and her passion for her cause.

Jane Robbins, agent provocateur, has reason to fear her country's march towards a new world order. Using her wits and her arsenal of spy gadgets to infiltrate Wells' house, she delivers him to her employer, who plans to use him as leverage to halt the coming Utopia. But when Wells' life is threatened, she must choose between saving him or sacrificing him to the cause.

Scientist and spy, they are irresistibly drawn to each other even as the future pushes them apart.

Warning: This book contains gadgets, guns, death rays, dirigibles, sexy scientists and a smoking hot Victorian spy who's as much steam as she is punk. Don't blame us if it makes you want to slip a pistol into your garter and abduct the man of your dreams.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Stealing Utopia:

Damn and blast. What to do? What to do? She retrieved her special sal volatile, the one that had put the Scotland Yard man to sleep so effectively outside of Wells' house, and took a deep breath and screamed, "A mouse! A mouse!"

In a flash, Mary was at her door, barging in without even knocking.

Jane stepped behind the maid and waved the vial under Mary's nose, causing her to collapse backward straight into Jane's arms.

"Oh Lord, help! Jack, come quick. Mary's fainted."

When Jack came into the room, he rushed to Mary's prostrate form. With a silent plea for forgiveness, Jane whacked him on the back of his head with the bedwarmer. It wasn't enough to render him unconscious, but a strong whiff of the ether from her doctored sal volatile was enough to finish the job. She searched through his pockets until she found his keys, then left, careful to lock her door behind her. On cat feet, she ran down the hall, unlocked Wells' door and opened it.

For the second time that night, Jane walked in on a man in a dressing gown, but on this occasion she had no time for embarrassment. "Get dressed, quickly," she hissed.

Wells looked up from the book in his lap and stared at her in astonishment. "I beg your pardon?"

She almost burst into nervous tears. "For God's Sake, George, we have no time. Get dressed and come with me, if you want to live."

Something in her voice must have made him understand that this was no trick, for he jumped up and grabbed his trousers, putting them on under his robe without even asking her to turn around. She looked behind her up and down the hall to make sure that no one was coming, and by the time she'd finished checking, he was already at her side, pulling on his shirt, jacket in one hand, feet stuffed haphazardly into his shoes.

She led him down the back stairs, to the entrance to the garden, but then she stopped, at a loss where to go next. There were guards all around the house, and she had no idea how she would get George past them.

George grabbed a raincoat off a peg by the door, a voluminous affair made to cover a much more massive man than him. He put it on, shrouding himself, then turned down the gaslight next to the door, leaving the entryway in darkness. "Now what?"

She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. Through the glass panel of the door she could see the shadowy outline of one of the guards, just yards from them, standing like a stone under one of the eaves, out of the rain. "I don't know. Easton has men at all the exits."

"Easton?"

"You know him as Mr. Smith."

"Ah." He pondered for a moment. "We'll need a distraction."

She nodded, hands clenched tight. "I'll go to the front, call to the guards, and you can escape out the back."

"What will they do to you when they realize that you've helped me escape?"

Images of Flewellyn as she'd last seen him, giving his wife a kiss before they'd all piled into the coach the night of the kidnapping, entered her head. "Nothing. I'll be all right."

"You're lying."

She opened her mouth to argue, but he put his finger on her lips. "We'll leave together. Where's Easton? Perhaps we can use him as a hostage for our escape."

"Too dangerous. Last I saw, he was sleeping in his study, three sheets to the wind. Overpowering him should be easy, but in his state he'll be a liability."

George cocked his head. "Inebriated, eh? Can we get to his study without being seen?"

"I think so. But we don't have much time."

Twice on the way to Easton's study they'd had to hide to avoid being seen by servants or guards. The first time they'd ducked into a dark alcove, and George, pressed against her, had said, "I know you carry a pistol. Do you have any bullets? Two or three of them? Yes, that will do very well."

When at last they slipped into Easton's study, Wells had loosened the casings on the three bullets she'd given him.

His actions made no sense to her. "What are you going to do?"

Ignoring her, Wells stared at Robert Easton, still snoring in his armchair. "I think I know him. But from where?"

"We don't have time for this."

George shook himself and grinned at her. She felt an unfamiliar flutter in her stomach at that grin. "Right, I just need... Ah, here it is." To her astonishment, he pulled out a silver teaspoon from his pocket and walked over to the large brass clock on the mantelpiece.

"Where did you get that?"

"Stole it the second night I was here. Easton was kind enough to point out that Mary only watches the knives." He turned the clock around and quickly opened it using the spoon to loosen the screws. "One never knows when a spoon might come in handy. Have you got a pound note?"

Jane couldn't quite see what he did with the note but after no more than two minutes he announced, "Done. We'd best get out of here and hide. We have..." he turned the hands of the clock to read 11:55, "...five minutes."

They hurried back the way they came, waiting at the foot of the back stairs. They didn't wait long. Just a couple of minutes after they reached their hiding place, a faint chime followed by a muffled boom and the sound of Robert Easton yelling in panic came to their ears.

Throwing open the back door, Jane called out, "Something's happened in the study. Hurry, I think there's trouble."

The guard from the back came to life, running through the rain and into the house. He barely glanced at George, who looked like just another guard in his purloined rain slicker. "You stay here and watch the door." The guard took off for the interior of the house.

As soon as the guard was out of sight, Jane and George ran out into the garden. They could see the other guard by the garden entrance drifting away from his post, trying to see what the commotion was at the front of the house. When his back was turned, the two of them slipped past, their sounds and movement masked by the fortuitous rain.



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