

A Hint of Magic



Linda Andrews

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LINDA ANDREWS

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To everyone who had the courage to dream. To my family who encouraged it and my husband who demands I work for it.

Chapter 1

At exactly seven minutes past the ten in the morning, Molly Stark arrived at Dr. Lance Knight's office in the back of the language arts building. Ignoring the curious stares of the cluster of students propped against the yellowed walls, she straightened her shoulders. Her sneakers squeaked on the worn linoleum floor. A student glanced at her through his dreadlocks before returning his attention to the phone in his hand.

The door was shut.

Dr. Knight hadn't waited.

After a quick rap on the wooden door, she tried the chrome handle. Locked. The sour taste of bile exploded in her mouth. Once a failure, always a failure. Tears pricked her eyes. At twenty-nine, she would be forced to move back in with her parents. Another statistic.

At least, she and Justin would only be there two weeks and four days. Then she'd have enough saved up to rent a two-bedroom apartment. Of course, renting a place meant she might have to give up the luxury of eating three times a day, but her son was worth the sacrifice. And she could afford to lose twenty pounds.

She rooted around in her oversized purse for a tissue. None. She sniffed and looked for the bathroom. Roaming through the hallways, she stopped just before reaching the third-floor landing. A man in a scarlet tunic and black knee-high boots prowled the corridor. Light sparked off the

broadsword he gripped in his hand. Muttering under his breath, he scowled at the blade.

Molly blinked. Once. Twice. He kept walking right toward her. Since when had hallucinations become side effects of failure?

She scuttled backwards around the corner. Why would a man in medieval dress be walking the hallways of a language arts building? He couldn't be a ghost. The building wasn't that old. Had the other students noticed him? Peeking around the corner, she didn't see anyone else. Only him. Close enough to her now she could make out the intricate silver and gold embroidery on his cuffs and the lacings on his boots.

Retreating to Dr. Knight's door, she flattened against the rough wood surface. If she closed her eyes real tight, would he disappear? Her heart hammered in her chest and fear dried her mouth, but her gaze remained fixed on the corner ten yards away.

With sure steps, the medieval figure turned into the hall and ran his hand along the blade. "Stabbing that dummy dulled it."

"Oh, my God!" Molly held her breath, hoping to slow her racing heart. Her left hand closed around the door handle and jerked it up and down. *Open. Please, open.*

Black shoulder-length hair brushed his broad shoulders as he stalked closer. A shadow of a beard clung to his strong jaw. With a shake of his head, he returned his sword to the scabbard hanging from his right side.

The medieval angel drew near and stopped. His glowing tawny eyes focused on her.

"You must be Molly." His deep voice stirred something deep within her, and his smile deepened the dimples in his tanned cheeks. "I'm Lance. Lance Knight."

He offered her his hand.

Molly stared at it. He couldn't be real. The stress of finding a place to live had caused her to snap. Men like him didn't exist except on the covers of those romance novels and fairy tales she had once been stupid enough to believe. They definitely didn't roam college campuses or pretend to be stuffy English professors.

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"Molly?" Her name rolled off his tongue slowly, as if he savored the taste. "Sorry to be late. My position, plus the impressive string of initials behind my name, allows me to indulge one of my passions—the Medieval Society."

She swallowed hard. Was this how Cinderella felt when she met Prince Charming? No. She clamped down on the notion. No fairy tales or happily ever afters. She wouldn't believe in them. Not ever again.

She tried to concentrate on what he'd said as she reached for his hand. Warm calloused flesh pressed against her palm.

"Medieval Society?"

"Such as you would see at the Renaissance festival. There's nothing like a good sword fight in the morning to get your blood pumping."

Nodding, Molly reordered her thoughts along practical lines. Her blood pumped just fine. She didn't want to think about how much he had to do with it.

"That explains the clothes."

"That it does." He winked, stripping off his gloves and tucking them in his belt. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

Attempting to throw off his sensual spell, she looked at their clasped hands, comparing her red, chapped one with his strong one.

"No. Not long."

"I'm glad."

When he cupped his left hand over her right, her speech centers shut down. She felt herself blush as his gaze roamed over her, knowing he would see a rumpled, stained cleaning woman.

"I never expected someone so young and lovely."

Molly blinked then glanced over her shoulder at the deserted hallway, searching for the object of his comment. He couldn't be talking about her. No one had ever called her lovely. In fact, most glossed over describing her looks at all. She was simply a nice person. What was she supposed to say to such flattery?

Easing her hand free, she stepped away from the door. The touch of him lingered, so she stuck her hands in her pants pockets.

Dr. Knight pulled up the hem of his tunic. Orange gores on the bottom of his shirt flashed open to expose the tan trousers underneath. Metal jingled as he unclipped keys from the black leather belt at his waist. He slid a key into the lock on the door, pushed it open and reached around the doorjamb. Fluorescent lights flooded the space.

“Come in. Come in.” The small of her back tingled where he pressed his warm hand against it to usher her inside.

Black shelves lined the walls; an oversized metal desk faced by two wooden chairs, wadded up fast food bags and stacks of composition books cluttered what could have been a decent-sized office. Popcorn kernels, papers and books littered the floor. Her gut clenched. Maybe she had misunderstood. Maybe he wanted to use her cleaning service rather than hire her as a housesitter.

“Have a seat.” Lance removed a stack of textbooks from one of the chairs and set them on his overflowing desk. Next, he swept papers, empty Styrofoam cups and crumpled potato chip bags onto the floor and kicked them into a pile near a crowded bookcase.

Molly sank onto the chair, fearing her legs would collapse. Strange. She felt the unforgiving wooden seat under her bottom, heard the air conditioning click on, but she couldn’t bring herself to believe this was real.

“Sorry for the mess. Environmental services refuses to set foot in here.” He perched on the corner of his desk, set his hands on his right leg and smiled down at her. “Something about cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Uh-huh.” His charm snatched every coherent thought out of Molly’s mind. She fought the effects. A man like him paying attention to someone like her. There had to be a catch.

“How long have you been housesitting?”

“F-five years,” she stuttered, eying the empty waste can leaning against the right side of his desk. The urge to clean and straighten rampaged through her. She clenched the side of the chair to hold herself back. Trapped in a messy room with a cover model holding the keys to a house she so desperately needed, and she couldn’t do a thing about the mess. This was her punishment for using cleaning to work through her emotions.

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"You must have started pretty young."

Young. There it was again. A reference to her looks. Molly clasped her hands in her lap. As much as she wanted to believe he was sincere, she couldn't. Her ex-husband had taught her too well. No one said anything nice about people like her unless they wanted something.

"I—I was twenty-two." She straightened away from the comforting curve of the seat back. "I can assure you, Dr. Knight, that I am quite responsible."

He raked his hand through his hair and nodded. "Yes. I've read your glowing recommendations, Molly. May I call you Molly?"

"Uh, sure." Her grip tightened, grinding the bones in her hands. Had she overreacted? Read too much into his words?

"Great, and please, call me Lance." He unbuckled the swordbelt and laid the blade and scabbard across the piles of paper on his desk.

Not trusting her voice, Molly nodded.

"I've never had a housesitter before." Red tinged his high cheekbones. "In fact, I just bought the house and haven't quite moved in. Will that be a problem for you?"

"No." She glanced around his office. This was bad enough, but the thought of a whole house full of clutter and piles made staying at her parents appealing.

"Feel free to unpack anything and everything you need and just shove the rest against a wall." He waved his hands to encompass his office, demonstrating his fondness for that decorating solution. "Just you and your son will move in, right?"

"Yes. We don't have any pets, and I don't smoke." She shifted in her seat. This felt too much like her last date. "And, of course, neither does my son."

"Good." A dimple appeared in his stubbled cheek. "It's good that it's just you and your boy—Jacob, is it?"

"Justin."

"Justin." Bracing his hands on his knee, Lance leaned forward. "A good, strong name for a boy."

"Yes." Molly pulled back as he crowded her space. Something hit the back of her head. She reached up, balancing the tower of books behind her chair.

"Named after his father, is he?"

"God, no!" Molly cleared her throat. Caleb had been at school during the birth of his son. Maybe if she'd named him after her ex-husband, the marriage might have lasted. Maybe... "No. No, he isn't."

"Excellent."

Molly kept her mouth closed. Just because he strutted around in strange clothing didn't mean he would be amused that she named her son after the hero of a romance she'd once read.

Lance asked more questions. None relevant to the position, yet not too personal, either. Her confidence slipped through her hands. Doubts plagued her, leaving her part of the conversation monosyllabic.

"Will you be there? When we move in, I mean. I would like to arrive a day or two early, so I can get accustomed to your security system, watering routines..."

He stilled for a moment, but his gaze sharpened on her. "Would it be a problem if I were?"

"I don't think I'd be comfortable with you being..." Molly shut her mouth before she could utter "so handsome." Definitely not the professional image she tried to present. "With you being a bachelor."

"Then I guess it's a good thing I won't be there. I wouldn't want to do anything to make you uncomfortable."

Molly relaxed a little. What would he do if he found out he already made her uncomfortable?

"Well..." He stretched across his desk, slipped his hand inside a satchel perched atop a pile of books occupying the high back leather desk chair she could barely see and pulled out two sheets of paper. As he sat back up, his elbow collided with the stack of books. They careened across the desk and plummeted to the floor. Lance frowned at them for a moment before focusing on her.

"I suppose we should sign the contract now."

She nodded, mesmerized by his long fingers massaging his thigh.

"I know we talked about a six-month contract, but I'm not certain how long my, um, research will take." Shoving aside a pile of composition books, he laid the pages flat on the veneered desktop. His black hair fanned over his cheek as he unearthed a pen and added a cramped signature to

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both copies. For a moment, the sound of scratching filled the air, then he handed her the silver pen. "I've extended it to twelve months. Will that be a problem for you?"

Twelve months. Shaking, she scrawled her name across the line. She'd never stayed at any place longer than three. It would be almost like having a real home. The black words swirled against the white background of the standard legal document. Could he really mean it? She looked up.

His amber eyes glowed with concern.

"No. No problem." Her lips twitched, but she couldn't manage a smile. A flicker of disappointment disturbed her happiness. She had been right after all. He had used his charm to get her to comply with the new length of the contract. "None at all."

She wrestled her attention back to the paper under her hands. Her signature had smeared. She quickly signed the other sheet, handed him the better copy and shoved hers between the pages of her day planner.

He held out a set of keys with a folded sheet of paper rolled inside the keyring. "It's directions to the house. I didn't know where you live, so it starts here, at the university."

"Thank you."

Molly raised her hand, palm up, for the keys. With one hand cupping the bottom of it, he carefully set the keys onto her palm. His finger skimmed the sensitive flesh.

"If you have any questions, any at all, you can reach me at the same number until the first of the month."

She nodded, despite the butterflies taking flight in her stomach. "And after that?"

Intensity cloaked his body. His smile seemed brighter, his eyes more yellow, and anticipation thickened the air.

"I won't have a phone where I'm going."

"Is there such a place anymore?" Molly slowly removed her hand from his grasp. "The way everyone is wired, I'm starting to think dead zones are the stuff of fairy tales and legend."

He fingered the hilt of his dagger, but his attention remained riveted on her.

"Don't you believe in fairy tales and legends?"

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Inhaling a shaky breath, Molly rose, dropped his keys into her purse and backed toward the door. He had to be joking, teasing her. Adults didn't believe in those things.

"Well, if there isn't anything else, I'll let you get back to work."

"Thank you, Molly. You're doing me a great favor." He rose from his seat on the edge of his desk and advanced toward her.

Molly swallowed hard. This must be what a deer felt like upon seeing a mountain lion.

"May I buy you a cup of coffee or something before you go? Answer any questions you may have about the house?" His silken voice closed around her, trapping her.

"No!" She held up her hand as if to ward him off. "I mean, I'm late for another appointment, but thank you for the offer."

After escaping his office, she fled down the hall and out of the building. He was charming—too charming. She definitely couldn't trust him, and if her past was anything to go by, she couldn't trust herself around him.

Molly jogged until she reached the gold-and-red banners draped across the concourse of Red Rocks University's Phoenix campus, then slowed to catch her breath. Black rain clouds mushroomed in the blue sky visible through the bushy palm trees and brick buildings. Was this a bad omen for her new job?

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COVER COPY

When the handsome, if somewhat odd, professor hires her to house-sit for him, Molly has no idea she's about to enter a world she doesn't believe exists, a world where villains from the distant past travel across time in search of five powerful gems and a battered stuffed dragon shares secrets with her young son. Her life becomes even more surreal when her employer not only says he wants to marry her but insists on it—and Molly isn't about to argue. She needs to provide her son a complete family to keep her ex from gaining custody.

Molly doesn't believe in magic and fairy tales are for children and people who haven't had to deal with life and its sharp corners. It may be that very unbelief that will not only shatter her new dreams but destroy everything and everyone she loves.

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