

Blue Moon

Cindy Lynn Speer

*Magic returns...
and the world ends.*

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BLUE MOON

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ISBN 978-1-934135-72-3

Cover art and design by Deena Fisher

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Speer, Cindy Lynn, 1974-

Blue moon / by Cindy Lynn Speer.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-934135-72-3 (trade pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Magic--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3619.P4425B58 2008

813'.6--dc22

2007045585

Prologue

On the other side of the world—not the other side of the globe, but the other side of existence—a dragon took flight. He was silver and brown, and seemed to meld with the mist that wreathed the steep, sharp crags. The mountain he circled was one of strange myths, so tall that no man or elf or four-footed beast had ever climbed its height, so hard that no dwarf had ever dug its depths. Some thought God lived at the peak, some considered it the domicile of husband sun and wife moon, and some believed it a barren wasteland where no life could ever survive.

The dragons know the truth. Only they have breath enough and will enough to reach the highest of peaks. And this dragon was testing his breath and strength and will, his magnificent wings, with membranes so fine and clear they seemed like a net meant to capture the stars, strove hard, cleaving the wind, pushing just a little bit farther. He was tiring, and even he, a prince of the northern frost dragons, felt the cold like an ache in his bones.

Heaving forward, he broke free of the last of the clouds, his scales glittering like snow in the pale moonlight. The summit still seemed far away, but he continued, straining, for he had no choice.

When he finally made the top, he didn't stop, flying almost vertically until he had no more breath and darkness dotted the corners of his vision. He dived, letting gravity take him, folding his wings back against his body. He was closer to death than he had ever been, but he did not see this as the end. This was a dive of faith, and he concentrated instead on another place, only seen in dragon dreams. Soil and rock rushed up to meet him, but he kept his eyes open. He was close enough, in those last seconds, to see the fine cracks of parched earth.

Then he was tumbling through absolute blackness. First came the emptiness, as his magic was ripped away; then the pain as his bones began to shift. He kept concentrating, reminding himself where he was going, who he was.

He came out of darkness and into twilight, fetching up against a tree. He pushed himself up, trying to focus on the land around him. His bones

shifted again, and the prince of dragons threw back his head and screamed as wings withered, as scales sloughed away into cloth. His coming was like a flare in the night for those who knew how to watch, a ripple across minds and hearts. They knew he had crossed through, but they did not know who or what he was, what his presence meant to them.



On the infamous ghost ship *The Flying Dutchman*, a group of elves looked to their captain. The captain's wife pulled out her charts.

"It's only the first sign," she whispered, "But the blue moon is coming."

The captain looked at his crew of refugees. "I swear to you now what I swore to you then. No one will force us back."

Grim silence greeted him, broken only by slap of the waves against the hull and the creaking of ropes.



In the cave beneath the ruins of her parents' castle, Nimuë of the Lake stirred. Her pale-green eyes opened sleepily, but there was no quickening of magic in her soul. She sighed and rolled over, back into dreams.



In a one-bedroom apartment, Sabin felt the stirring in the atmosphere but couldn't interpret its meaning. He shrugged and looked at his wife, shook the car keys. She winced at the sound but continued scrubbing dishes and pretending not to cry.

"Dry your hands, baby," he said. "It's time to take a ride."



Others heard the cry. Some trembled, some nodded and began to make plans.

"The Blue Moon is coming," they whispered, in fear and in anticipation.



The dragon had finished his transformation. Reaching up, he touched the dragon pin on his shirt, and it comforted him, reminding him that, no matter what strange feelings this new body gave him, he was Torvanith of the Frost-Sea. He let go of it reluctantly and sighed, then took a look at what he could see of himself.

His clothes had automatically reverted to what he knew humans wore in his own land—brown leather boots and pants just a little lighter in color than his scales, and a gray shirt in serviceable linen. He made a tall, lanky human, paler-skinned than he would have thought. He had no idea what the people of this world would wear, but with the luck that usually befell him, fashions would be wildly different.

“Probably stick out like gold among silver,” he croaked out to see what his voice was like. Frowning, he decided to use it as little as possible. His English would not be as hopelessly archaic as some of his fellow dragons’ would have been, but it wouldn’t be common, either.

His legs and feet protested as he stood, unused to their new form. He leaned against the tree, trying to figure out the best way to breathe, through nose or mouth, hating his weakness—his father would not be daunted by such a little thing as a change in form. His father was powerful and fearsome, and his only son and heir wanted to prove himself with a desperation that was strong for a male of the dragonkind.

He looked around at the trees, and noticed that his eyes were not as sharp, that the air did not tell tales to him as it once had. Carefully, he called on the little bit of magic still inside him, knowing he had to conserve it, and drew a square in the air. He dotted the center and whispered his name—Torvanith—then an arrow to stand for where he was facing. He focused, like calling to like, magic calling to magic.

To his left another dot appeared, shimmering white, and a smaller, fainter dot next to it. The brighter dot was his destination.

He paused to pick up a stick from the ground, and took a moment to peel off some of the fungus and bark. It was mostly dry, only rotten on one end, and had been lying long enough that it was no longer green. It would conduct his magic well enough, he thought, reassured that no matter how dead to magic this world was, he would always have the lightning in his bones. Nothing could take that away.

He began to walk to the left, using the stick to probe the weeds. There were things hidden in them he could not put a name to but knew what they were made of. He saw a few glass jars with labels so faded he wouldn’t have been able to read them even if he knew the language. There was a red thing of metal on one side of the path that did not sing when he reached with his mind to touch it.

Something else did, though, and he dug until he found a small disc of copper. When he touched it with his mind it sang to him, dully, of time and dirt and corrosion. There were no pockets in his clothes, so he let it slide down inside his boot. Most dragons loved gold, loved the songs it sang when they touched it with their minds. Some dragons even loved silver.

But he had a special place in his heart for copper, no matter how impure. There were some pieces in his lair at home, pure beaten copper vessels and trinkets that when left out in the warmth of the sun would chant to him of quiet, gentle things.

Closing his eyes briefly, he decided he was about as ready as he would ever be and set off again to meet the white dot that meant another magic user was in the area.

He strode along, spreading his senses out as far as they would go, trying to pick up any clues or hints about his prey. He did not think he was expected, but he did not want to walk into a trap. Bird calls were rare, the silence broken by an occasional, unidentified roar. He reached out to steady himself as he stepped over a low gray railing, and felt the crunch of stone beneath his boots.

A road wended before him; horseless wagons and carriages sped along at impossible speeds. They stank and roared, causing Torvanith to frown. These people had centuries of technology, and yet their modes of transport were still rather primitive and annoying to the senses. He mentally shrugged and ran across the road, then climbed the smooth stone barrier. He crouched there, waiting for a clear spot in the traffic. He had to admit that, speed-wise, they were a vast improvement on the cart and horse, which was mostly what the humans used where he came from.

Taking a deep breath he jumped down, running across the remainder of the road and into the woods on the other side.

Finally, he came to a small clearing. He hid within weeds and examined the area. There was a rutted cart path on which a four-wheeled enclosed vehicle sat. The cottage it was parked in front of was painted a now-peeling light green. Weeds had been allowed to grow up around it, and the windows were shattered, the white wooden frames broken in places. The roof appeared caved in at the back, but he wasn't sure.

He looked at it for a long time, trying to decide the best thing to do. The map said that a strong magical force was in that house—but if there was, wouldn't the place at least look habitable? He could not imagine a human tolerating a leaky roof or the wind whistling through at night.

He stood and pushed aside the weeds, circling to the back of the house. The porch had fallen in, and with it a small portion of the roof. The back door was blocked by rotten wood. He went back around to the front, walking with silence and care. He opened the door, wincing as it creaked, and looked inside, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

The sound of voices reached him now, and he knew they were coming from below, in the cellar. The old boards of the floor would creak, he thought, so he carefully lowered himself down, distributing his weight. The boards would still creak, but as long as it didn't sound like footsteps, as long as he could make it seem like random house shifting, he'd probably be all right.

Crossing the room like a serpent, he could feel the filth and mold ingraining itself on his flesh. He was grateful that, aside from the dirt and some leaves and twigs, the room was empty, and he wouldn't have to nav-

igate around furniture. A trail of clean wood marked his path and it bothered him, but he didn't know a better way.

Creeping into the cooking area, he saw cupboard doors hanging open, the wood stinking with rot. The water damage was bad, and it had warped the door leading to the cellar stairs so that it was impossible to close. He stood and, placing his foot on the nailheads along the edges of the treads and his life in the strength of the handrail, he carefully made his way down.

His hand found the metal rail, and he put as much weight as he dared on it, hoping he wouldn't make much noise. He regretted carrying the staff, as he would have liked both hands free, but he would not let it go.

The cellar was divided into two rooms. The floor was dirt, and broken and forgotten furniture was pushed against the wall. The door to the next room hung open, and he crouched in the shadows, depending on the dark to hide him. The light in the basement was even more fitful than above, provided by narrow windows close to the ceiling.

On the other side of the door a tall wooden cabinet hid him from view, and he was able to observe the situation. His adversary was there, and he was not alone. One of the Terfa—the tree people, his skin wrinkled and covered with bark—stood beside him, their attention on the naked human female bound to the table in front of them.

Torvanith winced in pity, for he could feel her fear radiating out like a cold north wind.

Three lanterns brightened the room slightly, allowing him to see the contents of the rough work table to their left. A jar of magic sat on the table, glowing a weak green. Objects glittered in the dull glow—a knife, pliers, a chipped cup, some stones.

The steady anxiety Torvanith had felt since before he left home faded. Sabin did not have the stone.

“You've been with me all this last year,” the woman said. “You know all my secrets.”

Her voice was made strong by bitterness, and Torvanith understood “this last year” had not been pleasant.

The adversary said something in a crude, cruel voice, and she twisted against the ropes.

“I don't know. Please, Sabin, I swear I don't know.”

The Terfa laughed and touched the skin of her thigh.

Torvanith stood and came around the chest. Something about the tree-man's action combined with the woman's barely contained fear angered him. The anger puzzled him, for it was not in the nature of dragons.

“I could conduct a banishing,” he said, “but I think I shall just kill thee.”

She turned her head at the sound of his voice, and the Terfa reached to take a long knife off the table.

Gathering lightning out of his bones, Torvanith thrust his hands out, pointing the staff at the Terfa. Power surged down the staff, and arched toward its target. The smell of burning wood and flesh filled the air as the lightning engulfed the creature. Torvanith dropped the stick, now little more than charcoal, and turned to face Sabin.

“Who in the second hells do you think you are?” Sabin yelled. He picked up a stone from the table and threw it at him. It hit Torvanith’s shoulder hard, and it burned. Another followed it, but he jumped forward, slamming Sabin to the ground. Sabin hissed a few words, then punched the dragon under the chin and pushed him off.

Torvanith crouched on the ground, pain and something else fragmenting his mind, replacing thought with odd shapes and colors. He shook free, forced himself to see through the haze. Sabin stood over the woman, and he knew that, no matter what the price, he could not let harm come to her.

He struggled to his feet and gathered the last of his magic, the last of what resources lay ready in his bones, and cast burning lightning at the figure by the table. Sabin threw his arm up, trying to protect himself, but the fire enveloped him. The low ceiling had also caught fire, and flames ran along the old beams. Torvanith moved to check on Sabin, but the growing crackle of fire changed his mind. He ran to the table where the young woman lay blinking, blinded by the lightning flash.

He undid the ropes. A tattered blanket had been thrown over some of the furniture, and he grabbed it and shook the filth off of it. He wrapped her in it, murmured something soothing. She clung to him as he took her in his arms—she seemed so delicate and light.

Now that he no longer needed silence, he made better time through the basement and up the steps, but the fire had already begun to smolder through the main room’s floor. The cooking room, on the opposite side and still damp from past rains, was the safer area, but its exit was blocked by rubbish. He set her down and took her hands and placed them on the counter. She balanced herself while he looked around for something to break out the remaining glass from the kitchen window frame. He ripped off his shirt and, wrapping the cloth around his hand, slammed his fist against the frame.

The rotten wood gave away, and he was able to push it out. He kept the dragon pin in his hand, afraid to let go of it, and picked her up again. He lowered her out the window, trying not to place her directly on the

broken glass. He wiggled out feet first, and was relieved when he felt his boot soles touch the ground. He picked her up again, this time because it was easier than trying to lead her through the rubbish. He did not want her to step on something hidden in the weeds. He only stopped when he was out of sight of the house, where he placed her against a tree.

He heard sirens, voices, and knew that her kind were near, and would help. Still, he was reluctant to leave her side. Something in her stirred all of his instincts, human and dragon, and he wanted to watch over and protect her. He smoothed her dark hair away from her face then took the pin and used it to fasten the blanket more securely. She grabbed his hand, and he thought about taking her away with him. She spoke, and he waited, his mind tired and having trouble with understanding the words. He was not quite as talented as his father at looking in other minds, and his personal resources were stripped bare. The fight with Sabin had hurt him deeply, and he needed rest to regain his strength.

“I am fine,” he answered her. “I must leave you here. I think that you should be safe.”

He stood and walked away. He tripped over something in the path and caught his balance against a tree. He was shutting down inside, and it frightened him, because if he didn’t hold on, didn’t get back to the spot where he had entered this world, he didn’t know what would happen.

He would probably die.

She said something else, but he could not understand.

“Your people come,” he said, to comfort her, over his shoulder. Indeed, they did, he could hear them approaching. “Stay where I have placed you.”

He walked a long time, relying on memory as his map was gone for good. He thought if he made it back to the entry spot, someone might be able to sense him there and come get him.

He did not even make it back to the highway.

Chapter 1

It's coming, Libby thought, with a little regret. Summer had fled before she'd had time to contemplate what she wanted to do with it, and now fall was turning the trees.

Winter, she thought, and worried over her mental checklist.

When she first moved into her grandparents' cabin a few winters before, she hadn't been fully prepared for the weather. It was much harsher than she remembered. She ran out of heating oil and had to wait two days for the truck to make it up to her home. Never again, she had promised herself, making sure now the tanks were full enough that she'd make it through the winter, changing the filters and checking to make sure the furnace was all right.

It took her a while, slowly unscrewing the cap from the oil filter to change the gaskets. Then she had to put it all back together while simultaneously trying to determine if there was a leak, if she'd crossed the threads or not made everything tight enough. *Too tight, and you'll crack that cheap cast iron casting*, she could hear Grandpa Halstead say.

She always tried to do things herself, at least indoor things. Sometimes, she hired people to clear the brambles from the woods, to cut back the tall goldenrod and the tree saplings that sprang up like weeds. While they were there, she kept to the inside, and she kept her German shepherd, Dashed, with her. Libby could not trust anyone; the secret she protected in the basement would not allow her to. She knew the men who did her yard work laughed at her skittishness, but she reminded herself, even when the tall younger brother of the foreman trimmed some roses and left them on the porch rail for her, that Sabin could get to anyone. It played hell with her social life.

This morning, she had curled up in bed and written in longhand, finishing a chapter of her book. Afterwards, she'd typed it into the computer—she was working under deadline and needed to keep up. The sun had broken through this afternoon, and now she was out with her wheelbarrow.

She was gathering wood and sticks—whatever she could handle by herself or with a hatchet, since she didn't trust chainsaws, either.

She liked to keep some wood piled up so that if the power went out, she'd be able to cook, maybe heat the house a little during the day. She never bothered keeping the wood inside the house, because the occasional need was rare, and because she only burned it during the daylight hours, since she didn't like to leave the damper open on her chimney after dark. You never knew what could crawl down inside, and she was happier to do without than risk it.

“Dashiel!” she called.

The dog paused, wagged his tail and looked at her.

“Don't go too far from me, okay?”

He wagged his tail a little faster then took off.

She loved her dog. He had large, intelligent brown eyes, and the way he acted seemed to almost understand her words. Sometimes, it even looked like he answered her. He was definitely her best friend.

It was a beautiful day. Fall days, Libby thought, were the prettiest, although if it were spring, she then admitted to herself, she would think the same thing. The leaves were just starting to turn, and the few grasshoppers she encountered had already traded in their bright coats for olive drab. Caterpillars hid under pieces of bark and in the crevices of the stone wall her grandfather had built to mark the orchard's boundaries. She looked at the chest-high wall, thinking there was something about walking in the woods and finding a wall, lichen-covered and crooked in places, that felt mysterious.

She carefully picked up a fox-colored caterpillar, holding the coiled creature until it relaxed and began crawling again. Its fur was incredibly long, and she rubbed the rust fluff against her cheek before carefully putting it back down.

The gate was an old one—all twisted wire and rusted cast iron—mounted between two posts. Its latch was a loop of rusting wire, and she carefully lifted it over the post to let herself in.

The orchard was a shambles—the workmen were only hired to clear away mess, not take care of fruit trees—and she felt slightly ashamed of her neglect. The trees had grown too tall; the apple trees in particular were covered with suckers, and the fruit that did manage to grow was small. She picked up some branches and placed them in the barrow. Fruit wood was supposed to smell the sweetest when burning, but she wasn't sure she had ever really noticed a difference.

She looked at the twisted trees, and the apples, small, green and tart, that covered the ground. She used to love apples, and in the past, she would

have picked the good ones up and stuffed her pockets full. She'd peel and stew them, then make applesauce. She sighed, because even memories of her grandmamma peeling apples, of the sweet smell of sugar and cinnamon, did not help overcome her revulsion.

She moved on, touching a tree here and there as she passed. The trees were innocent. She should not neglect them just because of their fruit.

The wall had fallen in near the back of the orchard. She paused to try and fix it, stacking the rocks haphazardly back on top of each other. The end result wasn't very good, but hopefully it would do. She looked up at the two pear trees that stood next to the gap, their branches intertwined. The pears were large—sweet-looking despite her neglect. She smiled and reached up to pick one, and saw in her mind's eye, without meaning to, another hand, long-fingered and strong, reaching up and caressing the fruit but not taking it.

She pulled her hand back, collected some twigs and rolled the wheelbarrow home. Fruit could be poisoned just as easily as people, and with even worse results. She imagined a bite of pear lodging in her throat, knowing she would not preserve as well as Snow White. Sabin would do it. He'd do it with great glee, happy to punish her.

She shuddered. A shrink would have said something like "You can't let an abusive relationship make you paranoid. He's been gone how long? Elizabeth, it's time to go on with your life."

But the psychiatrist didn't know what it was like living with a monster. Not just a man who was so terrible he was monster-like, but an honest-to-God not-quite-human monster. Plus, Sabin was capable of anything. She had to remember that before she unlocked her door, before she started her car, before she put food in her grocery cart. Was someone hiding outside? Had someone tampered with the car? Was the container still perfectly sealed?

She dug up her gladiolus bulbs and hung them in the cellar. She stacked the wood against the back of the garage, well away from the house—no need to give things a home to hide in, right next to the door—and looked in her cupboards to determine what she'd stock up on tomorrow. Lots of soup, shampoos and paper towels and cleaning supplies, and TV dinners, of course. Libby wasn't much on cooking. Oh, sure, once in awhile she'd get a taste for something, but not often enough to really make the effort. She didn't eat much, and hated to waste.

In preparation for a bounty of TV dinners, she cleaned out her freezer and plugged it in. She refused to use it during the summer, lest she become too much of a hermit. Getting out, she reminded herself, was fun.

"So, baby," she said to Dashiel. "What should I get you for the winter?"

He put his head against her shoulder, and she petted him, amazed at the softness of his hair, enjoying the feel of his skull under her hands. She knelt and scratched him behind the ears, because he loved it, and whispered endearments.

When the floor got too hard and cold for her knees she stood up. After tomorrow's paycheck-disappearance run, she'd be prepared for the coming snows. She savored the thought of having everything completely locked up for days on end, only going out when she needed something at the store or thought she ought to pick up her mail, the snow deep around her house. She'd spend the days wrapped up in blankets and writing and reading, the silence broken only by the furnace coming on or the refrigerator.

She worked best in winter, she thought, because winter had an introspective feel to it, a feeling of quiet and snowbound living that she loved. To tell the truth, though, it wasn't much different from summer. She would go out less, and she didn't have to guilt herself into yard work, but that was about it. Still, she could not wait for it to be truly cold, for the snow to settle into thick piles.

She put the heavy wooden bar in the brackets on either side of the door and closed the thick iron shutters. She barred them as well then checked to see if the little sliding window on each pair of shutters was completely closed and hooked. She undid one hook, slid the window cover back and peeked through the five-by-three-inch hole. Everything quiet, she thought, sliding it back shut and securing it.

She shut the window and turned the latch, and then, so she wouldn't have to see the depressing gray of the shutters, she pulled down the blind and drew the lace curtains.

"I wrote almost two thousand words today," she said to Dashiell, even though he was in the other room, lapping up some water. She always spoke in his direction, feeling it was a little saner than talking to herself directly. "I think I'll cook a TV dinner and watch whatever's on the telly tonight."



Sierra Morgan loved driving at night. Well, twilight, really, when she got to watch the world become coated in dust colors broken only by the soft glow of lights. She drove down a country road, the dusky fields and shadowy forests spotted with an occasional orange streetlamp. She hummed to a tune on the radio, enjoying the moment. She loved her car, the way it felt under her hands as she turned into the bend. She thought she could live in the car; it had everything she needed—a radio and compact disc player, a huge trunk and comfortable seats, the smell of leather upholstery

covering up another, musty smell, coming from the back. The car was one of the few things she would miss when she was gone.

The announcer came on and said the time, and she looked at the dash clock for confirmation. She sighed with impatience. She was going to have to quit soon—a pity, really, since she'd been hoping to finish tonight.

In the middle of the road ahead of her a mangled animal lay, entree for a group of late dining crows. She sped up, swerved with practiced skill, braking when she heard the satisfying thunk of two feathered bodies. She smiled at the thought of killing two birds with one car.

She turned off the radio, opened the door and got out. She paused behind the door, listening over the purr of the engine for the sounds of other traffic, then began looking for her prey. She could see one body a few feet up the road. She picked it up carefully by its leg and went for the other. She reached into the weeds for it, minding the broken goldenrod stems and garbage, and took her prey over to the headlights. She studied their beaks and the shapes of their heads, nodding in satisfaction. Definitely crows. It wouldn't do to get a raven or a magpie by mistake.

She flicked away a black feather that clung like fluff to her grill then popped the trunk on her way back. The crows joined several others lying on a tarp, and she felt distinctly pleased with herself as she slammed the lid shut.

Before getting back in, she inspected herself for burrs and used a hand wipe to clean the smell of crow off her hands. As she fastened her seatbelt and continued on her way, she hoped the combined smell of poultry, carrion and dust wouldn't be noticed by the valet at the party.

She flicked the radio back on. The first part of the job was done. Now all that was left was to pluck the suckers.

Sierra, besides being a crow killer, was thirty-two, widowed and infamous. The infamous part was partially because of her husband. He had been a shining star of the political world, immune to bribes, stalwart and perfect. At least, until he'd been photographed capering around naked in a hotel room with a waitress by two private detectives. The man who hired them demanded political favors in exchange for silence. Instead of giving in, her husband called a press conference.

She could remember him in front of the cameras, remember how handsome he looked.

“I want you to know,” he said, “that I have tried to do my best while in office. Sometimes, when people do their best, they succeed in their goals and overcome temptations and roadblocks placed in their path. I am not one of these people. I am so sorry.” He had paused and looked directly at

the camera. Even now, Sierra thinks that he was looking right at her. “I have to resign.”

He took a gun out of his pocket, put it in his mouth like they teach you on TV and blew out his brains all over the state flag draped across the wall behind him.

Well, she assumed the last part, since she’d only seen the first part of the conference on playbacks as the news repeated the clip over and over again.

While her husband was making history as the first publicly broadcast suicide, Sierra was oblivious. That morning, he had given her a small wad of money and bidden her to have some fun, get herself something nice for her birthday the following week. He knew her habits, that she would leave the house after lunch, wander around shopping at her favorite places then eat dinner, as he’d already said he wouldn’t be home in time for it.

When she got home she dropped her bags in the bedroom then began to change clothes because her bra was digging into the side of her breast. She sat down on the bed, and that was when she saw the envelope.

Inside was a creamy sheet of paper folded twice around what she had to assume was the chastest of the photos.

“I have never loved anyone but you,” he wrote. “I am so sorry for what I have done and for being such a coward that I cannot look you in the eyes and tell you the truth.”

You would think she would have screamed, or cried, or got up and started packing. Instead, she walked over to the TV and sank to her knees in front of it. Too numb to even feel impending dread, she hit the on button.

It was there right away as the anchors reported their breaking news.

Breaking news. Yes, it certainly was.

The police came and told her. “Do you have someone to call?” they asked.

“No,” she said. It was no surprise that the police had been given this task, that none of her husband’s cronies or staff had stirred themselves. The policewoman wrapped her in a blanket from the couch. She had greeted them in her slip.

They left eventually and the phone began to ring. She unplugged it and returned to her position before the bedroom TV.

She sat there, eyes dry and mouth slack, while they replayed the footage over and over, discussing the impact, revealing things she hadn’t known before and didn’t hear now. No murderer or drunk driver had done her the mercy of committing their crimes early—it was a slow news day, and they had an hour and a half to fill between sports and weather.

Eventually, the news changed—a blip on the world news, and then the world news became tabloid and entertainment TV. She slumped over on her side, and that was when she realized there was nothing left for her here.

She lay there until morning.

Now, more than two years later, she was driving to a party, going to this one specifically because there would be old friends attending and she wanted to look them in the eyes one more time, say her mental goodbyes and wonder if she would miss them.

Ironically, Sierra would have forgiven her husband. She would have forgiven him anything.

#

A few hundred years ago, the Pierce family had built a crypt for themselves. It had a small chapel on top with two alcoves so the first husband and wife to be buried there would have an exalted resting place. There was a small stairway that led to a chamber below where several niches waited to serve future generations.

Jonathan Pierce, the last of the descendants, lay in one of the niches. He was not yet dead, but he'd spent most of the last several years wishing he were. In the cool dark, he lay awake inside a body that no longer belonged to him.

The story of how he came to be in this horrible mess was simple. The last son and heir to the Pierce fortune, he had spent much of his time studying folklore and magic. He had come across old prophecies that declared magic would come to the world again for the space of one day and one night. Jonathan was determined to be in that spot should it happen during his lifetime.

So, he mapped and researched and studied, following the trail of the odd and the mystical, looking for a few true magical happenings. He knew the first law of magic was like to like, and knew that the majority of true magical happenings would be drawn to one place.

When he found it—an area in Pennsylvania only a day's drive away—he was thrilled. He bought a house and had it renovated, sold the Pierce estates and took himself there.

He had a friend who dealt in antiquities, who would send him anything esoteric or strange. So, when Jonathan received a wooden box in the mail he paid for it without question and attempted to open it.

It was a silver box, as big as two hands, decorated with runes. He tapped at it, he pushed the sides. He went at it, carefully, with a screwdriver and a hammer.

It would not open.

But when he shook it something heavy would move inside, tantalizing him.

He set it on his desk and left it in the semi-forgotten existence knick-knacks live in, until the night it opened itself.

He remembered it well. He had been writing notes down from a book he'd borrowed. He looked at the box once, and all was normal. Then there was a little click. When he looked again, a drawer had slid out the front.

He pushed aside rotted blue velvet to reveal a jewel. He picked it up with reverent hands. It was large and heavy; his fingers could barely close around it. When he held it up to the light, he could see that it was not black, but a very deep navy blue. He could make out a symbol in the center of it but could not read it, the carefully cut facets misleading his eyes.

Now, sitting in darkness, he cursed himself for his curiosity and diligence, for Jonathan would not be satisfied until he knew what the symbol was. He sat in his chair, feet propped on the desk edge, and turned it carefully, sounding out the possibilities to himself in the warmth and happiness of his study.

Finally, he turned it just right, and the symbol became clear. He named it out loud, triumphant.

No sooner had the echo of his voice died when he felt coldness seep from the jewel and into his arm. He looked at the case, and as if someone whispered the interpretation of the marks to him, they became readable.

“True evil cannot be destroyed, only contained.”

And thus the possession of Jonathan Pierce became complete.

Jonathan now spent his existence hiding in a corner of his own mind, watching with terror the evils the spirit that possessed his body committed. Several years ago, the spirit—Sabin, it called itself—had fought with something. Jonathan had no idea what it was, but their body was damaged in the battle. Sabin dragged them to the family crypt, where for the past several years their body had slept and healed while Jonathan stared at the darkness in his head and wondered if he was damned.

Sabin stirred, and Jonathan wept in horror, the way a soul weeps, which is to feel pain without release. He felt his eyes open, and he was forced all the way into the back, into silence and dread, where even his thoughts were no longer his own.



Sabin sat up, stiff from years of lying on the stone platform. He rubbed his eyes wearily, felt the roughness of scar tissue on his cheek. He took a vial of precious magic from his pocket and rubbed a drop into his skin. An-

other pass with his hand, and his face was smooth again. He capped the bottle, stretched. He could feel a blue moon coming, and its possibilities sang in his blood.

He climbed the stairs out of the crypt, his mind already brimming with cruel plans. He was hungry, and wondered if his servant was still waiting for him.

#

Alex drank his coffee slowly. It tasted like tepid mud water and did nothing to calm his stomach after his dinner of greasy salt strips—bacon, according to the counter girl—twin circles of burned rubber and stale bread. (Eggs and toast, respectively.) He'd have to go soon, but right now he wanted to try and enjoy himself. Just for a few moments more, watch the people, watch the traffic outside, relax.

The diner was grubby but warm, and it was good to sit, elbows on the scratched white counter, staring at the pattern of gold flecks, coffee rings and cigarette burns. You could tell the place had once been a slightly classy joint. The counter still had chrome trim in some places, and distant, tinny music proved that at least one of the miniature jukeboxes in the booths still provided music.

You could feel time in this place, and although he was slowly drowning in the combined smoke from the cooking and the patrons, he wanted to study it, let it sink in. His stool seat screeched as he turned to look out the window. It was growing dark outside. He didn't have a car, partially because he was trying to make his money stretch, partially because his driver's license was fake. It would do in a pinch, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to test his luck.

He didn't have a fiancée anymore, or a job, so he was free, unfettered for the first time in memory, a fact that wasn't that impressive, as he didn't remember anything past five years ago. And as long as his savings lasted, he could remain so. Free to walk across America, which he had decided to do. Free to sit inside a diner and regret buying the buck-fifty meal.

Five years before, he had been found in a ravine by a woman named Meg and her cousin. He didn't have any bumps on his head, just a few burns and scratches—nothing to cause his memory loss. The police ran his prints, a short-lived investigation was launched, but no clues could be found to his identity. He picked the name Alex Kincaid out of a book Meg's mother—a woman named Lucille—had on her bookshelf.

Lucille might not have found him, but she was his life saver. She gave him her basement to live in and got the cousin to get him a job as an accountant. The numbers made sense to him, and he had an uncanny knack

for telling when a person was fudging the numbers just by talking to them. He fixed up the basement and began paying her rent.

This was not the recent past he was interested in, though. He thought, perhaps, if he set out on foot, maybe he'd be led to somewhere familiar. Perhaps someone would recognize him, or maybe some odd landmark would trigger his memory. He had a feeling that if he found just one thing, he'd be able to link it to another, and another, until everything fell into place.

"You don't know it's the same guy."

Alex looked over at the two men. They had been taking turns staring at him; both had freakishly colored gold eyes. He looked away quickly, for the skinnier of the two was studying him with undisguised hostility.

"We were brought here, Tark. Fate, all that. We were meant to see him."

They both stood up, the one called Tark grabbing the other's arm.

"Sabin!" he hissed, then said something in his ear.

"Fine," Sabin growled and threw some crumbled money on the table. He slammed out the door, Tark on his heels like a devoted puppy.

Alex pulled his attention back to his thoughts. He'd actually enjoyed himself so far. His possessions were sitting in four good-sized boxes in Meg's cellar, the rest were on his back. He wandered where his will took him, had seen some really neat things. He stayed in odd places—YMCAs and church basements, or slept wrapped in a tarp in the woods.

A hotel room tonight, though, he decided. He looked like a vagrant, smelled like a vagrant and was being treated with suspicion. He was starting to think from the looks he'd been getting at a few stops, including this one, that homeless-looking people made desirable targets.

What did he mean, *homeless-looking*? Heck, he *was* homeless.

He'd lived in Lucille's basement in relative peace for three years until she got sick. Then, he slept in the living room so he could go up and help her. For two years, he helped Meg take care of her mother, and the working side-by-side, the bond forged by shared pain and worry, had begun to feel like love to them. They decided to marry. He liked to think it took some worry off Lucille, believing her daughter would marry a decent man.

Last month, Lucille died, and Meg and he decided they probably wouldn't be very happy together. Thus, Alex was homeless.

The fact was, Lucille had been a magic person, and he had hoped her daughter had captured some of that magic, some of that incredible spirit her mother possessed. But when that spirit was snuffed out, and he had time to think, he knew Meg was not at all the way he imagined her. He grieved a little then, for both Lucille and the Meg he'd loved.

Stupidity, he thought. Love for him was companionship, not passion. Companions were not so hard to find.

He needed to move on. Perhaps he'd just find a nice place and settle there. He was good with numbers. Maybe he could get a clerk or accountant job in some nice town, get Meg to mail his things to him.

He stood and walked out the door, feeling eyes studying his back. He shifted his pack higher and turned around the corner, ducking down an alley to see if anyone followed him.

"Paranoid," he muttered under his breath, and cut across the road. He'd seen some signs at the end of town, and hoped to find a clean, not too expensive room for the night.

Chapter 2

Many hours earlier, when Zorovin began his journey up the mountain, he had been a dragon, black-and-silver-scaled, fierce and strong.

What continued the journey now was no longer a dragon but a man. He wore black pants and a long black coat, and tall, heavy boots that crunched in the snow. He strode quickly, pausing only once to look back down at the glittering distant caverns of the Frost Sea Dragons. Seeing as a human, and not a dragon king, he noted how the moon made the home caves sparkle, and realized how very precious they were.

He shook his head to clear it, not liking this feeling in his chest. The humanness of his condition was settling in already, making itself at home. He tried to push it away, for strong emotion was not a thing for dragons; they did not see or feel things the way humans did. Yet his flesh was forced into human form, and therefore, human instincts and emotions were something he would have to deal with.

He rubbed his hand along his scalp, trying to loosen the skin a little. His hair was as pale as the snow around him and longer than he would have liked. He turned and continued walking. He must stay focused, remember who he was, or he would never see Torvanith again.

At the peak, Zorovin did not rest, although he had been traveling for two days with only brief stops. What he was doing had never been done before. Dragons could reach the peak of this mountain because they could fly, but he had no choice but to take the risk.

Years before, when his son had left this world for the other, Zorovin had given him a pin that would allow him to remember the truth of himself, to know he was a dragon and not a human. In this world, such memory loss was not a problem, because magic and dragons existed. Over there, where magic and dragons did not, the world would try and negate anything that was not part of its reality.

Zorovin was hoping that by crossing over to Earth pre-changed into a human, the world would leave his mind, his memories, intact. A Blue Moon

was coming, and its influence would soften reality, and God willing, make the recovery of his son possible.

He stood at the peak, huffing. All he could see was stone and cracked earth, bareness so complete not even snow gentled it. He stepped forward cautiously. The passage to the other land had to be here.

He looked around, and thought, *If I were still in dragon form, what would I do? Where would I be going?*

Down. A straight plunge to the center.

He knelt and crept forward, tapping the ground with his fingertips, searching.

The ground rippled beneath his fingertips like water. He let out a long breath and stood again. He held his name inside his head...and jumped.

He fell a long way through nothingness, the cold sharp as a skinning knife. He hit a barrier, then passed through; and there was light. He hit the ground and rolled.

He pushed silver hair out of his eyes and tried to breathe. He'd found early in his trip that he could take in more breath through his mouth than through his nostrils, but only now, on this barren feeling world, did he discover that he couldn't taste it anymore. He sniffed the air and decided that was a blessing.

He leaned against a tree, panting softly. *I am Zorovin*, he reminded himself over and over, forcing himself to remember what it meant. He hurt all over, but he welcomed it, because it kept his head clearer, didn't allow the noise and smells and textures of this place to muddle his mind and make him forget.

He pushed away from the tree. It was time to figure out where he was, where he was going to stay. Then he could look for his son.

The dragon walked painfully on his new legs, his body not used to working this way. A human nest of habitation was near—he could smell it, feel the rumbles of it beneath his feet, see the lights of it.

As he walked, his movements became smooth, liquid. Zorovin saw a group of human men, and he considered pausing to adjust his clothes to match the cut of theirs. No, this outfit would do.

He crossed the hard-covered parking lot swiftly, avoiding vehicles with their twin shining eyes and angry, mechanical purrs. His hope was that this place, which seemed to be a mass gathering point, would offer him a general idea of their society, maybe even help him find a guide to assist him in his search.

He went inside a large building, not pausing in surprise when the doors opened for him. Nothing would surprise him here because these people

had had technology for hundreds of years. Anything that didn't happen was a mark of laziness and lack of ingenuity.

Zorovin paused to orient himself. The place had two stories. He looked over the railing to the floor below and tilted his head, listening, feeling, eavesdropping on the minds around him. Some people thought in both words and pictures, and he learned things by associating the two. This is how he discovered he was in a mall, which was a collection of shops, or stores. His knowledge of the language was archaic, but, thankfully, workable. He pulled away from the railing and wandered from store to store.

Even though he was an austere being, he had to admit the brightly colored lights and signs were pretty, in a way—like flowers on a cliff face. One store sold jackets slightly like his, a heavy black leather whose smell made him oddly hungry.

He finally stopped at a shop that sold glittering jewelry displayed in long glass coffins.

“May I help you, sir?” a young woman asked, smiling.

He stared at her a long moment then slowly took a pouch from his pocket. She relaxed visibly when she saw it. Feeling her momentary fear, and wanting to comfort her, he forced himself to get over his reluctance and produce the ring.

“I wish to trade this for...money.” He checked the word in her head and was pleased he had chosen the right one.

“I don't know if we can buy things. We're just part of a chain, really. But our manager's in doing some repairs, so I could take it back and ask him.”

He was loath to hand her the thick piece of gold. It sang, dimly, sadly, in his palm, as if wondering why its master was getting rid of it after so many years. There was no way around it, really. He would need food and shelter, and such things did not come for free.

He gave it over to her, and she closed her plump fingers around it.

He waited, stooping over the cases, pinging some of the pieces with his mind the way some would use their fingers to flick a crystal glass rim and make it sing. The gold here was not overly pure, he discovered with disappointment, and instead of singing, it mostly thudded. Some of the silver pieces were better, but not by much, and he didn't bother further with them. He'd never liked the colder songs of silver, which whispered of long, frigid nights and of the secrets beneath the sea. He liked the gold, which spoke to him of warmth and good bright things, like lush plant life and plenty to eat. Things of comfort.

The manager came out. “Where did you get this?”

Zorovin started to reply “What concern is this of yours?” But he changed it to “It’s been in my family for a long time. It is my least favorite piece, and while I do not wish to sell it, it seems I have little choice.”

The manager nodded and pulled some paper out of his pocket. Money, Zorovin realized, and watched as the man counted it and laid it on the glass.

“Enough?” he asked.

Zorovin had no idea. So, he looked into the mind of the manager, to see what he thought of what he was paying.

“No. It is not quite enough.”

The manager thought about it, and placed another few bills on the counter. Zorovin felt the man was reluctant to give any more, to the point where he might not buy the piece at all.

“That will do,” he said, gathering the paper carefully and putting it in the pouch.

“If you have more, feel free to come back.” the manager said. “This is a very pure piece of gold.”

“I know,” Zorovin said absently. He needed to figure out how to use the little bits of green paper he’d acquired.

His wanderings took him to a bookstore. A young human approached him, her lips the color of bruised plums.

“May I help you?”

He nodded gravely, looking at the stacks of colored bindings. There were those in the lands he had come from who would have thought themselves in paradise.

She smiled up at him. Her thoughts were like silk, easy and pleasant. He caught the word *cute*, and since he associated that word with small, newly born things, he didn’t get what she meant.

“I’m Tracy. What are you looking for?”

“Dragons,” he said.

“Myth or fantasy?”

Both words meant much the same thing to him, so he answered, “Whatever you have the most of.”

“Follow me.”

Zorovin followed her though the stacks of books. Truthfully, he knew this child could not help him, but her mind was open and friendly, and she thought of several subjects at different levels, and the things she was teaching him were invaluable.

They passed a pushy matron who stopped them to ask where the self-help books were. Tracy’s mental image of the woman made him smirk. The

woman forced her way past him hard enough that he knocked a stack of brightly colored paperbacks on the floor.

“I am sorry,” he said, crouching down to pick them up.

The books had two covers, he was amused to see, the top a pearlescent color with roses, the second featuring humans in a scantily clad embrace.

“They’re just historical romances,” she said with gentle snobbery. He saw that she read them at home but didn’t want him or anyone else to think poorly of her for saying so. “Elizabeth Halstead’s one of our best sellers.” She gathered them hastily and put them back on their table, and he followed her away.

“Who do you like? Knaak? Hambly? McCaffrey?” He took the books as she handed them, and he blinked at the pictures of winged lizards being fought, being ridden. The closest to reality was the cover of a book where the dragon, large and black, was holding a dark-haired female in its claws.

“These...are dragons?”

“Oh, yes.” She nodded earnestly. “They’re very popular.” She turned away. “I’ll see what else we’ve got.”

The writing seemed like so much gibberish to his eyes. If he worked he could make out some of the words, and he realized part of the problem was that he’d never really bothered to study human writing. For his needs being able to speak was enough. So, under the guise of reading the back covers, he looked into her mind again.

She was thinking of bedding, and other things, and they involved him. He blushed as he pulled back then frowned over his reaction. When one assumed another shape, one acquired the normal thoughts, instincts and reactions of that shape. He was thinking and reacting like a human, and he was not all that certain it was a good thing.

He gave her the books back. “I thank you, but these are not what I’m looking for.”

“Oh, well.” She was tossing around for something clever to say.

He gave her his very first human smile, hoping it was about right, and walked away. His child was not here, among these dead trees and human maids.

Libby's Diary

It's the dreams that hurt the most, lying quietly in my head. Images I'd rather forget flickering behind my eyes and robbing me of rest.

For instance:

It's night, of course...when is it not? All the worst things happen in the dark. I am waiting for my sister. Rita is small and redheaded and adorable. She has men lined up around the block waiting just to see her.

I'm sitting on my couch, wondering what she has to tell me that's so very important she's willing to break a two-year silence.

It's not late, but I was up very early, and the TV isn't helping me in my quest to stay awake.

There's a sweet smell in the air, but apartment buildings are full of strange smells, and as long as it isn't the smell of burning, who cares?

The smell is a heady scent, though, and I find myself curling up on the couch, making myself more comfortable. My eyes close. *She'll wake me, I reassure myself, when she gets here. She has the key, I remind myself. She can let herself in.*

I wake to the sounds of the morning news. Downtown traffic snarls and "be sure to take your umbrella." My neck hurts, and it sends its complaints up to my head, which has decided to throb in a show of solidarity. I groan and force myself up. That article wasn't writing itself, and I had a deadline to meet. I'm not worried about Rita. That was an occupation I'd given up years ago.

Bleary-eyed, I look to my answering machine for clues, but the little red light isn't blinking. Calling to explain why she'll be late or not there at all is not one of Rita's habits. I shrug and make my way to the bathroom. I love that bathroom. It's the only nice room in the apartment, all white tiles with a bathtub separate from the shower. Unfortunately, it doesn't have a linen closet, so I keep my towels in the bathtub. I rarely use it, anyway, and the fact I use it as a closet of sorts gives me an excuse to buy a really beautiful shower curtain for it.

It is a mark of how crappy I feel, the fact I step over the neatly stacked towels in the middle of my bathroom floor on my way to use the toilet. I stare at them for a long moment then, thinking last night had been one of my rare bath nights, I pull the curtain back to see if the tub needs cleaned before I put them back.

I find Rita there, her hands tucked under her chin, her head tipped just slightly so it rests against the shower wall. She's smiling sweetly in my direction, her long red hair brushed over her breasts.

I don't check for a pulse. I know that still, pale body is dead. It is perfectly clean-looking, and flawless, save for the two careful red tracks, like tears, leading from the empty pits of her eye sockets.

Sometimes the dream skips all the first part, and I'm just sitting on the cold bathroom floor, unable to scream or think, staring at my sister's eyeless face.

Chapter 3

Libby woke with water up to her chin and the feeling of sliding. She sat up quickly—the thousandth replay of the dream of the night her sister died coupled with the fact she had dreamt it while sleeping in a bathtub made her feel slightly sick. It had also shattered the fragile peace she had been searching for, soaking in a bathtub surrounded by candles. Water from her struggles had splashed up onto the sides, and the last candle sputtered out, leaving her in the dark.

She pulled the drain and stood, grabbed a towel and began drying herself with merciless strokes. She wanted to ignore the shiny white tiles that made up the floor and walls of the bathroom, because they reminded her of her curse. She wondered what evil imp had made her grandparents want to do their bathroom in tile, anyway. With the light on, they were nice, well cared for, but in the dark the tiles reflected the soft electric-blue glow of her eyes.

She looked at the mirror without meaning to, and was forced to see the irises shining up like neon headlamps. The light was strengthened by the white around her, creating a sapphire glow she could see to dress by.

“This was the stupidest idea I’ve ever had,” she said as she flicked on the light. “You want to get away from your problems, so you remind yourself forcibly of them by bathing in the dark. Brilliant, Libby.”

The glow was no longer noticeable, but her eyes were still an improbable shade of neon blue.

“And,” she added, “I don’t care how much money my grandparents spent to put in this nice bathroom, the tile goes. Or gets painted. I don’t care, as long as what’s left is no longer glossy or white.”

Dashiel looked up from the floor of the kitchen as Libby passed through, putting a bathrobe on. He tilted his head as if listening to her; his liquid brown eyes seemed to hold sympathy. She spared him a pat, determined to forget all this, eager to get something done. She was behind on her book but knew if she got back on it, she’d have it finished to turn in to her

agent in November. Heck, with a little more effort, she might get it done sooner.

She turned on the computer and sat down, determined. She procrastinated a tiny bit, going over to the built-in shelves that lined the room and looking up things. She then noticed her one plant, an ivy, was dry as a bone and went to fetch water. This led her to wondering where the phrase “dry as a bone” came from, and she ended up poking through her shelves again.

Finally, she decided that her goal of three thousand words wasn’t getting any nearer and sat down again.

HIS EYES WERE LIKE SMOKED GLASS, she typed. *No*, she thought, backspacing, *they didn’t have smoked glass back then*.

His eyes, the color of early morning mist, met hers. They were alone in the hall, and while this was her opportunity to speak to him, she did not know where to begin.

“There is nothing left to say, Els—Miss Pettigrew. You made your opinions quite clear last night.”

“Perhaps I judged too quickly, Lord Drake, I—”

One of the ladies passed through the hall on her way back from the garden. Her gold silk gown and ringlets made Elsa feel even more frumpy and plain. Who was she, to speak to him? Even if he did learn the truth about her, instead of making her seem special in his eyes, it would only bring greater distance.

But she loved him. He had once only been a means to an end. He held information she needed, and he had given it to her. Reports had been made, her job was done, but still she lingered, needing him for so much more.

He shifted impatiently. “Is there anything else I can do for you, then?” He stepped back again, as if to go.

She had hurt his pride last night, although she had not meant to. If she didn’t speak, didn’t do something, he would walk out the door and be gone. She would return to her dull old-maid’s life, her chance at being Cinderella long gone, without even a glass slipper to remind her.

She took a step closer, and smiled sweetly. “Well, perhaps you could ravish me? Just a little bit?”

He looked down at her for a long moment. She feared she had only offended him more.

He reached out with one hand and gently, gently touched

her cheek. She looked up at him, expectant and breathless.

His smile was very kind. “No,” he said, and walked away.

Libby stared at the computer screen for a long moment. “No? What do you mean no?”

She thought it through a moment then saw how things were beginning to fit together. She began typing again, eager to find out the rest of the story.

#

Sierra took the body from the freezer and set it on the table in front of her. She grimaced and took a breath, grasping a feather as black as ink and dulled by death. She pulled, and shuddered as the flesh that held the feather resisted then let go. She held it up and stared at the end of it, then sighed and placed it in the large silver bowl. Grasping another, she pulled and tried to think of other things.

When she got to the party the previous night she had mingled a little out of habit. Circulating used to be an activity of key importance. Networking at parties such as those could get you new voters, could help you gain friends you would need later, and learn who was political poison.

She spoke briefly to two people. The first was Jennifer, who had chased the reporters away and guarded Sierra jealously those first few months. She hugged Jenn, who smiled back, slightly surprised. Sierra had never been one for public affection.

Sierra squeezed her hands. “Take good care of yourself, now.”

“You’re going?”

“I have a lot to do when I get home.”

Jenn smiled warmly. “I have to come and visit you soon. I’ll call.”

She meant it, Sierra knew, just as she knew that driving the kids around and taking care of the husband and drawing up real estate contracts would put it far enough down the priority list to make it impossible.

On her way out the door, she stopped to speak to one last man—Mark Gilpin, who’d been her husband’s advisor.

“Can I speak to you a moment?” she asked, drawing him away from the crowd.

“So?” he asked when they were out of earshot.

“I know what you did,” Sierra said. “Soon everyone will know.”

“I have no idea—”

“You will.” She looked over his shoulder. “Harvey! How lucky! Gilpin just told me he was looking for you! Excuse me!”

She walked away, and was out the door and in her car long before Gilpin could follow.

Squirm, you little bastard, she thought. Worry and wonder which of your lies have been found out.

In a week or so, the ethics committee, the mayor's office and all the news stations would get an envelope detailing how Gilpin had set the whole thing with her husband up, from providing the slut to hiring the detectives.

Sierra grinned as she drove home. Gilpin wasn't the only one who could hire PIs. Her smile faded. *The sooner I get home, the sooner I can start plucking those birds, the sooner I can get out of this miserable little world.* The thought ran through her mind like a mantra.

The fact was, when she got home, she'd put away the birds, bathed and went to bed early, so now she had to work extra hard and catch up. The blue moon was coming, the ultimate deadline.

Another carcass joined the first inside a large woven basket. She yanked feathers until she couldn't stand it anymore, removing each little bit of fluff, even using tweezers around the beak and eyes. She would boil the carcasses and strip the meat. She was still trying to decide if she should eat the flesh or just use the bones.

Some texts led her to believe the flesh itself was useless, others suggested she should consider it a part of the ritual—eating the flesh to become one with the creature. She tended to take the former with more seriousness, never having been much on poultry, not unless it was chopped, herbed and sauced beyond all recognition.

She was saved from trying to guilt herself into starting on another carcass by the sound of a car pulling around the back. She put the evidence away and washed her hands, then grabbed her keys on her way outside in case she locked herself out.

Raul was climbing the steps up to the apartment above the garage. She watched him for a long moment, admiring the way he moved. He'd changed a great deal from the scrawny teenager she'd hired to mow her lawn. As he grew older, she'd given him more and more to do until she decided it was time he stayed onsite. He took care of all the odds and ends, taking out the garbage, making sure the grounds looked good, fixing things when they needed it.

"Can I talk to you a moment?" she hailed him as he was about to unlock the door.

He turned and looked at her, slightly off-guard. She never visited him, always called him to come to her.

"Sure," he said, and she ran up the steps. He opened the door warily, and she entered his abode for the very first time since he'd moved in.

He had grown into a handsome man with a lanky strength that made him look like a stuntman, or like he'd be more at home under a car. The mess of books, the papers covered with impossible-looking calculations and strange little pieces of scientific equipment said otherwise.

It also reminded her he should have started college two years ago.

He stood, looking pleasant enough, hands in his pockets. He'd been coming to her bed on a bi-weekly basis since his eighteenth birthday, but they knew each other hardly at all.

"Nice place," she said.

"I'm sorry it's such a mess."

"Don't be silly. It's fine." Sure, there were messy piles of paper and books, but there was also not one dirty dish or glass, not one empty beer can. In the end, that's what counted with Sierra. No garbage.

She smiled. "Want to come over tonight?"

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"You don't have to."

"I know. But I want to." He smiled, and it was a very nice, brilliant smile. "I really like you, you know."

She smiled, too, and waited while he put his books away. She studied his shelves, and took down a book by Isaac Asimov. She slipped an envelope inside the book. She knew the author was one of Raul's favorites. The contents of the envelope would insure him four years of college and a stipend for books, if he wasn't profligate, which he wouldn't be. She wanted to know he'd be okay when she was gone, and with his mind he ought to be able to do so much. She almost wished she'd be there to see it.

"You can borrow that," he said.

"Nope. Just killing time." She put it back on the shelf.

"So," he said, passing her to put a telescope carefully back on its tripod. "What have you been up to?"

"Killing birds."

He laughed. His hands were very careful on the telescope frame, setting things back to rights.

"Out stargazing, were you?"

He nodded. "I went out to the park. I watched the sunset on the trees and ate. Then when it got dark enough, I tried to find some planets. There should be some interesting configurations soon."

"Wasn't it cold?"

He shook his head. He had the blackest eyes, and she imagined she could see the stars in them. The way he settled his gaze on her made her feel both motherly and very immature.

“I wish I had gone with you,” she said impulsively.

“Next time I’ll take you.”

“Maybe,” she said softly.

He put his arm around her. “I could show you such stars,” he said. “I could tell you their stories. I could tell you about the belt of Orion and the story of big bear, little bear. Every culture has its tales, so different, yet so strangely similar. You’d be surprised.” He made it sound magical and wondrous.

“You almost make me believe there’s some magic left in this world,” Sierra said, pulling away.

“There is!” He captured her hands in his. “The stars are magic. The moon in the trees—that’s magic. The millions of shades of red in one rose petal, the glitter of the sun on a swift-flowing river, all these things are magic.” He grabbed a sheaf of papers and laid them on the table before her. “And here are the spells.”

Sierra looked at the symbols—modern, yet so archaic-looking, runes and marks and equations to frame the miracles of the world.

“Sweetheart, these are not spells. Their lines are simply the borders of our reality. There is no magic in this, just knowledge.”

“I’m trying to remember who said...there’s a quote I was told once, that the future’s science is the past’s magic?”

He looked so disappointed she caressed his cheek. “I am old and bitter. You shouldn’t listen to me.”

“You’re not old. Bitter, maybe, I’ll give you that.” He grinned. “But you’re wise. I like listening to you. I want to learn from you.”

“Let’s go back to the house, before you make me feel even older than I feel now.”

“No,” he whispered, and it was the first time he’d ever said that word to her. “Not in his bed. In mine.”

He kissed her then, so deeply that she shivered. She relented and was pressed down into male-smelling blankets.

“I will show you how very young and beautiful you are,” he whispered, his hands on her clothes.

Another task done, she thought. And in two years, he’d get another draft of \$22,000. A gift of gratitude, she’d told the bank manager. She could afford to be generous. Her husband’s relatives would take the house, all her other assets would be gone. Raul, sweet, earnest Raul, was the only heir she had.

And hopefully, he’d remember her well. Miss her, perhaps, a little. But either way, he’d be in the clear. After all, she couldn’t make it look like he had a motive to kill her.

#

As usual, that night Libby did not sleep well, and as usual she woke up feeling awful, like her head had been banged against the wall forty or fifty times. She had to look at the clock to see if it was actually morning, since her bedroom and the attendant bathroom had no windows. She dressed slowly and thought longingly of a cup of tea.

She stumbled out of her bedroom and checked to see if anyone or anything had tried to break in before she opened the living room and kitchen shutters. She let Dashiell out and followed him, thinking a walk would clear her head. Dashiell was in a good mood. The night had been quiet, then.

She turned around and looked back at the fortress. When she had first moved here, it had been a cabin, and her mother's parents had both wanted her to have it.

"Your mother isn't a country girl, dear, but you are." *Just like your father*—the last part of the sentence was never spoken. Libby could not recall ever having met her father. She'd had enough bad men in her life, and she didn't need to make the list longer by bothering him. She didn't even know what he looked like, her mother having burned every single picture and memento. She shrugged. It didn't matter.

When she moved here, her first book had just started to sell. It hadn't been enough to pay for the renovations but at least it gave her provable income enough to substantiate a loan. That, and the house as collateral. She thanked God everyday that the loan was paid off. She hated debt, because if she lost this place she'd have nowhere else to go.

She'd had her bedroom and bathroom windows boarded up and supports built around the remaining windows to allow her to have heavy iron shutters. Sabin and his friends would never touch iron. She'd blocked, barricaded and barred every place she could think of, took every precaution. Still, it was only when daylight came and she could see the defenses untried that she felt as if she could breathe again. When Dashiell ran around looking happy, Libby was happy.

It was another beautiful day, she thought, though it could be the last now that winter was coming. She ran her hands down the stalks of the forget-me-nots, harvesting some late, clinging seeds. She put them in a baggie she kept in her jacket pocket. She double-checked to see if she'd locked the door then headed down the driveway.

She was constantly aware of her surroundings as she walked. She had a few things strung in trees here and there or hidden along the path that were, according to old books, supposed to tell her if one of the fae had been

through, though, to be honest, she really wasn't sure what type of creature Sabin was. Some of the wards were meant to detect brownies and dryads and other members of the fae; one was even supposed to detect ghosts. Not that Sabin would fall for such petty hedge witchery and woodsman's lore, but it never hurt to try.

So far, they never done anything to prove or disprove their worth; one, made of horsehair, was looking particularly worn as birds stole the strands for their nests.

She circled around the back of her house, checking, looking, feeling the area. Everything as it should be.

Five apples were stacked neatly on her back porch. They were red, perfect, store-bought. A couple of pears, the same she hadn't picked from her own orchard rested next to them. The top apple had a large, jagged bite out of it.

It was as she feared. He had walked unchallenged right through her alarm systems.

"Dashiel?" she called softly, a strand of fear wrapping around her heart. The apple's inner flesh was still perfectly white, a little teardrop of juice still clinging to the ruby skin.

He never comes during the day, she thought. Day is safe.

"Dashiel! Come here!" Distantly, she could hear him barking. Just some prank, she thought, looking at the apples. Or someone had put the apples and pears on her porch, and an animal had chewed on it and was scared away by her approach. She desperately hoped this was so, for no amount of preparation had readied her to face him again.

She ran to the front of the house. Dashiel wasn't coming; he stood just out of sight, barking like he was trying very hard to communicate something extremely important.

"Allright, boy," she said with a shaky voice. "I hope to God you know what you're doing."

She gathered her courage, and followed him into the woods.

Chapter 4

If you had asked Alex how he managed to get himself tied to the train tracks, he would tell you he had no idea.

He had a long time to think on it. He remembered double-checking the door to the hotel room, showering for a very long time, watching TV while he drank some soda then crawling gratefully into bed. That was it. An exciting life, to be sure, but nothing meriting this kind of treatment.

The whole situation had a surreal quality to the point where he now expected to see melting alarm clocks, and birds made out of fire. To his knowledge, only virtuous young women in frilly white dresses ended up in this situation, not boring young men in faded stripped pajamas.

He blinked up at the sky, trying to figure out what the constellations were above him. He struggled against his bonds, more to warm himself up a little and pass the time than because he thought it would help. The ropes and duct tape that bound him were thick and tight, and he had very little room to move.

After awhile, his new favorite time-passer became trying not to think of how badly he needed to pee.

Allright, he told himself. I need to think my way through this, be rational.

He studied the tracks, which went for a ways before disappearing around a bend. He was not happy to note that they were shiny from use, nor could he make out any skeletons of weeds growing up between the ties. He strained himself trying to take the best look around he could. He could see no house lights, no cars, no signs of humanity save for the power lines that ran parallel to the tracks.

“Hello?” he yelled anyway. “Hey, out there! The next time you decide to kidnap me let me put a coat on first, okay? It’s effing cold out here!” He paused. No movement in the bushes, no response of any kind. Silence. He liked silence right now, though. It meant he had a little longer before chop time.

“I don’t see the sense,” he continued, “in kidnapping a man whose PJs have worn spots in them. If I had money, I’d at least be sleeping in something a little less vintage.”

He shifted. The rocks were beginning to cut into his flesh, but for some odd reason, it didn't really bother him. The cold didn't, either, although he could feel it wearing away at his resistance. He wasn't happy to be in this situation, but he wasn't going to whine about it. His friends back at work would think he was unnaturally calm, and this might be true. He wasn't the kind of person to feel too deeply. He wasn't shallow, but he had to admit he wasn't extremely passionate. He liked to call himself even-tempered, but the truth was, he had an almost magical affinity for staying calm. It was going to serve him well now. He'd hate to spend the last moments of his life a sobbing, screaming idiot.

Who are my enemies? he wondered. He yelled "Hello" once in a while as he tried to think. His ex-fiancée? No, she'd already gotten what she wanted, i.e. rid of him, so there was no point. Anyway, they really didn't dislike each other, had just sort of grown apathetic. Although, come to think of it, their breakup scene hadn't given her much to recommend him to her. ("I don't want to marry you, Alex." "Oh. Okay. If you're sure." "What do you mean okay? Don't you care?") And on, and on...but they'd made a kind of peace when he left.

Work? He couldn't think of anyone there, where he was considered just one of the guys. People had actually said they'd miss him when he left. He had lost his job because the company needed to downsize its workforce. They decided Alex's office only needed four accountants. Those with seniority stayed. He knew it wasn't personal. He was the one, actually, who should be holding the grudge.

So, that left this as a random act of cruelty. Or perhaps someone from his unremembered past had caught up with him. He mulled that over and discarded it. It'd been roughly five years. Surely, someone would have stepped forward before now. Unless it had taken them that long to track him down? He laughed. Nah. He wasn't going to suddenly discover his exciting past as 007.

"No, Mr. Kincaid," he said in a terrible German accent. "I vant you to die."

It was probably someone from the diner. He hadn't felt very comfortable there. Perhaps he'd felt something on an instinctive level. Maybe someone had decided to rob him, had followed him to the hotel and, when they discovered he had nothing, brought him out here to die for the fun of it. Maybe they'd managed to drug him, which would explain how he slept through the whole thing.

It had to be someone from around here who knew where they were going. He remembered the pair with their weird gold eyes. Maybe he was the person they'd been talking about.

Or, he could just be barking mad.

Actually, some beautiful Russian spy sneaking into his hotel room and injecting him with a sleeping drug, then having him tied to the tracks so he would never get a chance to tell the secrets he knew sounded more plausible.

He was getting sleepy. He fought it, remembering a Jack London story about a trapper who fell asleep in the cold and died. On the other hand, maybe it would hurt less if he was asleep when the train came.

Dawn broke, and while he was pleasantly surprised no trains had come yet, he knew there'd have to be one soon. The line of sky in his vision was an unreal, glowing blue, the clouds touched with an edge of pink.

Alex was still alive, but he couldn't feel a thing. He tried to call out again, the sound a clotted and hoarse groan. He tried to make some spit to moisten his throat, but his mouth felt dry and cracked.

He closed his eyes again. He'd never been much of a morning person.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

He opened his eyes to see a German shepherd's face, so close that for a groggy second he thought the voice had come from it.

"Teaching myself patience," he croaked.

"Good grief! You've been tied down!"

He tried to see her, but all he could see was dog.

"Came as a bit of a surprise to me, too."

"Don't bother speaking. You sound awful. Move it, fatso." The dog moved aside.

She had impossibly blue eyes—large, electric-blue ones that could not have come from nature—and long, wavy auburn hair that brushed him as she cut the ropes. She had a pretty, heart-shaped face, and Alex thought he would have fallen in love with her even if she wasn't in the process of saving his life.

He heard a metallic snapping sound.

"Lucky I always carry a knife, eh?" she said.

"My...heroine..." he whispered, and she grinned at him before going for his ankles.

In the distance, he heard the low moan of a horn, blasting three long times.

"Don't worry," she said soothingly, "he's signaling at a crossing through town. Sound carries a pretty good distance on a cold morning like this." She huffed softly as she stepped over him. "Are you going to call the cops?"

"No."

“Are you sure? I mean, the rule is, if you don’t report it, it never happened.”

“Sure.”

“No need for forensics, then.” She balled up the duct tape and threw it aside with the ropes.

He tried to command himself to move but failed. She put her hands under his armpits and dragged him off the tracks. The day was suddenly looking up.

“Dashiel? Dashiel! Get off the tracks.” The dog complied, and she rubbed his ears in loving reward. “Dummy,” she muttered, but as before it sounded more like an endearment. She turned her attentions to Alex again, vigorously rubbing his feet and arms.

“Thanks,” Alex said, and was gifted with another pretty, fleeting smile.

“It’s not a dramatic last-minute rescue, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Grateful—had enough excitement.”

She patted his shoulder. “We’ll get you up to the house, get something warm inside you.”

He stood on wobbly legs. Use made them hurt then feel better. He held out a hand.

“Alex Kincaid.”

She took it briefly.

“Libby Halstead,” she nodded, almost shyly. “You can lean on me when you have to.”

They worked their way up the path to a clearing with a formidable cabin in the center. He tried not to be rude and stare at it too much, but it was hard. Thick shutters flanked the window, and the door was heavy when he pulled it closed behind him. Her house looked like a castle on the eve of invasion. Are times really that bad? he wondered when he saw the twin brackets that could hold a thick wooden bar firmly across the door.

“Sit down,” she invited, pulling an afghan off a chair and wrapping it around him. The chair was big and comfy, and he sank gratefully into it. Dashiel settled down in front of him, dark eyes watchful. He smiled at the dog, but it sat motionless, unmoved.

He heard things clattering in the kitchen. “Do you want to call anyone, let them know you’re All right?” she asked.

“No, thanks.”

The room he was in was paneled primarily with bookshelves and had an oak rolltop desk near the window. There was a couch, a rocking chair and some filing cabinets. There was only one picture, a painting of a woman

in an elaborate peacock feather-and-velvet dress. It was over a barrister bookcase, and he was tempted to wander over and see what books deserved such special treatment.

He looked back at the woman in the portrait, her white hair pulled up into an elaborate bun, her pale-green eyes, the black pearls around her neck, and felt a pang of familiarity. The *place* smelled familiar to him with its varnished wood and multitudes of books. He felt drawn to Libby, and he almost wanted to ask her *Do you know me? Are you sure you've never seen me before?*

But he figured if she knew him she would have said so, and he didn't want to invite questions. She was skittish, and he was afraid any more weirdness on his part would cut off any relations between them.

"Here's some coffee," she said when she came back in. "I only have instant. What kind of soup would you like? Something beef or something chicken? I have tomato, too."

"Don't trouble yourself." He looked at the portrait. "Nice picture."

"Thank you," she said almost absently. "I always liked that dress." She perched on the edge of the couch. "So, what should we do with you?"

He drank. It was sweet—Irish cream-flavored instant stuff, but it was hot, and he was beginning to feel human again. "I don't have anyone to call," he said, "except a cab."

She shook her head. "I can drive you to town. I'm going there anyway."

"Where?"

"California."

His eyes widened, and she laughed. "Little California. A town next to a river, not the state."

"That's good. How far is that to Uniontown?"

"Uniontown?" She blinked. "Half an hour, I guess. Is that where you were staying?"

"Yeah. I was staying at the Great Gable Inn." He waited for the question, but it never came. "Aren't you curious?"

"About?"

"How I got from Uniontown to a railroad track in front of your house?"

She shrugged. "Things happen."

He looked around at the shuttered windows. "I guess they do."

She shrugged again and stood. "I'm feeling charitable. I'll take you there."

She smiled prettily, and he looked at her standing in the light from the only open window in her fortress of a cabin. He couldn't deny it, he was

hooked. He had been hooked from the moment he looked into her eerie blue eyes, stepped into her home. It looked like he'd found a place to settle, at least for a week.

"If you take me there, I could take you out to eat. Just to show my gratitude."

"Maybe," she said shyly.

She got a trenchcoat out of the closet for him. It was too short, and he could only close it if he hunched his shoulders, but it was better than nothing. He followed her out, watching while she locked both locks then double-checked what she'd done. She unlocked her garage, and after a long inspection that involved kneeling and looking under the car with a flashlight, she got in and backed it out. He climbed in the passenger side and waited while she locked the garage again.

"Alright," she said, sliding behind the wheel. "Let's go."

He thought about commenting on her obvious paranoia. Libby looked like a reasonable woman, so he couldn't help but think (or, perversely, hope) that her fears were founded in fact and not just illusionary. Instead, he decided to pretend like nothing had happened.

"Do you mind taking me to the hotel first? I don't think they'll let me in a restaurant looking like this. Besides, I need my wallet."

"Sure," she said. "The car will be heated up soon, and I'll put the heat down on the floor so your feet can get warm."

"That'll be great."

Outside, it was a day that couldn't make up its mind, sometimes gloomy, sometimes sunny. He wondered which mood would win.

"So, where's a good place to eat?"

"You know, I was thinking that I really need to go to shopping. Why don't I just drop you off?"

"Because I want to do something to thank you for your kindness."

"It was nothing, really. I mean, anyone would have freed you, and you should just be grateful Dashiell brought me down. In fact, it's him you ought to be thanking."

"Maybe. But it's much more fun to thank you."

She laughed a little. "But really, I don't want to put you to the trouble, and I really need to get the shopping done."

He was silent awhile digesting this. It was pretty obvious she didn't want to eat with him, but he didn't know why, and he didn't want their meeting to end like this. He had a pretty sure feeling that if he let her go it would be the last he'd see of her. It was a vibe he was getting from her.

“I know! I need some things at the store, too. So, why don’t you take me, since I have absolutely no transportation, and I’ll buy us something to eat afterwards.”

“Why do you want to go shopping with me?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” he said, and it was true. The words You feel familiar to me and I want to know why would not be welcome.

“Try me.” She gave a hard little grin, and he knew he was on thin ice.

“Because I’m bored,” he said. “I don’t want to be stuck in a hotel room all day.”

“Uh-huh,” was all she said.

He stayed silent for a while, looking at different things. He saw a brick toll house, some seedy-looking bars, some nice houses. The place was an odd mix of decency and desperation. It did not know, he thought as they passed an abandoned bar, then a high end restaurant, if it was rich or poor.

When they pulled into the hotel parking lot he said, “I’ll be back out in a couple of minutes. If you’re not here I’ll understand.”



She watched him walk up to the building and disappear through a side door. He was scarcely a romantic figure, a lanky scarecrow of a man squeezed into a black coat. He was barefoot, his light brown hair was shaggy and in need of a trim.

But he had beautiful gray eyes. Kind eyes. And there was a gentleness about him, an awkward grace in the way he moved, even when he acted like he was uncomfortable in his body. He also had an odd but appealing sense of humor, and an unearthly serenity that soothed her.

And the ability to dress and shave very, very quickly.

“I’m back! I’m glad you waited.” He looked better in a pair of dark jeans and a slightly wrinkled dress shirt but not as comforting. Her coat was over his arm, and he stood back away from the door as if waiting for an invitation. She hit the unlock button, and he folded himself back inside, putting her coat on the backseat.

“I had no choice,” she said as she turned the key. “You still had my coat.”

He laughed, and she grinned, pleased.

She pulled out of the lot and drove down to the shopping plaza.



“So,” he said, grabbing a cart and pushing it through the automatic doors, “what’s your middle name?”

“Why?” she asked absently, digging out her list. Beauty products first. “So if I ever get mad at you I can use your whole name. So you know I’m serious.”

She laughed. “Guess.”

“Rumplestiltskin.”

“Uh, no.” She knelt in front of the shampoo display, comparing prices.

“Always get the most obvious out of the way, that’s what I always say. How much shampoo are you going to buy?” he asked as she dropped several bottles into the cart.

She gave him a look. He was trying not to laugh.

“Keep guessing,” she said in a flat voice.

“Anne? Lynn? Robert? Louise? Richard?”

“Those are guy names!”

“Anne? Really?”

“No, Richard and Robert, as if you didn’t know.” She grabbed a bottle off the shelf and opened the cap to smell it. It was too flowery for her taste and she put it back.

“I know. I’m just being as annoying as possible so you’ll get tired and blurt out the answer. I’m crap at guessing games.”

“Lorraine. And you?”

He paused as if he hadn’t considered the quid pro quo portion of the conversation. “I don’t have one. Why don’t you give me one?”

She laughed, then tried to ignore him while she checked to see if each shampoo had a conditioner mate. “I’m horrible at names.”

“Really? I’d hate to be one of your characters, then.”

She looked up, surprised, and he made one of her books materialize from out of nowhere.

“Same woman?” he asked, holding the cover up to her.

She nodded, and he held the book out near her, as if comparing the back cover photo to the reality.

“You photograph well, but the reality is still amazingly lovely,” he said.

She smiled at him but inside she was blushing.

“I’ll have to read it,” he said.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“What kind of writer turns away potential royalties? Your agent would not be pleased.”

“Well, it’s just...” Libby stopped, trying to figure out what to say. It was hard, since she really didn’t know what her objection to him reading her book was. “You’re a guy.”

“I am sure that many men, tons of men, in fact, read these. I bet we make up, what? Fifty? Seventy-five percent of your market.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” She looked at him as if he were mad.

“Anyway, if I buy it, I can get you to autograph it. I’ll be able to show it to whatever future progeny I have. ‘Yes, this is the signature of the woman who saved my life.’”

She pulled the cart toward her. “If you insist,” she muttered. She had other things to worry about, she decided. Things to buy. Royalty checks to make vanish.

“Excellent!” he said, and when she looked up, he was gone.

He caught up with her again next to the TV dinners. He looked at the growing stack of boxes in her cart, then back at her. She waited for a comment, but it didn’t seem to bother him.

“There’s a whole bunch of soup cans under those boxes,” she said defensively. He ignored her and held out her book and a pen.

“I nicked it from the display.” Her eyes widened. “I’ll take it back,” he assured her. “But I want you to sign this before you forget.”

“Are you always like this?” she asked.

“No,” he said honestly. “You seem to bring it out in me.”

She took the book and pen and looked both directions before taking the cap off. It was a gel pen filled with metallic purple ink. She paused for a long moment, then wrote, *To Alex Kincaid, please stay off the tracks. Your lifesaver, Libby.*

He grinned widely when he saw the inscription. She handed back the pen.

“Please return this before we get into trouble.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be sure to wipe off your fingerprints first,” he said and disappeared again.

He caught up with her at the checkout line. He looked at the line, looked at her cart, looked at the lines around them.

“We’re going to be awhile,” she said.

“Good. I have you all to myself, no distractions.”

She smiled, and tried to think of something interesting to say.

“Why *Alex*?” she asked.

He gave her an odd look. “What do you mean, why *Alex*?”

“Well, *Alex* is a nice way to shorten *Alexander*, but I was wondering why *Alex* and why not *Al*? Or *Xander*?”

“Well, it’s not *Alexander*. It’s just *Alex*.”

“Oh.” *Libby* stood there a moment, reflecting that conversation was hard when you were afraid to ask questions. Questions led to questions returned, and she didn’t have that much of a past she wanted to share yet.

“So,” she asked. “Did you go to college?”

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"To be honest," he said, "I have no idea. I had an accident a couple of years back and it knocked it all out of my head."

"You got hit in the head?"

He nodded. "Amnesia. Permanent, it looks like."

"Well, that explains a lot."

"Like what?" he asked, grabbing the separator from the side of the cash register and placing it on the belt. "I don't act like this all the time, I'll have you know. Most of my friends think I'm all normal and boring."

"I'll bet."

He took a stack of cold boxes out of the cart. "You should be grateful that someone's willing to try and add a little color to your life," he grumbled.

"I am." She bit her lip, trying not to giggle.

He looked at her for a moment. "You're teasing me."

"I suppose so, yes."

"I think I'm going to have a heart attack."

"It's not that rare!" she protested. "You just don't know me well enough."

"If you're going to have a heart attack, would you mind stepping to the side so someone else can get through?"

Alex arched an eyebrow and stared at the woman behind them. Libby turned around to face her.

"What's your hurry? They haven't even started on our order yet."

The woman didn't seem to hear Libby. She stared at Alex's face with growing dismay. Libby turned to look at him, but his face was calm, unreadable. He just stared at the woman until she pulled her cart out of line and went to a register several lines down.

Alex looked at Libby and blushed a little. He turned and concentrated on unloading the soup cans from the bottom. Libby helped, trying to figure out what it was that passed between Alex and the woman that frightened her enough to leave the line and start all over again elsewhere.

More than a few minutes later, he helped her unload the cart again into the trunk of her car. The last bag stuffed in, she shut the lid.

Alex smiled and said, "It's lucky you'll have me to carry all these things in."

"Well, actually," she said, focusing her stare on the keys in her hand, "I thought I'd just drop you off. We're practically right next to your hotel already."

"But I was planning on buying you dinner."

“You know that’s not necessary.”

“Libby, I’m offering you food that doesn’t come in boxes.” He shrugged. “Not that we know of, anyway.”

She looked at him and felt the familiarity, the comfort of him. She wanted to fight it because such a feeling could be deadly in her position, but she couldn’t find the will.

“Tomorrow night,” she said. “When I’m less tired. Shopping wears me out.”

“No, it’s not the shopping. It’s the spending,” he said, handing her the receipt that had fallen out of one of the bags. She winced at the total and stuck it in a pocket.

“Tomorrow would be great,” he continued. “I’ll come get you. Do you like to eat early or late?”

She got in and unlocked the doors. He shut the door for her and came around. When he was settled beside her, she took out a notepad and a pen.

“My life’s really flexible,” she said, “so it doesn’t really matter. I’m not much on being out after dark, though.”

“Why not?” he asked.

Because the woods are lonely after dark, she thought, but she said, “That’s just the way I am. Who knows why?” She handed him the slip of paper. “I don’t give this out often,” she said.

“Then I’m doubly honored.”

She laughed and started the car. “I hope you continue to think so.”

Chapter 5

Waking her would not be easy—if, indeed, she was still on this earth, if the tomb had not cracked and leaked. In fact, he was not entirely sure he wanted her. He loved her, true, but she liked to make things difficult for her little boy.

He knelt by the chalk pattern he had drawn on the asphalt of the abandoned parking lot. The recently boarded-up building stood between him and the highway. Behind him, it was all trees. The asphalt, although cracked, made a perfect place to cast spells, being both reasonably flat and easy to draw on. It was night, and the only illumination here was a single light by the back door of the building. There were others in the parking lot out front, meant to scare away the bad guys; he supposed the owner was still trying to sell the place. He didn't know and didn't care.

He had soaked the chalk in magic and allowed to dry. He put the stub in its pouch then rubbed the powder from his fingers into his cheeks. The skin would be rough for as long as he owned this body, and it would be cheaper, magically, to move to another than to continue using magic to make it look repaired. He thought perhaps, when the blue moon came and all his magic was restored, he could take away all this body's scars. He liked it—it was far handsomer and better made than the one he had been born with, and it had an affinity for the magical most didn't have anymore.

He sighed and removed some cut stones from another pouch, placing them on intersecting lines. It did not matter. Days and years moved swiftly, and he'd wear out this body soon enough, and have to find another.

Sabin hummed softly under his breath. Amber in the east and amethyst to the west. Night and day and rise and set. The cool electric light caught the facets, and his mind was lost in them for a time, fragmented. Eventually, he pulled himself together and placed a fist-sized ruby to the north and a counterpart sapphire to the south. The last stone he placed in the center. It was like shadow, with no real edges, no gloss to catch the light. Any shadow it threw was absorbed into its form, and it sat there as if it did not exist.

He cut his hand and dripped blood on the shadow stone. It did not react in any way, so he had to take it on faith that he had done right.

Sabin stood and paced around the circle of stones. He whispered as he walked, strange old words that had long ago lost their meaning. This was not his true magical talent, making a soul call; his true gift was a strange one. He could move souls from one body to another. His other magics were weak—pitiful, really—but he considered that a flaw of the parched world he lived in.

He had only a little magic left, about two jam jars full, found in a rare buried pocket of a cracked and dried-out ley line, but it ought to be enough to last him until the full moon.

He opened one jar with great reverence. Magic had not started out as a tangible. He remembered when it was as light as air, when you could breathe magic, feel it in the thrum of life around you—when magic had been a thing of provable faith. You only had to know how to tap into the great well of it that made up the core of the planet and you could do anything. There were rules, of course, always rules, but the magic had been worth it.

Sabin remembered—he thought, but was not sure for it had been many, many years ago—lying out beneath the stars with his mother.

“Listen, Sabin,” she whispered in her Shadow voice. “Feel the ley lines beneath you. If you close your eyes you can see them running under the ground, pounding in time with your own heart.”

Now, for what little magic was left to survive, it had to be bound to the tangible. Water was the best medium—it could sink into things, it could be doled out with a dropper. He took a spoon from his pocket and dripped out a tiny bit on top of the rock. It mixed with his blood and glowed redly. The redness spread along the drawn lines. He needed to keep thinking of her, to give the spell focus.

Sabin paused, and tried to remember more of his mother. What she had done to cause her name to be removed from the memory of all living beings. You could remember the others—Puck and Titania and Oberon and Mab. You could recount their deeds, describe for the listener what they looked like, but no one remembered his mother, the Dark Queen.

The Dark Queen. Sabin closed his eyes. He was to call her, to bring her here for the blue moon. It was his curse-task, and he knew how to complete it. But the most vital part, her name, what she looked like, had all had been wiped from his brain just like all others.

The Black Queen. Not the Dark Queen. The *Black* Queen. She was whispered of in a tale to keep children in line. What they whispered—of

murdered lovers, and orgies where the flesh of children was consumed, and disgusting sexual acts involving innocent maidens and mutated beasts were just stories. His mother had done far, far worse.

What had she done?

Sabin knelt again, staring at the circle, shaking his head. The glow had stopped just short of the outer stones. He grabbed the memory of her Shadow voice speaking of the ley lines, an unreliable memory but more than he had otherwise, and stepped inside the circle. He took everything he knew was hers—the color of his eyes, his magic, and called with every bit of his essence.

The glow leapt forward and engulfed the stones. The reflected light encased him in a sheaf of deep red.

He threw back his head and screamed.



Zorovin could have told you, had you asked him, about the burial place of the Black Queen, for he was one of the very few who remembered who she truly was.

In the mountains far away from where Sabin cast his spell there is a tomb undisturbed by man. There are six bodies in total, two elves and three dwarves in armor, the majority of a party sent forth with a terrible task. They were the pallbearers of the Black Queen.

She had been a cruel woman, so terrible that her memory was taken from almost all living beings. The kings and their wives carried the burden of her history, softened so they could sleep without nightmares. The seven brave ones they selected carried the horror in full so they would never forget why they must take care with the corpse they carried, why they must bury it deep in foreign soil. And why they must not return, lest she possess one and return to the Twilight Lands like some nightmare plague. They enclosed her in crystal, they buried her beneath rock and dirt, deep inside the tall mountain.

Freed from the greatest part of their task, they walked five days, and there they had a feast with special provisions they had saved. They sang and ate, then spent the next day in quiet contemplation while each dug his own grave. One stayed alive long enough to shovel the dirt over the others, to erase any signs they had been there. His hatred of the Queen rose above that of all others; his was the sword that had pierced her heart.

He then crawled down into a small cave, and as his life bled away, he thanked God he would no longer remember the Black Queen's name, or her deeds—and his own shame. That her one wish, to be remembered for all time as the greatest horror that ever lived, would not be granted. That she would die as she should have lived, quietly and unremarked.

His only hope was that his brother would have the courage to slay the Black One's child and not let misdirected mercy or familial ties stay his hand. He was relieved that he would not have to put the knife to his own son, that the task would be his brother's. He closed his eyes, and prayed he would be forgiven his sins, and drifted away into everlasting sleep.

This is the story the dragons tell, but sadly, they do not know the rest of the story. They could not warn those who were to come after.



Five days away from that place and many, many years later, deep in a cavern, a soft reddish glow reveals a tomb of crystal beneath centuries of dust. A ghost stands there and sees the small cracks where air and water have seeped in. Her body is nothing more than sludge and filth, nothing the Black Queen can reclaim as hers. She feels a pull, insistent, to the east of where she is. So, her son still lives. All is not lost.

She wills herself to the surface. There she wanders, trying to find a direction that will take her to what she needs. She shakes her head. Who knew a soul could be groggy from so much sleep?

She hears footsteps crunching on the path, and looks for a place to hide, then laughs because she is invisible, unless she doesn't want to be. At least, if the old rules hold.



Jill broke down on the highway but managed to roll her car off the road, sputtering and hissing and leaking fluids like a slain dragon. Her father would be angry, mostly because she had bought this car rather than let him buy a better one for her. It wasn't really stubborn pride but the desire to do for herself and prove herself.

She kicked the tire and grabbed her backpack out of the trunk. She wished now she'd let him buy the better car. Or the cell phone he'd also offered.

She looked up at the sky and realized she'd better get going. Girls were prey after dark, and staying by the car was even more dangerous than heading through the woods. Besides, she was familiar with the area, and in an hour she'd be home. She was only an exit, maybe two, from where she'd meant to get off anyway.

She jumped over the rail and began climbing. After a time, she reached a path. Her feet crunched on dead leaves, and she tried to walk more softly. The moon had broken through, bright even though only a sliver showed, so she could see.

The path melded into a clearing. She saw a stone and thought she would sit and rest—it was about waist-high and flat enough on top. A

cloud passed, darkening the land, so she looked down at her feet to make sure she was still on the path. When she looked up, she saw a woman.

She was the most beautiful woman Jill had ever seen, and she wished desperately she could look like that, with such glossy, raven-black hair, such large, gold eyes set in a finely boned face. She was slightly alien-looking, and very exotic.

Would you really like to look like me? a Shadow voice in her head asked.

“Yeah,” Jill said. “Who wouldn’t?”

The woman smiled. The moon’s light glittered again through the trees, and Jill realized she could see through her.

Now, now, the voice said as cold fingers touched her face. *It is too late to change your decision.*

The cold poured into her, shoving her consciousness into the back of her mind.



The Black Queen stretched as she filled Jill’s body, was reminded how it felt to have arms and legs and a back.

Do I still have the power? she wondered, and tapped deep into the earth, looking for one drop, one little rivulet of magic.

She found what she sought in the stone of a ring trapped on an ancient skeleton’s finger. She absorbed it, and Jill got her wish. Her face and figure re-formed, her hair became long and black.

"Sabin?" she whispered, and the wind took her voice as she sensed for magic. She let her knowing spread until it touched the sea, where she felt her own kind coming closer along the waters. Silly creatures. They thought Titania, far away on the other side of existence, was the one they should be afraid of.

She smoothed her hands over her hips, swayed in a few steps of dance, feeling muscles bunch and slide beneath flesh. She giggled with undiluted joy, and small things for miles around covered in the brush and would not make a sound or move until she was far away.

To Be Continued...