

Prologue

BOY TUGGED at his leather collar, then stopped when he noticed the embarrassed glances of his friends. He fingered the bowl of food that he'd left untouched at his feet until now. Other members of the circle of nine looked away, giving him time to switch bowls with Owl, the youngest and the most in need of food, aside from Boy.

"Prince is a cruel fellow," Tandia whispered. She stroked Boy's bare arm with her painted nails.

Her touch sent whispered taunts between his legs, which he dared not answer. Boy shook his head. After three days in the collar, it hurt to speak.

Prince, so named because he was the only one among them who could gather the coins for a meal, hadn't meant to cause Boy pain. Like a thoughtless fool, he gave his friend candied sweets Boy could not eat. Nothing could pass the constricting bands that circled his neck except for the smallest sips of water. The collar provided the master with insurance Boy would return with what he stole.

If he weren't so busy stuffing his face with boiled honey sticks, Prince would doubtless scold him from staying away from his master for so long. "The collar ensures the slave return to his rightful owner. You don't wish to go against the natural order do you? I must attend school every morning and work with my father every afternoon. My mother has already picked one of my fat cousins for my bride. When I marry, I won't have even these few hours to spend with you, my friends."

Boy had received the lecture before with a respectfully bowed head. He did not want to hear it again, not when his stomach had shriveled to an aching nut.

Now, Boy looked at Prince, one of his eight friends, who squatted around the fire with him and shared stories of the day. What about his smiling friend made him more worthy of a happy life? Why did he wear embroidered linens and have food enough to share?

Tandia scratched at Boy's arm for attention. He fought to ignore her. Only a rich man could afford a wife, or a woman such as Tandia.

"Let me take you back," Tandia said. "I can say I found you in a ditch, beaten by palace guards. You are dirty enough that your master will believe me. Where did you get all these bruises?"

Aware of his scars and filthy loincloth, Boy pulled away again, ashamed to have his well-washed friend touch him and afraid she might guess his secret desire for her. He was a slave, he could be nothing more.

She wore her second best dress, tightly woven threads dyed a pale yellow. The hue made her skin glow golden, like the sand. He could almost wish he, too, served a master who required a clean slave, a well-fed slave, but Tandia had told him he would not like the work.

"You have to go back, Boy." The haughty words of Prince came to him over the smoky fire. The rest of his friends nodded. No one dared disagree, not when their fingers were still sticky with his treats. "You are a slave and a thief. It is your destiny. If you are afraid someone will catch you, come home with me. Mother has a broken bowl you can take. That should satisfy your master for a day or two."

Boy didn't contradict his naive friend. A broken bowl, a silver one, would not satisfy his master. Only beating his property would sate him, and then, only for a few days. Boy would return to his master, he had no choice.

Soon the gnawing pain in his stomach would grow more unbearable than his fear of a beating. He would kneel before the man who held the key to the shameful band he wore about his neck. Certain knowledge of the humiliation to come and the beating that must follow were not what kept Boy from returning. Fear trapped him outside the village and kept him hiding in the scraggly shrubs that dotted the dunes.

Three days ago, he had faced death for the first time.

The end had come swiftly to the man kneeling in the square. The victim's head rolled from his shoulders, severed by a shining blade, and came to rest at Boy's feet. A guard retrieved the head and stuffed it into a basket.

Boy couldn't stop staring at the spot where the dead man's eyes had fixed him in place. "Who was this man?" he'd asked.

"A thief," barked the guard. "What's that you're hiding there under your shirt?"

Boy turned and ran, dropping the apple he'd so skillfully taken from the vendor's stand.

The guard called after him shaking his fist. "You're next, Boy. I'll see your head roll in the dirt."

The words still rang in Boy's ears. He hadn't been back to his master since. And the collar placed around his neck, to keep him from eating any food he might find the courage to steal, kept growing tighter.

A quick look around the fire confirmed his lot was far worse than his fellows. Tandia might not like whatever it was her father made her do with the men who visited his tent, but she was well fed, owned two dresses and was hardly ever beaten. Owl would be all right if he survived until he was big enough to claim his share of the food at home. At least his mother had died, Boy's had simply left.

The two black-haired girls across the fire from him, their heads together, had secure futures, one with a potter, the other with a maker of cloth. Then there were the twin boys and their sister, all of them with strange red hair of various degrees of brightness. Their father ran the only inn in the area. They complained about their work and the roughness of the customers, but they seldom went without supper.

Boy had two choices, starve or lose his head in the Town Square.

Before he could decide which death he preferred, a wind descended from the heavens and put out their fire. Instinctively, he grabbed the bowl in front of him and wrapped it in a loose end of his loincloth. Then he tried to decide which way to run.

Owl pointed upward and they looked at the star-filled sky, a blanket of black studded with laughing lights. Boy had never found comfort in the stars. Cold, unfeeling eyes of the gods, his master had told him. Gods who amused themselves by watching the futile struggles of men as they sought to avoid their fate, eternal torture in the pit of death.

The stars vanished.

Prince broke ranks first. His finely embroidered tunic dragged in the ashes as he ran from the shadow that threatened to swallow the sky.

Tandia pulled Boy to his feet. He grabbed Owl and tucked the five-year-old under his arm. Together, the three followed their friends, screaming as they ran toward town. The bowl Boy carried dragged on his only piece of clothing, where it became tangled in his feet. He paused long enough to kick himself free and continued on, naked.

Wind whipped their legs, turning them in circles before they could travel half the distance to safety. Laughter sounded behind them, then in front. All around them, a spinning figure in white waved his arms, his sex made clear by the beard that seemed to precede him. The nine friends fell on each other.

When they lay panting on the ground, unable to move, paralyzed by fear and exhaustion, the words began.

Magic words.

Boy held his breath and waited for the wizard to turn him into stone or transmute him into a beast. Nothing happened.

Nothing happened to Boy or to his friends. Something happened to the world.

It grew large around them.

The giant wizard bent, his hand as big as the sky. Without a word, he scooped them from the ground and dropped them into his pocket.

Chapter 1

MAGGIE SLID her foot forward another inch. Her father's arm pressed hot against hers as they stutter-stepped down the aisle. When she tried to shake off his touch to keep his sweat from staining the delicate fabric of her white gown, he clutched her more tightly.

At this rate, it would take forever to reach the altar, which, oddly enough, didn't bother her. She studied the welcome distraction of the stained glass windows that lined both sides of the narrow country church. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John--old friends in fractured glass--stared down at her.

The windows had entertained her as a child while she endured the minister's interminable, hour-long

sermons. Today, events threatened to progress too quickly.

Pastor Hague, white hair spiked in disarray and his eyes wild, motioned her forward. Her wedding veil slowly slipped to the right. She straightened it with her free hand. It slid to the left. Finally, it left her head altogether, and rolled on the floor under her mother's feet. Ruined! She'd ruined the wedding.

Maggie froze, her gaze riveted on the back of the man who stood in front of the altar rail. The man she would promise to honor and cherish, and something else, something important. Something she'd forgotten.

Chet turned, cold and disapproving. The two men, the minister and her bridegroom, motioned her forward. She'd spoiled things, spoiled everything. She couldn't get married now.

Finally, she turned to her father. His hot hand still supported her arm. She looked into his blank face. Not a single feature, eyes, nose or mouth, marred the smooth surface. The breath whooshed out of her. She didn't have to go through with the wedding.

Reality woke her. Father was dead. He'd died five years ago.

Maggie stretched her hand out from under the blanket long enough to crank the temperature control down to low. A blast of sunlight glared off the snow and through the window to catch her in the eye and send her blinking back under the covers. "I hate winter."

"Yes, dear," her mother said, patient as always, but firm. "You do have to get out of bed sometime. It's been three weeks. Your father never would have stood for this behavior."

Maggie pulled the blankets higher, this time out of embarrassment. Twenty-seven years old and no reason to get out of bed. Afraid to. Who would have thought? Maggie Yates, Master of Science degree, graduate assistant in psychology, no less, and she was falling apart.

Maggie's mother dropped a cardboard box, not too gently, on Maggie's legs.

"It can't be three weeks, Mom. Besides, I do so get up. What's in the box?"

"A wedding present."

"I thought you were going to return those." Maggie winced at the whine in her voice. Reduced to living on charity and whining at her mother.

"I can't return this one. It's special."

Maggie peeked from beneath the covers again. She didn't like what she saw. Whatever the cardboard box held strained the seams. She'd have to repackage it. The thought sent her under the covers again. She wasn't ready to face the world, not long enough to rewrap a package and certainly not long enough to walk to the post office.

"I'll send it back later, Mom. Leave me alone for a few minutes, so I can get dressed. All right?"

Maggie recognized her mother's sigh. They both knew she wasn't getting out of bed until the sun went down.

"Your great-aunt on your father's side mailed this package fifty years ago. How she knew he would have only one daughter, I have no idea, but she left instructions for you to have it on your wedding day."

"I didn't get married, remember?"

Silence met Maggie's question. Of course, her mother remembered. The entire town would be talking about it for decades. Maggie Yates canceled her Christmas Eve wedding two days before the big event. "Can't we send it back with the rest of the presents?"

The sound Sarah made changed from a sigh to a disapproving cluck. "The old lady died fifty years ago. She mailed it on her deathbed. Where am I going to send it? I'm streamlining things around here, so I'd appreciate you taking it and the rest of your junk with you when you leave. It's been four weeks. The postmaster asked if you want forms to have your mail forwarded here."

Maggie grimaced under the covers. She had no idea where to go or what to do. She had only just admitted it to herself. She wasn't ready to tell her mother yet. How could she have canceled the wedding? Over the phone, no less. Chet would never forgive her.

"I told Pete down at the post office that you weren't staying long enough to need your mail forwarded. The new quarter starts next week. Shouldn't you be back at work?"

No wedding, no job. "Fine, Mom. Just go, please."

Sarah Yates continued to talk from the other side of the closed door. "You're going to have to talk to

me someday, young lady. If not me, someone else."

"Not if I can help it," Maggie muttered. Normally, Maggie got along famously with her mother. Or she did during the week at Christmas and the occasional phone call, the only contact they'd had since she graduated from high school.

The box her mother left on the bed pressed the hot coils of the electric blanket against her legs. She endured the torture for as long as she could. With a groan, Maggie rolled out of bed, taking the blanket and the box with her. The crash shook the room. Maggie held her breath, expecting her mother to come running up the stairs.

A scrapping noise outside the window drew Maggie to her feet. From the second story window, she could see her mother clearing snow from the sidewalk. Had all that snow fallen last night? Was her mother right? Had she been home almost a month?

Maggie looked at the bathroom door where she'd always hung a calendar. With shock, she realized the picture of the bare-chested hunk belonged to her mother. The calendar was brand new, "Go get `em, Sarah" sprawled across the January pin-up guy. Who would send such a thing to a woman over fifty? A gag gift, obviously.

Maggie ignored her mother's daily visits to the room to mark off the days on the calendar with a red marker. Most days, she managed to sleep through it, spending her waking hours wandering around the kitchen in the middle of night and watching old movies. Thank God for 24-hour television.

Assuming this was Wednesday, Maggie really had been home almost four weeks.

The scrap of metal against sidewalk stopped. Maggie crossed the room. Her mother planted the snow shovel in a snow bank and headed down the road toward town. A sting of conscience sent her looking for her slippers. If she was going to hit her mother up for free room and board, she could at least help with chores. When she backed out of the closet, slippers in hand, the room was full of smoke.

Before she could fill her lungs with air to scream, she realized this was not regular smoke.

Maggie yanked the electric blanket cord out of the wall socket. Her mother's computer, left on 24 hours a day, hummed happily behind her on the desk. The overhead light her mother turned on each morning didn't waver.

Not an electrical fire. Not a fire at all. The white cloud that filled half the room wasn't smoke, but dust. Old, musty, incredibly fine dust.

At the heart of the cloud stood the box that she had knocked from the bed, one side split open, contents strewn across the floor. Her great-aunt obviously had a sense of humor. She'd sent her unborn niece a pile of dirt.

After several minutes, Maggie managed to fight open the window and raise the storm glass. When she turned, she found a man in her bed. A naked man.

"A BREAKDOWN. I've had a full, psychotic break." Maggie steadied herself with a cup of her mother's coffee. Nothing said reality like her mother's kitchen table.

"Don't be silly, dear. You'll be back to your old self soon. You just need some time."

Maggie wasn't so sure. Never in her life had she suffered from hallucinations. But then she'd never canceled a wedding before, and she still didn't know why.

Oh, she remembered reaching for the telephone. Chet was in California, finishing up the term while she made the final arrangements in Minnesota. She hadn't even known what she was going to say until the words poured out of her.

For the past few weeks, she'd blotted out that moment, but it had come back in a rush this morning after that dreadful dream. It was the twenty-second of December and she had put on her wedding dress for a last minute fitting. Not just any wedding dress, but *the* wedding dress, the one her mother and grandmother had worn.

Maggie remembered growing dizzy while her mother went on and on about how happy she was that Maggie had fallen in love, how lucky she was to have found Chet. They would have problems, of course, and children were always a challenge, but nothing that couldn't be overcome by true love and patience.

Problems, children, true love.

Seconds later, Maggie was on the phone canceling her wedding, leaving a message on Chet's machine for godsake, telling her fiancé he should stay in L.A. She'd changed her mind.

Maybe the incident this morning explained her odd behavior. Maybe she could tell Chet she'd been suffering from stress. He would understand. Chet was a psychologist, after all. That would certainly explain her hallucinations; although, some people would say finding a gorgeous, naked man in your bed in the middle of a cold, hard Minnesota winter wasn't a hallucination. It was a vision.

At least she'd had the good taste to imagine him with his arm strategically placed over what her mother would call "the interesting parts."

A smile invaded Maggie's lips. It fled when her mother spoke.

"Will you be going back to L.A. or applying to some other university?"

"I haven't decided. I guess I will." Fat chance of getting a placement without a recommendation from her supervisor, and she sure as hell couldn't ask Chet for one. He had retaliated, swift and sure. Two days after her announcement, lacking an answering machine on which to leave his message, he'd sent her an equally impersonal telegram. He needed an assistant with whom he could work closely. He would find someone else.

Her mother refreshed her coffee and patted her arm with uncharacteristic warmth. "You know, I thought you were so happy those two years you worked with kids. Our school here is too small to afford a full-time psychologist, but other districts in the state do. That is if you want to stay in Minnesota."

Did she want to live in the place she'd fled, impatient with small town attitudes and people? She'd left to explore the world, face new challenges that would force her to grow. She had thought Chet offered just that when he picked her out of a room full of high school counselors and offered her a post-graduate position as his assistant.

Living for three years on the pay of a research assistant had wiped out her savings. She'd moved into Chet's apartment six months ago to save rent money to pay for their wedding. Now all of it was gone. Her money, her job, her plans.

Not just her plans, their plans. Chet was perfect. A tenured professor, ready to start a family, emotionally mature and stable. Three children, "our own personal lab rats" Chet had called their future offspring. Maggie hugged her middle, which suddenly felt hollow. How could she have thrown it all away? She didn't even know why.

She wasn't the suicidal type and if she stayed in bed much longer, Mother would send for her brothers. Maggie didn't need their condescending concern. The twins would probably compete to see which one could offer her the most insulting job. The picture sprang too easily to mind. Receptionist for Eric the hotshot software developer or Freddy the optometrist. She shuddered at the next image, nanny for Freddy's kids, to replace the second wife who'd walked out on him.

One thing she did know. Before she put her life back together, she had to face whatever neurotic twist had created such a disturbing image in her mind and placed it in her bed.

If the vision resembled Chet, the connection would have been made. She'd made a mistake and wanted him back in her bed, in her life. But the naked man upstairs didn't look anything like Chet.

Chet, the classic Nordic type, had blond hair, broad shoulders, blue eyes, hairy chest, and shifty expression now that she thought about it.

The man she conjured up had a smooth chest, not a hair on it. She noticed his chest right away. Broad, not overly muscled like a body builder, but enough so you knew he worked out. Distinct nipples, dark brown, almost black. Smooth, dark olive skin accented by the broad, silver necklace that lay loose across his collarbone. His hair was black. Long and straight, it hung down his back and in his eyes, keeping her from discerning their color.

But then he was her vision. She could imagine him with any color eyes she wished.

Brown, she decided, as she pushed away from the table, distressed to find her knees still wobbled. The only men she wanted in her life now were imaginary ones, but even imaginary men could gain the upper hand. She planned to stay in control.

"Mom, I going to clean up my mess upstairs. I'll get to work on finding a job tomorrow."

BOY FORCED himself not to cringe when footsteps sounded on the stairs. It was She. The special bond between master and slave revealed her presence. They were tied together, linked as surely as his collar was linked around his neck. Impossible to separate without the proper key. Until she banished him into the abyss or she died, he belonged to her.

When he first emerged and saw the look on her face, he'd feared she'd left for good. She had only to travel a few leagues and he would dissolve where he stood. But she hadn't gone far. If she had, he would have returned to his prison. He remained free on her suffrage. He swallowed past the knot in his throat, checking with his hands to make certain his collar remained slack on his shoulders. The metal that now circled his neck was only one of the changes the curse had brought him. Boy had been human once and the concentric bands that circled his neck had been made of leather.

If he wanted to remain free, he would have to please this new master, or trick her. Keep her alive and close to him. She was obviously a powerful lady to have received him as a gift, but she was only a female. More than one master had taught him how traitorous and weak a female could be.

His Tandia had been sweet, gentle. He would have killed anyone who hurt her if he'd had the power then. He hadn't seen her or Owl or Prince in thousands of years.

The moment he sensed his new master standing behind the door, he stretched out on the bed, arranging himself for her. He had grown during the last six thousand years. One day for each cycle of the moon he spent free from his prison. He was a man now, and more than one of his owners had used him for their pleasure. He was confident of his skills and of his beauty.

When her eyes met his, he knew he'd made a mistake.

"What are you doing still here?" She didn't give him a second glance but bent to pick up the discarded package where he'd been hidden so many decades ago.

The women had no interest in him as a man, but she seemed to need a house slave. Taking care not to touch her, he scrambled from the bed. On his hands and knees, he swept dust with one hand into the palm of the other.

He looked up to find her collapsed in a chair, staring at him, her mouth open. She didn't seem as fine a lady as he'd first supposed. His head lowered to appear focused on his task, he noted her shorn golden hair and worn plaid gown. Possibly, he could trick her. She was only a woman, and a poor one at that. He would grant her two wishes, and perform some small service if she insisted on a third.

If he could remain close to her side, he could spend the rest of her life in freedom, returning to his prison only after her death. Or even better, when her death became imminent, grant her last wish, twisted and dark, guaranteed to have her end her days screaming. He, after all, would have to return to his living death no matter what her fate.

After sweeping the last of the mess under the bed, Boy waited on his knees, his head bent at the proper angle to display his subservience. He knew how to play this game. He'd had thousands of years to practice, thousands of years to plot revenge. But he couldn't do anything if this strange new master continued to ignore him.

His head turned to the side, he peeked up at her. Heat crept up his neck when he realized she'd forgotten him entirely. She obviously didn't find him attractive or useful. He had to please her in some way, make himself indispensable, or she would make her wishes quickly and dismiss him. Lazily, she turned the pages of a small book. An educated woman. Very dangerous indeed.

"Cybele, your servant awaits your pleasure."

"Cybil who?" She sounded annoyed.

Perhaps the gods of Phrygia had fallen out of favor. People were fickle in their worship of gods. Boy held no being more powerful than himself, except for the Shadow who had cast him into this darkness. He did not worship the Shadow, he wished the Shadow a life of torture and the death of the damned. But then, he could not make wishes for himself.

"Oh, great mother, goddess queen." *Damned little woman. Holder of my chain. Cause of my pain.* "What would you have me do to serve you? No duty is too great or too small?"

The woman had the nerve to giggle.

He had to admit goddess queen was a bit of an exaggeration, considering her state of dress. She

appeared to be a totally ordinary woman, but in the past, he had found it best to flatter his masters before broaching the matter of wishes. He had served more than one queen. This one did not seem to appreciate the honor he paid her.

Soon the woman was laughing and muttering at the same time, "Oh, god. Oh, god."

He remained on his hands and knees, and gave her a wide berth when she lurched from the chair to her bed.

When she didn't move he approached, his back straight but still on his knees, inching forward so he wouldn't startle or offend. She lay supine, staring at him. Now that he was inches from her, he could see she wasn't ordinary at all.

Her eyes were the most brilliant blue, filled with the tears of her laughter. Or was she crying? Short, golden curls framed her delicate face. She was clean, as clean as Tandia before she entered the tent to do her master's bidding. He had since learned what duties she must have performed in that tent. Boy's face flushed and his loins tighten. With skill practiced all too often, he cooled his blood. Seldom did his masters take an interest in his pleasure.

This master looked like a child, her face almost lost among the deep pillows. Her breath smelled like mint. He rose to his feet, while being careful not to tower over her. With great care, he drew the blanket over her body. "If not Cybele, what shall I call you?"

"Maggie, of course." She still looked like a child, but now a petulant one. "Tomorrow, I'll be myself, and you'll be gone. So if you want formal introductions, you'd better tell me your name now."

"My name is whatever you wish it to be, Goddess Maggie."

She rolled her eyes and pulled the blanket over her head.

How did she expect him to serve her if she hid? A dozen accusations, a hundred insulting names crossed his mind before he cooled his anger. Anger, like passion, was a commodity seldom required by his masters. Some had required both.

Perhaps he could persuade her to emerge. The least she could do was give him permission to dress. The room was cold and he'd be hungry soon. He tugged on the blanket. She resisted, curling her fingers around the top of the cloth.

Of course, he could force her to look at him. He could fill the room, fill the house with his presence. He could speak with the voice of thunder. He could make himself as big as a mountain, but that seldom did anyone any good, including himself.

At best he was left with a trembling fool who asked for three wishes guaranteed to ruin his life, and Boy was back where he started before lunch. Imprisoned for a minimum of fifty years. At worst, the idea of having a powerful jinn at his command went to the master's head. Boy returned to his prison months or years later chased by memories of bloodshed and grief.

After surveying the room, he decided he could persuade this master with gentle words and soft deeds. She would settle for a few crumbs and consider herself lucky to have escaped a worse fate. "Does my Maggie desire to chose a name for her slave or shall I find one for you?"

She snapped the blanket back so quickly she startled him. "Don't call me that. I am not your Maggie."

He scrambled to resume his position in the middle of the room on his hands and knees. Forehead resting on the floor, he bit his lip to keep from trembling. He fought the urge to move his hands from their prayerful position and check his collar, which seemed to tighten with every breath.

"Don't you ever call me that. Only Daddy calls me, My Maggie. You're not my father. That would be too weird."

Not certain how far her anger would carry her, he lost his fight to keep from trembling. Beginnings. He hated beginnings, and women were so unpredictable. If she wished to harm him, he could not protect himself or retaliate, not until she made a wish.

A feather light touch brought his head up. Her delicate hand, nails unpainted, revealing the pink beneath, rested on his shoulder. Her impossibly pale skin revealed the flow of blood beneath and the outline of inner workings he did not understand. With her finger, she traced the scar on his shoulder. It ended beneath his collar, which lay loose around his neck. She no longer appeared angry. He didn't dare move.

As quietly as she'd left, she crept back under the covers. How he wished he could join her. He continued to tremble, now only partially from fear. The muscles in his shoulders and back knotted from the cold and the awkward position. In this anxious state, his jaw muscles clenched and unclenched out of his control.

"I'm going to sleep now," she said, and closed her eyes.

He rose on his knees and wrapped his arms around himself for some warmth. Inconsiderate bitch. She could at least offer him a scrap of cover.

"Why don't you write down your name and I'll look at it in the morning. I might as well give my psyche something to do while I'm asleep."

He couldn't make out if she was talking to him. Certainly, she didn't want to waste a wish providing him with parchment and ink. "Mistress? What shall I use to write my name?"

"Use Mom's computer. If you tell me your name, I can figure out what it means and who you are. Then maybe you'll disappear."

Disappear. Yes, he would disappear, no doubt, but not until he had a chance to live. Live and find some small measure of revenge. "At your command, Master."

Chapter 2

MAGGIE WOKE to a blissfully empty room. The only man in sight was the one on her mother's calendar. That explained it, of course. Without realizing it, she'd been staring at that naked man for the past three weeks. No wonder one had turned up in her bed.

On her way to bathroom, she lifted January to peek at Mr. February. He didn't resemble her hallucination either. February 15 was circled in red.

Half expecting to find her mystery man in the shower, she flung back the curtain to reveal unoccupied tile. Her stomach made a tiny flip. *Hungry. You are hungry, damn it, not disappointed.*

After her shower, she felt ready to take on the world. A towel firmly wrapped above her breasts, she hesitated, then reentered the bedroom. She lifted a second towel from her head long enough to determine she was still alone. With what sounded suspiciously like a sigh, she dropped both towels on the floor and walked to her closet.

Alone. She was alone and likely to remain that way for quite some time. Dammit, she was going to enjoy this. She would be the happiest single woman alive, or die trying. She certainly didn't need to create an invisible friend as if she were a neurotic five-year-old.

"Are you awake, dear?" Her mother's voice carried up the stairs. "I've asked Tom to move my computer out of there this morning so I can get some work done."

"Okay, Mom, just give me a few minutes." Who was Tom? Maggie shrugged. Probably one of the neighbors. People moved in and out in this part of town. Not that Rawley had much town to move in and out of with a population of twelve hundred people. Couples moved to smaller houses after raising their kids, retired folks moved into town after selling their farms. No one remained on their block whom she remembered.

She threw her dad's old plaid robe to the back of the closet and rummaged through what she'd brought from California. Most of the clothes were for the honeymoon. Had Chet gone to Florida alone? He did have the tickets since his parents paid for the trip. The closet held mostly sundresses and things suitable for throwing over a bathing suit. She hated the beach.

Don't you just love Minnesota winters? With a grimace at the glimmering snow outside, she pulled out a pair of jeans and a summer sweater, as close as she'd get to winter clothes. At least she had sunglasses. She adjusted the frames and looked out the window. She no longer had to squint. The world had turned a peaceful gray. Just the color for someone who wanted to get their life back on track, but not too quickly.

When she opened the bedroom door, the smell of coffee and bacon immediately enveloped her. Voices sounded below, one her mother, the other male, both too low for her to understand. "I'll be right down," she called.

A look behind her revealed a trail of debris between the door and the computer. She whisked up the discarded towels, a pair of socks, and a brush. The path clear, she continued to the desk. This Tom was probably some old codger who didn't know a Macintosh from a lamp. She grabbed the mouse to shut down the computer. If the program hadn't asked her if she wanted to save the document, she wouldn't have noticed it at all.

"Cancel," she mumbled to herself, then waited the fraction of a second it took for the document to reappear. The sight turned her knees watery. "Oh, shit." She sat with a thud, then scrolled down the document.

A list of my humble names, as master Maggie hath commanded.

Dasa--slave

Shami--husband

Yama--god of death

Nadim--friend

Aolus--god of the winds

Daemon--guardian spirit

Tristan--full of sorrows

Maggie put her hand to her forehead. She didn't have a fever and she felt rested. Yet, sometime during the night, she'd gotten out of bed and written this list of names.

Tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood at alert and she knew she wasn't alone. Spinning away from the computer, she found her imaginary friend standing in the door fully clothed. She allowed herself to breathe. He wore blue jeans that were much too tight and a baggy flannel shirt she recognized as her father's. He held a stack of laundry close against his chest, as if he were afraid someone would try to take them from him.

"Go away."

His brow wrinkled, but he didn't move.

"No, don't go away. Not yet." She slid past him to the door, not wanting to know if he would still feel solid beneath her fingers this morning. Last night she had totally freaked when she worked up the nerve to touch him.

He had knelt there trembling like a frightened little boy. For a moment, she'd forgotten he wasn't real and had gone to reassure him. His skin was satin smooth, a rich, light brown. The white scar on his shoulder had drawn her fingers as if she had no control over them.

Maggie had seen scars before. Scars on children, old scars and new. This one appeared to be several years old. The original wound must have been deep and not properly cared for. The ragged scar tissue showed no evidence of stitches. When her fingers met his necklace, a spark had leapt from the silver metal to her hand, sending shivers up her entire body. This was crazy. The collar did not exist. The scar did not exist. The man did not exist.

Now, with the voice she used with parents of her more disturbed patients, she called to her mother. "I'm going to be a while longer, Mom. I have some things to straighten out up here. But I'll be down eventually, and then we can talk."

"That's okay, dear. You take your time." Her mother's voice added to Maggie's calm.

Everything was fine. She wasn't going insane. Even the air felt different. No longer charged with expectancy. Maggie turned. The man, still clothed, stood in the middle of the room, his head bowed.

"Where did you get those clothes you're wearing?" *I really am crazy. What difference could it make? The clothes aren't real. He isn't real.*

A slight smile curved his lips. "Does my master wish me to remove them?"

When the silence stretched out between them, his smile faded. The muscles in his throat rippled as he swallowed again and again.

"God, no!" This was too weird. Her psyche had him dressed as her father and now he was asking if she wanted him to undress. "I want to know who you are. I need to figure this out, so you can leave."

He bit his lower lip then, like a little boy waiting for punishment, and his frown grew. With exaggerated care he placed the clothes and towels in a neat stack by the door. "I would beg my master's indulgence

to stay in her presence a moment longer." With lowered eyes, he pointed to the computer. "I have prepared the list as requested. The list is long and contains many powerful and honored names."

He stepped aside, making room for her. Keeping as close to the bed and as far away from him as possible, she inched toward the computer. The list was still on the screen. At least she hadn't imagined that. The names hadn't changed. Maybe Chet knew the name of a good psychoanalyst. After ten years of therapy, she'd be her normal, non-hallucinating self.

While she stared at the list, he knelt beside the empty computer chair and palmed the mouse. "Perhaps my goddess did not feel her humble slave's list worthy to follow to the end."

Maggie watched, fascinated, while the document scrolled. Her hands were nowhere near the controls. The scrolling stopped and the I-bar moved to highlight some of the text. The words sprang out in bold type for her to read.

After a thorough search of your data banks, I prefer Thomas. Thomas--twin or one filled with doubt. Not as I wish, but as thou.

"Okay," she started, not quite certain what to say next. Psychotherapy wasn't her field. She should consult an expert instead of trying to treat herself. Then, she wasn't likely to sue for malpractice. Maybe another entire personality had typed this list. Split personalities were rare, but they did occur. She'd just never heard of such a break occurring in a person with a background as mundane as hers.

It had to be something simpler than that. *Like what, Maggie, the worst damned case of wedding jitters in the history of the universe?* Only the thought of her mother downstairs kept her from screaming.

"That's where we'll start. My name is Margaret and your name is Thomas. My friends call me Maggie. Please feel free to do so. May I call you Tom?"

Still on his knees, he looked up at her. She had made his eyes brown, a soft, rich brown, and sculptured black brows with a graceful arch. A tentative smile crept across his lips. Full, sensuous lips, several shades darker than his skin. "Yes, Master Maggie." He dipped his head reverently.

"Tom? No, that can't be." Her hand flew to her mouth. "Calm down. Tom is only a coincidence."

"I am hardly that." Her hallucination sounded indignant. "My transformation is the result of centuries of study in the black arts. The culmination of a life's work--"

"Oh, shut up. I have to think."

Tom looked as if she'd slapped him. His olive skin darkened as a blush spread across his face. Her first instinct was to reassure him, but she didn't have time to comfort someone who might not exist. *Might not exist? Might ?*

"You, whoever you are, stay here and don't move." She needed to know if Tom was real, and she no longer had any faith in her own sanity. Maggie ran across the room and slammed the door shut behind her.

The one person in her life Maggie knew who was utterly sensible and grounded in reality, was her mother. If Sarah Yates could see Tom, then Tom was real.

WITH EVERY STEP she took down the stairs, Maggie prayed she would not find her mother alone in the kitchen. Tom had to be with her, another Tom, a normal Tom, a crotchety old Norwegian Tom, waiting to help her move the computer. Despite her efforts, her bare feet made the eighth stair squeak.

"Is that you, Maggie?"

"Yes, Mom." Maggie continued down, no longer on tiptoe.

"Do you want some breakfast?"

No men in the kitchen, but everything seemed perfectly normal. Her mother stood at the kitchen sink washing the dishes. Hadn't she always sung while she washed dishes? Maggie didn't think she'd heard her mother even hum since she came home.

Sarah Yates looked the same as ever to Maggie, several pounds heavier than in her wedding pictures, but still fit. After Dad died, Mother had seemed to gain energy to compensate for his loss. She'd even started dyeing her hair, and looked a decade younger than her fifty-plus years. But she didn't look happy.

Come to think of it, she hadn't looked happy before the wedding was canceled.

"I hope you're not hungry, because Tom ate every last egg and piece of bread I own. I don't suppose I could persuade you two to go shopping for me, could I?"

It was the strangest feeling. Her mouth opened, then closed. Maggie couldn't utter a word.

Her mother dried her hands and joined Maggie at the breakfast table. "Now, I'm only going to say this once."

Maggie managed to nod. She squinted while she listened to her mother, as if that could bring focus to the words.

"I have nothing against nudity and I realize it's a perfectly natural lifestyle, but I do prefer that your young man wear something while he's here. Occasionally, people do stop by and I really can't afford to keep the house warm enough for him. I understand it's quite a bit warmer in California this time of year, so I showed him where I keep some old clothes."

Maggie's mouth dropped open again. Her mother could see Tom--a naked Tom--and didn't seem to be the least bit disturbed by it. What had she called him? *Your young man* .

"You could have told me, dear. I would have understood."

If Tom isn't a figment of my imagination, then what --who--is he? "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said it's perfectly understandable why you called off the wedding with Chet. I didn't want to say anything before, but Chet always did seem a bit cold to me."

"Cold? You said he reminded you of Dad."

Her mother winced, but continued. "When you talked about your plans with him, well, they didn't sound very romantic, dear. All I heard was how well your professions meshed and your desires for a family had peaked at the same time. Hardly things marriage dreams are made of."

"Dreams, Mom? I'm almost thirty. I'm hardly a little girl waiting for Prince Charming."

"I'm afraid you're right."

Maggie ignored the sarcasm. "We made a logical, considered decision, just the way I'm sure you and Daddy did. We're in the same profession, Chet doesn't go to church any more, but we were both raised Lutherans and we both want children. Our financial situation isn't ideal, but you can wait forever for the perfect moment."

"What about love, Margaret Yates? Those marriage vows don't just say honor and cherish. Love should come in there someplace. You might not think so, but I'm in a position to know." Her mother's eyes teared over, an alarming sight. When was the last time anyone had seen Sarah Yates cry?

Maggie's throat went dry. She croaked her answer. "Of course, I loved...ah, love...Chet."

"Then why did you call off the wedding?" Her mother stood and threw down the dishtowel, as if she'd settled the entire matter.

What could she say to that? Maggie didn't know why. She hadn't had a coherent thought since she made that phone call to Chet.

"You just be glad you did call off that wedding, Miss Yates. Some people can't marry their one true love, some people have to settle, but you don't. You've got an unmarried man upstairs who worships you. Don't you go letting him slip away."

Tears welled in her mother's eyes again. Tears that didn't dare fall, not if Sarah Yates ordered them not to.

"Man? What man?"

Her mother pursed her lips and gave her a stern look. "Don't forget to tell Tom to wear clothes from now on. I've already told him to feel free to take anything he wants from the spare bedroom. Your brothers won't mind." She turned her attention to wiping the kitchen counter. "Make sure he's dressed warm when you two go shopping."

The last of her mother's words chased Maggie up the stairs. Tom. Damn. If he wasn't an illusion, that meant she had a Loony Toon in her bedroom. No reason to freak out Mom...*I'll try to talk him out of the house first. No telling who a call to 9-1-1 will bring to the door. Probably old Sheriff Rustad, still hung over from New Year celebrations.*

This time when she found her room empty, Maggie wasn't at all relieved. If she did have a nut loose in

her house, she wanted to know where he was. She expected to find him kneeling in the middle of the room or sitting at the computer. He wasn't in sight, but the shower was running.

When she flung open the door, she met the smiling face of Mr. January in all of his unclothed glory. Quietly, Maggie eased the bathroom door closed. The last thing she wanted was to startle him and she certainly didn't want a confrontation with a naked man. He might not be so docile this time. He had seemed indignant when she referred to him as a coincidence.

She looked at the list of names on the computer again, searching for some clue--slave, husband, god of death, friend, god of the winds, guardian spirit, full of sorrows, twin, full of doubt. Not universally happy monikers, but no pattern she could immediately identify. Chet was good at this sort of puzzle. If he kept to his usual schedule, he'd be checking his e-mail in another hour. As long as he didn't automatically delete her message when he saw her screen name, she knew he'd help. Chet could never turn down a good mystery.

During the pause that followed the hum of booting software, Maggie noticed the water had stopped running. Tom was humming but she couldn't make out the tune. Too dissonant to be most popular music she listened to, certainly not Christmas carols.

When the sound grew louder, she turned. Tom stopped humming, his easy smile fading when their eyes met. He was wearing jeans. These fit him better than the others, but still managed to show off his well-conditioned thighs. The loose, silver necklace lay across his shoulder blades. Water fell from his hair and dotted his chest. He shook his head, sending his tangled hair over his shoulders and back. Water splattered the naked calendar man.

Instead of looking frightened, he looked angry. A muscle at the corner of his eye twitched. "Does my dress meet my master's approval?" His voice, soft and controlled, didn't match his belligerent stare.

Figure out what he wants to hear and say it. "You look fine, Tom. I'm glad to see that you've decided to wear some clothes. I wouldn't want you to catch cold."

"Sarah is a kind woman. *She* has seen to it that I am taken care of."

Her mother had obviously made a good impression on her crazy boarder. He looked at least twenty-five, but she had a hard time judging his age. Middle Eastern or possibly Indian descent. "Why do you need taking care of, Tom?"

Tom scowled and tugged at his necklace. "Do you wish me to be cold? To starve?"

"Of course not."

"Then don't complain. Someone else has fulfilled your duties."

Her duties? Where had he gotten the idea he was her pet or her responsibility? Sounded like a chauvinistic pig to her, but that didn't make him crazy. Maybe Chet could help. Tom could be someone he knew, someone who knew they were getting married and had followed her here.

If she was lucky, he was only slightly delusional. She could convince him to go home. "What are your duties, Tom? Why are you here?"

"To fulfill your fantasies, of course. To make your wishes a reality." Spoken through clenched teeth, he made granting wishes sound like a threat rather than a promise. Instead of cringing as he had yesterday, he drew himself to his full height, over six feet, and looked down his nose at her.

Damn this man was arrogant. She almost preferred the cringing boy. This Tom sounded like a condescending fool. Again, not necessarily delusional or dangerous. Time to retreat to some simple, direct questions he could answer. "How old are you, Tom?"

"Age is a measure of relative units."

So much for simple and direct. "In what year were you born?"

"The year of the great flooding of the plains."

He had to be kidding. She tried to keep sarcasm from her voice. "Can you translate that into a number?"

"I have always favored the old ways, but under your modern way of measuring the unmeasurable, I was born in the year five thousand four hundred. A rough estimate only."

Great, her nut thought he was from the future. "You traveled back in time just to grant me wishes? That makes me feel very special."

"That is five thousand four hundred before the birth of your god."

"B.C., you mean?"

He nodded and puffed out his chest. She expected him to pound it at any moment and proclaim himself the biggest bully on the playground. She hid her smile.

"If you don't mind my saying, you look extremely well preserved for someone over six thousand years old."

His arrogant expression wavered. "Does my master wish me to remove my clothes?"

That strange pounding started in her chest again. "No, please, keep them on."

This time he did strike himself in the chest with his fist. "Tom is over six thousand years old, and in very good shape."

"I bet you are...I mean, I don't understand why you look so young for someone your age."

His shoulders lost their tension as he relaxed. He sat on her bed, his legs crossed in yoga fashion. "I will explain all to my Maggie. Come sit."

Gingerly, Maggie sat on the edge of the bed. The man experienced extreme mood swings, not a good sign.

"The bodies of my kind age only when we are free from our receptacle. One cycle of your moon equals one day of age for me."

"Your receptacle?" she repeated, not certain she'd heard correctly.

"Box in this case. I have been in bottles before. Vases. A violin on one occasion. The vessel that holds me when I leave this plane and enter the next is for you to decide. When the time comes."

Maggie couldn't think of anything sensible to say. "A box?"

"I believe it is under your sleeping pallet. Would you like to see it?"

She pictured him on his hands and knees in those exquisitely fitted jeans, rummaging under her bed. "No, thank you. I don't think the method of your arrival is important right now."

"No, not important. I have no interest in returning immediately." Panic veiled his eyes for a moment before the arrogance returned. "Not that I fear returning."

"So, let's review what we know, shall we? You were born thousands of years ago, but you only age when you are out of your bottle or box or whatever. Right?"

Tom nodded and gave her an indulgent pat on the head.

Maggie swallowed hard but managed not to pull away. "So, why are you here in my bedroom?"

"You called me forth, master. You broke my dark slumber and called me from the box." His condescending smile in place and his arms opened wide, he announced, "Now, I am here."

"But for what purpose, exactly?"

"To grant your wishes, of course."

Light finally dawned. "Oh, my three wishes, you mean?"

Tom nodded eagerly and crossed his arms over his rather impressive chest. He looked nothing like the blue genie in the movie and certainly didn't sound like Robin Williams, but if he was delusional, small details like that wouldn't bother him.

"Oh, wait, I know the rest. I've seen this movie twice. You can't make anyone fall in love with someone else, and let's see, you can't kill anyone or bring anyone back from the dead, and I can't ask for more wishes. Right?"

Tom stood. He did not look pleased.

Maggie's patients were children. She'd never run across this psychosis in her work. Maybe if she tested his fantasy world, he'd find remaining uncomfortable and go look for someone who would play along.

"If you're really that old, how did you know how to work the plumbing?"

In response to her challenge, Tom's chest expanded. "The time of my last great sleep began fifty years ago. Your primitive society has made pitifully few advances in plumbing. In fact, over the past three thousand years, you've lost ground."

"There weren't any computers around fifty years ago, at least not like these." She nodded at her mother's Macintosh. "But you used it."

Tom shook his head as if preparing to address a painfully ignorant child. "Because you commanded me. You did not make a wish, so I did not need to use my special powers, but I must fulfill your commands. Within reason," he added.

"So, how did you know how to operate the computer?"

"That is not for you to know."

"I thought so."

"What?" he thundered.

Maggie expected her mother to knock on the door at any minute. But then her mother thought Tom was wonderful, he worshiped her. Yeah, right. "Never mind. Why don't you grant wishes for someone who needs them?"

Like an angry storm cloud, he stood over her. "Woman, you called me, and you will have your wishes. As for the rules, you may have only three wishes, at which time I must return to my great sleep for fifty years before I can hear the call from another master. I have never tried to bring anyone back from the dead. No master has proved so idiotic as to make the request. The result would be quite distasteful for all involved, I'm certain. Making one person fall in love with another is as easy as making a hungry man desire food, and I have killed on more than one occasion. With my bare hands."

Maggie swallowed hard at the last, and stared at his rather impressive hands, which he clenched into fists. She forced herself to smile. "That's quite an interesting list of rules you have there, Tom, especially, that last one."

"Does My Maggie want someone dead? This Chet person, perhaps. Lady Sarah believes he has made you most unhappy."

Great. The last thing she needed was a homicidal maniac. "No, no, don't kill anyone, Tom. You don't want to kill Chet, or anyone, do you?"

"I only wish to do my master's bidding and return to the abyss," he intoned solemnly and bowed.

"Then I'll make my three wishes now, and you can go."

"Good," he replied his arms crossed over his chest again. He didn't look happy, only determined. Rather like Mother these past few weeks. Like someone forced to do another's bidding. Not that her mother and Tom had anything in common.

Maggie hesitated before she spoke, realizing she wasn't certain she wanted Tom to go. He might be crazy but he was a human being, and someone to talk to. Once he left, she'd have no excuse. She'd have to find another job or tell Chet she'd changed her mind again. She wasn't really considering that, was she?

No, best get rid of this slightly delusional young man, and direct any fantasizing to the men on her mother's calendar.

"My feet are cold. Tom, I want you to warm my feet. Can you do that?"

Chapter 3

WARM HER FEET? He who had made kings and brought them to their knees, raised up a fortress from nothing and destroyed mighty cities? She wanted him to warm her feet?

He almost succumbed to roaring in fury. Oh, he would grant her wish all right. Hold her over the nearest erupting volcano. That would do the trick. Or fill a pot with boiling oil and lower her slowly, an inch at a time. Then there was that delightful practice of burning at the stake. That would toast and roast her feet quite nicely.

After rising to his full height, he began the incantation still uncertain which method would delight him more. The words swirled from his mouth, drawing the ancient powers to him. He looked to his master for inspiration, for a hint of what she would fear most. That was a mistake.

Cross-legged on her raised pallet, she looked as sweet as Tandia and as in need of protection as Owl. Pleasing to look at, as helpless as a five-year-old camel herder. The magic words abandoned his mouth. He could not burn her to a crisp.

Besides, he had Sarah, his benefactress, to consider. Her eyes held enough sorrow without having a

charred daughter added to her woes.

The glazed look Maggie had worn while he recited his incantation faded. She smiled encouragingly and wiggled her toes. "Well, aren't you going to warm my feet?"

"Don't tempt me," he muttered.

"What?"

Had any of his past masters made such a foolish wish? The damned fool woman deserved to have her wish granted properly, but Tom admitted with a shrug that he didn't feel like roasting a woman today. Lucky for her.

After all, he had planned this all along--pretend to grant her last wish, then enjoy his temporary freedom. Instead, he would pretend to grant her first wish, something he had done before with masters who were careless with their words. A want was not the same as a wish. Women were so easy to fool.

"I said you should not tempt me with a wish that is such a pleasure to perform." Tom dropped to his knees before her and took her feet in his hands. They were tiny things, cold to the touch. No surprise considering the temperature of the house. Sarah had mentioned this before. She had given him clothes because she could not afford to keep the house warmer. Why didn't Maggie ask for an unlimited supply of fuel or slippers for her feet instead of wasting one of her wishes this way?

"Is that all," she demanded, wiggling her toes in his hands. "What kind of genie are you?"

Unable to control the urge, he put a hand on his collar and was surprised to find it slack. "One whose only wish is to serve you, master. But I am not a genie." He picked up her feet again, cupped them in his hands and blew on them.

With a sigh she closed her eyes. "Not a genie?"

He rubbed his hands up and down her feet while he continued to blow hot breath on them. Each time he sent his breath higher, rippling under her pant legs. His breath caught at the sight of her face, her mouth pursing as if preparing for a kiss as each wave of warmth passed over her. "You are the one who called me such. Genie is a term that came much later than my creation to explain legends of our existence."

With a gentle groan, she stretched her arms overhead and lay back on the bed. He moved to accommodate her. Next, she stretched her legs, which brought her feet to his chest. Her toes played across his breadth, sending shock waves through him. So long since he'd been touched. So very, very long.

He took her feet in his hands and began to rub again, touching her ankles and stroking the delicate bones on either side. Her feet grew hot in his hands. He altered his breath to cool them, then brought her toes to his face, warming them again with his mouth. Such perfectly lovely feet.

Her eyes opened, wide with shock. "What are you doing?"

His throat threatened to close at her anger. At the sight of apprehension in her eyes, his fear vanished, replaced by a more appropriate emotion.

What *was* he doing? He was supposed to be plotting how to trick the woman, not worshiping her feet, sensuous and tempting though they were. She tried to pull away, but he was unwilling to release her.

He no longer had any thought of fulfilling anyone's wishes other than his own. Her gaze caught in his, he brought her feet to his mouth again and kissed each arch in turn. It had been so long, so much longer than fifty years since he had tasted a woman. He savored the feel of her flesh between his teeth. Then he released her.

With deliberation, he dropped to his knees beside her bed and bowed his head. "I only act at your command, my Maggie. I can do no other."

"Yeah, right." She didn't sound convinced, but she was no longer angry. "Well, my next wish is for you to come to the store and help buy groceries. Time to get up."

"Outside?" He looked out the window and shivered. His memories of snow were vague, but he knew he didn't like it.

When he turned, he witnessed the oddest sight--Maggie pulling socks over her feet. If she could warm them herself, why had she wasted a wish? Was her life so perfect that she purposely scorned his promise of granting her wishes? Had she wanted his touch, invited it deliberately? And why did he feel such loss when her toes disappeared beneath their coverings?

"OUTSIDE," MAGGIE ordered.

Tom obeyed with the look of a man condemned to his death. She pushed him off the stoop and into a snowdrift. He stood staring at his boots.

"Don't just stand there. You have wishes to fulfill."

"Two more." He tried to hold up two fingers, but the stiff gloves defeated him. He lifted each foot in turn, appearing surprised to find them intact when they cleared the snow.

She grabbed his arm and dragged him down the cleared walk. They looked like identical twins, bundled in her brothers' winter clothes. Make that fraternal twins, Tom was a foot taller and quite a bit wider. His jacket didn't meet in front. Her mother had compensated with an extra sweater and a scarf that wound around his neck twice and filled the gap his impressive chest left in the winter coat.

"The car is snowed in." She pointed to the driveway. Snowplows had left a four-foot drift across the entrance. "We'll have to walk to the store."

Tom stomped over the snow, examining the drifted pile from several angles. "Does my Maggie wish me to obliterate this white mountain?"

Maggie tried not to giggle, coughing instead.

Tom immediately came to her side, his normally smooth brow wrinkled. "Does my Maggie wish me to warm any of her body parts?"

She squinted, looking in his eyes. She had no intention of letting him lay a hand on her again. It had been entirely too frightening an experience and thoroughly enjoyable. He had warmed more than her feet.

This time the man was pulling her leg. The harder she squinted, the deeper the laugh lines around his eyes became. Without looking away, she reached for a handful of snow and hit him right in the kisser.

She braced for retaliation, but none came. By the time he'd cleared the snow from his face, no hint of humor remained. What had she been thinking? That he wanted to play in the snow? *He's crazy, remember? Three wishes and boot him out.*

"Are you all right?"

"Of course, Master Maggie. You will have to try much harder if you wish to harm me. I possess a great deal of stamina." Tom loosened his scarf. "I am ready to follow your commands. Or do you wish to hit me again?"

Maggie decided to ignore his question. It showed how out of touch with reality he was. Everyone knew how to have a snowball fight. "Yes, commands. Those are different from wishes, aren't they? Things you do that are necessary, like using the computer to write the list of names I asked for."

Tom nodded.

"If I ask you to drive the car as part of my commands to fulfill this wish, you could do it even if you'd never seen a car?"

"Of course, Master. Any task, big or small, I can accomplish. I can move this white mountain and drive your car wherever you wish. Or I could fly you to this store. That would be much quicker. But I have driven cars before."

"Yeah, right. Fifty years ago." Fly her? Now that she would like to see, but she didn't want to humiliate Tom. She'd leave that to someone else. Like Chet. With luck, he'd read her e-mail in a few hours.

She'd made it sound theoretical, of course. She didn't want Chet storming out here or calling the police. This was something she could handle on her own with a little advice. Three wishes and this guy was out. Might as well use her second one to get Mom's groceries.

"I think I'd enjoy a nice walk in the snow. How about you?"

He grimaced, stomping up and down on the snow as if he could crush it into oblivion. "As you wish, Master Maggie. I am at your command."

"Well, this is a pleasant change. I'm usually the one following orders." She pointed to the boxed sled in the side yard. Tom picked up the rope and started down the street after her. "I follow orders back in California, I mean. You'll probably enjoy getting back there. No snow, you know. Just floods, earthquakes, and plagues of locusts."

Maggie looked sideways at him. He didn't react to her mention of California. "Chet is...was...my boss

and I was the lowest creature on the totem pole, aside from the janitor. I swear, I spent most of my time filing reports and correcting that man's grammar. No wonder I decided not to marry him."

"Chet was not right for you."

Now she was getting somewhere. "What about Chet wasn't right? Where did you meet him? How long have you known him?"

"Chet was not right because he is not the love of your life. I did not have to meet this Chet to know that it is so. Sarah has told me. You must find the love of your life to be happy."

"My mother doesn't know anything about it," Maggie snapped.

Tom pulled slightly ahead of her, having mastered how to move through the icy ruts of snow on the partially plowed street. He looked angry. As angry as he had when she called him a coincidence. "Your mother is a wise woman, a crone."

A crone? Who used words like crone? "Don't let her hear you call her that."

"Sarah is a lady of age and wisdom with ways my Maggie could wish to emulate."

Where did this guy get off telling her how to behave? First treating her like some kind of deity, then insulting her. "Yeah, like what ways?"

They made the last turn onto Main Street. Their breath preceded them down the street, Tom's cloud twice the size of hers. As he considered, he reached under his scarf. That necklace of his must get cold out here. He should take it off before he went out next time.

"The way she deals with her sorrow, for one. You have spent the last three weeks in bed, mourning a situation of your own creation. Sarah's sorrow is much older, but she continues with her obligations and makes plans for her future."

"Has my mother been talking about me? She had no right to do that."

They stopped in front of one of the town's two grocery stores--a long, low building, yellow with black graffiti, a quarter the size of the super stores where she shopped in California.

"Sarah told me nothing."

Maggie glared at him, then quickly smiled and said hello to a patron she didn't recognize, but who obviously knew her. "How then?" she gritted out between clenched teeth. "How long have you been spying on me?"

Tom followed her lead and kept his voice low. "I woke from my deepest sleep several weeks before your call to arise reached me. In this state I gather information from the air around me."

"Like how to speak English, I suppose, and work a computer."

Tom nodded. "I also learned the heart of your house was sad."

"Hi, there Maggie. You coming in?"

Mr. Pederson held the door for them. She vaguely remembered him as someone who sang in the church choir. Probably one of her disappointed wedding guests. She helped Tom lean the sled against the side of the building.

"Your mom called to add some things to her list. I'll have them waiting for you at checkout." He didn't move away but looked at Tom, waiting for an introduction, no doubt.

A quick okay was the safest bet. Maggie nodded and shoved a shopping cart in Tom's hands. He managed to look dignified as he followed her down the aisle. They received more than one strained look when she stopped to take off his hat and gloves. She didn't know if they drew attention because he didn't know enough to strip off a few layers to avoid over heating or because of his exotic coloring.

In retaliation, she smiled and spoke in a loud voice, explaining every package to Tom before she put it in the cart. She'd give everyone something to talk about.

Maggie canceled her wedding and then showed up a month later with a foreign gentleman who's not quite right in his head. Maggie, you know, the one in the sad house.

It didn't take long to work their way through the store, even explaining everything to Tom as if he was a half-wit. She didn't have trouble identifying the checkout station with her mother's things. The store had only two and Sarah Yates was probably the only adult in town who asked for chocolate milk. After a quick glance at both piles of groceries, she realized they had forgotten eggs.

How long was too long to leave a delusional man alone in a grocery store? Two minutes sounded

about right. "Forgot something, Mr. Pederson. Tom, you wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

Just her luck, she reached for the same eggs as someone else. She had another carton in her hands before she realized the person was speaking to her.

"I've been meaning to come over, but your mom said you weren't up to company and then the weeks just seemed to go by." The woman turned to the boy who tugged at her coat. "You go watch the cars go by, Andy. Mommy wants to talk."

No, Mommy does not want to talk. Mommy can't leave Tom alone for as long as this person can leave an eight-year-old alone.

Maggie brought her eyes into focus and engaged her mind. She was pleasantly surprised at who she saw. "Shelley Bergen? It's so nice to see you again. It's been what? Ten years, at least."

Closer to fifteen and she still looked beautiful. The most beautiful girl in town. *I was never the least bit jealous.*

"That's Shelley Summers now." Her smile faded and wrinkles filled her friend's forehead. "And that was Andy. Andrew, junior, but we call him Andy. My husband is the principal at the high school. I don't think you know him. We met in college."

Married to a big shot in town, a son, and another baby on the way, judging by the bulge that pushed open her winter coat. She went on tiptoe to check on her son.

Maggie followed suit, relieved to see Tom still at the checkout counter, engaged in conversation with Mr. Pederson. At least she thought she was relieved. What had those two found to talk about? Hopefully, nothing about six thousand year old men and sad houses.

"I...I was hoping we, you, might have some time to talk. That is, if you're not too busy."

"Hmmm?"

Tom had left the counter and stood looking out the window. Contemplating the cold walk back or thinking of some way to embarrass her in front of the whole town? As if she hadn't had enough of that to last a lifetime.

Her brothers. How was she going to face them? With luck, the when of the question wouldn't be until the annual family get-together at Christmas, almost a year away. By then, she could have a job on the other side of the world. Right now, she'd settle for one in the next town and a place of her own, where her mother didn't discuss her business with every crazy person who happened by.

"It's Andy," Shelley said, interrupting Maggie's silent monologue. "I know we should get a referral, but that means going out of the system for a specialist. Andrew, my husband, thinks I'm being silly, but I'd really like to talk with someone about Andy. You're still a school psychologist?"

"What? Yes, I suppose so. Andy seems like a nice little boy." Like little boys, the two of them, Tom and Andy, squatted at the front of the store, doing heaven knows what. "I'd like to meet him. How about now?"

Eggs under her arm, Maggie sprinted to the front of the store, arriving several seconds before Shelley. There Tom and Andy were, drawing on the storefront window in the condensed water with their fingers. Maggie didn't know which picture disturbed her more. Andy's frost picture was a giant breathing fire down on a little boy, obviously himself. The stick figure sported the same billed cap as the boy. Tom's picture was a naked lady with very big feet. Thankfully, they obliterated both figures with their breath before Shelley joined them.

"Tom?"

"Andy?"

Tom jumped to his feet. So did Andy. Like two soldiers, they stood at attention, awaiting orders.

"Yes, my Maggie."

"It's okay, Mom. This is Tom. He's not a stranger. Mr. Pederson introduced us."

"That's fine, Andy." Shelley relaxed, her face smoothing to that of the homecoming queen Maggie remembered. She looked at Tom and her smile broadened. "This must be the new friend your mother mentioned."

He'd been in town less than twenty-four hours and everyone knew about him. Failing to suppress her groan of despair, Maggie tried to disguise it instead. "Ohhhhhh, yes. Shelley, this is my friend, Tom. Tom,

this is Shelley Summers, Andy's Mom and an old high school friend of mine. She was homecoming queen our senior year."

Tom took Shelley's hand and looked at Maggie. She could see his knees begin to flex. *No, dammit, don't kneel*. She shook her head. Miraculously, Tom seemed to understand. He bowed instead.

"We are honored to meet a queen of this strange land, and one of my Maggie's friends."

"Oh, my." Shelley looked totally flustered now. Andy giggled and kicked Tom's boot.

"Tom's from...well, Tom's from out of town." *God, that was an understatement.*

"Oh, is that so? Where are do your folks come from, then?"

Maggie answered before Tom could open his mouth. "Tom's family's from Italy." That should be far enough away. "The southern part," she added.

"Oh, well then, that explains it."

Following Shelley's glance, Maggie saw that half of Tom's naked lady remained on the window. She erased the rest of it with Tom's hat, then tugged on his arm until he bent low so she could pull it down over his ears.

"Is Tom an artist?"

"No." This time Tom answered too quickly for Maggie to intervene. "I used to work for one of the old masters in Verona, but that was centuries ago. Now, I'm taking care of Maggie."

Shelley didn't seem at all surprised by his statement, only amused. "You find that a full time job then?"

This had gone on long enough. Maggie's hands shook when she put Tom's gloves on for him. "Doesn't Andy have to be in school today?"

"Are you crazy? It's Saturday." Andy kicked Tom's boot again. Tom ignored him.

"That's not nice, Andy. Sorry, Maggie. I can see you're in a hurry. I'll call later and we can talk. Okay?"

"Sure, you do that. Tom, let's go."

Tom gave Shelley one last dignified bow and winked at Andy, sending the boy to the floor in convulsions of laughter.

Maggie didn't realize how hot she'd become until the outside air bit her cheeks. Tom waved again to Andy, who had smashed his mouth and nose against the other side of the window. After Mr. Pederson waited for Tom and Andy to exchange tongue wags, he turned the sled full of groceries over to Tom and handed Maggie the bill to give to her mother.

Before they could get away, Shelley came after them, Andy only half-dressed against the cold. "I almost forgot. Please tell your mother how much I enjoyed her book. I'm really looking forward to her next one."

"Mom's book?" Did she really want to admit she had no idea what Shelley was talking about? Probably not. That would only take more time and Andy was busy making snowballs. Tom would catch on in a minute. "Sure, Mom's book. I'll tell her you liked it."

When she turned back, Tom was easing a tin of sardines out of a grocery bag and slipping it into his pocket. An orange followed. Food for the road?

She took another look at the grocery bill. They were costing her mom a bundle in food. Maggie didn't need some fool hanging around eating her mother's groceries and pretending to grant wishes.

"What I need is a job," Maggie mumbled. "That would be a wish worth making."

Tom looked at her, eyes steady and guileless, despite the food secreted in his pockets. "Is that your last wish, my Maggie? A job?"

Had she spoken aloud? "Are you pretending you can read my thoughts now?"

"Of course, not. That would be silly." Slower now that he pulled the filled sled, he started down the path for home, fitting his boots in the prints he'd left in the snow. "I can only read your wishes."

"Great, just great." Maggie pulled her scarf over her mouth so she wouldn't have to say any more. Tom did the same, but he probably had other reasons. His lips were turning blue. Definitely from California. She lengthened her stride. It didn't pay to saunter at twenty below.

Chapter 4

AFTER THEY PUT away the groceries, Maggie showed Tom how to remove snow mountains with a shovel. At the start, he wore an incredibly grim expression, but after he cleared the initial path in front of the garage door and she retrieved a second shovel, his mood improved. Improved almost too much.

By the time her mother called them in for lunch, Tom had dumped more than one shovel full of snow on her head. For sixty magical minutes, Maggie forgot about lost jobs, lost fiancés and even delusional, drop-in guests. Like the mornings of her youth when word came through the much-listened-to-radio. *No school today!* Maggie spent the day happily shoveling snow. The chore was a game when accompanied by those three magic words.

Tom was a day without school.

After devouring two cans of chicken noodle soup, he pronounced himself fit for duty and her mother sent him out in the snow wearing dry clothes and armed with a new list of chores.

Maggie's panic was intense but short-lived. *How much damage can he do in one afternoon? Tomorrow, he'll be running back to California and sunshine.* She spent the rest of the afternoon sorting through boxes her mother had stacked in the living room. Report cards starting with the first grade, a half-finished beaded campfire girl headband, pay receipts from her summer as lifeguard.

Nothing required more than a cursory glance before she shoved it into a bag destined for the dump. By the time she finished, all that remained of her childhood was a short story she'd written in eighth grade and her high school diploma. She didn't know why she saved either one. The story was nonsense about a girl kidnapped by elves who decided not to return home. The teacher had corrected the punctuation.

Maggie hadn't noticed the room grow dark until her mother walked in and snapped on the light. "How's it going?"

"All through." Maggie looked at her mother. A woman of wisdom and age, Tom called her, with an old sorrow. She looked like *Mother* to Maggie. "I ran into Shelley at the store today."

"Yes, Shelley and I see quite a bit of each other. We're in the same study club group. I hope you find time to spend with her while you're here. She needs someone her own age to talk to."

Shelley needed someone to talk to? She hadn't when she was homecoming queen and Maggie's claim to fame was being second best flute player. "She said something about you having a book. What's that about?"

"Oh, I must have mentioned it, dear. I had my first book published in July. It's a romance, nothing you'd be interested in reading."

A romance novel? Her mother? She didn't have a romantic bone in her body. "I'd like to read it sometime."

"There must be a copy around here someplace." Her mother didn't move to find one.

Maggie felt relieved. She didn't think she wanted to learn *that* much about her mother's fantasy life.

Her mother closed the scattered, empty boxes one by one and stacked them by the television. "I have a deadline next month so I asked Tom to move my computer downstairs tomorrow morning. The poor boy looks all worn out. I sent him up to take a hot shower. Are you sure you two are comfortable? You can use the other bedroom. I still have a double bed in there."

Oh, God, she thinks we're sleeping together.

Maggie had no idea where Tom slept last night or the night before, assuming he hadn't snuck up the back stairs that first morning she'd discovered him in her bed. "Tom doesn't need much to be comfortable, and he's not going to stay that long. Tom's just a friend."

"I suppose it is too soon after breaking up with Chet to make any decisions. Speaking of decisions, I'm going to put the house on the market this spring. That's why I'm cleaning things out. Will that give you and Tom enough time to find someplace else to stay?"

"Mom, listen, there is no me and Tom." It took her several heartbeats to understand the rest of what her mother had said. "Selling the house? Are you sure that's what you want to do? Dad hasn't been gone that long."

"Your father's been dead five years, Maggie."

Am I the only one who still has dreams about him? "That's really not that long. You haven't had time--"

Maggie looked up from her hands, which had curled in her lap. Her mother stood over her.

"I loved your father very much." She knelt now, taking Maggie's hands in hers. "We had a wonderful life together and he was taken away much too early. I would change that if I could, but I can't. It's time for me to move on."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Travel, maybe. See some of the country. Decide where I want to live. Your father and I settled here thirty years ago after we got out of the service. I joined the Navy to see the world. I'm not sure how I ended up back here after only four years, but I'm ready to get back to traveling."

The earth was shifting and soon all familiar landmarks would be gone. "When did you know you loved Daddy? How did you know? The very first time, I mean."

Her mother slipped beside her on the sofa. As she had so often when she was little, Maggie let her head drop to her mother's shoulder.

"I remember the exact minute."

This was what she needed, guidance. A path to follow. She wanted what her mother had had, a husband and children to love, a family. Her mother's unhappiness was temporary, a pleasant ache that followed feeling so fulfilled it couldn't be duplicated. "Tell me."

"Well, once upon a time," Sarah began, "long ago, we'd celebrated our first anniversary the week before. I remember, because I couldn't drink the champagne he'd bought. He finished it all himself, became quite tipsy, and broke his ankle when he tripped on the back stairs."

Maggie realized with a start that she'd heard this story before. More than once, prompted by a picture of her father wearing a cast on his right leg, she had asked him to show her the place where he'd fallen.

"Anyway, the next week, I held my first baby in my arms. A beautiful, perfect little girl we named Margaret, after my mother. I knew then I'd made the right decision and could never regret it. I had my Maggie in my arms and that made everything right."

"But that happened after you married. I meant when did you know you loved Daddy, that you wanted to marry him?"

"I told you, dear. I loved your father very much. He gave me three wonderful children. But now it's time--"

Her mother wiped her face with her hands. Crying twice in one week. The world was ending. Maggie's world, and for some unknown reason, her mother's.

"Time for me to go to bed." Her mother turned out the light when she left, going to the downstairs bedroom, the boys' old room. Maggie sat in the dark a long time before she found the strength to climb the stairs.

Maggie knocked before entering her room. Tom sat on her bed, petting Sam, her mother's Siamese cat. The room smelled of sardines. The corner of a cracker box peeked out from under the bed and crumbs covered the floor.

The cat was purring. Sam didn't purr for just anyone, but people who fed him sardines were high on his list. Both males looked fed and content. Neither intended to leave her bed tonight.

Yesterday, Tom was a hallucination. Maggie hadn't cared where he slept. Tonight, he was an exotic creature with delusions of godhood, or genie-hood, who kissed her feet. She had to admit that now she was used to the idea of him being real, she found him more attractive. After their morning together, she considered him a friend in the way she'd learned to measure friends in California, quickly, before they disappeared.

She and Chet had spent so few nights together. He was always working late, saying there would be time *forthat* later. Tom apparently had nothing better to do than sit on her bed waiting for her next command.

I must be crazy, most women would kill to have Mr. Wonderfully-Built, if slightly crazy, waiting for them in bed.

Tom spoke before she could throw him out or ask him to stay. "I must sleep someplace else tonight,

my Maggie."

Finally, some sense from the man.

"I have consulted several people--your mother, the food vendor, the United States Post Office. They all concur. I must find separate quarters unless you wish to wed me. You do have one wish left."

He looked sane enough, even hopeful, asking if she wanted to marry him with the same calm detachment of asking if she wanted him to shovel the snow from the neighbor's drive.

The same way Chet had asked her six months ago.

"Let me get this straight. You've been going around town telling people you're sleeping with me and asking them what they think about it?" She had liked it much better when he was a figment. Now the entire town knew about her crazy life. But, what the hell, it wasn't as if she planned to stay here. Think job in Peru, think Peace Corps, think Antarctica!

Tom nodded, a pleased grin on his face. "Your mother has kept me quite busy. I went out into the cold to deliver a package to the United States Post Office. A very efficient organization, and very friendly. They do not charge for information, only for stamps."

Great! The post office! Everyone in town would hear about her strange friend by the middle of next week. "What other errands did you run?"

"I delivered groceries to Old Lady Hanson, your piano teacher. You must play this piano for me some time. It sounds most complicated. She demonstrated the instrument for me."

Maggie tried to picture Tom on Mrs. Hanson's doorstep, shoulder length hair, bedroom-brown eyes, and all. "I hope you didn't call her Old Lady to her face."

"She is a very old woman, much venerated in the community." He spoke so solemnly she had to giggle. Tom puffed out his impressive chest, bare at the moment, and continued to stroke the cat with his large hands. "Tomorrow, I will move furniture for Sarah and she will make me beef stew. She offered chili, but I told her I had had enough of the cold today."

She coughed to hide her laugh this time; although, she was curious to see if he could expand his thoracic region further. "I'm glad to hear you've been entertaining my mother."

If only he could manage to cheer her up. Tom was right. Her mother was unhappy about something.

He accepted her praise with another nod, his expression now more distracted than smug. Maggie hadn't realized she'd taken off her shoes and socks until she caught him staring at her feet.

With exaggerated care, he set the cat on her pillow and left the bed. "If my Maggie desires, I could continue to warm her feet, as part of her first wish. No need to waste another."

Before she could stop him, he was kneeling before her.

She had every intention of stopping him, every intention, but then she noticed how cold her feet had become. She would make him stop as soon as her toes were warm.

Instead of starting with his hands, he used his mouth to warm her feet. Without stopping, he eased her onto the bed, brushing the cat aside with his arm. Sam hissed when he flew off the bed. Maggie could only sigh with pleasure.

This was crazy. Tom was crazy. Maybe crazy was what she needed. Her mother was right, she should have the experience of falling madly, hopelessly in love, just like in the movies or one of those romance novels. That would never happen if she married Chet.

Not that she was falling for Tom, of course. She was too sensible, but Tom was just the ticket for getting over Chet. Besides, Chet had never made her feel this way--all tingles and glows spreading up from her feet.

All the delightful feelings stopped when Tom backed away. His brown eyes were black now and bottomless. "Sarah said we might have the bedroom next door. I have checked the accommodations and find them suitable. Do you wish to take the larger room or should I leave?"

"No, don't go!" The words left her mouth before she could stop them. As much as she didn't want to admit it, she liked having Tom in her bedroom, in a perverse sort of way. Some neurotic reaction to having called off the wedding, no doubt. She contemplated checking her e-mail account to see if Chet had answered her message, but decided she no longer cared what his opinion was.

"No?" Tom looked puzzled. He placed his hands on her feet again. "Do they still feel cold?"

Maggie wiggled her toes and Tom smiled. It was relief to see his strained expression relax. Despite his mental derangement, he deserved a chance to smile. He had spent the day running errands. Now Maggie wiggled her toes in response to the uncomfortable feeling she'd been taking advantage of Tom and his affliction. Certainly not professional behavior.

"Tom?"

"Yes, Master Maggie." He raised her feet to his lips again, and kissed them.

"You can take the larger bedroom."

He lowered her feet to the bed and bowed. "As you desire."

"Tomorrow, I'll make my last wish and then you'll go away. In your box, I mean."

Was it her imagination, or did his expression change then? He eyes looked older, by thousands of years. His jaw tightened and he tugged at his collar before he spoke. "After you make your last wish, I must leave."

He was sticking to his story. She tried not to feel disappointed, but the pit of her stomach betrayed her. How would he handle it? Would he walk away after he pretended to grant her last wish? He couldn't hide in a town of twelve hundred. Where would he go? If he tried to live on the streets, he could die this time of year. Mom had mentioned a blizzard expected in two days.

Tom turned to go, the cat sticking close to his heels. Sam knew a good deal when he saw one. They both stopped at the door. "If Master Maggie would consider a delay?"

Ah, now it came. Tom hadn't figured out how to pull off this returning to the bottle thing. He needed to delay granting the last wish if he wanted to keep his delusion intact. That might be for the best, until the weather improved. Of course, in Minnesota that could mean April. Maybe Chet knew this guy and would call when he got around to reading his e-mail.

"Sarah asked for a favor, which I granted. I told her I would have to ask your permission, of course."

Maggie could just imagine her mother's reaction to that. *Such a considerate young man, and so well mannered. No, Mom, just crazy. All the good ones are.*

"She will soon depart to the land of Losvegas to meet with the sages who write. During her absence, I will perform certain chores. Painting. Wall papering. I'm not certain what that is, but I am confident I will discover its mysteries."

"No doubt." When Tom gave her a hard look, she endeavored to smile sweetly.

"So," he continued, looking uneasy now, "if you could delay making your last wish until I am able to complete my tasks--"

"Are you sure you're not stalling?" He looked so very serious it was difficult not to tease. "I think you're afraid to go back into your box. Maybe I should find it and make that last wish tonight."

Looking even more uneasy now, he tugged at his necklace. "As you wish."

For a self-proclaimed mythical creature in a cold Mid-Western bedroom, he looked unusually hot. A light sheen of sweat made his face and bare chest glow. When she stared at the silver ring around his neck, he pretended interest in his hair, running his fingers through it.

Not taking his eyes from her, he slowly dropped to his knees. She expected him to touch her feet again. When his hair grazed her legs, she gasped. He continued down, under the bed, his shoulders disappearing as he searched.

The first thing she noticed about his back was the sheer width of it. Broad and muscled. Next, she noticed the scars. Like the one on his shoulder, they were ragged and white, from old, uncared-for wounds. Ten stripes ran diagonally across his back, the last disappearing beneath his jeans.

Tears stung her eyes and she reached to touch him. Someone had hurt him. Someone had made him cry. She felt angry and sad all at once.

He backed out as slowly as he'd gone in, dragging the battered cardboard box with him.

When he raised his head, his face was all lines and planes, tension drawing his features tight. His glossy black hair hung in disarray over his shoulders. Did he ever shave? She could see no sign of facial hair.

Her hand found his cheek and she stroked it. His face felt impossibly smooth. He closed his eyes but remained at attention. When she touched him again, this time moving closer, he rested his cheek on her knee while she ran her hands over his hair and onto his back. His features smoothed and relaxed under

her touch.

Who had done such a thing to him? And why? With her finger, she traced a scar across his back. When she reached the end, he jerked up, fixing her in place with his gaze.

"What do you wish? I am at your command." Tension had returned to his face. When she said nothing, he backed away. "This is my former home. Where I must return when you have finished with me. When you have no more need..."

He kept his eyes lowered while he cleared the torn wrapping. At the bottom of the pile of paper, dust and string was a box, just as he said, a rectangular shape, low, like a music box or jewel case.

Suddenly, she knew what he meant. If she made her last wish she would be sending him back where he came from, someplace where people had hurt him and he was powerless to break free.

With her hand cupping his cheek, she raised his face. "I don't want you to return to your box, whatever you think that is. What I want is for you to be free, not following someone else's orders but deciding what you want for yourself and doing it."

He looked puzzled now. His hand rested on the box, tracing circles in the dusty surface. No wonder. He needed to take small steps, and she was rushing him. She needed Chet. She'd call him tomorrow and find out where to take Tom for help.

"You don't have to go anyplace you don't want to, Tom. For now, you can stay here with Sarah and me. No one here wants to hurt you."

His brow furrowed, marring his usually smooth features. "No one can hurt me." He sounded indignant.

"Yes, that's right. No one can hurt you." They had that much settled, at least. She had to admit she rather liked having someone at her beck and call to help with chores, but she didn't want him to think she would beat him, as someone obviously had.

He shook his head, evidently still confused. "Tell me what you wish me to do, and I will do it. If you do not desire to use your last wish at this moment, I will continue to assist you until you send me to the abyss."

Abyss? This was something new. Sounded ominous, but considering the scars on his back, perhaps applicable.

"Why don't you grant my last wish," she suggested, "and give yourself three? That would work, wouldn't it? I can find someone to take you back to California if you like. This isn't prime tourist season in Minnesota. You'd be happier there with no snow and your friends." She stopped, trying to sound hopeful. "Family?"

Damn that Chet. He should have figured out from her e-mail that she needed him and called. Tom needed help and she wasn't sure what to do. What trauma had he suffered that he felt compelled to go around granting people wishes? What if he ran into the wrong person? Someone who would take advantage?

What was she saying? Someone already had. Her breath caught in her throat. Someone had hurt him. She had no idea how badly. If she sent him away, someone might again. At least with her, he was safe.

A slow flush spread over Tom's face. "I do not have a family. I was told I am a bastard."

Maggie blushed, suddenly embarrassed for him. "What's that? Just a word."

Still on the floor, Tom bowed his head, his hands resting on his knees. "Perhaps Master Maggie's first two wishes didn't count. Perhaps she has other dreams I may fulfill before she sends me away." One hand moved to tug at his necklace. Despite the way it hung loose around his neck, a red band stood out across his neck.

Not a necklace but a collar. Maggie's hands curled into fists to keep from reaching for him. Removing this manifestation of servitude wasn't something she could do for him. He would have to free himself.

When Tom busied himself collecting loose pieces of wrapping from his box, she stopped him with a gentle touch on his shoulder. This wasn't getting either of them anywhere and it was after midnight. "Why don't you take the big bedroom tonight? We can talk about this in the morning?"

Tom looked startled. "You do not make a wish?"

Too tired to argue, she picked up the box and carried it to the desk where the computer had set. The soft sheen of old wood peeked through layers of dust. Filigreed silver outlined the lid. The present from

her long-dead aunt from Norway. "No, not tonight. Tomorrow, I can wish for my feet to be warm if you like, and then we can find you a nice, new master. I'll get the name of someone in the Cities."

Tom was standing now, his whole demeanor changed. He crossed his arms over his chest. "You would waste your last wish on frivolous pleasure?" His voice shook the windowpanes.

"Calm down. You're the one who wanted me to make a wish."

"A wish from your heart. Something to make your life happier or more at ease. Something to cure your mother's sorrow."

"Now, you stay away from my mother or I will have to send you away right now."

He didn't appear to hear her. He used his thunder voice again. The windows shook. "A real wish. Why don't you make a real wish?"

"What I wish for isn't important, Tom. Why you want to grant me wishes is what's at issue here."

Tom not only sounded like thunder, he looked like a storm cloud. His lowered brow turned his normally clear brown eyes muddy. Lines multiplied on his face when he scowled. "You do not believe."

Amazing how the pitch of his voice made everything vibrate. Was it her imagination or had he grown an inch or two?

"Do you believe?" he demanded again.

"Now that depends on what you mean by believe--" She stopped mid-sentence, struck by the impression that steam was blowing from his ears.

"You do not believe. All this time you have been in my presence and you do not believe in my power."

"Of course, I do. You are a very powerful man." *Especially when it comes to warming toes, playing with little boys in grocery stores, and shoveling snow. I've known men with worse traits.*

"You do not believe I can grant your wishes." Tom strode toward her, his arms still folded over his chest. She backed away.

Tom's frown deepened. He took the box from her and opened the lid. She expected music, instead dust poured out, a great deal of dust.

"I will make you believe, foolish woman."

The dust swirled higher. The windowpanes rattled.

His eyes pierced through the cloud between them. His presence shook the room, but his voice was a calm whisper. "I will return to the box until you call me forth."

She stared at him hard, willing herself not to lose sight of him. A wave of erupting dust made her blink.

She sneezed and he was gone.

Chapter 5

BOY SAT BEFORE the fire again, this time alone. Long ago his friends had disappeared in the same wind that took him. Out of sight, Maggie spoke from a point behind his back.

"Tom, this isn't funny. Come out." A pause was followed by the sound of furniture being shoved across a wood floor. "Where the hell did he get to?"

Sound didn't carry far between worlds. Once she was halfway down the stairs, he could no longer hear her footsteps or smell her hair. He hung onto her for as long as he could, remembering every detail.

Her golden hair curled around her neck, much shorter than was proper for a woman. Yet, he loved the way it left so much delightful flesh bare for his viewing. If only he'd found the courage to kiss her while he had the chance. When he saw her again, he would do so immediately. Her eyes, never had he seen eyes of such brilliant blue. Or was it only because she now and then looked on him with tenderness that he thought it so?

Over and over he relived their short time together, remembering the details, each time she touched him. Even he could not hold on forever. How many days, weeks, or months passed? Boy didn't know. He did not enter the living death that usually enveloped him when he returned.

You have not fulfilled your mission. You must grant three wishes.

When she returned to the room, he would leave the box. He was certain he could, even if she didn't call him. She hadn't called him the first time, had she? He responded to her presence, to her unspoken

wish. He didn't understand why or how. Sometimes the fog that clung to him cleared and the real world claimed him, totally out of his control, as all of his life had been.

The world he had left faded in the silence. The fire tugged at his attention. He had once been tall and strong, hadn't he, with a voice that made thunder and fists that crushed iron? Even that memory began to fade and he wrapped his skinny arms around his shrunken chest.

Naked and cold he moved close to the fire's glow. The scars on his back began to itch and once again, the leather slave collar tightened around his neck, reminding him why he hated his master.

THE NIGHT TOM left, Maggie hadn't slept. At any moment, she expected him to show up and start making his ridiculous claims about granting her wishes. In a sense, he had granted her one. She'd thought she wanted nothing more than solitude after her canceled wedding, but she'd been wrong. Instead of allowing her to wallow in self-pity, he'd dragged her out of bed and back into the world. She only wished she could thank him now.

Seeing Sam scratching at the door, Maggie opened her old bedroom. Since Tom's disappearance three months ago, she slept down the hall in the bedroom with the double bed. Now, she almost expected to see Tom sitting cross-legged on her bed. Every night she slipped downstairs to unlock the back door, just in case he returned.

Sam expected to see Tom here, too. The cat stalked up and down the bed protesting loudly the loss of his generous friend. Three months and he hadn't forgotten. Neither had Maggie.

When the telephone rang, she jumped. Sam streaked out the door, indignant at the interruption. Maggie didn't realize how much she wanted to hear Tom's deep, velvet voice until she recognized Chet.

"Hi, Margaret, I hope I'm not calling too early." After almost half a year, Chet managed to keep most of the hurt from his voice. We have to be civilized about this, he'd said the first time he'd called, totally defeated by her filing system in his office.

"It's almost noon, Chet. You're the one on the West Coast, remember?"

He laughed longer than necessary. She held the telephone away from her ear. "So what can I do for you?"

"I wanted you to know I mailed your reference for that job in Chicago. I noticed it doesn't start until this fall. Can you wait until then? Do you need help with anything?"

Maggie bit her tongue to keep from snapping at him. Why did everyone think she needed help just because she was living with her mother? The answer was obvious. Her life was pathetic. Even she could recognize none of this was Chet's fault.

You're the one who called off the wedding. Remember?

"I'm really enjoying this time off to rethink things, and my mom needs someone to help her sell the house. She's gone a lot, so I have the place to myself most of the time."

"That guy didn't show up again, did he?"

That guy? Had Chet ever played in the snow with her? Run errands for her mother? Had Chet ever kissed her feet? At this moment, she'd give almost anything to be talking to Tom, the passionate foot warmer, instead of to Chet.

If she weren't so sensible, she'd be insulted at how Tom had gotten over her so quickly and completely. For days she'd held out hope that he'd reappear at their back door. After the first two weeks she'd have settled for a phone call, a letter. Months had passed and still nothing. Every morning he didn't show up, she prayed he was safe in a homeless shelter or halfway house. Somewhere where people understood and took care of him, or better yet, that he was home.

"You know, I almost flew out there when I heard about him from your mother. If he shows up again, you will call the police won't you? Despite everything, I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

Despite everything? If Tom thought she were threatened, he wouldn't be advising her to call the police. Tom would be here, throwing his body between her and danger. She didn't need protection from Chet, but it had made her feel oddly comforted when Tom had asked if she wanted Chet killed. Not that she wanted such a thing. It made her feel sick to think of it, but here was a man willing to do anything for her. Just her luck. The man of her dreams, her Sir Galahad, was a nut case.

"Oh, sure Chet, but I don't think he'll be back." She'd called his bluff, exposed his delusion, done everything except throw him out the door in the dead of winter. She cried out at the thought, catching the sound before it could escape her throat. "If he did show up, it would give me something interesting to do though. You know what things are like here while we wait for the snow to melt. Anything for a little excitement."

"You don't really mean that, do you?"

Maggie left the desk and moved to where she could look out the window. The roads were clear now that April Fool's Day had passed. Only the highest snowdrifts were left, shrunk to the size of sports cars. Last week they were minivans.

"I guess not. I'm seeing Shelley and her son Andy twice a week. I told you about them, didn't I? And I'm up on the journals, keeping an eye on job postings on the Internet. I worry about Tom out there on his own. It doesn't make me crazy just because I want to see him again."

"Well, don't go--"

Maggie dropped the telephone the moment the floor began to shake. The cord attached to the receiver dragged it back to the desk. Something heavy hit the floor behind her, something metal. Dust rose around her feet.

She had no idea how, but she knew what was behind her. More specifically, who. Ignoring Chet's demands, which emanated through the dangling receiver, she closed her eyes and turned around. She counted to three, then opened them. There stood Tom in all his naked glory.

Unlike the first time she saw him, he wasn't smiling and his hands weren't strategically placed. Before she could admire the landscape, his eyes claimed her attention. They were ablaze.

"You didn't see me, did you? You weren't watching. We'll have to do it all over again, and this time, don't you dare leave the room."

"Tom." She was so glad to see him she didn't care what foolishness he was babbling. He was back and he was in one piece. She walked around him, checking for new scars. Nothing. She knew she was grinning like an idiot, but she couldn't help it.

After her first circuit, he followed her, turning as she circled him. Finally, he stopped and grabbed her shoulders. "My Maggie, do you understand? This time you must stay here and wait until I return."

He was back. She continued to search his face for some sign. Where had he been? "But I did stay. I stayed right here in this house. I've turned down jobs, I've turned down trips with mother, so I'd be here when you came back."

Why hadn't she realized it before? She'd been waiting for Tom. Before good sense could stop her, she threw her arms around his waist and hugged him. "Where have you been? Why did you go?"

She was crying now. Her! Sensible, Norwegian Maggie! She was crying on a naked man's chest.

He grew still in her arms, every muscle tightening beneath her embrace. When she let go, she backed up to see what was wrong.

He turned away. "Would my Maggie permit me to wear clothes?"

Clothes? He'd never been shy about clothes before. He'd actually paraded naked in front of her mother before she gave him something to wear.

"Of course you can. You don't have to ask permission." Maggie handed him her bathrobe. His back still to her, he placed the robe over the computer chair and stripped the top sheet from her bed.

When he turned, anger no longer radiated from his sparking, brown eyes. The sheet firmly tied about his waist, he looked like a high priest in some historical flick on the education channel. He bowed to her. She bowed back.

A smile threatened the corners of his mouth. He shook his head. "The master does not bow to the slave."

She immediately straightened. Now was not the time to challenge his delusion. She wanted him to stay, and she wasn't at all certain she wanted him to stay for his sake alone.

"I would ask my Maggie for another favor."

She nodded, not daring to speak for fear she'd say the wrong thing.

"Stop that noise. It annoys me."

So much for his humble, slave act. "We can't have that now, can we?" She didn't think Tom caught the sarcasm in her voice.

"Chet, I'll call you back." She hung up without giving him time to protest.

"I do not have time to deal with this Chet now. I can dispose of him later if you wish."

"I don't wish you to do anything to Chet. Do you understand? I don't want you to hurt him or anyone else."

"As you wish, my Maggie. A slave cannot pursue his own pleasure, but must serve the master." He straightened the sheet around his waist, bringing her attention back to his body.

Only half-naked now, but still impressive. She almost regretted giving him permission to dress. Before, she'd been too afraid to lose eye contact to properly view him.

"To serve you, I must convince you of my power."

She was only half listening. *He's back*. "Oh, I believe. I believe."

He shook his head, talking as if she were a small child. She hoped she didn't come across this condescending with her patients.

"My Maggie must be taught. You will sit on this chair." He pulled out the computer chair and placed it in the middle of the room, facing the bed. "Please."

When she sat, he gave her a smug smile. She had the distinct impression he wanted to pat her on the head, but refrained out of pity. He retrieved the old wooden box, which had fallen to the floor, pulled up the sheet he wore, returned to the bed and sat cross-legged.

She tried not to stare at his exposed thighs, and settled into her chair, crossing her legs to match his. With what she hoped was an expression of rapt attention and not a leer, she leaned forward. "Go ahead and say what you have to say. I'm listening."

"I'm not going to say anything. I'm going to show you."

She nodded while she kept a close watch on the sheet, which was making its way up his legs.

"I will disappear from your sight for a short time. You must not move. Do you understand?"

She nodded again. This time she wouldn't let him out of her sight.

"You will wait for a moment. The time it takes you to blink twice." He held up two fingers as if she were too dim to understand. "Then you will order me to return. Do you understand?"

"You're going to vanish, then reappear when I call for you. Got it." Maggie prepared herself to look amazed when he pretended to disappear. He probably had some kind of magician's trick that threw that strange smoke into the air like last time.

"Are you certain, Maggie? This is important." He looked apprehensive now. He tugged at his lower lip with his teeth and checked the fit of his necklace. A shadow circled his neck that she'd missed seeing before. Bruises or dirt. Had he been hurt after all? She couldn't let him run off again.

She nodded encouragement, her attention still divided. What did she have in the fridge? No telling if he'd eaten today. Meals were something she'd had to remind him of before. Two days, they'd spent exactly two days together. Why did it seem like they'd known each other forever?

"I'm going to stay right here, blink my eyes twice and then you're back. No running away this time, right?"

He bowed at the waist, his eyes closed and his palms pressed together. She jumped when the puff of smoke enveloped him.

Damn, he was good. She almost went to look for him, then remembered his instructions not to leave her chair. When magicians did this on TV, they showed up on the other side of the stage. Not that much maneuvering room here. She leaned to the right to look under the bed. Her quilt lay half on, half off the bed. How could he fit under there? Should she call Chet back? He might be worried.

Her neck began to cramp before she remembered Tom's instructions. *Blink twice*. Might as well, he could be watching. She blinked with exaggerated care. Once. Twice. What next? *Olly olly oxen free*. "Tom, where are you?"

Nothing. After five more seconds, she'd reached her limit to following instructions. She left the chair and opened the window. All that dust or smoke or whatever it was might spread to the other rooms. She had buyers visiting in the morning.

Maybe she had the words wrong. Delusional patients could be compulsive about these things. He had said something about orders. She tried again. "I order you to return."

This time when the smoke rose it dropped rapidly away, blown aside by the breeze from the open window. One moment the bed was bare, the next Tom was in it.

But not her Tom. This Tom looked about twelve years old. Disappearing and reappearing in a puff of smoke she could chalk up to a magician's trick, not this. This trick couldn't be done with smoke and mirrors, and Tom had only smoke. Putting aside the impossibility of what she witnessed, she watched with fascination as the little boy on her bed began to grow.

His thin face, full of fear and pain, gradually left the softness of youth behind and grew hard and strong. The only sign of fear that remained she recognized in the hand that clutched at his necklace. Not a necklace, but a collar, a hurtful device that left behind a ridge of bleeding, bruised flesh. The collar grew too and lay loose on his collarbone, no longer cutting into this Tom's neck as it had the young boy's.

By the time she could tear her eyes from his face, his body had grown into that of a man. Tom, the Tom she knew, sat before her on the bed. Naked, as usual, his broad chest heaving from some unexplained exertion.

"Now you believe," he announced, then crossed his arms over his chest, as if he'd just delivered the Ten Commandments. "You will make your wish."

A wish. Sure. She would make a wish. Tom was a genie, a real genie. She tried to focus. She stared at her feet. She looked up. Tom shook his head. Wishing for warm feet was out. He wasn't in the mood.

What did she believe? Tom wanted her to believe he was a genie, a demon spirit. The alternative seemed to be that she was the crazy one.

She managed to stutter her request. "I...I want a glass of water."

Tom crossed his arms higher over his chest, raising his chin to look down on her.

"Not hard enough?" she asked.

He narrowed his eyes to slits.

"A glass of water in a fancy glass."

She watched his chest with fascination as his muscles rippled. He wasn't ready to do any wish granting yet.

Was she willing to call his bluff or not? Or was it her own credibility the next few moments would answer? "A silver goblet with jewels."

He weakened then, his arms sagging slightly.

"Make it full of French wine instead of water. Expensive French wine." If he could fulfill that wish, she'd know he was for real or she was insane. There wasn't a bottle of good French wine in the county.

"Very well," he intoned and closed his eyes.

She was tempted to dash to the bathroom and fill her rinsing cup with mouthwash. It was green, but what the heck, it was worth a try.

She must have done more than just think about getting up. The chair creaked and Tom opened one eye. Maggie snapped upright. He appeared not angry but disappointed at her weakness. If he could face the consequences of her staying put, so could she. At least she hoped so. It would give them a place to start. If he would only ask for help, she'd find it for him.

Where in the state of Minnesota am I going to find a funny farm for an overstressed magician. Or an unemployed academic assistant.

"I'm waiting," she said, closing her eyes again. She held her hands out in front of her.

The first thing she noticed was the smell. Rich, musty, not unlike the dust that accompanied Tom's disappearing and reappearing tricks. But fruity. She squeezed her eyes closed tighter.

Something formed between her outstretched hands--smooth, cool, hard. It seemed to float in her grasp, then suddenly take on weight. She almost let it slip between her fingers. Then she was staring into a swirling bowl of burgundy. When she gasped with surprised, the aroma filled her head. French wine and from the smell, a very good year.

"I don't normally grant such frivolous wishes."

What did it mean? It was a small thing, really, but significant beyond words. Tom might still be crazy

but he couldn't possibly have guessed what she would ask for and prepared ahead of time. He'd been back barely a half-hour.

She looked up to see him grinning at her. Through his arrogant facade, she could still visualize the young boy, frightened and tugging at his collar, as he looked for approval.

Her throat swelled, her eyes threatened to overflow. "The wine smells very nice. Thank you."

"And the goblet? It meets with your approval?"

"It's lovely," she said, before she had time to study it. Lifting it higher, she examined the heavy, silver bowl. Four dragons' tails formed the stem, their heads and open mouths spaced evenly around the bowl. Colored stones, she couldn't believe they were jewels, served as dragon eyes. A different color for each beast--ruby, emerald, onyx, and diamond.

Fakes. They were too big to be real. Unless Tom really was a genie or whatever. If he really did possess magic. What other explanation was there?

Maggie concentrated on what appeared to be the diamond. It looked an awful lot like the engagement ring Chet had given her. Only this one was four times the size. Diamonds were supposed to cut glass. She went to the window and moments later stepped back to stare at a foot long scratch in the pane.

It seemed her feet had become stuck to the hardwood floor. She couldn't turn to face him.

"With another master," he said, "I would have conjured a goblet as big as the room. You would have drowned in the wine, unable to climb the smooth walls."

His words didn't frighten her, and she wasn't certain that was logical. "I guess I'm pretty lucky you like me then."

He took a step toward her and stopped. Evidently, supernatural powers hadn't given him self-confidence.

After what she had seen, she had to face it. Tom was tall, dark and cursed. "Do you remember how this happened to you? Or were you born this way, with this power?"

"I was not born in this box," he said, a slight smile lighting his face. "I have always been exceptional, of course, but at one time I was human."

The boy Maggie had seen materialize through a cloud of smoke had appeared exceptionally dirty and frightened. And hungry.

TOM TUGGED AT his collar, unbearably tight, but a quick check confirmed it was his imagination. He was about to lie. Not as serious a trespass as thievery, but a trespass nevertheless. "After thousands of years, my early memories have faded. I was cursed at an early age. The man whose job it was to look after me and my interests accumulated great wealth."

The man was a thief and so were you. Now you are a liar.

"I was obviously destined to be a ruler of some sort. A prince. I distinctly remember a circle of people waiting to hear my pronouncements." *Waiting to hear you whine about your life. Too weak and frightened to act on your own. If you hadn't been damned that night, you would have crept home to accept your beating and thanked your master for the privilege afterward.*

Maggie cocked her head. She didn't believe him. When had he ever known such an obstinate woman? Or such a beautiful one? She wore tight blue pants, like the ones Sarah had given him that first day, and a sleeveless yellow shirt that didn't quite meet her pants. Bare flesh teased him.

"Some might consider my predicament a curse, but obviously it is not. At my present rate of aging, I will live indefinitely. No master can resist making his third wish for long. I have power and respect." He resisted the urge to check his collar again. "I have served kings and queens. Built armies and brought armies down." *I would trade all that for the chance to be free, for the opportunity to live my life and die. For the courage to kiss My Maggie.*

"Do you remember your other masters after so many years?" She sounded curious and respectful, but she was staring at his collar. Did she know it marked him as a slave?

He couldn't help but remember each life, each horror. Nothing to do while he waited for the next master to call from the darkness but to remember in excruciating detail what had preceded. He fought to forget them, but the fog around the fire sapped his strength. Eventually he slipped into his past. It always

ended the same, alone by the fire with this damned collar tightening around his neck.

She frowned when he didn't answer. "How many wishes do I get? Have I used all three yet? You did say three, didn't you? And then, you have to leave? Shoot, I've wasted them all, haven't I?"

Just like the others. She wanted her wishes--fame, fortune, love--then, when she was through with him, he would reenter his prison and, alone, he would remember.

Anger boiled in him again. Why should she have what he could not? Why did she deserve a better life than he? Tom could almost see Prince in his silk robes and sugar coated lips, telling him to go back to his master.

A soft touch on his arm returned him to reality. He was sitting on her bed, Maggie standing quietly beside him. Her brilliant blue eyes told him he should not be reliving childhood resentments. She was with him now. He was a fool to waste even an instant of their time together. How could he forget the special power she held over him, the wish only she could grant? Would she allow her slave to press his lips against hers?

She waited patiently for his reply, like she had when she spoke to the boy, Andy.

He must be careful about granting her wishes. He had awakened in a complicated world, one he would like to leave without blood on his hands. "No, you have not wasted all of your wishes, my Maggie."

Her face remained neutral, giving him permission to say anything. The thought that she considered him a boy bothered him. She had tried to hide it, but he knew at first she thought him a madman. This was worse. At least then, she thought of him as a man. He had been reduced in her eyes to a little boy, like Andy, who needed her help and protection.

He shouldn't have allowed her to see him transform. He knew how he appeared when he first emerged. One of his old masters, an especially sadistic one, had described the transformation in great detail. But how else could he have convinced her of who he was?

Her hand still rested on his shoulder. He didn't like the pity in her eyes. He wanted to see a woman in love.

"We can speak about your other wishes later. You must enjoy this one first." He nodded toward the goblet she had left on her chair.

"I'm not much of a wine drinker. Hot chocolate is more my style."

A drink for children, to soothe little boys. "I have displeased my master." He turned away, using a technique he'd seen Andy employ more than once with great success.

"No, really, it's what I asked for." She took the goblet in both hands and took a sip.

An old wizard had commissioned the cup. He'd wet himself when Tom first appeared in his conjuring room, the old fraud.

She held the cup out to him. "Would you like some?"

He almost dropped the cup when she pressed it in his hands. Never had anyone offered him a share of their wish. He had to swallow hard before he could speak. "If that is your desire."

She didn't look away when their eyes met. While he drank his fill of wine, he held her gaze. For once, he felt more the master than the slave.

"Have I wasted another wish then?" she asked, sounding unconcerned. It was hard to believe she understood the power he possessed.

"You have used only one wish. Before I grant one, I will warn you. It's only fair. Wishes are dangerous things." So few of his masters had hesitated when he returned their foolish wishes to their own ears. They rarely understood. Perhaps Maggie would be different.

He tilted back his head, taking in the wine in gulps. It had been so long since he'd been offered wine. Sarah seemed to drink only coffee, which was quite dreadful, and Maggie drank water from jugs.

He returned the goblet to her and with his hand, invited her to sit. She joined him on the bed, her hip resting against his. A surprised look possessed her face as she stared into the cup. He tipped the vessel until she took another drink.

"This is only your first wish. Warming your feet did not take any special powers." He put his arm around her shoulders and pressed her against him. *She doesn't pull away!*

She looked especially silly when she grinned--and wonderful. "I knew that. I didn't use a wish when you helped me buy the groceries either. Why did you want me to think I had?"

To trick you, to destroy you, like the others. Because knowledge is power and I want it all for myself. I didn't want to ever leave this plane until the last possible moment, even if it means denying you your wish.

She leaned against him while she sipped the wine. How many millennia since he had felt such warmth at his side, such trust? He kissed her hair and breathed her scent. She had tucked her bare feet under her, so he kissed her ear instead. A delightful experience. It made her sigh and shiver in his arms.

"I pretended to grant you wishes to save them for you. I could tell you were a nonbeliever. It would have been unfair to grant wishes to one who did not take seriously her gift." He trailed his hand down her neck. Such a delicate thing. He lowered his mouth to join his fingers.

"I've got two wishes left?" The vibrations when she spoke tickled his lips. How breathless she sounded, how eager. She couldn't be as eager as he. She hadn't waited nearly as long.

"Two wishes. Anything you desire." He took the cup from her and drank again. *Not for courage, but for strength.*

When her turn came, she took the cup, tipping it to drain it. He had never seen such vulnerability and trust in the same eyes.

"The cup's still full," she said, her words slurring most delightfully.

"You wished for a silver goblet with jewels, full of expensive French wine. That is what you have. Not just for now, but for as long as you keep it."

She left the bed to set the goblet on her desk. She stood in front of him, too far away for him to reach. That she would soon be out of his reach forever, made his heart thud in a way that it never had before.

Did she fly across the room? Did his Maggie hold some magic power of her own? Perhaps it was only his overheated perceptions. She entered his arms with some force, and then, they were lying on the bed.

By necessity, their hips met as they lay side-by-side on the narrow bed. He didn't dare touch her, not yet. His hands hovered around her head.

"Do you always grant wishes with a trick?" she asked. Her breath whispered against his chest.

"An old habit I'm not certain I can break."

"I'll have to weigh my last two wishes very carefully."

Gods, had any master tortured him so sweetly? Unable to resist any longer, he stroked her hair, tangling his fingers in her short, blonde curls. "Careful consideration. That's what I would advise. Lengthy consideration."

"And if what I wish for is you?" she asked.

The thudding in his chest increased and threatened to blow him apart. What did she mean? What could she possibly mean? "You do not have to waste your wishes on me. I want for nothing."

"I wouldn't think of it as a waste."

"It is unnecessary. I am yours to command." For this brief moment, she was his to enjoy. After staring at her lips for what seemed to be an eternity, he touched them with his own.

Maggie seemed to lose interest in wishes then. At least she didn't try to dissuade him from stopping her mouth. It wasn't his desire for silence that made him press his lips against hers with force. With an experimental hand against her back, he pressed her entire body against his. Still no protest.

Her feet and her ears lost their previously irresistible allure and her breasts gained his full attention. Bare beneath the thin yellow cotton, her nipples brushed his chest, drawing a groan from him. At any moment, he expected her to stop him. His thumb grazed the bare skin where her pants and blouse didn't quite meet.

When he continued to hesitate, her hands told him what to do and his body seemed to develop a mind of its own. She stretched and purred as contentedly as her mother's cat, and guided his hand up her side beneath her shirt.

He found himself suspended over her, his weight balanced on his knees and the arm he had tucked under her head. One hand remained free to follow her wishes and bare her breast to his gaze.

His lips had already taken shape and his head had begun to dip to take her when she stopped him.

"You don't have to do this."

He groaned, his entire body throbbing disappointment. The sheet had slipped from his waist sometime after she joined him on the bed. His naked body pressed against her jeans.

"I mean, not if you don't want to. I don't want you to think this is a command or an order or something." Her body stiffened in his arms as she prepared to withdraw from him.

Gods, the woman was foolish. Did she think he had a choice? How could he respond in any other way when his sweet Maggie lay in his arms? He kissed her mouth again, hoping to silence her words and her doubts.

She didn't relent. She turned aside her head. "This has to be consensual on both sides"

Why was the woman so stubborn? How could he make her believe? With his hand under her chin, he turned her face. Lost, he'd become hopelessly lost in those blue eyes of hers. "Please, Maggie, don't make me stop."

She melted in his arms again, evidently satisfied. Later he would consider and decide what it was he'd done right. Next time he didn't want to waste time convincing her of his sincerity. For now he was content to use the time they had. No longer master and slave, he had no need to protect himself from her and she had nothing to fear from him.

In answer to his plea, she jerked her shirt over her head, pushing him away when he tried to take her breast in his mouth. He didn't have time to worry. A moment later, she was doing the same with her jeans, shimmying back and forth to slide them down her hips.

Flesh against flesh, how long, how many centuries since he'd experienced such delight, and never before born of his own desires. No orders or commands, no watching master. Just him and Maggie and their desire.

With her hips thrust against his, she erased all doubt. Maggie wanted him and he would not disappoint. His mouth busy with her taut nipples, he slipped his hand between her thighs. After she shuddered to climax, she made him abandon her breasts and silently directed him to kneel above her.

Her wandering hands and tongue explored his growing member, her examination forcing him to bite his lip to stay in control. Then, when he was certain he could no longer hold back, she took him, her hands guiding his hips. This time when she came, he joined her.

The rest was a blur. He rested briefly with her beneath him, then rolled onto his back, taking her with him. She covered them both with the sheet and the blanket before she lay on top of him. The single bed left no room for any other position.

Tom liked single beds, he decided. Maggie nestled against him, one arm flung over his chest and a knee against his thigh. She would be close by when he woke. He could tongue the nipple so close to his mouth and entice her into another round of making love. They could do this all day and all night, with short breaks to visit Lady Sarah and eat. No need for anything else, not even the larger bed in the other room.

With Maggie's warm breath on his chest, Tom slipped away into darkness. Not to a lonely fire and a tightening collar this time, but a safe haven in Maggie's arms.

TOM WOKE TO Maggie's hand rubbing his face. For the first time in memory, and Tom had a long one indeed, he did not flinch from his master's touch.

She yawned and stretched against him, her body arousing nothing more than answering extensions in his limbs. His Maggie had awakened him throughout the morning. Additional lovemaking would have to wait until evening.

Her voice was full of sleep and innocence. "I'm ready to make my second wish."

Tom's heart constricted and his breath refused to leave his throat. Her second wish. How long before she lost interest in this new desire for his body and decided to make her third?

"I want you to make my mother happy."

Blood rushed to his face. He had thought her selfish. Then another, even more uncomfortable thought occurred. "Do you mean for me to make her happy the way I have made you--"

Her finger on his lips stopped him. "I'd never ask you to do something like that. Never. Not with me"

and certainly not with someone else."

He gathered her in his arms again, thankful the narrow bed kept her so close. Thankful that for this lifetime at least, no matter how short, he would not be forced to speak false words of love with his mouth and with his body.

"Besides, I'm sure she doesn't want anything like that. Mom's a mature woman. She's had her love. That's something that only happens to a person once in a lifetime, don't you think?"

"I have lived many lifetimes, my Maggie, and I believe that might be so." *Had he ever experienced love? He had warm feelings, companionship with Maggie's great aunt. Love at some far distant time, just out of reach, when soft, gentle arms cradled him. Was love what he felt for Maggie?*

"I want you to talk to her and find out what's wrong. Then you can grant whatever wish is necessary to make her happy. Okay?"

"Yes, my Maggie. I will learn what will bring your mother happiness and grant her wish. Whatever that might be."

He pulled the covers over her bare shoulder, ignoring the hole in his stomach, the result of no breakfast or lunch, needs that awoke once he was free from the abyss.

A second wish. If he granted this one, that would leave no more wishes for Maggie, not if he kept to his plan to avoid the third wish and stay by her side. He couldn't grant a third wish, not now, not when it would mean giving up all this.

"Thank you, Tom," she whispered, falling asleep again, just as the sun began its final decent from the sky.

"I am yours to command," he whispered, ruffling her hair.

Chapter 6

HE REALLY DID look terribly sweet while he was sleeping, but Maggie couldn't think of Tom as a little boy any more. She had passed that, days ago.

Still, he had a lot of little boy in him. She knew when he woke and looked out the window, he would ask where all the snow had gone. She loved that about him. His ability to experience the small wonders in the world after thousands of years.

Thousands of years! It hit her again with full force. Maybe because she had resisted the idea for so long, been willing to believe she was totally insane rather than dare believe with childlike wonder that magic could be real.

Chet wouldn't believe, not even if he had seen and felt the evidence as she had. Whatever little boy remained in Chet was too deeply buried to work its way out. Maybe that's why she'd backed out of the wedding. She was still childish enough to want a relationship with magic.

Tom moved under her. When he chose to sleep on his back, on top of him was the only place for her to lie. He didn't seem to mind. Despite her unease with how he could leave the room, not to mention this plane of existence, in a puff of smoke, she wasn't complaining either.

If only he didn't lie so much. She always knew when he did, which was crazy since she believed him about this being cursed and granting wishes thing. It was something about that collar around his neck. Whenever he was nervous about something, he tugged at it, as if afraid that if he were caught in a lie it would tighten and choke him.

She recognized other clues that told her Thomas had not lived in the lap of luxury before his transformation. Princes did not hide food and worry about having enough fuel to heat the house. Tom's actions indicated depravation as a child. A prince? No, Tom had never been a prince, he'd probably never even had loving parents.

He stretched his arms and legs, and then, with an arm around her waist, he pulled her close against his chest. His eyes fluttered against her cheek. Her clinical interest in him faded when he stroked her bare back with a lazy hand and ended by pinching her bottom.

"Does my Maggie have any more commands for me this morning or will she grant her poor servant a few moments of rest?" His voice sounded groggy with sleep, but she felt him grow hard against her thigh.

He wasn't all that sleepy.

"I didn't mean to wear my genie out with so many duties."

"I'm not a--"

She put her hand over his mouth to stop him. "I know. You are a jinn, an evil spirit. What names did you give yourself that first day we met--slave, death, winds, spirit, man of sorrows, friend, husband?"

He licked her palm, kissed it, and blew warm breath across it until she could no longer resist him. He rolled, carrying her with him, so she lay under him on the bed, safe in the space he created with his arms.

"What would my Maggie have me be to her?"

"Can you be anything other than someone who grants wishes?"

He brushed away stray hairs that had fallen across her face. A shadow passed over his. "Isn't that enough?"

Not enough for a normal life, not enough to start a family. Chet hadn't been enough for her and he'd been perfect, or damned near. So what was she doing in bed with a man who had nothing? Even the clothes he wore were borrowed. He didn't have a job or job skills that she could identify. No job experience, unless you counted conjuring glasses of wine out of the air. The bottom line was his existence on this plane was transitory.

His groggy, sleepy smirk faded along with his hard member, which had stopped probing her thigh. He took the sheet with him when he headed toward the bathroom.

"I can be nothing else." His pronouncement left no room for arguments.

Maggie scrambled from the bed and into her clothes. She didn't want him to return to find her naked, not when she was remembering all the things that he was so very good at.

APRIL VANISHED in dreamy nights spent with Tom in the narrow bed of her childhood. Mother was off at writing conventions and looking at condos. Maggie kept the house clean against the day the Realtor found someone interested enough in buying that they wanted a tour of the house.

What Tom did during the day was a mystery to her. She caught only hints when she went into town. Everyone knew Tom. He brought Mrs. Hanson her dinners and stayed to listen to her play the piano.

One day he entertained Shelley and Andy with stories about ancient Rome, and Shelley persuaded him to share what he knew with Andy's third grade class. He was the perfect teacher for children that age. They didn't think it odd when he talked as if he'd actually seen Cleopatra and spoken with Mark Anthony. Maggie didn't press him for details. She didn't want to know what part he'd played in that piece of history.

As for the chores her mother had left for Tom, he'd finished those in one afternoon while Maggie was out. Magic the only explanation for how he'd accomplished so much painting and papering in such a short time.

Maggie didn't have much to do with her days. Maybe that was why she spent so many of them talking with Shelley. Her baby was due in another two months, and Maggie enjoyed the anticipation. They both looked out the window at Andy playing in the backyard while they shared a pot of coffee.

"So he is doing better at school?" Maggie asked, finally broaching the subject they always left for last.

"Yes, not so many arguments and tempers. Although he has slammed the door to his classroom so many times, the wall will have to be repaired. Andrew won't be happy when he hears that."

"What does Andrew say about Andy's problems?"

"Oh, I always speak to his teacher at the beginning of the year. I don't want them bothering him with Andy's little problems. Being principal at the high school keeps him busy enough." Shelley's smile came too close to a cringe for Maggie's liking. Everybody was too concerned about not disturbing Mr. Andrew Summers when they should be helping his son adjust to school.

"Andy's second grade teacher said we should consider sending him to private school, but Andrew said that won't look right, like public school wasn't good enough for his son."

Although very bright, Andy didn't appear to need more freedom. More structure, perhaps. By the time he adjusted to a new teacher, it was time for him to move to the next grade. "We can help Andy do better in the school he's in. I plan to be here for the summer. You and I can work together on some strategies, and then meet with his third grade teacher before school starts. Get him started out on the right

foot next year."

The shoulders Shelly had held so tight while discussing her husband relaxed. "Thanks so much. I really do appreciate--oh, there's Tom."

Tom waved at them through the window. He joined Andy in the backyard and they kicked the soccer ball back and forth. Andy tried to sneak it past Tom and into the bushes, but he made the boy try several times before he sidestepped the ball and let it pass.

The sight of Tom in his blue jeans and tee shirt could make her heart race even in the middle of the day. He looked and acted totally at home in the town where she'd grown up. Much more at home than she would ever feel. She expected people to be standoffish because of his shoulder length hair, dark skin and soft accent. Obviously, she was wrong. Either her small town wasn't as prejudiced as she'd thought or Tom's magic could bridge the differences. Maybe she'd been the one who had kept these people at a distance all these years and not the other way round.

Tom could make a good life for himself here and he had a lot to contribute. She couldn't imagine him in the bustle of a large town. He needed someplace where the pace was slow and people had time to take him in. She realized with a start she was actually daydreaming about living in Rawley with Tom. The two of them like high school lovers, coming back to raise family.

Shelley touched her hand. "When are you two getting married?"

Maggie heard herself gasp at the question, but wasn't certain why. Maybe because she'd been considering it herself. Since Tom returned, they'd been living almost like husband and wife.

With a maternal cluck, Shelley patted her arm. "I'm sorry. It's too soon after Chet, I suppose. I think Tom will wait. He's devoted to you and anyone can see what a great father he'll make."

Maggie didn't even know if genies, or jinn, could have children. That first time they'd made love, he'd said she needn't worry, and she hadn't probed. She'd been too preoccupied with the immediate effects of their love making to consider the future. Did jinn practice some magical birth control they could turn off and on, or was mating naturally sterile, like trying to cross a bird with a fish?

She and Shelley returned their attention to Andy and Tom, who now sat on the grass, heads inches apart.

Sure, Tom would make a great father, except Tom couldn't stay. He had hinted the other day that he would grant her second wish soon. When he granted her third, he would have to leave.

It would be easier for everyone if they didn't count on Tom. "We don't have any plans. Not together anyway. I'm waiting to hear about some job offers for this fall. I don't know where I'll end up." Or where Tom would be. She didn't have to make that third wish, did she? Or would Tom insist, grant some wish when her guard was down to fulfill his obligation?

To the outside world, Tom might appear to be a devoted lover content with small-town life, but she knew him to be something quite different. When he granted her three wishes, he would wake in another fifty years to a wonderful and exciting new world. If he left tomorrow, she would be eighty years old when he emerged from his box to serve his next master. She wouldn't be alive for the one after that.

"Tom will follow you wherever you go." Shelley smiled with confidence that seemed to vanish when she spoke of her own problems. "He did come after you from California, didn't he? Oh, shoot, look at the time. I'd better get Andy moving along."

When they reached the backyard, Tom and Andy were locked in conversation. Shelley was opening her mouth when Tom startled them with the words he spoke to her son.

"If someone yelled at me that way, I'd get angry, too."

If Andy noticed his mother, he decided to ignore her. "Did you ever have a father?"

"No, but there was someone who told me what to do. When he yelled at me, I didn't get angry. I got scared. Sometimes I ran away. I think you are very brave to stay and be angry."

"I go to my mom when I'm scared."

"You are very lucky to have such a mother."

Suddenly, the two looked up. Shelley's face had flushed red and she grabbed Andy's arm. "We've got to get going now. You need to work on your spelling homework and I have to get supper made."

Andy went willingly, missing his mother's embarrassment. Tom looked confused but didn't say

anything. Maggie wanted a few minutes alone with Shelley. "We can talk about this later. Okay?"

Shelley's face distorted into a semblance of a smile. "Sure we'll get together next week sometime." She dragged Andy with her toward the front of the house.

"How about tomorrow? I'm free tomorrow," Maggie called after her. Shelley disappeared around the corner with a hasty wave.

"You are not free tomorrow." Tom stood slowly, brushing the grass off his jeans. With his hands on her shoulders, he pulled her into his arms. He kissed her mouth first, then her neck, his hands remaining on her shoulders and not straying to her breasts. That wasn't allowed outside of the house, and Tom was very good at following her commands. His kisses were eager and when he pressed against her, she could tell he wanted her. But she liked order in her days. Work, then supper, then bed. He would wait.

"What am I going to be so busy with tomorrow? Or is it a surprise?"

"It's your mother's surprise. I've granted your wish. Your mother will be happy tomorrow."

Brief panic ensued before she rushed to reassure herself. Maggie could put up with whatever would make her mother happy. Sarah Yates was over fifty. How dangerous could her wish be? "What have you been doing, Tom? Mother is in Myrtle Beach. How can you make her happy from that many miles away?"

Tom looked at her with mild disdain. She had obviously hurt his feelings. "I have called your mother home. She will arrive at the Minneapolis airport at two ten in the afternoon. Her happiness will arrive a couple of hours later. I cannot be more precise."

Another moment of panic hit and this one didn't end. When Tom finished the house repairs so quickly, Maggie had assumed that had constituted her second wish. "You'd better be a lot more precise than that. This is my mother we're talking about. What the heck are you planning?"

Tom settled her back against his chest and she decided not to struggle. Not that she could pull away if he didn't want her to, and besides she was much too comfortable. Maybe they should get takeout tonight. It was hours until sunset. Just her luck. She finally had some reason to enjoy the long winter nights and now they were getting shorter.

"I am certain my Maggie told me once that she loved surprises. This is a surprise. One I promise you will approve of. You won't have to wait past tomorrow. Besides, you will wish to discuss my conversation with young Andy and you were going to make chili for me now that the weather is warmer."

Walking back to the house with a warm, strong arm wrapped around her waist, she forgot to worry. For the next few hours she'd be much too busy explaining chili and why it was hot despite how the word sounded. After that, there was bed.

"CHILI IS VERY HOT." Tom waved at the busload of school kids they passed.

Maggie ignored him. She hoped by the time they picked up her mother he would have tired of saying it. He took great delight in pointing out the inconsistencies in her world. Just what she needed, a mythological creature lecturing her on logic. Especially since he couldn't seem to tell the truth. Not the whole truth, anyway.

Tom had tried to convince her that he could drive the car without any instruction, but she didn't want to waste her last wish on picking pieces of herself off the highway.

"Does this wish have to do with my mother's writing?" she asked. The last twenty-four hours had been an endless game of twenty questions.

"In a way."

His evasive answer, along with his smug smile, made her grip the steering wheel more tightly. "If you plan to buy a whole lot of copies of her book to make it a best seller, it won't work. I don't have enough money."

"Money? No, I don't use money. I can grant a real wish like the cup full with wine in an instant. Discovering what Sarah wanted and bringing her home is what has taken the time. I thought it best to have her at home when she receives it."

Maggie sighed and passed another bus full of kids on a field trip. Tom waved again. She didn't pump him for more information about her mother. Yesterday, all she'd received for her trouble was the sight of

him standing with his arms crossed over his bare chest, solemnly shaking his head. Why did the most loving man she know, not to mention the most attentive in bed, have to be the most stubborn?

She almost ran off the road when she made the last turn to the airport. Tom blocked most of her view, his upper body over the dashboard of her mother's Honda as he tried to get a better view out the windshield. "Tom, what are you doing?"

He pointed up.

"Oh, those are planes. They--"

"I know what they are. I've only been gone fifty years. We had planes. Where are the propellers? How do they fly?"

She could be enigmatic, too. "Magic."

He sat back, one eyebrow raised. "I doubt that."

"You don't want to answer questions. I don't want to answer questions."

"I'll look it up on the Internet."

The Internet. The man had spent every waking moment at home, with a few delightful exceptions, on mother's computer. Maybe his idea of making his mother happy was fixing her up with some guy he met on-line. Looking for love in all the wrong places. If that was the case, Maggie would put a stop to it when the time came. The last thing Sarah Yates needed was a man in her life, at least one Tom might find in some lonely-hearts chat room.

Her irritation grew when she took her ticket stub and waited for the gate to rise and let her into short-term parking.

"What's that for?" He looked all-innocent again, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"We have to pay to park." *We*, what was she saying. She would have to pay, like she and her mother had to pay for everything. Her severance check had gone for new clothes, not for her and job interviews, but for Tom, who couldn't comfortably fit into her brothers' old clothes. And for food. Did all mythological creatures eat so much, or just hers?

"I don't suppose you have any change in your pockets?"

"What's change?"

Damn the man. She couldn't even embarrass him about his failure to contribute. He ran around the back of the car to open her door. The last time they were in town, he'd see Mr. Johnson open his wife's door. She'd broken her leg and couldn't pry herself out of their little Chevy unaided. Tom had decided it was the custom for all ladies.

"Change is money, something you lack in great quantities." Maggie headed for the terminal. Tom followed behind and slightly to the left. He made her feel like royalty with her own personal protector. A nice feeling in bed, not so nice in public. She stepped back and grabbed his arm, forcing him to walk beside her.

"Does my Maggie want money? Have you decided on your third wish?" His jaw tightened. A muscle jumped beneath his smooth skin.

"Why? So I can keep you in the lap of luxury?"

He stiffened and pulled away, preceding her to open the door. When it opened before he reached it, he ignored it. Stopping just inside, his head bowed, he waited for her to go first.

Now she had hurt his feelings. She hated it when she did that. Lately, she'd been short tempered. Worrying about money did that to her. He would retreat, tugging on that collar of his, his eyes glazing over. Where did he go to for comfort? She couldn't guess.

A quick glance at the flight board told her the gate number. This time Tom remembered to walk beside her. The curiosity usually lighting his face wasn't there. He didn't glance at the escalator, but moved to let her pass and stepped on behind her. She hadn't expected him to stand so close, and almost lost her balance when his hand closed around hers.

When she teetered, he circled her waist with his other arm. She didn't know if he pulled her against him or if she fell, but halfway up the escalator, she was resting her head against his chest. She didn't notice when their ride had ended. Only his arm under her elbow kept her upright.

"I have been offered a job," he said.

He couldn't have startled her more if he'd announced he'd sprouted wings.

"A job? Where? Doing what?"

"I have refused the offer. It did not seem fair to make a commitment to an employer when I do not know how long you will wish me to stay. If you wish, I could find something temporary to bring home the bacon."

Maggie almost giggled. She loved the way he picked up new expressions and used old ones in ways they were never intended.

"I understand I must obtain a number from the government. Something about security."

"Oh, you mean social security." Wouldn't that be fun? Tom involved with a government agency. He didn't have a birth certificate, no record of entry into the country. No telling what they would do with him. "I think Mom and I can find plenty for you to do at home without you bringing home any bacon."

Tom lowered his head to stare at the floor again while they waited for Mother to disembark. Maggie would have to find a way to make it up to him. She had been unfair, considering the wonderful goblet he'd given her. The heavy silver plate--solid, sterling, she had no idea which--was covered with intricate details. The jewels could be worth a fortune. She had no way of knowing and couldn't bring it to anyone to find out.

Maggie grew irritated again. She couldn't have the goblet assessed because every time she dumped out the wine it filled again. When she complained, Tom smiled and told her to be more careful when she made her last wish.

Maybe she could pry one of the jewels from a dragon's eye and have that appraised. Were the two walnut-sized crystals really diamonds? She hadn't dared ask.

"Maggie!" Sarah Yates gave her a peck on the cheek. "And Tom. So nice of you to come too, dear." Tom received a pat on the cheek, a great sign of affection from her mother when bestowed on an unrelated male.

She didn't seem to notice how quiet Tom was as she chattered away about her conference and condos all the way through baggage and to the car. She stopped only halfway home when Tom fell asleep in the back seat.

"Is anything wrong, dear?" Sarah whispered to Maggie with a glance at Tom.

With an adjustment of her rear view mirror, Maggie could see that he was really sleeping, not pretending. She could tell because his face had lost its sharp angles and one hand rested on the collar hidden under his shirt.

"He must be tired," Maggie said. "He's been staying up late for the past week. Did he say anything to you?"

"Say anything? What do you mean?"

"About you coming home. Did he say anything about it?"

"No, dear. He answered the phone when I called to tell you I'd be home a few days early. He must have told you or you wouldn't have met me."

"So, he didn't ask you to come home early?"

"No. Why would he?"

Maggie managed a smile. "No reason. I must have misunderstood."

"I understand, dear. These things happen. Is there some reason why he would want me here? Have you two had a fight?"

"Nothing like that. He just said something about a surprise for you. I guess we'll have to wait and see."

"A mystery. Now that's nice." Sarah turned to study the countryside as they turned off the freeway from the Cities.

Maggie couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or telling the truth. Maggie didn't think it was nice at all. Sarah's wish was bound to have a flaw. A big one, like a gorgeous artifact that she couldn't show to anyone.

Chapter 7

"THAT WAS SUCH a lovely meal, Tom. Thank you." Sarah's smile touched Tom's heart in a way that felt totally alien. Never had anyone made him feel so at rest. Looking at her, he could almost believe someone had held him in their arms and rocked him to sleep thousands of years ago.

He glanced at the clock, wondering if he would have to conjure a dessert as part of pretending to grant Sarah's wish. He needed Maggie to think this wish was real. That wouldn't be easy. The foot warming hadn't fooled her, but she'd distracted him. Helping with the groceries, well, he hadn't been trying with that one.

He had granted her one wish, the goblet. Now he had to make her think he granted her second. That way when she made her next wish, he would be free. She wouldn't know to make her last wish and send him to the abyss. All he had to do was live near her for the rest of their lives. That would be no sacrifice at all. He would make up some story about having successfully served a hundred masters and how she had broken his curse. His naive little Maggie would believe any story he told her.

"If the ladies would like to adjourn to the sitting room, I will bring dessert," Tom announced.

Maggie signaled him over her mother's head. He indicated they should leave. When Maggie and Sarah went to the living room, he slipped out the back door and circled around to the front. He would have to think of some dessert. The fool was late.

Tom tromped back to the kitchen in disgust. He had explained to the man why he had to be on time. At least he'd told him to arrive promptly at 6 o'clock. He hadn't explained anything really, and the man took no convincing. Tom merely spoke Sarah Yates' name, and he said he was on his way.

Not Sarah Yates, literally, but Sarah Nelson. That had given Tom some trouble. First, he'd had to discover her maiden name, which he found on the back page of her book. When Maggie made her wish, he had no idea how to make her mother happy. The book had provided the key--her last name and a story of love.

"Sugar scones," he announced. Maggie immediately frowned.

What the hell had he done wrong now? At least Mother Sarah seemed happy enough, just surprised. "Would you ladies like coffee?" *Please, someone, ask for tea.*

His silent plea went unanswered, but while in the kitchen he heard the taxi pull into the drive. He had barely time to rush to the living room and stand behind Sarah's back to pretend to grant her wish.

Maggie's eyes grew wide while she watched him. When her surprise turned to fear, he almost rushed to her. After thousands of years terrifying masters, he finally had one he didn't want to fear him. He tried to reassure her with a brief smile, then crossed his arms over his chest and gathered the forces of creation to him, nothing flashy enough to draw Sarah's attention. The brief flurry of wind and his glowing fingers were enough to convince Maggie. She jumped up and looked behind her chair.

His naive little Maggie. What did she think? He hid happiness behind a rocker? Everyone knew the best things came in cabs. He conjured a cup of steaming orange tea and let Sarah answer the door.

He didn't bother to watch for her reaction. He was certain what that would be. He had, after all, been a student of humans for centuries, a malevolent one most of the time, but a student none the less. Humans were nothing if not predictable. All except his Maggie. She baffled him. What would make her happy? What wish when granted would send her heart home, where she could find the most amount of peace possible while still in this plane?

He and Maggie stood on the wrong side of the open door. All they heard was a voice in response to Sarah's gasp.

"Sarah Nelson. You are still the most beautiful woman ever to wear a Navy uniform." The scratchy male voice turned Sarah's cheeks pink. "I've come to say good-bye."

"I haven't worn a uniform in almost thirty years," Sarah said.

"I know. It's been a long time. I would have changed that if I could."

"I doesn't matter now, dear. Besides, you haven't changed a bit. It's just dreadful how you men can disappear and come back decades later without aging a day." Finally, Sarah moved aside and the man Tom had spoken to on the telephone stepped into the room.

Sarah looked startled to find they weren't alone. "Oh, Glenn, this is my daughter, my oldest child, Maggie."

GLENN HAD AN infectious smile that Maggie tried to ignore. She allowed him to pump her limp arm, but couldn't find the strength to speak. *Is he real? Alive? Why is Mom acting like she knows him?*

For a moment, Maggie thought he was going to hug her mother, but Sarah turned away. "I think I'll show Glenn the garden."

Tom grabbed Maggie's arm when she tried to follow. He swore under his breath when his tea sloshed on her hand.

She hardly notice it burn. "What have you done?" she demanded.

"Let's get some cold water on that. You don't want to waste your last wish on something as simple as a burn."

By the time they reached the kitchen, Mom and Glenn, whoever he was, were already in the backyard. "Why would she want to show him the garden? She hasn't planted anything this year."

Tom turned on the tap full force and put her hand under the faucet. "They go to the garden for the same reason my Maggie makes me wait until we are alone to kiss. They require privacy. Is that why we kiss in private or are you ashamed to be seen with me?"

Maggie recognized the hurt in his voice, but worry about her mother crowded out her concern. She moved to the side of the sink so her mother couldn't see her through the window.

"What are you talking about?" she said. "Why would she want to be alone with that man? She's only had one man in her life, my father. She married him twenty-eight years ago."

"She had a life before that, didn't she?"

Tom must be acting dense on purpose. Maggie pulled her hand away. The tea hadn't been very hot. The skin was barely red. She took the cup Tom held in his hand and dumped the contents down the drain. When the smell of cloves and oranges rose from the sink, she realized he hadn't been drinking their usual coffee. Where had he gotten this stuff? It smelled very soothing. She almost relaxed against the counter. Tom's hand folded around hers.

When she looked up, she found him looking with regret at the water that spun down the drain. "I wish you hadn't done that."

"You wish? I want to talk about my wish, or Sarah's wish, or whatever your story is this time. I want to know who that man is and what he has to do with my mother."

Tom took her by the shoulders and turned her to face the back window. Still, she didn't look up.

"What are you afraid of, Maggie? Look."

It took Tom's hand on her chin, gently coaxing. Sarah was the word that came to her mind, not Mother. The woman in the garden didn't look maternal, but maybe that was because always before Maggie had been looking at her through a daughter's eyes.

Today, Sarah looked younger than her fifty-five years in the Kelly green suit she'd worn on the flight, and it wasn't just because she'd dyed her gray hair. She still looked plump and soft, but graceful when she raised her hand to touch Glenn's cheek. Her smile was young and eager, and it was directed at this thing Tom had conjured.

Conjured like he'd conjured the silver goblet with the endless supply of wine. The man might look and act real but something was wrong with him. Something had to be.

Glenn looked mid-fifties maybe. A little less than six feet tall, fit, trim, and a military haircut. Gray more than just around the edges, full salt-and-pepper. His clothes had a military cut about them too. Jeans, white dress shirt, and a leather jacket. Not formal dress, but immaculate and pressed. Everything in place. He had a kind face, one that broke into wrinkles when he smiled.

Those wrinkles vanished when he bent toward her mother.

"What have you done, Tom? What on earth have you done?"

When Glenn's lips met Sarah's, Tom pulled her away. "Come with me upstairs. I'll tell you all about it." It didn't seem right leaving her mother there alone. When her Mother's arms circled Glenn's waist, Maggie turned of her own volition.

Before they got halfway up the stairs, the doorbell rang. Her heart jumped in her chest. Not another

one. What had Tom done? Ordered a male harem for her mother? He looked puzzled when she glared at him and stomped down the stairs. She was onto his trick. That puzzled, innocent little boy look was all an act. He was up to something.

She jerked open the door, ready to throw the next gigolo down the street. She almost punched Chet in the nose.

Adrenaline still pumping through her veins, she couldn't quite manage a civil greeting. "What are you doing here?"

"What kind of greeting is that for a jilted fiancé." Chet brushed past her, into the house.

Tom had just reached the bottom of the stairs. Chet eyed him up and down before turning back to Maggie. "Is this the guy?"

"This is Tom. Tom, this is Chet Atley."

Tom crossed his arms over his chest and rocked on his heels. Maggie got the distinct impression he was planning to turn Chet into a toad.

Maggie could only fit so much craziness into a day, and hers had just reached the limit. She had to put a stop to this now. "What do you think you're doing here, Chet?"

"I know what I'm doing here, Margaret. I've been worried about you. I understand your penchant for taking in lost strays. Birth order, a strict father, and all that, but you've gone too far. Taking in crazies off the street is dangerous. You're not being responsible."

"Tom is not crazy."

"I don't hear him protesting."

Tom stopped rocking and tilted his head to study Chet. "Why don't I fix us all some tea?"

Maggie held her breath until he left the room. She didn't know what she'd do if he started with his smoke and glowing tricks in front of Chet.

Like a visiting potentate, Chet acknowledged Tom with a nod and settled into the largest chair in the room. Had he always behaved so arrogantly and she'd never noticed?

Tom spent exactly two minutes in the kitchen before he emerged with a full silver service compete with tea and tiny sandwiches.

The minute she got Tom alone, she was going to issue a command. No magic, absolutely none, without her permission.

He set the tray on the coffee table. "You will pour," he said to Maggie, and then returned to standing, his back against the staircase.

Great. She was stuck in the living room with two arrogant asses while her mother was kissing a phantom in the garden. What else could go wrong?

Chet was giving Tom looks he had no right to give. "Did I interrupt something?" Chet asked.

Tom responded before Maggie could beat him to it. "We were going to the bedroom to discuss a matter of some intimacy. I have always found Maggie to be most responsible and responsive."

Chet's cheeks flamed red. Maggie could almost find this funny. Almost. Having Tom fly to her rescue made her feel cared for and angry at the same time.

Chet refused to look at Tom. "I meant the food. Have I interrupted some social event? You seem prepared for guests."

Improvise, girl, you can do this. "We're having a little party. Mom has an old friend visiting."

Chet picked up the bone china cup and examined it before he drank. God, she hoped it wasn't Ming dynasty or something. That was just the sort of thing Chet would know about. "We've brought out Mom's old things to use one more time before we pack them away. She's moving to a smaller place."

"I didn't come here to discuss your mother."

Maggie held out a cup to Tom. He was getting back at her for dumping his tea. The pot spewed the heady aroma of cloves and oranges. This time she detected a pinch of cinnamon.

Maggie breathed deeply. *You don't hate this man. He has done nothing to you. You're the one who dumped him.* "Why did you come? I thought we said everything that needed to be said."

"On answering machines and letters. Despite your past actions, I do care what happens to you. You take in some crazy off the street--"

His condescending tone sent pain spiking across her forehead. "Chet, I won't have you talk that way about my guest. You have a Ph.D. in psychology for godsake."

"All right, this paranoid, schizophrenic, sociopath, whatever. I haven't had time to diagnose him, and from what I've heard from your mother, you haven't professional distance in this case."

"Tom is not a case. He's...he's a friend. He's between jobs and helping Mother and me get the house ready for sale."

"What does Tom do when he's not sponging off gullible Midwesterners?"

Tom returned his cup to the tray and retreated to the wall with a fist full of sandwiches. "I grant wishes."

Chet growled, "Wonderful," and reached for a sandwich, too.

Evidently they weren't content to fight over her, they were competing for the food as well.

"So what do you have to say for yourself?" Chet moved the sandwich tray closer to his side and ate another.

"About what?" she asked.

"Taking up housekeeping with a nut case."

Getting Chet to behave in a civilized manner was impossible. At least Tom was behaving better than usual. Still feeling smug about granting what he thought was her mother's wish. Just like a man to think every problem could be solved with sex. What was her mother doing in the garden?

"We do not sleep in the same bedroom," Tom said, finishing off the last of his sandwiches.

Finally, someone was on her side.

"A survey of this village indicates that would be contrary to custom for an unmarried woman."

Good so far, Tom. The language is a little archaic, but keep going.

"When I need rest, I use the second bedroom upstairs. We don't sleep very often, of course. Maggie is quite accomplished at making love. The best I've had in several millennia."

Oh, God, no.

Chet choked on his sandwich. While she pounded his back, Tom conjured a glass of water, obviously not willing to put in the effort required to walk to the kitchen.

"Don't you like peacock tongue?" Tom asked, his eyes wide and innocent.

"What?" Chet and Maggie asked in one voice.

"The sandwiches. Peacock tongue. An acquired taste, I'm told."

"Tom, you did that on purpose." She continued to pound Chet on the back. Boy, was she glad she'd been too distracted to be hungry. Think of something crunchy. "They're tuna or celery or something, I'm sure. We don't have peacock tongue in Minnesota."

Just then her mother came into the room, her phantom lover in tow. As always, Mother chose to ignore the chaos around her and pretended nothing was wrong. "Oh, my, Chet, how nice to see you. What are you doing here?"

Tom answered for Chet who couldn't stop coughing. "My Maggie has already asked that question. He doesn't seem to know."

Glenn stood calmly munching the last of the sandwiches. "Peacock! I haven't had these in years."

Chet looked like he was going to throw up. This from the man who put bananas on his pizza. Mother was glowing. Chet was green. Tom and the result of his incantation were discussing Middle East cuisine like old buddies. Oh my, indeed.

"Margaret." Whenever her mother used her given name instead of Maggie, she knew it was important.

With a final pat on Chet's back--okay, she hit him--Maggie left him to fend for himself on the couch.

Her mother patted the stuffed chair next to her. "I do want to explain."

"No, Mom, I'm the one who's sorry. I don't really know how to explain this--"

"I'm not sorry about anything, Margaret Yates."

Maggie blinked. She rarely saw her mother indignant. The emotion didn't suit her.

"Your Tom did a very good thing."

Maggie looked at him. He stood a few feet away, talking with Glenn. They'd evidently both visited Turkey, but Maggie doubted they'd run into each other there. Probably hadn't visited in the same

millennium. Unless Glenn was some creature you won't want to meet in a dark alley. Would he turn into a wolf at the next full moon or did he like to suck blood out of old retired ladies for a pastime? "Tom did?"

"Yes, he did. I've been thinking a lot about Glenn lately. You don't forget your first love. I don't think I would have found the courage to go looking for him."

"You actually know Glenn?"

"Of course *I know* him. Didn't Tom tell you?"

Maggie turned to glare at Tom again. He shrugged and sipped his tea. "No, he didn't," she said.

Tom gave her a little wave and mouthed *I tried*.

Tried? Sure he tried, after the man was already here and kissing her mother in the garden. If Chet hadn't interrupted them, Tom would still be trying to distract her. Explaining, at least giving sensible explanations to anything, wasn't his long suit.

"Glenn and I met when I was stationed in Japan, before I met your father. We were very much in love, but there was a...well, let's say an impediment."

What had Mother said? *Some people can't marry their one true love, some people have to settle.*

"We couldn't marry and I wanted a family, so we went our separate ways. But I never forgot him."

Her mother gave Glenn a look Maggie had never seen there before.

Glenn looked up just then. When their eyes met, Maggie knew Tom had kept his promise. He'd made her mother happy.

If her mother remembered him, Glenn must be real, not some figment of Tom's imagination. "How did Tom locate him?"

Her mother got up from her chair. "Glenn, you take my place here. I'll let you tell that story."

"But..." Maggie protested, but her mother had already crossed the room to greet Chet, who now calmly drank his water. Tom seemed to have disappeared. She hoped not in a cloud of smoke.

Glenn sat beside her, but couldn't stop staring at her mother. He turned toward her abruptly. "I'm sorry. I'm still having trouble believing I'm really here."

Had Tom snatched him without any warning? Had he been at work or something and then materialized at their front door? Thank heavens he hadn't been in the shower. That would have been the last straw--another naked man popping up unexpectedly.

"I...I understand the feeling. Tom can have that effect on people."

"Tom? Oh, yes, your friend. I don't know how I'll be able to thank you both for getting us together."

Now Glenn was staring at her. Maggie shifted on the chair, not certain where to look.

"Sorry. I don't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. It's just that you look so much like your mother. It's hard to believe she has a grown daughter now. She looks just the way she did when we first met thirty years ago."

Maggie squinted at him. She had seen old pictures of her mother in her Navy uniform--short black hair, beautiful smile. Her face had wrinkles now and she was at least forty pounds heavier. Maybe what they said about your eyes going first was true. Maybe he was trying to butter her up.

What did this man want? Why was he here? Besides being whisked away by Tom from whatever it was he'd been doing. "Mother has had a very happy life since then."

"Yes, so she's been telling me." He glanced across the room at her, a wistful expression returning. "It's what she always wanted, children. I'm only surprised she didn't have more."

Maggie almost asked him if he had any children, then realized that must have been the impediment. Glenn couldn't have children. Unbidden, the thought occurred, *can Tom?*

"Sorry, I guess your mother forgot the full introductions. The name is Glenn Howard. Your mother is lucky to have you still here with her."

"Just temporarily."

"Yes?"

"Well, the circumstances don't really matter--"

"I imagine they have something to do with the two young gentlemen glowering at each other."

Maggie grew warm. She was not making a good impression. At least Tom had stopped spouting elaborate explanations about their sleeping arrangements.

Before she could change the subject, Glenn did it for her. "Has your mother ever mentioned me?"

Had she? Indirectly, Maggie supposed, with all this talk lately about true love. But that wasn't possible. If her mother had really been in love with Glenn, she would have married him, despite the fact that he couldn't have children. It all seemed clear now. She had never been in love with Glenn, she just wanted to think so now that Daddy was gone. She was afraid to be alone.

"No, she's never mentioned you. Never."

Her emphatic denial didn't seem to bother or surprise him. "No, I suppose not. Well, I'll leave filling in the past to your mother if she wants to." He took her hand in his and patted it softly. "I just wanted to tell you how glad I am that you asked Tom to find me."

He made eye contact with Sarah then. As one the two rose and met by the stairway, leaning against the rails.

Chet had gone to sulk in the kitchen and Tom sat on the couch, sipping tea, looking smugly satisfied with his work. Maggie joined him and together they watched the couple. They stood holding hands, Sarah's eyes alight while she talked. Maggie could hear an occasional word, her name, her brothers'. She was talking about her children. Maggie couldn't tell what Glenn was saying. He had his back to her. Tears ran down Sarah's cheeks.

When Glenn reached out to brush them away, Maggie felt a finger on her own wet cheek. She hadn't realized she was crying.

Tom gripped her arms and turned her to face him. "I didn't know it would make you so unhappy. I will send him away at once."

She had never seen such a look of pain on anyone's face. "Don't you dare. I have the feeling you did a very good thing."

"You're not angry?" The look of pain eased. "Why are you crying?"

Maggie shook her head. She had no idea why. More confusing, a single tear stained Tom's smooth cheek.

"I didn't know you could cry," she said.

Together they wiped the tear from his face.

"Neither did I."

Chapter 8

SEVERAL MORNINGS later, sitting across the table from Chet, Maggie looked at their relationship in a different light. Maybe because Tom continued to sleep down the hall and she could think more clearly, or her mother's talk about this "true love" thing had her distracted. More and more it seemed to Maggie, she had been suffering from pre-wedding jitters when she made that awful phone call to Chet.

That crazy day when both Yates women met unexpected male visitors at their door had past. Two more days followed and none of the male callers seemed willing to leave. Officially, Glenn stayed at the motel down on Highway 10, but he'd slept on the sofa twice.

Making a family, being stable, responsible, that was what was important to a marriage. After all, her mother had turned her back on "true love" to get it, and she never expressed regret about her decision, even now, while she was mooning over Glenn.

That first night, when it became obvious no one was leaving the house, Tom had gallantly offered Chet the larger bedroom upstairs. Of course, Tom had to add that he would find sharing the single-bed with *My Maggie* no sacrifice at all.

Chet surprised her by not rising to the bait. He drove ten miles each way to the same motel where Glenn had a room, and he still beat Tom to breakfast. Maggie had never had such ardent pursuers. Considering one was a mythological creature who would, no doubt, disappear before the end of the year, her choice seemed clear. She almost forgot why she'd called off the wedding in the first place. Almost. An unsettled feeling remained in her stomach when she connected the words Chet and wedding.

Pair Chet and work or Chet and breakfast, and she was perfectly fine. Today, he sat talking with her and Shelley Summers while Tom played with Andy in the backyard. No telling where her mother and

Glenn had gone off to. Maggie could only hope that if they were still acting like teenagers, they had the common sense to stay indoors.

"Tom certainly has a way with children," Shelley said. "Does he work with you in California, Dr. Atly?"

Maggie had to admire the way Chet ground his teeth without making a sound. "No, Mrs. Summers, he does not. I think Tom's childlike ways come naturally. He doesn't need training."

Maggie couldn't resist. "What a nice thing for you to say, Chet."

"Yes, well..." Chet rattled the papers in front of him before giving Shelley his most formal I-am-doctor-you-are-parent look. "You understand I'm speaking as an outsider. I don't make official judgments without following certain procedures. I meet with both parents, when possible, as well as with the child."

"Oh, I understand, Dr. Atly. No need to bring Mr. Summers into this. I appreciate you looking over Andy's records unofficially and giving me a second opinion. Not that I don't have complete faith in Maggie's, I mean Margaret's, judgment."

Maggie took Shelley's hand before she could do any more damage. She'd shredded two paper napkins to bits and had started on the tablecloth. The poor woman appeared moments from falling apart and moments from giving birth.

"I'm glad to hear that, Mrs. Summers, because I agree with Maggie, as far as her assessment goes, and neither of us can make any reliable recommendations without some testing."

"Do you really think that's necessary? Andrew says--"

"Your son is very bright. Anyone can tell that much by talking with him. But in another month he will complete the second grade and functionally, he can't read."

"But he gets passing grades."

"Yes, because he is highly skilled at compensating behaviors."

"Compensating behave--"

"He cheats, Shelley." Maggie smiled when she said it, and patted her hand. "He's very good at it, too. It only means he's very bright and he wants to succeed."

Chet winced at her assessment. "My colleague has an interesting way of putting things, but essentially she is correct. This could mean he's developing more slowly than his classmates and will catch up in time, but we need to find out if there's an underlying organic cause for his--"

Maggie broke in to Chet's droning. "We need to see if he has a learning disability."

"Oh." Shelley looked relieved. Then she started in on twisting the edge of the tablecloth again.

"Andrew says they don't do that testing at the school. We would have to apply for service out of system for that."

"That shouldn't be difficult. Someone at Andy's school will know how. Certainly your husband does. You did say he was the principal at the high school?"

Shelley nodded, then stood to look out the kitchen window. "Really, I should be taking Andy and going soon."

Chet ignored her distress. "Then, there's the matter of Andy's anger. I'm not so much worried about how he expresses it, as I am by the frequency and duration. What was he like as a toddler? Did he have frequent temper tantrums?"

Shelley put her hand to her mouth and walked to the kitchen window, as if she physically needed to keep her little boy in sight. To get close to the window, she had to stand sideways. She looked every bit of eight months pregnant.

"Andy is a very angry young man," said Chet. "He strikes out at authority, rather than retreating. This does have a positive side. We can both see that you are a very supportive parent."

Maggie knew where Chet was going with this. She tried to join Shelley, but her legs wouldn't move.

"Chet," Maggie tried to stop him with a hand on his arm, but he shook his head.

"Sometimes this behavior in a child indicates a father who is verbally abusive. Mrs. Summer, has your husband ever struck Andy?"

"No!" Shelley turned, her face red and her fists clenched. "I would never allow anyone to hurt my Andy that way."

Chet looked to Maggie for help. The awful feeling in the pit of her stomach told her the truth she'd been trying to hide from herself. She so wanted a simple, physical cause for Andy's problems, something she knew how to fix. Maggie didn't know how to fix a broken family.

She joined her friend at the window and together they watched Andy and Tom play soccer.

"Shelley?" Maggie fought to keep her voice from breaking, and intertwined her fingers with Shelley's. "Sometimes a word can hurt more than a fist. Especially when it comes from a father."

Shelley wiped her eyes with her hands and returned to the table. "I'll tell Andrew about the tests. I'll insist Andy take them. You just tell me which ones to ask for."

"Of course, Chet and I will make a list that you can take to your school counselor. If you have any problems, let me know."

Before Maggie could offer Shelley more coffee, yells from the backyard drew the three of them from their chairs. Maggie was fully prepared to see little Andy crying, his nose bloodied or his ankle sprained. Instead, Tom, arms and legs akimbo, lay draped over the hedge, one hand covering his nose.

Andy, arms crossed over his chest, looked frighteningly like Tom. "I got it past him," he announced gleefully.

Tom's answer was muffled. "You sure did, Andy. Great shot."

"You should leave kids to the experts, Tom, old man." Chet gave him a hand getting out of the bush.

Yeah, like you're so good with mothers. Maggie decided to leave her gibe at Chet unspoken.

Shelley was still sniffing and didn't need any more aggravation. "I'm so sorry, Tom"

"No, problem." Tom stood upright now, his hand still covering his nose. "It was a fair shot and Andy got it past me." He ruffled the boy's hair.

"Maybe you and Andy..." Maggie drew Shelley's attention to the drops of blood that stained Tom's fingers.

"Oh, my! Andy, we have to go now and fix supper for your Daddy."

Chet walked her to the car and left Maggie alone with Tom in the garden. "So you can cry and you can bleed."

His hand partially obscured his smile. "Just like a real boy."

She led him to the kitchen and handed him an old towel. "Did he try to hurt you?"

"He's just a little boy, Maggie. It was an accident."

Maggie found she didn't have the strength to explain, and it probably didn't matter. Tom could take care of himself. Or could he? After she learned what he was, she had assumed his scars were obtained when he was too young to protect himself, before whoever placed this curse on him. Now, he had strength and power, but his behavior when they first met had been disturbingly passive.

"I didn't know genies could get hurt. They don't on television, you know."

"You will have to introduce me to this television genie someday." His nose had stopped bleeding, but the bridge of his nose and one cheek were red. He'd have a black eye in the morning. At least he would if he was human. Just like a real boy, he'd said, but he wasn't a real boy or a real man.

"Why don't you sit," she said. "I'll make you tea. The slow way. I asked Mom to buy some herbal at the store. One of them is orange. You should like that."

It was easier to ask her questions while she busied herself with the simple, domestic task of heating water.

"Lady Sarah showed me how to use the microwave. It is almost as fast as my way." He sounded wistful.

Maggie ignored the information and filled the teapot. She needed more time than micro-zapping eight ounces of water allowed. "I didn't realize you could bleed."

"If I hit Chet in the nose, he would bleed, wouldn't he?"

Maggie recognized that look in his eye. "But you won't hit Chet. You're different. Your bleeding worries me."

Tom's gleeful grin changed to a frown. "Why?"

"It means you can be hurt."

Silence. She felt the teakettle. It was barely warm.

"Those scars on your back. Did you get those when you were younger, I mean before..."

He gave a harsh laugh. "Before I received my curse, you mean? When I was still human?"

She refused to look at him and refused to answer. He knew exactly what she meant.

"They are from my early years, but my original owner had other, more effective ways of controlling me." His hand went to his collar. "The presence of old scars brought out the beast in some of my masters, but they soon learned they could not put an end to me no matter how hard they tried."

"You couldn't protect yourself?"

"I was under their command, Maggie, as I am under yours now. Until they made their wish, I was not free to act for my own benefit. My constitution protects me from damage, not from pain."

The kettle became too hot. She had to remove her hands. "Sometimes the wishes you granted killed your masters, didn't they?"

Tom rested his chin on his fists. "Yes," he ground out between closed teeth.

"Can you be killed?"

The room became so quiet she could hear the bubbles rising from the bottom of the pot to burst when they reached the top. In a few moments, it would reach a full boil.

"Is that what you want to do, Maggie, to kill me before I kill you?"

Her head began a slow spin. What were they talking about? Why would Tom say such a thing? "I thought you were under my command. Answer my question."

She opened the new box and dropped a bag of orange flavored tea into one cup. In the other, she heaped two spoons of instant coffee.

"The more severe my wounds, the faster they heal. A life threatening injury repairs itself in seconds. Why I was given such power, I have no idea. I have no control over it. Minor wounds, like my bruised nose require a few days to heal. I feel pain, but I cannot be killed." His voice had gone cold and flat.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"One of my masters tried, several times. Dying is just one of the things I cannot do."

She had wanted to ask her next question for several days, ever since Glenn arrived. "Is that how you discovered you can't have children? One of your masters forced you to try?"

The thought of someone forcing Tom to perform that way made her sick, but was that what she was doing? Did Tom leave his double bed down the hall because he could, how did he phrase it, *hear your unspoken wishes*? Did he make love to her because he felt compelled to? His hair partially obscured his face. She could no longer see his eyes.

"This particular master was quite desperate to increase his number of wishes. The fool never could make up his mind about anything. He thought if he couldn't increase the number of wishes I could grant him, he would increase the number of jinn he possessed."

"The result of this experiment?" Was even this questioning a form of coercion? Was she forcing him to share his secrets?

He brushed the hair out of his eyes. Was his bruise spreading, or did something else darken his face? "After months of rather tedious mating with a series of supposedly fertile women whom I did not know, the result was a very frustrated and angry master. No offspring."

She didn't look up when she slid the cup across the table to him. Why did the thought of Tom making love to other women make her face flush and her hands curl into fists? Had he rubbed their feet and whispered words of love in their ears? "That must have been a strain for you, having to have sex with all those women."

"After a while, it became quite tedious, yes."

"You sure do hear some interesting conversations around here."

Maggie looked up to find Glenn grinning at them.

Her mother followed a few steps behind. "What's that, dear? Oh, my." She stopped when she caught sight of Tom's face. "What have you two been up to then?"

TOM TRIED TO grab Maggie before she ran from the room. He would have taken back his words if that were possible, but he had no ancient jinn to grant his wishes.

Sarah stopped him from following Maggie, and he found himself left in the kitchen with Glenn.

"Looks like we'd better lay low for a while," Glenn said as he put away groceries.

Tom wasn't certain what he meant, but decided sitting down was a start. Evidently, Glenn was bringing home the bacon. Tom recognized several items as those Maggie identified as too pricey for their budget.

That was something, at least. Sarah was happy and cared for.

"I'd help you out, boy, but I've got my own troubles."

Tom squinted at Glenn, trying to figure him out. He was a most difficult man to read. Always smiling and humming, but he said he had troubles.

"Has Lady Sarah changed her mind about her wish? Does she no longer desire your presence?"

"Lady Sarah. I like that. I always called her that, my lady, decades ago. She needs time to get used to the idea of me being back in her life. I can wait. Seeing her again is more than I'd hoped for at the end this sorry life."

Tom nodded understanding. "I'm not sure how much time I have left."

"Hmmm, Maggie's taking off in a couple of months, isn't she? That's tough when you're young. You have a career to think about, putting down roots, all those incidentals that don't mean a damn when you're older."

"What is an impediment?"

"Huh?"

"According to my Maggie, you did not marry Sarah because of an impediment."

"Well, I wouldn't want to contradict Maggie. Sarah told her what she wanted her to hear. It's not that I don't appreciate what you did for me, Tom, looking me up and all, but I don't suppose I should say any more."

Glenn looked uncomfortable, but Tom didn't feel any compulsion to put him at ease. "I did bring you and Lady Sarah together, and I know you are happy. I wish to make Maggie happy, also. Merely occupying the same space with me does not seem adequate, at least not for my Maggie. We have occupied the same bed for many weeks, but even this has not brought her supreme happiness."

"Oh, it's *supreme* happiness you're looking for, is it? I'm not sure I'm qualified to give advice on that."

Tom's face grew hot. The man dared to laugh at him. It took all his self-control and a stern reminder that Lady Sarah would be most distressed if he squashed the man like a bug. Besides, it would rather counteract the wish he hadn't actually granted. Glenn had appeared at Lady Sarah's door as the result of his research on the Internet and a couple of long distance telephone calls. No magic had been required, not even the ordinary kind he employed to carry out commands.

Was his head spinning because of the blow from Andy's soccer ball or was his web of deceit spinning too fast around him? Perhaps he should trust these humans. Tom tried to remember the last time he had been made of honest flesh. The image that came to mind was the choking leather band closing his throat and the raised arm of his owner.

Glenn might not be qualified, but he was the most experienced person at hand. Tom could hardly go to Chet with his questions. "I thought you might know the secret to making a woman happy, since you failed to adequately please Lady Sarah when you were first acquainted. I am well-versed in many subjects, but have had little time or experience in the study of women."

Glenn didn't stop smiling. The man obviously didn't know the danger he was in. Tom could always destroy him later, if he displeased Lady Sarah.

"Making a woman supremely happy. Let's see now. For a woman like Sarah, that meant getting married and having a family. Oh, she liked the Navy well enough and enjoyed the traveling. And she's smart enough to make a success at whatever she sets her mind to, but for her, I think, life wouldn't be complete without a family. I couldn't give her that."

Family. The word conjured no image in his mind. Tom was used to having words create a picture after all the languages he'd learned over the centuries. Family was a dead word. It carried a definition only, no picture, no feeling.

"Maggie already has a family."

"Yes, she does, but from what little I know about her, she wants a home of her own. Sarah is pretty

upset about this wedding thing with Chet. Seems to think she set a bad example for her daughter, her own marriage being so...well, I don't know, not a love match, anyway."

Love match? Tom thought of Tandia and the dress her father gave her to entertain men in his tent. The master who had wished for and received a hundred wives, not one of whom he loved or ever learned to love. Maggie's great-great aunt, whom Tom kept company for five years after her husband died. Never once did she show interest in another man. Then there was Maggie.

"So you are saying that if I wish to make my Maggie happy, I must make a home for her?" He could do that. He already had one offer for a job. He could provide for her without using his magic, which seemed to bother her. She wanted a normal, ordinary life. She had made that clear. He could be normal. He could be ordinary.

"Well, not necessarily you personally, boy, but yes, that's the idea. Nothing like babies to make a women feel fulfilled. I'm sure settling down and starting a family would make her happy."

Children. He had almost forgotten about children. He enjoyed playing with Andy so much, it was hard for him to remember the boy had a real father, something he had no chance of being.

Sarah breezed into the room and started making coffee. "You can't make someone else happy, Tom. Happiness comes from inside. A person has to make their own happiness."

Glenn came up behind Sarah and kissed her neck. "You always were smarter than me."

They both looked happy to Tom, and as the result of his actions, not of any baby. Despite what Sarah said, he had made her and Glenn happy, and he could do the same for Maggie. All he had to do was decide on her real second wish.

MAGGIE WAS HALFWAY to downtown when she ran into Chet. Like Tom, he had made himself way too comfortable in town for her liking. He fell in beside her, taking his place on the outside, between her and the cars. She would have appreciated his thoughtfulness if his presence didn't force her to walk in the mud.

"I've just been to see Mr. Summers. A fascinating case."

Maggie recognized that look in his eye. It usually meant she wouldn't see him for weeks. "This isn't a case at your clinic, Chet. These aren't people who've volunteered for one of your studies."

He raised an eyebrow. "So?"

"You have to be careful, that's all. People don't like strangers interfering in their lives, especially people in small towns. You need to tread softly. Unless you have evidence for legal intervention--"

Chet shook his head. "No, nothing that serious."

"Well, you have to be careful not to make things worse. It takes a delicate hand."

"So my little lab assistant is an expert now, is she?" Chet ruffled her hair.

She set to work flattening it with her hands. *Condescending bastard.*

"I may not have my Ph.D. I may never have one. But what I do have is experience working in school systems with real kids and real parents, who have real lives. That's a long way from your ivory tower out in California."

For once, she seemed to have gotten through to him. He looked thoroughly chastened. "I didn't mean to step on your toes."

"Then for heaven sakes, get out of my way so I can walk on the road." She shoved him into the street and claimed dry pavement. She tensed while she waited for him to respond, but he followed in silence, walking a few paces behind. By the time they reached the grocery store, she realized she had overreacted.

This time of year always did that to her. The snow had just melted, but spring wasn't really here. You needed a winter coat evenings, but in the afternoon sun you could go in shirtsleeves. She didn't know if she was cold or hot and took turns at each.

It wasn't only the weather that had her on edge. Just when she thought she had everything figured out, her mother and Tom threw her these curves. After everything her mother had spouted about *true love* and weddings, now she was telling her she hadn't been in love with her father when they married. That came later, she said. A different kind of love. The kind built over time through overcoming obstacles.

Why did her mother's words hurt so much?

Her mother hadn't made a mistake, she'd loved Maggie's father. It was just that she'd loved this other man too. She hadn't come out and said why she hadn't married Glenn, but Maggie suspected she'd faced the same decision Maggie did now. Well, maybe not the same, exactly. Tom was hardly your typical Navy pilot. Heck, he wasn't even human, not any more. The fact that he couldn't have children didn't really matter. It was just one more reason why she had to forget him.

Maggie stopped on the sidewalk that started a half block from the store. Chet joined her. "Look, Chet, I'm sorry."

"No, it was my fault. You're right, about everything. Berkeley is no place to study child psychology. I should be here, back in a small town. The answers are where the people live, not in some sterile academic tower. I can feel it, Maggie. This is what I need, to return to my roots. I have you to thank for pointing it out to me."

As usual, she and Chet weren't even on the same subject. Was it any wonder they seldom disagreed? At least with Tom, they fought over the topic at hand. "Well, I'm glad I could help, but really all I said--"

Chet took her hand. "Look, Maggie, things haven't been going that well since you left."

Why did that make her feel so good? She wanted to feel useful again, productive, not sitting around all day thinking about wishes. What good were wishes? She wanted to do something. "They haven't?"

Chet didn't seem to hear her. He was excited now and ready for action. He couldn't stand still. He led her off the well-lit sidewalk and into the shadows of the parking lot. "We can go back to California and finish up things there. I know we can get new funding to work here in the Midwest someplace."

"We?"

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to pressure you professionally. I can understand now why you were reluctant to leave your old job. You can still take that position near Chicago. Your working as a school psychologist will provide me plenty of material on which to base my work."

He moved closer, for the first time his gaze softening from the fever that had them afire. "When I said we, I meant you and me, Margaret. I want to marry you, now more than ever. This delay has only shown me how good we can be together, how necessary you are for my life."

She didn't resist when he kissed her, but watched as if a stranger grabbed her arms and crushed her against his chest. His kiss was full of passion and ardor.

When she looked up and stared into Tom's eyes, she knew what was missing.

Magic.

Her eyes widened over Chet's shoulder. Tom stood in the glow of the street light, his arms crossed over his chest. His features were chiseled, hard and smooth. He didn't smile or snarl. She couldn't see any reaction, except the single tear that slid down his cheek.

Then the light went out.

Chet released her. "Gee, I'm sorry. I guess we talked so long the store closed. Hope you weren't going for anything important."

Maggie wiped her mouth on the back of her hand and searched the shadows for Tom.

"Are you all right?" Chet sounded far away.

The grocery store, the entire town, slipped into nothingness. She had to find Tom. So many people had hurt him. She didn't want to be like the others. She wasn't like the others. She wasn't because--

It hit her like the proverbial bolt from the blue. That was why her mother's words stung so, why she left the house, ran away rather than face them. She'd been ready to honor and cherish Chet. Hell, she'd even obeyed him on more than one occasion. What she couldn't do was love him.

"I'm sorry, Chet. I came to the store because--"

"Yes?" He tried to take her arms again, but she shook free.

With as much compassion as she could muster in her confused state, she stood her ground and looked him in the eye. No more running away, no more leaving messages on answering machines. She was strong enough to tell him how she felt. "I should have never left that message on your machine to cancel the wedding."

At the look of hope on his face, she almost backed down. "I should have had the courage to face you

and tell you myself. I don't love you, Chet."

He stiffened, letting his hands fall from where they were poised to take her shoulders again. An ironic little grin twisted his mouth. "And that means?"

"That means we're not getting married."

Chapter 9

THAT NIGHT Maggie entered her room singing. Telling Chet the truth to his face resulted in feelings she hadn't anticipated. She felt happy and free, and she wanted to share her feelings with Tom. His bedroom had been empty, so she wasn't surprised to find him sitting cross-legged on her bed, Sam curled contentedly in his lap.

Stroking the soft fur was having its desired effect. Tom looked supremely calm, even the redness around his nose and eye had faded. By tomorrow no one would be able to tell he'd been hit.

The presence of old scars brought out the beast in some of my masters. Remembering his words made her shiver.

He didn't look up, forcing her to speak first. "I wanted to explain about what you saw this afternoon."

She'd planned what she was going to say. No, there wasn't anything between her and Chet anymore, and there couldn't be anything between her and Tom either. She had to get her life in order, she couldn't keep on living in this dream world, and Tom wasn't any better for her than Chet. She loved Tom but he was a temporary apparition in her life, quite literally. She needed something that fell in-between cold logic and illogical fantasy.

Then he looked up.

Had his eyes always been that incredible shade of brown, so deep and dark, and warm? She could hide in them forever and never have to face reality again.

"The master does not explain to the slave."

She took a step back, bumping into the door. When it shut with a click behind her, she had the irrational urge to open it just for the pleasure of slamming. For once, Maggie followed through on her instincts. The crack of the door echoing through the hall sounded as angry and brittle as she felt.

How could he say such a thing so calmly? Wasn't he angry about his condition? Wasn't he angry with her? "If I want to explain my actions, I will and you'll sit and listen."

He looked up, all-innocent, stroking the cat. "I am sitting, My Maggie. Do you wish me to kneel?"

That man could get her mad without trying. "Don't start that I'm the master, you're the slave bit. It can be fun occasionally in bed, but people don't live in bed. They live out in the real world, working, going to school, taking care of kids. The master doesn't explain to the slave. What kind of way is that to talk? I don't think of you that way."

"How do you think of me, my Maggie?"

She swallowed hard before she answered. Then she looked at him again. It wasn't just his broad bare chest, was it? Or the way he looked so regal on her narrow bed, his head held high, wearing only black silk boxers? Mother had been shopping for him again. It was obvious Mother liked him best. She never did give Chet a chance.

But turning down Chet had nothing to do with her mother or how he looked in boxers. It had to do with love and the tearing feeling inside when she had looked from Chet's closed eyes and into Tom's wet ones. She was in love with a fantasy, a creature who should not exist, but he did.

"How do you think of me, my Maggie?" Tom repeated his question, never blinking as he stared into her eyes.

Could he read her mind? Did he know she wanted him to fold her in his arms and make love to her tonight? A wish she could not say aloud. He had to take her willingly.

When she walked toward him, he brushed Sam from his lap and set her in the cat's place before she had time to think. Then, she didn't want to think, only feel. Tom lowered his mouth to hers and slipped her clothes from her body.

WHEN MORNING CAME, Tom held Maggie to his chest, then slipped out from under her. He stared out the window a long time before he made his decision. She had told him last night she would not be marrying Chet, despite what he'd seen in the parking lot. Tom wanted to believe that would be for the best.

He felt uncertain, a sensation unfamiliar to him and uncomfortable as hell. He should know, he had sent more than one individual there and received the last of their frantic thoughts as they plunged downward. According to what Glenn had said about women, Chet was what Maggie wanted. Certainly, Glenn would know. He made Sarah happy.

Maybe Chet needed only small changes to become acceptable to Maggie. She could make her last wish, the one she thought was her last, to make Chet the perfect husband. The man obviously had a few flaws.

He had been kissing her all wrong, for one thing. Maggie liked her hair pulled back from her face when she was kissed, and a hand on her lower back sent the most delightful spasms shooting up her back. Tom didn't need special powers to know she wished for more.

She would know what else needed fixing. She had canceled the wedding, after all. Maggie, sensible woman that she was, would have had a reason.

Tom returned to the bed to clear the hair from her eyes. If he could have a wish, if somewhere in this unfeeling universe there existed a power that granted wishes to men with cursed souls, he would wish for his perfect Maggie to be less sensible. Less sensible enough to find room in her heart for her less than perfect jinn.

When she opened her eyes, her lips curled in that early morning smile of hers that made him want to rejoin her in bed and spend the rest of the day.

"You're up early," she said.

"I have work to do," he replied.

"Oh, yeah? What kind of work does a mythical genie do? Maybe that should be my last wish. You can find me a job and then do it, while I sleep in every day."

Tom's heart thudded in his chest. The day had come. It didn't matter now that he'd planned to grant her a wish today and set her free. What mattered was that she wanted him to grant one, and she believed it would be her last.

Yes, the master was enslaved to the wishes just as the slave had to serve the master. Maggie would never have her home, never be happy until she was free of her wishes and free from him. It had always been so. No master he served had ever found happiness while Tom waited for his orders.

"I don't think that would work." Tom managed a weak smile. "After I grant your last wish, I must return to the abyss." Was that what she wanted? Had his Maggie grown tired of him so soon?

Maggie stumbled out of bed, looking less perfect every moment. "You're always coming up with some excuse. I don't think you like granting wishes."

What did she mean, he didn't like granting wishes? Would she? Would anyone? Why should he be the one who was always giving things? He who had never had anything except a bit of warmth around a fire thousands of years ago.

He followed her into the bathroom and into the shower. The fit was tight, but their bodies slid past each other deliciously, without friction, while he shampooed her hair. He didn't want to fight this morning. She was right. He didn't want to grant any wishes, especially not the one that would send him away from her forever.

When he finished with her hair, she soaped his chest. "Maybe I can grant your wishes this morning," she purred.

Forget what I said about not being perfect. My Maggie is beyond compare. "Does my Maggie read minds now, as well?"

"Not your mind, exactly."

When she lowered her hands to his waist he realized what she meant. The shower left little space between them. His erection crossed the distance and pressed into her belly. It wasn't evening. Sarah would call them to breakfast soon. Chet would be waiting downstairs. Making love in the morning wasn't

sensible.

Tom didn't care. "Perhaps, I can grant some smaller wish, some desire, that does not require magic." *You are sending me away. I will never see you again, not like this.*

A brief look of panic lit her features. "We should really be going down. Mom might send Glenn looking for us."

"A most sensible man. He will know exactly what we are doing and not intrude." Tom ended the possibility of further protests with his mouth.

Her struggle was brief, but it nearly ended him. She bucked against him, her taut nipples exciting his chest. He almost came at once, against her hot, wet belly. Her hands pushing against his hips provided him with the balance to remain upright. Her tongue answered his, entering his mouth. The rhythm of her body changed.

This delightful rhythm he had never known before Maggie. An eager woman. Not merely willing or doing as ordered, but eager for him and him alone. His body responded with force and grace he hadn't known he possessed.

When he lifted her off her feet, she wrapped her arms around his neck. Her fingers slipped beneath his collar, massaging the skin that begged for her soothing touch. Her tongue in his ear wrung a groan from him. He retaliated by lowering her, inch by inch, onto him, keeping her hips still until he rested fully inside her.

His feet braced against the wall at his back, he cushioned her head with his hands and rested her against the other. He had failed to notice the water had grown cold, until, with her head thrown back, Maggie began to choke.

He almost slipped when he was forced to balance her single-handedly while he turned off the water. He managed to fall slowly to his knees, one arm holding Maggie in place on the narrow shower bench. Her eyes were closed now, and she began to move against him as if in a trance. With his tongue, he followed drops of water as they left her chin to dance off her breasts.

He lapped water from her fawn brown nipples, unaware of anything but her tight warmth around his throbbing need. She started that rhythm again, that beat in his brain and made his hips answer of their own accord. His woman was calling him, and he was responding as men had done for centuries. For centuries he had watched, never daring hope he would be found worthy.

Now he had his Maggie. He would never let her go.

A pounding sounded, close, on the bathroom door.

"Oh, God," Maggie gasped. She tried to pull away, but the shower walls kept her from moving far. "I'm taking a shower."

"Sarah sent me to get you. Breakfast is ready."

Tom ground his teeth at the sound of Chet's voice. Lady Sarah should have sent Glenn. He had more sense. Tom tried to ease Maggie back into his arms and into rhythm with his still heated body. Surely, the fool would go away.

Maggie shoved against his chest, making him lose his balance and fall forward. He groaned when he slipped out of her, much too soon. His forehead banged against the wall.

To make the moment perfect, she hissed at him, "keep your mouth shut."

His mouth shut? She hadn't complained about his mouth being open a few moments ago. She hadn't given him orders to be quiet then.

"Are you all right, Margaret? I don't hear any water." Chet tried the door.

Tom looked up in time to catch Maggie's panicked expression. He hadn't locked the door. A sensible precaution, but one he hadn't taken. Well, he was cursed, he wasn't perfect.

Maggie looked distressed at the prospect of Chet seeing her without clothes. Tom had noticed that about Maggie. She was not entirely comfortable when nude. Mayhap this was why she had canceled the wedding. Could Chet be such a fool that he didn't find her attractive in this state?

"Stay out," Tom said, secure in the knowledge that Chet would not violate such a simple request.

When Maggie slapped her hand over his mouth, he was no longer so sure he'd done the right thing.

"Margaret? Is that you?"

She didn't release Tom's mouth, not even when he kissed her palm, not even when he started to nibble, which usually did the trick.

"I heard something fall. If you don't say something, I'm coming in."

Maggie shot Tom a warning glance, but when she opened her mouth, nothing came out.

Sometimes his sensible Maggie surprised him with her nonsense. Since he needed both hands to keep from falling on her, he shook his head to free his mouth. "Maggie and I are making love in the shower. We will join you for breakfast as soon as we are done."

Now the water on her face was from her tears. "Oh, Tom." This time when she pushed, he landed outside the shower. They didn't hear anything from the other side of the door.

Tom decided to retreat. He closed the shower door and left the bathroom when the water started to run again. Chet had already gone downstairs, as Tom expected. He didn't know what Maggie was upset about. What he had said had the desired result and was truthful. What more did she want?

Why didn't she want Chet to know they were making love? She had already decided she didn't want to marry him. Unless...the approaching thought disturbed him. He shook it away and slipped on his jeans. The rough fabric irritated his still-damp skin, but he didn't want to return to his assigned room and his clean clothes. He didn't want to leave Maggie.

She chose that moment to burst into the room, when he was trying to maneuver himself into pants. Not an easy task in his present state.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded.

The thought flashed through his mind that with one tug he could separate her from her towel. She was tapping her foot. Part of him recognized the warning sign, she was impatient, angry. The other part could only stare at her delicate, still damp toes. He almost asked if her feet were cold. He was too aware that they hadn't finished making love to take an interest in this argument.

Maybe she was hungry. Would it be too far fetched to imagine he could convince her to return to bed after breakfast? He could tell everyone how pale she looked and insist she needed a nap. Or maybe his injuries of yesterday would require her soothing touch on his forehead while he took a nap.

He didn't know if he'd actually made a move to hold her or if she had finally noticed him eyeing her toes. The tapping stopped. She stuffed her feet into slippers and slipped on her bathrobe. Her wet towel fell to the floor unnoticed.

"Well," she demanded again. "Why did you do that?"

Maybe if he hadn't been so damnably uncomfortable he would have taken time to consider his response. "That's the question I should be asking you."

"What do you mean by that crack? You had no reason to embarrass Chet and me that way."

So it was true. She wasn't angry because Chet had discovered her with a man in her shower, she was angry because Chet had discovered her with him.

"Believe me, what I was doing in the shower with you had nothing to do with embarrassing Chet. It had nothing to do with him at all. For one thing, I don't think there's enough room in there for three. Besides, I understood there wasn't a Chet and you any more."

"You know what I mean. You knew they would be expecting us for breakfast. It's not like you don't know the routine."

Tom's chest grew tight. Routine. She wanted to fit love into a routine. He had seen her there, all naked and willing and wanting him, and she expected him to shove those feelings aside and wait for an appropriate moment. She was willing to accept him, quite willing, when he fit into her schedule, when he was convenient, when he responded to her commands. But he wanted...no, he needed...to make commands of his own. Commands and demands.

Despite what he had said earlier, he couldn't be her slave. Even now, the collar threatened to tighten around his throat.

"You're right about one thing, my Maggie. I know what you mean. Chet may be feeling a little foolish right now, but he'll get over it. You're the one who's embarrassed. Admit it!"

"Admit what?" She crossed her arms over her chest in blatant mockery of him.

"You're ashamed to be seen with me unless you can explain me away as some sort of nut case you've

taken pity on."

The truth became clear suddenly, to both of them. She dropped her arms and pulled her robe more tightly around her. She didn't even try to deny it.

"Ashamed isn't the right word. It's just that a relationship between us isn't appropriate. You're not, well, people around here don't see you as someone I would...and I was supposed to marry someone else just five months ago."

He turned away, not wanting to look at her, not wanting to torture himself one more minute. After all these centuries, it had finally happened. He had been beaten, humiliated, tortured, but never had a master managed to fool him, until now.

He ignored her hand on his shoulder. "Tom, I didn't mean that, not the way it sounded."

She had convinced him she wasn't interested in wishes any longer, that she cared about him, the man, not the walking wish maker. Maggie, his Maggie, had tricked him.

TOM SEEMED TO grow taller while she watched, but Maggie could never tell if that was her imagination or if he was getting ready to do something. Something she wouldn't like.

"I know exactly what you meant." His voice rattled the windowpanes. "I'm not good enough for you. Me, descendent of princes, caller of the power, summoner of demons."

She could imagine the people downstairs looking up from their breakfast. "Don't do this, Tom. You'll upset Mother."

"Lady Sarah is perfectly capable of taking care of herself."

"Why did you bring Glenn for her then?"

"Why did you wish for it?"

"Me? I didn't wish for Glenn to come here. I don't remember making any wishes really, except for you to go away. You seem to think you can waltz in here, grant the wishes you want to grant and ignore the rest."

"Well, if that's the wish you want." He rose his arms over his head, a cloud of smoke rising from his feet. Never before had he looked so otherworldly, so supernatural. Light reflected at dizzying angles off his silver collar. His bare chest rose and fell in rhythm with his chanting.

"Hey, you wait. You're not going to trick me again. First, that worthless cup I can never show anybody and then tracking down a missing person I could have found myself for a few bucks. No more granting wishes willy-nilly. I order you to stop. I command it."

He hesitated, but he didn't lower his arms. The cloud at his feet rolled in on itself and the windows stopped rattling. "You have wasted enough of my time, little one. Make your last wish and I will grant it."

And you will disappear forever.

Was that what she wanted? She knew what she didn't want--Tom constantly interfered in her life, kept all forward progress at a standstill. Was that what he was doing or was she the one who'd put her life on hold? Was Tom only her excuse? Wasn't it best to leave this fairy tale and return to the real world? Send Tom back where he belonged before he could do any more harm?

Suddenly, she remembered the look on Tom's face the last time he'd prepared to return to his box, and then only for a minute or two. "Won't that mean you'll have to go back to the abyss?"

"That does not concern you, insignificant one," he thundered.

"I...I thought you were afraid--"

"I am afraid of nothing."

Now he was getting on her nerves. Of course he was afraid, he was just too damned stubborn, and too male, to admit it. "In that case, I'll make my wish and we can both get on with our lives."

He looked a little nervous now, not all the moisture that stood out on his body was from the shower.

"Just promise me one thing. From this moment on, other than this wish, there's no more magic. Do you understand? I don't want any more whipping up desserts or conjuring pots of tea. None of it."

Tom darkened, as if he stood in a shadow.

"No more magic. Except for my wishes. Agreed?"

Tom nodded, his chin moving a fraction of an inch. "Your wish, little one."

"Can't I wish we will both be happy? You wouldn't go back to the box then, since that would make you unhappy. Not scared, unhappy."

Tom gave her a look of pure disdain. "Lady Sarah says one must find happiness in one's own heart, not in the presence or absence of others."

"So you're saying you won't grant my wish?"

"I'm saying I cannot."

"Lady Sarah, the new high priestess of genie rule-making."

"You should not mock your mother."

"What do you know about mothers?"

The color rose in Tom's face again, giving new meaning to the term black expression. "You wouldn't know how to make a sensible wish if you tried. A silver goblet full of French wine. Bah! What kind of wish is that? The wish of a child or a drunkard."

"A...a...a child?" she sputtered. He was making her so mad, she couldn't think straight. "I'll have you know that before I met you, I never had more than a couple of sips of wine and most of that at Communion."

"Are you claiming I seduced you with wine? I have been accused of corrupting the innocent before, my Maggie. One more victim added to my slate cannot damn me further into the depths."

Her head pounded with the unfamiliar sensation of uncontrolled rage. "Innocent? How dare you call me such a thing?"

For the life of her, Maggie couldn't figure out why she was so offended, she just knew that she was. "I am an adult, responsible for my actions. I know what wish I'm going to make. I know what you're going to say. I can't unwish wishes, I only get three. So I'm going to wish that all the negative results of my first two wishes disappear and...you, I guess I can say that since you're not entirely negative, you can stay here."

Now she was babbling. She'd totally lost track of what she was saying. She wanted Tom to leave, but she didn't. She wanted him to hold her again, knowing they would make love before an hour had past. She wanted him to magically vanish. He had brought her to this. She was counting on magic to fix her life. "Not stay here, here, but here, out of your box, away from the abyss. Because I want you out of my life. I have to get on with my life, but I don't want you to be unhappy--"

The cloud of smoke rose suddenly and enveloped him. Nothing could have startled her more than to find him standing there, still wearing his jeans, when the cloud cleared.

"I will pack my things and be gone before lunch."

"My wish--"

"Has been granted. All negative results of your first two wishes have vanished."

She looked around the bedroom, taking an accounting. Nothing seemed missing. Her silver goblet stood in its place next to the computer. She looked inside. It was empty.

I'll never see him again, but at least he'll be free to go where he wants.

"We can go down to breakfast then," she said.

Tom nodded solemnly.

When she left the bedroom, still wearing only in her robe, Tom didn't look thrilled at the prospect.

Chapter 10

TOM WAITED until he'd seated Maggie before he made his solemn announcement. "I am leaving today."

Lady Sarah, Glenn and Chet appeared startled and sympathetic. Apparently, Maggie hadn't heard him. She was staring at Chet, who returned his attention to his pancakes. Tom considered turning him into a tree slug, but changed his mind. He wouldn't want to spoil Maggie's appetite, or break her no magic edict this early in the game.

"Before lunch," Tom added. Still no reaction from Maggie. Was it too much to expect a show of regret? He was, after all, fulfilling her wish.

Maggie couldn't take her eyes off Chet. Her forehead wrinkled in the most unusual way. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Eating breakfast," Chet replied between bites. "It's great, as usual, Mother Yates."

Maggie choked. Chet continued to smile. So did Sarah.

Tom dismissed the exchange. It was that way after a memory erase. Some victims acted like asses before enough time passed to make the lack of information irrelevant.

"Why thank you, Chet." Lady Sarah returned his smile, managing not to look quite as insipid. "I'm just happy to have you two back together."

Tom had hated to tamper with Sarah's memory, but it was necessary. To erase the negative effects of his presence in Maggie's life, he had to return everyone's opinion of Chet to its original state. Maggie he would not tamper with. If she wished to renew relations with her ex- and obviously inferior lover, she could do so on her own. He wasn't going to push her.

"So, are you going to need help moving?" At least Tom had a sympathetic ear in Glenn. His presence had resulted in an entirely positive result and his memory needed no adjusting.

"I depart as I arrived, with nothing."

"Tom!"

Finally, he'd gained Maggie's attention. "My clothes then, I suppose."

"I think I have a suitcase someplace you can borrow, dear," Sarah added.

Chet dragged his attention, which he'd divided between his plate and Maggie, to Tom. "If you need any help moving your stuff, let me know. Maggie and I won't be leaving town for a few more days."

"What?" Maggie's voice rose several decibels.

Tom recognized that look on her face. Foot tapping followed. It took all of Tom's self-control not to duck under the table to watch. She was wearing bedroom slippers, which left all of her ankle and much of her arch exposed.

Sarah didn't seem to notice her daughter's distress. "You two are going back to California then?"

"No, way--"

"Yes," Chet interrupted, seemingly oblivious to Maggie, who seethed at his side. "I need Maggie to help me finish out the semester. I don't know how I managed without her. We'll make definite plans for next term. It's too late in the academic season to move before next year."

Tom hadn't considered that. If Maggie went to California, he would have to follow closely. If he didn't, he'd return to the abyss, one wish left unfulfilled. Even after his 50-year sentence, he would not be free. Trapped forever until his Maggie returned to a house that would soon be sold. If she died without fulfilling that wish....

Glenn, his memory unimpaired, looked confused by the conversation. "Where are you off to then, Tom? You didn't mention leaving yesterday. Has something happened?"

Tom opened his mouth, certain a logical solution would come to him before he needed to take another breath. Maggie grabbed his shirt and dragged him out of the chair.

"You have to excuse us," Maggie said, not letting go. "We have a few things to discuss in private."

The instant before panic claimed him, Tom remembered Maggie believed she had no wishes left. She would make no more wishes with their accompanying commands. She could do nothing to him. Obviously, she believed otherwise.

"Tom...Tom..." She sputtered to a stop, her finger waving in his face. "Why the hell don't you have a last name?"

Such an irrelevant tangent. "I chose a first name for myself. If you wanted me to have a last name, you should have--"

"Oh, don't bother. It's just easier to get mad at someone if you have two names to yell at them."

Maggie certainly did look angry and for once Tom had no idea why. She had her three wishes, or so she thought. Chet no longer held her relationship with a "crazy person" against her. Their past association would no longer cause her shame. Maggie could now have her home.

His Maggie in a home without him.

Tom stared at the floor and waited. This was probably for the best. Parting in anger would make the

separation easier for her. He would have to be careful not to be seen when he followed her to California.

"What did you do to them? You promised me no more magic."

So, that was it. She wasn't upset about his leaving only that he might have broken her silly ban on magic. His Maggie never had gotten the hang of wishes. Fortunately, she would not make another until she was an ancient. Tom tried to picture the scene--Maggie gray and bent, learning he had tricked her out of her last wish until it was almost too late. No telling how badly she would botch her last wish.

"I have performed no feats of magic since receiving your instructions."

"Then why is Chet out there acting like I didn't kick him out of my life last night? Why does he think we're an item again? And why is my mother looking at him as if he's her future son-in-law?"

"Memory adjustments have nothing to do--"

"Memory adjustments!" Maggie beat on his chest. "What did you think you were doing?"

Tom stopped her attack. Not that she was hurting him, but he knew when she came to her senses she would regret her actions. Never had he had a more kind and gentle master.

Perhaps he shouldn't have stopped her. Her hands were no longer on him but he held her wrists. He straightened his elbows to gain more space between them. Her bathrobe came undone.

"It was part of your wish, My Maggie."

They stared at each other for another moment. Neither of them moved. Then the telephone rang. The fight went out of her and she stepped into him. Maggie rested her head against the chest she'd been hitting.

Maggie's robe loosened some more and bare flesh pressed against Tom's chest.

"Your wish for me to be happy...I didn't thank you properly for that, My Maggie." *You have a plan. You have to stick to it.* "No master has ever held me in such regard. Now I can remain on this plane of existence."

"What will you do?" she whispered.

Maggie ...if only... "I will accept the job working with Mr. Larsen at the diner. Mrs. Hanson, your piano instructor, has indicated that in exchange for yard work and running errands, I may stay in her spare room and join her for breakfast."

"But you'll grow old, you'll..."

Finally, he gave in. He released her wrists and touched her hair. Soft springs of gold. They caught his fingers, binding him to her. "You have given me a gift, Maggie. Something I've long wished for."

When she stepped away, Tom felt chilled.

"You're not going to do any magic tricks, are you? Whip up a castle or something and a few dozen dancing girls to clean for you?"

Colder than he'd ever felt in the dead of the Minnesota winter. "You don't think I can survive without using magic. You think I'm an incompetent fool. You're not just ashamed to be seen as my lover, you're ashamed to be seen with me period."

The kitchen door slamming shut interrupted them. Maggie looked like a woman who wanted to say much more, but who let curiosity get the better of her.

"No more magic," she warned. Then she tightened her bathrobe and stalked back to the kitchen.

TOM IS LEAVING. Tom is leaving. Maggie staggered toward the kitchen determined to live through this. She was going to enjoy living alone. She was going to love it.

If Tom wasn't ready to be on his own, she'd be in the area at least until fall. She didn't think for one moment he'd actually stick to his promise, but maybe he could learn to curb his magical impulses. He'd have to learn to or he'd land in a world of trouble.

As for Chet, she didn't care what he remembered or didn't remember. Her decision would stand. She wasn't going with him to California or any place else.

"Chet, I..."

Tom was right behind her when she came to a halt before the kitchen table. Her mother was alone.

"Where did everybody go?" Maggie asked.

"Chet went to fill his car with gas."

Her mother stared at Tom oddly. A quick evaluation revealed the reason. Maggie had mussed his hair and his button down shirt had come undone. She tugged on her bathrobe tie again. If Sarah's mind was fuzzy about their relationship, they would both soon remind her.

Which of her problematic beaux to settle in first--Tom at his new digs with reminders that making things go puff was not allowed, or Chet on a big jet back to quakeland?

Glenn made the decision for her when he came into the room, suitcase in hand.

He gave Sarah a kiss on the cheek first and then addressed Maggie. "I'm afraid I have to cut my visit short. An emergency at home."

Maggie hadn't quite adjusted to thinking of Glenn as having any home before Tom spirited him here. "Nothing serious, I hope."

Glenn shrugged. Sarah answered for him. "His son is in the hospital."

Another bit of information for Maggie to digest. She had imagined Glenn to be alone in the world.

Glenn rested his hand on Sarah's shoulder. "It's not like he's a kid or anything, must have turned forty some time back, but my ex worries about him and wants me there."

Married? His son would have been what? Seven or eight when he was stationed in Japan with her mother. Tom pulled out a chair for Maggie to sit.

Glenn seemed to know what she was thinking. "It wasn't your mother's fault. I didn't tell her I was married when we met."

Sarah patted his hand where it still rested on her shoulder.

"I'm not proud of what I did, but, well, I confess I can't truly be sorry either. The only thing I do regret was running away instead of ending it properly. I do love your mother, Maggie. I always have."

A honking horn interrupted him. "Well, I guess Chet's here."

Maggie's mother got up to walk him to the back door. Their kiss was brief. Maggie looked away.

"Good-bye, Lady," Glenn said.

"Good bye, dear."

Maggie gave her mother a count of ten before she set into her. "How could you welcome that man back into your life after he deceived you?"

Sarah shook her head. "Maggie, it was thirty years ago. I don't know why, but when I saw Glenn again, I remembered the hurt he caused but I didn't feel it. What I felt, really experienced again, was the love we shared."

What had gotten in to her mother? Too much time on her hands after Dad's death. And romance novels. They were putting funny ideas into her head. "So now that he's not married, you plan to take up where you left off?"

Her mother's face took on a glow that had been missing before this morning. "This was about closure, Maggie, not about reuniting with a long lost love. For all these years, Glenn needed to say good-bye and he's done that. I thought I needed to tell him how much I hated him, how he had ruined my life, but once I saw him, I knew it wasn't true. I needed to forgive him and to admit to myself that I did make the right decision when I married your father."

"You don't intend to see him again?"

Her mother frowned and pursed her lips. "I can manage my social life, dear. You seem to have your own to handle."

Despite orders to the contrary, Maggie's cheeks grew warm.

"I suggest you start with Tom there. Chet won't be back from driving Glenn to the airport for some time. He said something about seeing Shelley this afternoon."

Shelley. Of course, Chet hadn't just forgotten about her turning down his second proposal of marriage, he'd also forgotten her warning to tread softly with Shelley's husband.

Chapter 11

ALMOST THREE months on his own and Tom still could not lie in his bed in Mrs. Hanson's spare room without thinking of Maggie. How had he managed to bungle things so badly? Even Sarah's beast,

Sam, resting on his lap could not comfort him. He had lost his Maggie. Knowing he was free to go his own way, within limits, failed to compensate.

The first days on his own had been exciting. No master had ever given him this kind of freedom, even before the curse. So much to do and see. Moving into his very own room, reporting to work, walking to the post office, making deliveries. Tom didn't think Maggie appreciated all her village had to offer. Here people welcomed him without suspicion. More importantly, he'd never once seen a head rolling in the streets without a body attached.

Maggie. She was the catch. He had to know where she was at all times. Well, not exactly where, but he'd put a location spell on her. If she neared his distance parameters, or the airport, he would know, but he had to keep out of her way. It seemed to distress her greatly to see him, and Chet maintained contact from California. Sarah mentioned him when they spoke. Tom needed to give them time alone together if his Maggie was to find her own happiness.

If she didn't rejoin Chet soon, Tom would have to consider finding her a mate in Rawley. Sam strained beneath his fingers as Tom considered witnessing a successful courtship in the confines of the small town. Doomed to watch as she fell in love, married and had her family. He could almost wish he was returning to his box.

In the abyss, a flood of memories would join those of his Maggie and help block them out. If he really granted her third wish, he would not have to endure this dreadful weight on his chest--sorrow that he and Maggie would never again share the same bed.

A knock on the door chased the cat from his lap. Tom took his time straightening his hair in the mirror above his dresser. Such a luxury to have a door with a lock and no one making demands, but politely requesting an audience. "Just a moment."

How odd he looked with his hair shorn. He'd never altered his appearance for a master, but he did so for Maggie. She had said it was important for him to fit in. No one else in town wore their hair as long as he. Besides, he was an example now. That's what Coach Therman said when Tom volunteered to help with the grade school soccer team.

Tom put down his comb. Now that his hair was short it insisted on curling and he couldn't fix it. With a final look in the mirror, Tom fastened all but the top button on his white dress shirt.

When he opened the door, the wind rushed from his lungs, leaving a painful vacuum behind. "Maggie."

She stared at him so long he was tempted to touch her to see if she was real. "You cut your hair," Maggie said.

"Not I, but Melanie of the First Cut. Mr. Johnson recommended her."

"I like it." Maggie ran her fingers through his hair. Sparks flew from her fingers to the back of his neck.

Tom stiffened. He hadn't expected physical contact. She straightened his shirt collar, finding the metal one under his shirt and drawing her fingers across it. Tom flinched at the reminder.

"How are you two doing on your own?" She peeked over his shoulder, obviously looking for the cat.

Sam, the deserter, rushed passed her into the hall, leaving him to face her alone.

"Can I come in?" Maggie asked.

What would his new friends suggest? "It would be more appropriate if I were to entertain you in the drawing room."

Maggie pushed past him. "Been getting advice from the post office again, Tom? As usual, they're a few decades behind the times. Besides, Mrs. Hanson had me playing hymns. I don't want to risk her cornering me again."

Most of what she was saying made no sense to him, but he was paying more attention to her feet than to her mouth. "I can play two scales..."

"That's nice, Tom. I came here, because...well, are you avoiding me for some reason?"

"...and one song, but it's very sad. Many men on a river pulling a boat."

What was she wearing on her feet? Why was she walking around half-naked? For his benefit or did everyone see her dressed like this? Her arms and legs were completely bare.

"Because if you are, there really isn't any reason for it. I'm not angry with you. I've straightened everything out with Chet, so you have no reason to worry on that score."

One foot was tapping now. Delightfully half-naked feet with pink polish on the nails.

The tapping stopped. "Tom, I'm trying to talk to you. Would you please look me in the face."

The last finally got his attention. Mr. Larsen had told him the same thing his first day at work. Always look the customer in the eye. Maggie had such beautiful blue eyes. "What are you wearing?"

Maggie blushed pink and looked down. "Sandals."

"They suit you."

"Which is why I've come." She held out a bag. "Mother sent these. Now that summer is here, she thought you could use shorts and things, for your days off, that is. How is work going?"

"Fine." He took the bag, avoiding direct contact with her. He wanted to say more, do more. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her. Remove the sandals from her feet and pull her onto the bed with him.

If you want Maggie to be happy, you must stick to the plan.

She was staring again, this time at his chest. He looked down but could see nothing wrong. This morning he had showered and he'd spilled nothing on himself at breakfast. He managed not to tug at his collar. He wore button-down shirts to keep it covered, but she knew it was there, the badge of shame he could not remove, forever reminding him of his servitude.

He turned, setting his face in stone to keep her from seeing how very much he wanted her to stay. Maggie was sitting on his bed.

"Is this why you came?" he asked. "To ensure my body is adequately covered? Or maybe you need assurances? I have not been practicing magic." Except for the location spell, of course, but that didn't count. Making certain Maggie didn't set foot out of town was a necessity, and thinking about her feet was a mistake. Tom returned to flattening his hair.

"I wanted to see how you were doing on your own. I've tried to catch you at work, but you always seem to be busy. When I came by here the other evening--"

"I watch Andy now until his father comes home from work. His mother has been delivered of a child and must rest. I have taken another job, at the cinema in the evenings. The regular projectionist is on vacation for the month of July. It is a simple task, the equipment easy to understand, and..." he stopped himself before he could reveal more.

"That makes what? Four jobs? Is this getting to be too much for you, Tom? If it is, all you have to do is say so. Working is a new experience for you, so I'd understand--"

"Lonely," he said, not certain why he'd said the word. Maybe because he didn't want her to think he was a failure at living by his wits and the sweat of his labor. He would rather admit to a more human emotion. "I became lonely at night. I enjoy watching the movies."

Maggie continued to perch uneasily on the edge of the bed, making no move for the door. Tom squared his shoulders, determined to endure her presence.

"I may not have a profession, Maggie, but I can take care of myself. Mr. Johnson--"

"The mayor?"

"Yes, I have explained to him my difficulty with your security system."

"Social security? What did you tell him?"

"That I do not know where I was born or who my parents are, that I have never attended a school, and the only name I have is Tom."

Soon the whole world would know, or at least the state of Minnesota. He didn't have a real name. Maggie would find her happiness with someone she would not be ashamed of. Chet, or someone like him.

"What's an amnesiac?" He really did need to get a book of words. Until now, he'd depended too much on Maggie. He had to be his own man.

"Someone who has lost his memories."

Tom nodded, now understanding. "I have not lost them, but perhaps it is best others believe so. Mr. Johnson said he would check into the matter and discover what is necessary for me to obtain a number so I might work. For now I have a room here and a morning meal in exchange for my work in the house and the garden. I wash dishes at the diner in exchange for lunch and some small items at the drug store.

After school I care for Andy and share the evening meal with his family. My nights are spent being entertained by your Hollywood in exchange for, what did Mike call it, money under the table. I'm not supposed to tell anyone. On Sunday I attend church. You have not been attending. Pastor Martin asked about you, but I told him I no longer sleep in your bed and so cannot demand your presence.

"So you see, My Maggie, I can take care of myself. Sarah could have left a message for me to pick up the clothing. She visits Andy's mother during the day. Why are you really here?"

"I...I missed Sam."

Her words stung. To express interest in him was too shameful even in private. "I will return the cat if that is what you wish."

"I don't have any more wishes, remember?"

Tom fought to keep his anger from showing. "I can count to three, My Maggie. One, a silver goblet full of wine. Two, a happy Lady Sarah. Three, all negative affects of my visitation erased. If you now wish me to return to the abyss, you are too late. To wish is an expression used by your people to express a desire."

"It was only a joke, Tom. Of course, I don't want you to go back there, and I want you to keep Sam. He did follow you here and Mom doesn't seem to miss him. Apparently, she's still planning to sell the house."

Once Sarah was gone, Maggie would have no reason to stay. He would have to follow her wherever she went, of course, but it would have to be in secret. Only here in Rawley could he allow her to see him. Shelley had explained the term to him--stalker. Tom did not want to stalk Maggie. It would trouble her.

"You had hoped she would stay. If you really believe that would make her happy, perhaps I could--"

"No, Tom, no more magic. I guess I don't understand how she could forgive a man for lying to her that way."

Tom stared at his feet. He understood Glenn all too well. If it would bring Maggie to him, no lie would be too large or too black. She condemned a man for such a small thing. Many men took more than one wife and now Glenn had none.

What would Maggie think if she knew he was a thief? They might not chop off people's heads in the streets of Minnesota, at least he'd never seen it done, but they had laws against such things he was certain. Mr. Johnson had mentioned he would have to answer questions to obtain this powerful number. Would they ask him about his past? Would they allow him to remain if he told them he was a thief?

In the face of such questions, getting a real job no longer seemed important. A job was only a more efficient way of filling his days. His time might be as well spent performing small services and deeds. What he wanted was to fill his days, his bed, his heart with Maggie.

MAGGIE STOOD, leaving Tom's bed feeling lighter than when she arrived. Talking with Tom again seemed to restore her balance. Maybe that was why she'd sought him out. Her subconscious knew she needed this. Talking with someone who had a fresh perspective, someone who wasn't judgmental. Chet would have launched into some theory about the kind of woman who dated married men. Or mentally unbalanced men. Not helpful at all.

With Tom she walked the short distance from his bartered room to his afternoon job of dirty dishes, a duty performed in exchange for a meal and all the toothpaste and soap he could use.

If she observed Tom as a stranger, she would have labeled him as almost dysfunctional. Not a fair assessment. He functioned at his own level, and she was the only one who wished he was more. Everyone else accepted him as he was. But a dishwasher/babysitter hardly seemed an appropriate companion for a professional woman with a master's degree--still she had sought him out.

Why? Maggie had been asking that question ever since Tom moved out of the house. So much happened that day. Glenn walked out of her mother's life again, yet Sarah continued to sing while she washed the dishes. Chet returned to California, without Maggie, at her insistence, but she didn't feel like singing at all. It didn't make sense.

How could her mother be happy when the man she professed to have always loved walked out of her life again? More importantly, why didn't sending Chet away bring Maggie peace? She couldn't help but

think it had something to do with Tom.

Peaceful didn't describe her since Tom slung Sarah's old duffel bag over his shoulder and walked out before lunch, as threatened. Since then, she planned her days to intersect his, never succeeding until now when she confronted him directly. She hadn't even known about Tom caring for Andy after school. Had Tom asked Shelley not to tell her?

Maybe she was making this too hard. It could be Tom didn't need or want her in his life. Maybe it was Tom's own wish he fulfilled that day.

"How are you getting along with Andy's father?" she asked, keeping the conversation professional.

Tom shrugged. "He is an angry man, but sad too, I think. The new child worries him. He fears he does not have room for another."

"The house is too small?"

"No, his heart."

An interesting observation if overly poetic. Based on Shelley's descriptions her husband, Andrew was depressed. Anger was a common symptom of depression in men. Maggie had only met the man once. He was even more adept at avoidance than Tom.

A half block from the diner Tom stopped and looked around. "You will want to leave. I use the back entrance."

She wasn't going to let him get away so easily. She had enough to do without chasing him around town another three months. "When will I see you again?"

"Wouldn't that defeat the purpose of your third wish?" He sounded angry, his color high against his crisp white shirt. "I believe the idea was for you not to see me again. You said, 'I want you out of my life. I have to get on with my life.' A jinn and the happiness of one Maggie Yates are mutually exclusive."

Had she really said that? She remembered something of the sort. Just her luck that genies, or was that jinn, had memories like elephants.

"You want to live a normal life," he continued, "and so do I. I must not see you any more, Maggie Yates."

So that was the way it was. They had become enemies during the past months without her knowing. Had something happened since he'd moved? Was someone taking advantage? The urge was strong and sudden. Her hand curled into a fist at her side as she fought to keep from touching him. She wanted to see for herself that no one had hurt him.

His hand was on the handle now. Sounds from the kitchen and the smell of grease and fries came through the screen door. "I will not stand in your way, Maggie Yates. Don't you stand in mine."

Tom slammed the door behind him, leaving her to count the holes in the screen.

She didn't like how he'd switched to using her full name, like he was perpetually angry with her and calling her on the carpet each time he said her name.

My Maggie, what would she give to hear him call her that again.

Well, she wasn't going to leave things like this. She was responsible for Tom, and despite his bravado, she wasn't certain he could function without her.

Before she could leave the alley and step onto main street, the two most powerful men in town, the major and the head of the board of education, rounded the corner and moved to follow Tom into the back of the diner. Rawley was a small town, but its school district included most of the county.

She hesitated, wondering if she could get away with ducking the other way before Mr. Johnson and Mr. Bergen spotted her. No such luck.

Mr. Bergen of the board of education smiled and extended his hand. "So, Miss Yates, are you serious about that application of yours?"

She must be serious. Otherwise, she wouldn't be trying to use telekinesis to make her cutoffs grow to cover another six inches of her thighs.

"Yes, sir, I am. I would have to find another part-time position in the area, but I'm looking into it."

"We always like to have our young people come back and work in Rawley," Mr. Bergen said. "We're going to breakfast. Would you care to join us?"

"Through the back door?"

Ben Johnson, the mayor, frowned. "Is something wrong with back doors, Ms. Yates? We were planning to speak to Tom on the way to our table. A very busy man, our Tom." He said the word "our" as if the town had recently taken possession.

"Yes," Mr. Bergen broke in, "we were so impressed by his theatrical presentation on history for the third grade that we would like him to repeat the performance this fall for more classes. Is that usual, Miss Yates, for someone with amnesia to have such extensive recall in another area?"

"I'm not really an expert--"

"I suspect this Gulf War syndrome thing," said Mr. Johnson. "He has the look of a marine to me. Has the build too, just needs a decent haircut. I've called the sheriff to arrange getting fingerprints. Wouldn't be surprised if he has a security clearance. All the bright ones do. We think a lot of Tom down at town hall. I'll pull up an ID on him eventually."

Of course, he wouldn't, Maggie knew, not unless Tom did some magic juggling of the records. Tom had become a fixture at the post office, but what on earth was he up to down at town hall? At least they couldn't deport him, they wouldn't have any idea where to send him.

"He'll be supervised, of course," Mr. Bergen added, "since we can't do a complete background check. We would have asked you for a recommendation, but Tom indicated you haven't known him the required number of years."

Mr. Johnson spoke as if she weren't standing there. "I suspect that after her years out West, Ms. Yates doesn't hang out with dish washers in small town diners."

Before Mr. Bergen followed him through the screen door, he squeezed her arm. "Don't worry about the mayor, Maggie. Ben has nothing to do with the hiring process. I'll get back to you in two or three weeks. We know you have plans to make, and will let you know as soon as we've made a decision."

Maggie found herself blinking in the July sunshine, wondering how she'd become the wayward daughter and Tom the favorite son.

THREE MONTHS LATER, Maggie found herself blinking again, this time at her mother.

"So how do you two like working together now that school has started?" Sarah asked. Dressed in one of her few business suits, she looked out of place in her homey kitchen.

Maggie stole a sideways glance at Tom, who was sitting beside her with his mouth full of pancakes. Just like Tom to have a good excuse to leave the explaining to her. Her mother was standing over them like a prison warden.

"We don't work together, Mom. I'm only at the school three times a week. Tom less than that. We hardly see each other." Maggie glanced at her watch and brushed crumbs from the sleeve of her suit. She had a half-hour before she had to leave.

Applying for the part-time counseling position at the school had been a whim. Something Chet had said about getting back to the source, to the students, had struck a cord with her. Not with Chet, of course, but she felt ready for the challenge of working in a school again. Life at a big university had lost its appeal. That her position brought her into proximity with Tom was purely accidental, as was the way his knee brushed against hers every time he reached for something.

Why the contact sent shivers up her back, she wasn't certain. The feel of jeans against her nylons shouldn't have that effect. Probably some blasted spell Tom had put on her.

He reached for the syrup again and she bit her lower lip to keep from gasping. When he added a dollop to his plate, she up ended the bottle for him. A nice lake of syrup would put an end to all of this reaching and rubbing.

Tom gave her that all suffering look, like the one when she'd hit him in the face with a snowball that first time. "Maggie, what are you doing?"

Now she knew he wasn't as innocent as he looked. He was a conniving jinn, even if she didn't believe he was evil. "As if you didn't know, you little--"

"Margaret Yates." Sarah removed the syrup from the table. "You behave."

Tom followed his knee brush with a squeeze of her upper thigh. Maggie opened her mouth to report the violation, but decided the situation had already descended to the kindergarten level and her mother

was losing patience. Tom was finishing her pancakes for her, ones that weren't drowned in syrup.

Sarah cleared the table, despite Tom's moving fork. "If you two have stopped playing, I have an ulterior motive for asking you both here."

Tom sat at attention now, his hands folded before him like an obedient schoolboy. Maggie wasn't fooled. He rubbed his tennis shoe against her leather pump, forcing her to move her chair, which earned her a glare from her mother. Tom had been eating too many meals with third graders.

Maggie stood to retrieve her coffee mug. "So, what's up?"

"I've decided not to wait until I sell the house. I'm going to move now."

Maggie knew they were coming, but the words still shocked her. She had finally reconnected with her mother after all of these years. It was like leaving home again, only this time her mother was the one doing the leaving. "Are you sure you want to do that? Will you have enough money without selling? Where are--"

"Maggie." Sarah no longer looked impatient. She sat at the table across from Tom and Maggie joined her. "Now that it's October, I don't want to deal with another winter. I know, you and Tom could help, but it's time for me to go."

Tom's eyes had lost their playful sparkle. He reached across the table and took Maggie's hand, but he spoke to Sarah. "Will Maggie go with you?"

Her mother chuckled at that. "I think Maggie is old enough to get along without me, don't you?"

Maggie squeezed his hand, hoping to reassure him. She succeeded in encouraging him. His other hand joined his first. She pulled slowly away, then stood again to refill her mug. Why did he have to look so blasted seductive in a white, button-down shirt?

Sarah joined Maggie at the counter and started another pot of coffee. "I did have an idea along those lines, which is why I asked you here before I leave. I want you to house-sit for me, Maggie."

"I can pay rent and--"

"Taking care of the utilities will be more than enough, dear. I was trying to say the house is so big and I wouldn't mind if you asked Tom to share the house."

The image came to mind much too easily. Working together with Tom, living with him, sleeping in the single bed just up the stairs.

"No," they both said at once.

"Mrs. Hanson needs Tom there," Maggie said.

"I wouldn't mind either." Tom finished a fraction of a second behind her.

Tom withdrew his hands and stood. He was blushing. Maggie reached out to reassure him. Her hand met his smooth cheek, and the truth came in a rush.

He didn't shave, he didn't have to, and not because of some genetically inherited lack of facial hair. He didn't have an explanation of course, just observations. Hair didn't grow on his face, his fingernails never needed trimming. The hair on his head remained the same exact length Melanie had trimmed it.

As for the rest of his body, for every lunar month he aged a day. How long had he been with her, out of his box? A few weeks only in this house, less than six months total. Tom had aged six days since she met him. If he remained on this plane, how old would he be in twenty years? In another thirty, when like her mother, Maggie was thinking about retiring? She didn't want to do the math.

"Of course, Mrs. Hanson depends on my presence." Tom intoned the words and retrieved his cup half filled with cold orange tea from the sink. "Maggie has no need of me."

"I'm sure you two young people can sort that out. I have a plane to catch."

"So soon?" Again, Maggie and Tom spoke in unison. It was beginning to get on Maggie's nerves. Tom swore he couldn't read her mind.

"I've been packing and sorting for months. Neither one of you should be surprised. I'll be renting a condo in Myrtle Beach for the time being, giving it a test before I buy. In the mean time, Tom?"

Tom bowed, still keeping an eye on his cold tea.

"I want you to take care of Sam for me. I'm afraid the weather change between here and the Carolinas would do him in."

"My pleasure, Lady Sarah. And what do you have for Maggie?" Tom was smiling now.

It wasn't an evil grin on her mother's face, not exactly, more like that of a plotter. "Nothing but advice. Maggie needs a date for the Halloween dance. I suggest she ask you before some other young lady beats her to it. I have plenty of old costumes in the upstairs closet. I saved them just for you, Maggie. I know how you love to play dress up."

Maggie groaned. A car horn interrupted her.

"You know how I hate good-byes. I've got a ride all set to the airport, packed and ready to go."

Several kisses and hugs later, Maggie and Tom were left facing each other in the kitchen. Maggie understood about hating good-byes, but she hated Halloween more. Her mother knew that, so why had she made certain she couldn't weasel out of the dance?

"My Maggie would like to ask me on a date?"

"No, Tom, it's not like that."

"Oh, of course, I must ask Maggie. That's the way it's done. I didn't know about the Halloween dance. I am helping with a party for the children after school that day next week."

"That's what I'm doing too, Tom. It's a party for the older students later in the evening. I'm going to be what is called a chaperone. I supervise the activities, make certain they don't get out of hand..."

Tom wore that puzzled expression again.

"I will act as an example for the younger people to follow."

That Tom understood. "A solemn honor. I will endeavor to live up to the responsibility."

Maggie suppressed her sigh and took Tom's cup. It wasn't his fault she hated Halloween--the dressing up, the scary talk, the pretended belief in the supernatural....

Not pretend any longer. She believed, at least in one jinn.

"You'll need a costume. Mother might have something of my brothers' that would fit you."

"What is the purpose of this costume?"

Maggie thought of it as a way of showing off. Someone always had a costume flasher or more expensive than hers. When she was younger, her mom had whipped hers out on the old Singer a few days before.

"There are various theories, but children like to pretend to be someone they would like to become in the future or what they would become one day if they could. Of course, the choice is limited by what clothes are available."

"I will give the matter thought."

"And consult the post office?"

"Yes, My Maggie, I will consult the post office." He smiled at what had become a joke between them.

When he slipped a hand around her waist, she pressed a fresh cup of tea into his hands. He took the hint graciously and stepped back, using his free hand to examine the box of tea bags. He had expressed a preference for anything British or Indian.

Tom looked very much at home in her mother's kitchen, his legs crossed at the ankle, leaning against the kitchen sink. She didn't catch on at first, thinking he was studying the box of tea. Then she noted he was looking over the box at her legs.

With a tug, Maggie tried to lengthen her knee-length skirt. "Don't forget, you promised no magic. Not even on Halloween."

Chapter 12

MAGGIE HESITATED, her hand inches from Mrs. Hanson's front door. Why had she let her mother rope her in to this? Apart from polite greetings, Maggie and Tom had spoken exactly twice since he'd moved.

Since their meeting last week in her mother's kitchen, it had become worse. If he crossed her mind whenever she saw pancakes, she could have endured, but every time she ate breakfast, visions of Tom, clothed and unclothed, filled her head. The moments that stretched between one breakfast and the next became an exercise in concentrating on work.

If she could forget him for weeks, even for days at a time, she could have stayed away, but she was

obsessed. She couldn't go for more than an hour without thinking about Tom. This felt worse than when she'd suspected a psychotic breakdown. At least then, she'd had her apparition. She'd had Tom.

After squaring her shoulders, she knocked on the door. Closure had worked for her mother. It would work for Maggie. Sarah had moved on. She was dating other men. She implied she did, anyway.

Mrs. Hanson answered the door, peeking first, then swinging it open wide. "My, don't you make a cute witch, dear."

Maggie tugged at her skirt, wondering again how Shelley had talked her into going to the Halloween party as a witch. She could only pray someone had explained the concept to Tom.

Although they worked in the same school system, they traveled in separate circles. Maggie worked at the high school two and half days a week as a counselor and filled in as a part-time special education teacher in the next county. The driving didn't leave much free time.

Tom, who had only three jobs since the theater projectionist returned, worked periodically at the grade school. Maggie had observed one of his historical theatricals and had been impressed. He was strictly a volunteer and seemed to enjoy working with the children.

Mrs. Hanson's smile drew Maggie farther into the house. No reason why she should be shy. It wasn't like this was a date. She was only giving Tom a ride.

"He's in the piano room relaxing, dear. The poor boy is quite exhausted from this afternoon. I hope you two enjoy yourselves. He deserves an adult evening after spending so much time on the children's party."

Maggie didn't know why she felt she had to explain. "This isn't a date, Mrs. Hanson. We're chaperones."

Music sounded from the living room. Tom enjoyed classical music? That surprised her, but maybe classical was all Mrs. Hanson had to offer on her ancient stereo.

The sight of a man dressed in black, seated at the piano stopped her. The lights on the stereo amplifier weren't lit.

"I thought you weren't going to use any magic."

The familiar strains of Moonlight Sonata ended in a dissonant jangle of cords and Tom stood. He didn't turn to face her, but she recognized the black curls beneath his top hat and the swirling grace of his arm when he swept aside the black cape.

"Magic doesn't make the piano work, Maggie." Before she could stop him, Tom had lifted the top of the upright to show her the inner workings. "It's these little hammers on strings inside"

Abruptly he stopped his explanations and his body tensed. "You know how a piano works, Maggie. You used to take lessons."

"She always was a slow student," Mrs. Hanson said. "Never did like to practice and cheated on her assignment book. More than once I caught her erasing numbers and tearing out pages to avoid Bach."

Maggie blushed at the memory of childhood transgressions. Finally, Tom turned to face her, a tentative smile on his face. He addressed Mrs. Hanson. "Bach is most difficult. I prefer your Mr. Beethoven."

"My most gifted student is my last," she said as she shuffled from the room.

Tom was dressed as a magician. The inside of his cape was bright red satin and a plastic cane rested on the top of the piano. Underneath, he sported a well-worn tuxedo, the costume a hand-me-down from some citizen of Rawley, no doubt.

"Mrs. Hanson says you've been entertaining the children."

"Magic tricks," he replied with a bow. "All done without magic and only the tricks. To please you."

That smile again, as if they had just met and he wasn't certain of his welcome. "You did not attend."

"It was my day to be out of town."

He nodded, accepting her explanation. "The children had a great deal of fun. Such wonderful games. I understand more such celebrations follow in the next two months."

"Thanksgiving and Christmas." The words caught in her throat. She wanted to share them with him.

"Yes, Pastor Martin has been trying to explain your mysteries to me, but this All Hallows Eve, honoring the dead, I understand. Now the celebration for the grownups begins, but still no real magic." Tom flared his cape and drew flowers from the air.

She expected a plastic bouquet. Instead, the smell of flowers filled her head. Before she could make any accusations, Tom retrieved the pin from the florist box.

Which of his advisors at the post office had suggested flowers? What he should do next, escaped Tom. He shrugged his massive shoulders and let her take the pin and flowers from him.

Attaching them to her tattered black dress seemed a futile effort. Why hadn't she come as a fairy princess or that Amudala person from Star Wars? Someone with beauty and style. Instead, she wore black polyester with slits that extended from below her knees to her waist. Black satin shorts protected her modesty and a black hat with a limp peak hid her hair. Thank goodness, she hadn't had time for makeup or the fake crooked nose Shelley had offered.

Tom was unusually silent as he walked her to her new car. Chet had arranged to sell her old clunker for her and had promised to mail the check next week. The Jeep seemed extravagant considering she'd just started at a regular job again, but it didn't pay to have unreliable transportation with a Minnesota winter only a few weeks away.

She shivered on the walk to the car. The temperature seemed to have dropped since she'd arrived. Before she got settled, she pulled her sweater over her costume. The bright blue cardigan ruined the effect, but considering how fond she was of the outfit, it didn't matter.

After seeing her to the driver's side seat, Tom shut the door and spoke to her through the half open window. "You said a Halloween costume should reflect one's secret desires."

Tom's desires were clear enough. He chaffed under her no magic edict.

"I've heard that, Tom, yes."

"So, Maggie Yates, why are you dressed as a wicked woman?"

THEY RODE IN silence in her car. He had obviously said something wrong. He found himself crossing his arms over his chest and raising his chin. The woman didn't believe he could drive. One of the many deficiencies he needed to fill. An easy thing to do with magic, slow and difficult without.

Tom swallowed past a painful lump that had developed in his throat. He had made a promise to his Maggie and he didn't want to break it. He also didn't want to be such a disappointment to her, a most difficult thing for a jinn pretending to be a mortal.

Shelley had said this was an important night for Maggie, her first social function with her new employer. A celebration to honor the dead, Pastor Martin had called it. Tom frowned. Not a happy prospect for a party--all of his past masters, returned from the grave, their hatred, fears, and grudges intact. He hoped none of them would find him in Minnesota.

Chet had been notified of the celebration, but gave no indication if he would leave California to attend. If Tom had more notice, he could have found a date for Maggie among the men she worked with at the schools, but Sarah had surprised him and he said yes before he had a chance to think. Maggie had extended the invitation in an impersonal manner. He hadn't dared hope she wanted him for anything other than an escort.

Perhaps while she danced she would attract the interest of others. Her dress was designed to display her charms. The thought displeased him when obviously it should not. This was what he wanted, for Maggie to attract a mate, someone to make her happy.

Escort or not, they must speak or Maggie would not have a pleasant evening. Her knuckles were turning white from gripping the steering wheel. "I am pleased, my Maggie--"

"Just Maggie, for tonight, Tom, okay? No masters or clouds of smoke tonight. Okay?" Maggie kept her eyes on the road, her frown as dark as her dress.

When she parked the car, she stopped him before he could get out to open her door. Her hand on his bare neck caused shivers he couldn't quite contain. When she leaned across the stick shift to kiss his cheek, he groaned with the pleasure of it. She was a very wicked woman.

"Thanks for coming to this with me. It's awkward to come to these things alone. Everyone expects that after ten years I should have accomplished great deeds or have a family or something to show for my time."

Tom thought a moment before he spoke. Her words weren't always clear. "And you have brought

me? I am flattered, Maggie."

"Yes, no job, no husband, no kids, but what the hell, I've got a genie." Her smile appeared genuine, but her eyes didn't dance.

"Jinn," he replied, his correction automatic. Sarcasm, definitely sarcasm. Andy had explained it to him. The young often had a grasp on what adults considered their domain. "Tonight, I am a magician who cannot practice magic."

So bitter his thoughts had become. The abyss called to him. Maybe the dead were coming to visit him after all.

By the time they entered the high school gym and pinned on their badges, Maggie had grown even more lifeless. The crowd and the activities excited Tom, but Maggie found a chair and sat. "If any one asks--"

"I'm Tom," he said, reading his name badge upside down, "and I'm a guest."

"Everyone lies at these things, so if anyone asks for details, feel free to embellish. No one will remember in the morning."

So much for her holding him in high regard. She expected him to lie.

The gym, where Tom had this afternoon entertained the children, had been transformed. The large overhead lamps had been extinguished, replaced by those that flashed bits of colored light. The music was not composed by Bach or Tom's personal favorite, Mr. Beethoven, but the beat was compelling.

He wanted to see her skirt swirl. She wore practical shoes with low heels that hid her arches. She had no veils to remove, as Tandia did when she entertained her father's customers, but Maggie's dress revealed much already.

"Aren't you going to dance?" He looked at Maggie's feet with optimism, but they didn't move in rhythm as his did.

Maggie no longer looked listless, but anxious. After removing her hat and his, she stood and took his arm. "You're right, I'd better come with you. We can get some food first and then I'll teach you how to dance."

Dance? Had a master ever asked him to perform a more humiliating act in public? Reluctantly, Tom followed when Maggie tugged on his arm. He regretted the hour he'd promised to leave magic behind, because now it was his fervent wish to disappear between the floorboards.

FOR SOMEONE WHO had been dead set against setting foot on the dance floor only two hours ago, Tom had caught on fast. Maggie could almost see the mental process in his eyes. When he figured out they would dance together and dancing involved putting his arms around her waist, there was no stopping him.

She wasn't the only person who enjoyed Tom's dancing. More than once when they tried to take a breather on the sidelines, someone grabbed him by the arm and pull him onto the dance floor. Even total strangers, of which there were many, amid the public county school staff and alumni. Over the arm of her current dance partner, she watched Tom whirl the mayor's wife around the room.

A few moments later, Tom appeared at her partner's back. "Excuse, me." He said quite politely. "I have returned to claim, My Maggie."

Maggie didn't bother to correct him. Mr. Nygard, her tenth grade chemistry teacher, smiled and released his hold on her.

Tom whisked her away, barely losing a beat. "What's a boy toy?"

"That's an odd question," Maggie said, not wanting to think, but enjoy being in Tom's arms again. "Where did you hear the term?"

"A young woman I was dancing with earlier."

"The mayor's wife."

"No, a young girl, not an old foggy. Is that a derogatory term, old foggy?"

"Not something to say to the mayor's wife, or to me, for that matter."

"She applied the term quite generally when she asked who my date was for the evening. I know you said this wasn't a date, but you did encourage me to lie."

"Hmm," was all that came out. It was a slow dance and Tom had a way with slow dances. He had a way of making her feel they were in bed, only standing up. He pressed his entire body against hers, leaving no doubt that bed was exactly where he wanted to take her. No matter how thirsty she got, she would not send Tom for another drink and give the other ladies a chance at him.

"When I pointed you out, she asked me how old I was," Tom said. "I didn't have any idea what would be appropriate. When I said fifty she laughed, so I said twenty-one. I didn't want her thinking I was illegal. That's when she said I was a boy-toy. Yours. Should either of us feel insulted?"

"Next time why don't you say thirty? It's a nice round number."

"As you wish, My Maggie," he whispered. Next, he kissed her ear and pressed her more firmly against him with a hand against the small of her back. "I don't believe Mrs. Hanson would approve of me entertaining a young woman in my bed. Is Sarah home this evening?"

Maggie looked over her shoulder, expecting the principal would show up at any minute and tell them not to dance so close. She giggled and whispered back to him. "She's gone until Christmas."

Tom had stopped dancing. He pushed her away from him, the arm that held her waist straight and stiff. "We have company. Or rather you do, Maggie Yates."

Her blasted full name again. What had happened now? A glance over her shoulder provided the answer. Chet. Hadn't she told him to leave, twice? Okay, in all fairness, she could only count once, what with Tom's memory alternations. "What is he doing here?"

A malevolent gleam appeared in Tom's eye and his lip curled. "If you don't wish to see him--"

That's all she needed. Tom turning Chet into a toad in front of everyone. Now that she worked here, she was even less eager to have Tom get the whole town talking.

"I'm happy to see Chet," she said through gritted teeth. *What's the interfering bastard want now?*

Tom didn't release his hold or start dancing. He held her in a formal dance pose, like they were in eighth grade and he was afraid to let their bodies touch. Tension radiated through his warming palm and down her back.

When he finally spotted them, Chet raised his arm to wave. At the same moment, Andrew, Shelley's husband, tapped Tom's shoulder to cut in. Dance with her new boss or her ex-fiancé. Was her life the only one filled to the brim with these challenges?

Tom solved the dilemma for her. "Mr. Summers, Miss Yates would be most pleased to dance with you."

Considering their rocky start, she was surprised to see the men exchange genuine smiles. Tom released her to the principal's arms. With a hand still resting on her shoulder, Tom whispered in her ear, sending a wave of tingles down her back. "I'll deal with Chet."

"Yes," she whispered, still caught up in the magic of Tom's breath on her neck.

Throat clearing from Andrew returned her to reality. "I asked Tom to see that you saved one of your dances for me."

Damn, what did Tom mean he'd deal with Chet. Maggie almost twisted an ankle maneuvering to search for the two men. Tom had promised no magic. Chet should be able to handle anything Tom threw his way as long as he didn't cheat. When she stepped on her boss's foot, she returned her attention to business.

"Sorry," Andrew said, holding her more stiffly. "I won't keep you long. I just wanted to tell you how glad we are that you introduced us to Tom."

"You are? I mean...ah, of course, you are. Tom's very good with children."

"And parents."

Maggie stopped searching for Tom and started to listen. Andrew, in a daring effort to save his feet, came to a halt in the middle of the dance floor. "I hadn't realized how bad things were until Tom started to take care of Andy for us."

This didn't sound good. Maggie bit her tongue to keep from jumping to Tom's defense. The band had switched to the monster mash. Neither of them moved.

"It sort of snuck up on me, I guess. All the pressure at work, the baby coming. Then Chet called and asked about the tests Shelley ordered for Andy behind my back. I got so mad I couldn't think straight."

Everything came down at once. I stormed through the door that night ready to confront her. I mean, I'm the expert in these things. I'm the husband here. Who is she to say something is wrong with my boy?"

His hands tightened uncomfortably on Maggie's shoulders.

"Andy has a learning disability," she said, hoping to diffuse some of his tension by labeling it. "It's not terribly severe, and he has great compensating skills."

"Damn it, that's not the point, Maggie. My son is fine. It's me who has the problem and it took a total stranger to show me that." He took a tentative step or two, as if deciding whether to continue. "When I got home I was so mad all I could see was Shelley. One minute I was telling her what a mess she was making of our lives, and the next Tom was shoving me out the front door."

Maggie glanced around for Tom again. No sign of him.

"That's when it hit me. I should be the one protecting my wife. She was there with a new baby. Andy was at the table doing his homework. The last thing she should have to worry about is her husband coming home and yelling at her in front of the kids." Tears shone in his eyes now.

Maggie looked away again, searching for Tom among the dancing couples. Through Andrew's eyes she was seeing a new Tom, one she suspected most of Rawley saw. He wasn't that little boy she'd seen in the cloud of smoke. He was a protector, and he could be a husband.

"Tom's a great guy, Maggie, the greatest. But I want to be the one to take care of my family. I don't want them afraid of me. Do you think you could find someone...you know...who could, well, I could talk to...we could talk to?"

"I can recommend someone you can call for personal and family counseling, and we can go over Andy's report together."

"Thanks, Maggie, for this and for Tom. I don't know what we would have done without him. He's been a real source of strength for Shelley through all of this and a real friend to Andy. I just hope that...well...we won't need him quite so much from now on."

Maggie wanted to thank Andrew, too, but she wasn't sure how or what words to say. The realization remained half formed in her mind. After Andrew said his good-byes and left her next to an enormous bowl of bright orange punch, she started to look for Tom again.

Her concerns about Tom seemed petty now. He had a gift when it came to working with kids. Anyone who could figure out how to use a computer in less than a day would have no problem getting a degree eventually. Tom could read. She'd never seen him write, but he could type. If he started at the community college level, she could work around his lack of school records.

If that didn't work out, if Tom wanted to wash dishes and bring meals to shut-ins for the rest of his life, who was she to argue? Argue? Since when did she measure people's worth by the number of their degrees or the size of their paycheck? He was a wonderful, sweet man, and he kept her feet warm.

On her way across the gym floor, Ben Johnson nodded stiffly. "So where's our boy tonight? He told me he was coming with you."

Obviously, the mayor disapproved. Maggie didn't have time to worry about his opinion. She needed to find Tom.

As she stood scanning the crowd, she wiggled her toes in her sensible black shoes, finally admitting to herself she'd worn them instead of her sexy black sandals with the spaghetti straps so she wouldn't draw Tom's interest.

When Tom was around, she was happy. That had to count for something. Maybe for more than living in a reality she'd always believed was true. Tom was here, he was real. What was she doing but holding his past against him?

No wonder the mayor was angry with her. She would have been the first to protest if people in the town had rejected Tom because of his dark complexion, his foreign accent or his unorthodox ways. Instead, they had embraced him. He'd won them over by...by...it was hard to pin down how. Just by his being Tom, she guessed. But she had judged him as being unsuitable, not good enough, just because he was several thousand years old and used to live in a box.

Maggie started to move faster. The lights were turned low, an old disco light hung on a raised basketball hoop sending dizzying light bouncing off bits of costumes.

She had to stop thinking of him as tall, dark and cursed, and start thinking of him as tall, dark and sweet, like everyone else did. Or indispensable, like Mrs. Hanson who depended on him to buy her groceries and weed the garden she couldn't bare to see go wild. Or Andrew and Shelly whose marriage he might yet help save. Tom had probably touched dozens of other people she didn't know about.

Damn, she was going crazy. She was in love with a myth and it was starting to make sense.

Twice she thought she'd found him only to discover vampire teeth behind the black cape. Why had she been so afraid of Tom? His magic seemed benign now compared to all the dangers she knew lurked in the world.

Finally, she spotted him. His black costume made him hard to pick out in the darkened gym. He and Chet stood at the top of the bleachers.

Maggie stepped onto the bottom step.

Andrew, standing five feet away, called to her. "I've been chasing kids down off the bleachers all night. We're going to fold them up. Would you tell whoever is up there to come down?"

Maggie jumped to the next level. Tom's cape flared when he raised his arms to gesture toward the dance floor. It threatened to swallow Chet, who backed away.

Chapter 13

THIS WASN'T WORKING and Tom knew it. The tingling in his fingers reminded him of the power he could so carelessly unleash. Even without magic, he could do major damage, and Tom felt like taking a swing at Chet's square jaw.

"Why don't you let me take the check to Margaret? That's why I'm here. I sold her car for her. Damn it, you're the one who told me she'd be here."

"First, you will explain what you meant when you said Maggie would change her mind."

Chet was smiling that phony smile he'd used when telling Shelley not to worry about ordering Andy's tests. "No need to get hostile."

No need to get hostile? Well, Shelley had had good reason to worry. Luckily, Tom had been there when her husband returned home. Tom hated to think what might have happened if he hadn't been there to throw Andrew out of the house. Tom had taken the precaution of informing the holy man at the church to ensure Andrew lived up to his promises.

"It wasn't meant as an insult to you personally," Chet continued. "We all know how fond Margaret is of you. In fact, if you weren't here I doubt she would have stayed in this backwater as long as she has."

Tom was liking this Chet person less and less. Not a suitable mate for his Maggie at all. The need to blast this mortal across the room was becoming almost impossible to resist.

"Margaret's probably afraid you'll follow her back to California if she leaves, and she'll feel even more responsible for you. Is that where you first saw her, at Berkeley? You can get along in a place like this, sure. It's a small town, lots of do-gooders with nothing better to do than look after people like you. In the real world people like you slip through the cracks. Just sane enough to pass, but not functional enough to make it on your own. Out in California you did what? Let me guess. A homeless shelter when the weather was bad, park benches when it wasn't. Beds of gullible coeds in between. I know your kind."

A swing, yes, to the jaw. That would be as satisfying as changing him into a lizard, and would require no magic. Tom flexed his fingers. A wave of cheers from the dance floor distracted him. He had almost forgotten the children. He was here to set an example. The red exit sign flashed at Chet's feet, fifteen feet below the top row of bleachers. Tom would have to move this discussion out the back door.

Evidently, Chet didn't see Tom's flexing fists or he wouldn't have continued. "If you care anything about Margaret, you'll leave so she can move on. You're an impediment to her career and to her happiness. I'm not going to see her waste her time in this town like her mother did, raising simple-minded brats with the likes of you."

Tom stepped back. The truth of Chet's words were sinking in, a partial truth. Maggie would not be wasting her time if she remained in Rawley. She had a lot to offer the people here and they had a lot to offer her, but her time would be wasted if she stayed because of him. He couldn't give her what she

wanted, couldn't give her a family, couldn't give her a normal life. For every turn of the moon, he would age a day. How soon before people began to notice? Maggie would grow old without him. Tom couldn't make her happy.

Chet raised his arm and waved. "Maggie! Up here."

Tom turned to see Maggie standing two rows down the bleacher from them, her face lit by flashes of lights from the whirling ball on the dance floor. Had she heard what Chet said? Had the music below kept the awful truth from her?

The next time the lights flashed Tom saw them, tears staining his Maggie's face. He crossed the distance between them, lifting his cape when it caught on the seats. Standing this close, her outstretched hand in his, still, he couldn't see her features clearly.

"Tom, I wish...I wish--"

"What do you wish, Maggie? I'll do anything for you."

She shook her head and dropped his hand to wipe the tears from her face. "It's too late for that, remember? I've used up all my wishes."

The bleachers shook. Chet took a step toward them.

Tom would have to work quickly, before he came close enough to hear. "Tell me your wish, Maggie, please."

"It's silly." She looked down at the dance floor and waved to Andy's father.

Tom took her hand again, forcing her to look at him. "Pretend you have one wish left. What would it be?"

She was smiling now. The tears had stopped flowing. The abyss tugged at Tom's feet. He could feel it there, waiting to pull him under if he granted one more wish.

"I...I wish we had a second chance. That we could meet again for the first time. That you weren't..."

"Not what, Maggie, not a jinn?" How it hurt to say the hateful word, but that's what he was. Before becoming a jinn he'd been nothing but a helpless boy.

"I wouldn't want you to be anyone but who you are. I love you, Tom. I want to be with you, but..."

It became so very clear to him now. What Maggie wanted, what he wanted, and the impediment that stood between them. A cloud of dusty smoke rolled at his feet. If the impediment could not be removed then Tom must go and leave Maggie free to find her own happiness.

Maggie's eyes shot wide open. "Please, Tom, you promised. No magic."

Possibilities flashed through his mind, like the flow of data on Lady Sarah's computer. "Not magic, my Maggie." Tom's voice boomed, temporarily drowning out the music. "Your last wish. The one I tricked you out of when I tried to bring Lady Sarah happiness. You will have your last wish now."

The stairs beneath him shook, thunder reverberating through his head.

"No, Tom, don't. I can't let you go back there. I don't want to lose you. Stop!"

"Hey, what's going on?" Chet stood directly behind Tom now. He grabbed Tom's cape, pulling him away from Maggie.

With the power of his magic swirling around him, Tom had to fight to keep from hurling Chet to the floor. Everything was in place, the wish and all the commands necessary to accomplish the feat. The silver collar burned Tom's neck as it tightened its hold. Power filled him, expanding in his chest, and the ancient chant rolled from his lips.

Reality began to fade as his arms stretched to gather the elements. If the fates allowed, this would be his last wish, his last master. If not, he would return to his place by the fire with no hope for escape. One amendment before he spoke the final words. One thing he could not forget, one thing must remain or his heart would break. If ever he was blessed to see his Maggie again, even for an instant, he would remember her and their love. He never wanted to forget his Maggie and how once someone had loved him.

Chet shoved at Tom's back. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Tom realized his mistake the moment he turned, the final words unsaid. He struck Chet across the chest with his outstretched arm.

"No, Tom!" Maggie cried, reaching for Chet, who lost his balance and teetered at the edge of the

bleachers.

CAUGHT IN A horrible dream, Maggie tried to reach Chet in time. Her shins banged painfully against the bleacher seat, sending her toppling forward. With an exhale of relief, she realized Tom had only to blink and Chet would be safe. The second it took Tom to turn and grab for Chet seemed like hours.

She raised her head in time to see Tom dive for Chet. Tom wasn't using magic. Why now, of all times, did he choose to listen to her?

The flowing black cape covered Tom's movements. When he jerked Chet away from the edge, Tom lurched forward, nothing to stop him. He twisted toward Maggie while she watched, everything moving in slow motion.

One hand came to her mouth, the other reached for Tom, too far away. Chet grunted when he fell into the seat above her.

Tom was saying something, words drowned out by the music below. She dragged herself upright. For some reason, saving him no longer seemed important. She had to hear what he was saying.

Tom was falling backward. He seemed to catch himself, then he jerked. His boot wedged between a seat and a riser. A flash of pain captured his face and he shook his head.

His foot came loose with a snap. His black cap enveloped him and then Tom was gone.

"MY MAGGIE." The words whispered from Tom before unconsciousness claimed him.

Maggie didn't remember how she got down the bleachers. She only knew she knelt at Tom's side, afraid to touch him. What was wrong? Why didn't he open his eyes? Tom had said he couldn't be injured this way. He'd bragged about it.

Now she looked up to see Ben Johnson, who shoved through the crowd that surrounded them. "Paramedics are on their way. Let's make our boy comfortable until then."

Arms behind her gripped her shoulders and drew her to her feet. She experienced a moment of panic before she spotted Chet at the edge of the crowd.

Andrew held her. "Ben was a medic in the corps. I used to ignore his old war stories. I guess I'm pretty grateful for them now."

All Maggie could do was nod. Tom looked so still, so perfect, as if at any moment he would open his eyes and speak. He would demand that she explain some word or make a wish. God, this was her fault. It was also Tom's. Why hadn't he trusted her, told her she had another wish? Why hadn't she guessed the truth? Tom was afraid of going back into his box.

When her knees began to shake, Andrew helped her return to Tom's side. That's when she knew Tom was no longer a jinn. The floor was covered with blood.

"Just a scalp wound. Nothing to worry about. They bleed a lot, but don't mean a thing." Ben pulled gauze from the first aid kit. "The boy is breathing fine, heart sounds strong. Probably just has a concussion. Hey, Tom, can you hear me, boy?"

Tom didn't react, not even when Ben pressed the pressure bandage against the back of Tom's head.

"I'm going to clear the way for the paramedics," Andrew said before he moved off.

The music had stopped but the mirrored ball continued to rotate, adding bizarre flashes to the now well-lit scene. Voices echoed off the gym walls, Andrew's rising above the rest as he ordered the gym cleared.

"Maggie?" Ben's calm voice cut through the rest. "Do you have any medical history on Tom? Allergies? Anything?"

She shook her head. What could she say? According to Tom, up until this moment, he healed almost instantly from traumatic injury. His only permanent injuries were scars from wounds healed thousands of years ago.

Ben untied the cord that held Tom's cape in place, then unbuttoned the top of his shirt. A dark red ring of bruises circled his neck. Maggie gently pushed his shirt aside. His silver collar was gone. In its place lay a rough, brown leather cord, loose around his neck.

With a nod toward Tom's leg, which lay at an odd angle, Ben said, "Looks like he's got a break there. As long as he keeps breathing steady and the heart beat stays strong, I'm going to leave it to the guys with the gear. No reason for jungle medicine here."

He reached over Tom and took Maggie's hand. "He's going to be fine. He's a fighter, our Tom."

Maggie almost laughed at that, *our Tom*. All these months he could have been hers and she'd been too stubborn to accept him the way he was. Now that he, by some miracle, had become mortal, she was going to lose him.

"Tom?" Ben continued to speak while he lifted his eyelids one at a time. "Maggie, I need you to catch the paramedics."

Maggie dragged her thoughts to the present. She could hear the sirens through the open emergency door.

"Tell them we'll need transport to a Level I facility. It's been twenty minutes now and I'm not getting any reaction."

Someone helped her to her feet and she staggered toward the door. She knew what Ben was doing, giving her something to do so she wouldn't go crazy with worry. The ambulance had all ready pulled up when she reached the door. They swept past her through the emergency entrance into the gym and didn't leave room to follow. When she tried, Ben grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the way.

"They don't need us in there now. They'll immobilize his leg, put on a neck brace, just in case, probably an IV. I'll find out where they're going to take him and we can follow together."

Maggie could only nod, grateful that Ben included her in his plans, considering how he'd always made his feelings clear. She wasn't good enough for *our Tom*. At the moment she had to agree. If she hadn't insisted on that silly, no magic rule no matter what, Tom would have saved Chet with a flick of his finger and not been hurt. As for her wish, she wasn't certain what she'd wished for and had no way of telling how Tom would have interpreted it. She had to think it had something to do with why Tom lay unconscious on a gurney, headed for the hospital.

He'd existed for thousands of years, a terror and threat to his masters, and she'd brought him down with one tiny, foolish wish.

When they wheeled Tom past her, Maggie tried to reach him. His skin looked oddly translucent against the white sheet with the IV tube taped to his wrist. Suddenly Chet was at her side, pulling her away.

"I've got my car out front. We can go--"

A sob rose in her chest, so painful that it threatened to erupt into a wail. Ben supported her on one side, Chet pulled on the other. "No, Chet."

Maggie didn't bother to worry about Chet's pained expression as he said, "I'll meet you there then."

"No...no, Chet. I've told you before and you wouldn't listen. I hope that this time you'll take what I'm saying to heart. I don't want to see you again."

Before he could protest, one of the paramedics tossed a bag to Ben. "Here's the personal effects. We'll meet you there."

Personal effects? Maggie strained to understand. Ben patted her hand. "Well, we are the closest thing the boy has to family, so that's what I told 'em. You come with me. We'll leave this fellow to the police. They'll want to find out exactly how this fall happened." He glared at Chet as he helped Maggie to his car.

She was belted in and halfway down Highway 10 before the weight of the bag in her lap drew her attention. Ben glanced toward her when she opened the plastic.

"Not much there considering." His comment came out in a choked gasp as he blinked at the road ahead and clutched the steering wheel tighter.

Not much, considering he was an ancient and powerful jinn. Considering how much he meant to all of them. Considering how much he meant to her. The paramedics had cut the leather cord from his neck. Somehow, she knew it was the same silver collar that had tortured him so. From this at least, he'd found release.

The mass of keys were a mystery. One of them to Mrs. Hanson's house. Had he ever returned the key

Mother gave him when he helped paper the upstairs hall? One was labeled Summers, probably for meeting Andy when his mother couldn't make it home for the school bus. A dozen others she didn't recognize. She hadn't realized how many people trusted Tom. She wondered if he knew.

A dollar bill and some change. Tom never was much for money. Always seemed to get along without it. A red rubber ball and a deck of cards, probably left over from his magic show.

The familiar shape in leather at the bottom of the bag startled her. A billfold. Someone must have given it to him, not realizing he had nothing to put in it.

"What's that you got there," Ben asked.

She held it up for him to see, not trusting to use her voice yet.

"Open it up," Ben said. "Never know, the boy may have been holding out on us."

Maggie didn't think one more thing could happen today that would shock her, but she gasped.

Ben swerved at the sound and pulled to the side of the road. "What?"

Maggie said nothing, just removed the card and held it up for Ben to see.

Tom had a Connecticut driver's license.

Ben took the card from her and squinted in the uncertain light. "Tom has a last name, and you'll never guess what it is."

Chapter 14

TOM FOUGHT back panic. He knew why his leg was raised and attached to the pulley, but understanding didn't make the feeling go away. He was trapped.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Rawley?"

"Fine." His response sounded clipped to his ear. He'd been trying to match his accent to those around him without much success. The doctor's crisp, clear words hurt his ears.

"I reduced the pain medication yesterday."

"My damn leg hurts." Tom growled the words. His doctor insisted on honesty. Tom wasn't certain why the condition for their relationship irritated him so. "I didn't sleep well last night, felt like pacing." He rattled the traction chain that held his leg.

"We'll be getting you in a walking cast this morning when we're through here. Then you can be on your way to becoming an outpatient."

Tom's interest peaked when a young lady entered the room, but when he looked in her eyes he fell back against the pillows. She wasn't the one. He shifted uneasily in the bed. Even his own thoughts seemed odd. What was he looking for? What trait did this petite woman with the nervous smile lack?

"This is Miss Lunder. She's the social worker assigned to your case."

"Why?" Tom demanded. Social worker held no meaning for him. He was angry but not certain why. If he didn't remember the word that must mean he had no need for one in Connecticut.

"Because you don't have any immediate family that we know of, Mr. Rawley." Miss Lunder spoke in a small voice while she consulted her notebook. "You do, however, have a great many friends here in Minnesota who expressed the desire to help. Returning to your usual environment can be an important part of your recovery."

Tom crossed his arms over his chest. He was more interested in getting dressed and out of this place. Where he would go wasn't important.

The doctor began flipping through records of his own. "I agree. It would be best for you to remain here rather than return to your apartment in Connecticut, where you do not appear to have any close friends."

Here, the land of Connecticut, what did it matter?

"Your only connection there seems to be a part-time housekeeper who has sent clothes and a lawyer who knows something of your background. According to him, last year you walked away from your job as a graduate assistant at Yale sometime over the Christmas, New Year holiday and no one heard from you until last week when you showed up here in the emergency room with an insurance card."

Yale. It was a word that meant something to him. "Yale is a school where they teach history."

His doctor smiled, making Tom nervous again. "History among other things. Do you remember anything about your time in Connecticut?"

Tom shook his head. "Yale is in Connecticut. It is a simple question in geography. That is all I know. Was I born in Connecticut?"

A faint memory stirred then, strong, comforting arms cradling him.

"No, you were born in New Delhi, India. Your father was British, your mother Indian. They apparently met at the embassy in India where they were both assigned."

"They are dead," Tom added.

"Yes," the social worker said in her soft voice. "We spoke of this before, Mr. Rawley. Do you remember coming to the hospital?"

Tom shook his head. His parents were dead. It meant nothing to him, and he knew it should. Children loved their parents. Why didn't he?

The doctor spoke again. "Well, Tom, you might not have made a lot of friends out East, but we've had a lobby full of them from Rawley. Do you remember your friends?" The doctor flipped through his records again. "A Mr. Ben Johnson and Miss Margaret Yates came with you when you first arrived. They took turns sitting with you until you regained consciousness. Do you remember them?"

Tom shook his head again. What did he remember? Little snatches from the day before. "Yesterday I had pancakes for breakfast."

"This is normal for head injuries, Tom," the doctor said. "Memories of your hospital stay, some of it, should return to you. When we spoke before, you remembered much of your time here in Minnesota."

"Yes," breathed Tom, relieved to have something to say besides he didn't remember. "I washed dishes at the diner, sometimes ran the movies at the theater, and I played with the children at school. It seems I'm not what you would call an overachiever." His mocking laugh hurt his ears.

"Before you came to Rawley you were a successful scholar and businessman. Your lawyer will be contacting you soon. You have an estate to support you. Perhaps that's why you didn't concern yourself with employment here in Rawley."

"But I didn't remember that, did I? I was sponging off people. If I was such a success out East, why did I walk off without a word? Why did I forget everything about my life there? Why did I come to this place with the same name as my own, when I didn't even remember my name?"

"We can't answer that, Mr. Rawley, but maybe you will some day, given enough time. The trick is not to worry about it. You have memories enough to function. You can speak, read, and write. Your general knowledge of the past is detailed. You have a lot to be thankful for."

Thankful. The word didn't sound right. "It's just my own past I can't remember."

"Maybe you remember all you want to know, or all you need to. You remember enough of your life in Rawley to be comfortable there, for the time being, and you have people who care about you, who are eager to help. People, I might add, who know nothing about your having any resources to pay them for their efforts. That's a lot to be thankful for right there. As for your past, before you arrived in Rawley, can you remember anything today?"

Tom shook his head, tired of having to make the gesture.

"How about when you were a child, Mr. Rawley?" the social worker asked. "Do you have any childhood memories?"

Before Tom could shake his head again, the image came to him, brief and painful. "I was sitting around a fire with friends. My neck hurt and I was hungry." He stopped himself from rubbing his neck. The bruises no longer hurt where a nurse had said a leather cord he'd been wearing had injured him.

"That's a start," the doctor said, closing his notebook. "We aren't going to just send you home, you know. Your friends will bring you back for follow-up appointments on your leg and your head injury. This type of injury requires a long recovery period. You've made a lot of progress in the last two weeks."

"I just don't remember, huh?"

"I think our Mr. Rawley has had enough of us for this morning." The doctor stood. "Your orthopedist will be along soon to get that new cast on your leg, and I'll be seeing you again before you check out. I'll be giving you instructions then. They'll be all written out so you won't need to worry about forgetting

anything."

Forgetting. It seemed to Tom that he must have spent his entire life forgetting. Why else did so little remain? A circle of faceless people around a fire. The scene dripped with pain and sadness. Some day in the recent past the doctor had asked about scars on his back and Tom had panicked. Where had they come from? Who had wanted to hurt him so badly? Only assurances that the wounds were old had calmed him.

Nothing else remained of his life until Rawley, which consisted of scattered fragments, flashes of scenes, and a feeling of warmth, despite the snow.

Yes, he had arrived in snow. Snow filled the streets outside his window now. Next week would be Thanksgiving, a major holiday from what he'd gathered. Why did the word mean nothing to him? Had he never shared a Thanksgiving feast? Hadrian's Wall and the Gardens of Babylon were words embedded with meaning, but not this simple family holiday.

The aching in his chest told him nothing. Perhaps he had always been this lonely and the tears that threatened now had fallen many times before. He had to make a new life for himself and all he had to build it on were fragments of a tortured past and people he did not know.

That and the knowledge he had to find someone he would recognize when he saw her.

TOM LOOKED LIKE a perfect stranger standing in his private hospital room. He wore a blue suit with a sweater vest and a highly polished dress shoe on his good leg. A black, wool topcoat lay draped over his hospital bed.

Where was her Tom? The one who wore blue jeans with button-down shirts and tennis shoes when the law required footwear.

Tom hadn't been coherent the first week, responding to her voice no differently than the others. He insisted he had to "get to work" and fought against his restraints. The only name he'd called was Tandia, and they didn't know if that was a place or a name. All normal according to the doctor, who felt part of the problem was Tom's blurred vision. When his sight returned, Tom became even more agitated, and the doctors decided to hold off on visitors for the time being.

When Tom had recovered enough to receive visitors again, he'd insisted on none. The doctors were vague about why. They implied he was deeply troubled by his loss of memory and wanted to wait until he remembered his friends before he saw them again.

Now she noticed why he looked so different to her. It wasn't just the clothes. He hadn't shaved this morning and it showed. The dark shadow that covered his face enhanced his glum expression, and his hair had grown, curling below his suit collar. One more sign that Tom was no longer who he'd been.

Maggie could have told the doctors he wouldn't remember, but she didn't know how. She answered their questions the best she could without muddying the issue with talk of genies or evil jinn. Tom had fulfilled her wish with a vengeance. He was no longer a jinn and he didn't remember anything associated with being one.

What did that leave him but a few scattered hours when the demands of selfish masters left him time to rest? She had been one of those masters. She was part of his life as a jinn.

Stopping their visits to see Tom was the hardest thing she and Ben had ever done. After consulting with his doctor and social worker, they had directed their energies to preparing for Tom's homecoming. Ben was providing a bedroom on the first floor of his house. Ben and his wife would watch him during the day, Maggie had promised to keep him company evenings, and Ben was organizing a team to take turns keeping an eye on him at night. Nothing was too good for Tom.

She expected him to look up and see her standing there, as he always did when she entered the room. He leaned heavily on a cane, his right leg in a cast to above his knee. The compound break had affected both lower leg bones and the twist when he fell had torn ligaments in his knee. It would be a long time before Tom returned to kicking soccer balls with Andy in the backyard.

Tom didn't look up, not even when the social worker walked past Maggie, giving her a reassuring smile and pat on the arm. Miss Lunder stood in front of the window to distract Tom from the snow, which had been falling since yesterday.

"Miss Yates is here for you, Tom. Are you ready to go?"

Tom looked past the social worker, not taking his eyes off the snow. "I have the doctor's instructions." He held up a packet of papers, identical to the ones Maggie clutched.

"Do you remember Margaret Yates?"

"Yes," he snapped the word. An angry stranger had taken the place of the Tom she remembered so well.

Maggie crumpled the papers in her hands.

Tom continued, his voice a parody of the soft tones he'd whispered in her ear. "I will stay with Ben Johnson and his wife. Miss Yates will come in the afternoons and at night I will howl at the moon."

The social worker blushed at the last, and Tom finally smiled. His lip curled into a grimace when he repositioned his foot.

Maggie squared her shoulders and stepped into the room. His hair curled enticingly over his ears. Tom had always preferred button down shirts to hide his silver collar. Now the white linen accented his dark skin and shiny black hair. Standing close behind him, she could see the fine detailing in his clothes. This housekeeper, whoever she was, had sent the best.

While she continued to stare, Tom leaned his cane against the chair and raised a hand to run a finger between his shirt and neck. Maggie wanted to put her arms around him and pull down his shirt to see for herself that the silver collar had not reappeared around his neck.

Maggie put as much distance as she could in her voice. "If that will make you happy, you can do all the howling you like."

She didn't know who this Tom was or how he would react. She was prepared for anything. She'd cried about it last night and she wasn't going to shed another tear. If Tom didn't remember her, considering her wish, the condition was most likely permanent.

Tom glanced in her direction. No lightening flash of recognition, no thunder clouds at his feet. He retrieved his cane and moved to lean against the windowsill to watch the snow fall. "You must be Miss Yates."

"You remember me?" Hope thudded in her chest.

"You don't look like someone who would have the name of Ben Johnson." His voice had softened, but it had not regained its familiar lilt.

Her one wish was that he look into her eyes, cross his arms over his chest and call her My Maggie again.

He turned toward her, but the social worker stepped between them. "You have the doctor's instructions and the numbers to call if you have any questions?" she asked Maggie.

Maggie nodded as she picked up Tom's coat. They would make an odd pair, him dressed like some Wall Street Executive and her wearing jeans with boots and winter coat borrowed from her brothers' old closet.

"Well, I'll leave you two to it then."

Tom finally gave Maggie his full attention. He started at her feet and worked his way up.

Her words from that fateful night returned to her. *I wish we had a second chance. That we could meet again for the first time. That you weren't a jinn.*

"I'm going to take you to Ben's house. He has a room for you to stay there. His youngest left for the Navy a couple of years ago so he has lots of room. But I guess the doctor told you that."

"I...I am much obliged to Ben Johnson for his consideration." Tom gave a stiff bow and licked his lips, looking uncertain and suddenly not at all like an executive.

"You'd better put on your coat first. It's really snowing out there."

He handed her his cane and took the coat from her, his fingers skimming her arm. A small gasp sounded from both of them. Had he felt it as well, the spark that flew from one to the other and back again? Was it static electricity, the result of low humidity, or was it magic?

"You will need your snow removed from your driveway I am thinking, or your car will become trapped."

It was back, that gentle accent, the dipping and rising of the words. Somehow, it made his voice more

painful to listen to now that they were strangers again.

"You're not in any shape to be shoveling snow today or next month. You've got to rest and take things slow."

"Giving me orders already, my...Miss Yates?"

She stared hard at his mouth, then into his eyes. She had the distinct feeling he was teasing her. "If you're talking about granting my every wish, I prefer having things done the old fashioned way."

"Ah, an old fashioned girl. That explains things."

"Explains what?"

"Why you are keeping me at bay with my cane."

She looked down to see she had pointed it at his chest, preventing him from approaching.

"I assume you are protecting your honor, but I do believe I need the aid if I am to navigate to the wheelchair."

The smile that lit his face didn't warm her heart. It set it on fire. This was Tom.

"I do believe I can protect my honor without resorting to violence, Mr. Rawley, and I can shovel my own snow."

He took her arm with his free hand, and together they made their way toward the door. "But perhaps when I have recovered we can shovel snow together. I so enjoy having hot chocolate afterward and a cup of chili. Did you know that despite the name, chili can be very hot?"

By the time they reached the door to his hospital room, Maggie could no longer contain herself. The doctors had warned her not to press, so had Ben and her mother, but she had to know. "Tom, do you remember?"

His hand left her arm and caressed her hair, his warm mouth against her cheek, made her shudder.

"I remember two, no, three things quite clearly, My Maggie. I live with a cat named Sam, I'm madly in love with you and I want to kiss your feet."

When she turned to face him, he started to tip, regaining his balance when he leaned against the door.

One look in his eyes and she knew. He might not remember anything else about his past, about being a jinn, but he did remember her. That was enough magic for a lifetime.

"I think we'd better leave feet kissing until we're home, don't you?"

"If that is what you wish, My Maggie. I am at your command."

~ The End ~

Christine W. Murphy

MORE THAN once when she was a little girl, Christine came to the conclusion that she'd been dropped by an alien space craft and left to grow up in a small town in Minnesota. She wanted to know when they would notice she was missing and come back for her? After graduating from Concordia College, only 20 miles away, she decided drastic action was called for and she joined the Navy to look for them. The Navy, in their infinite wisdom, sent her to Iceland, one of the few places in this world with more Lutherans per square foot than Minnesota. After serving in Florida, Iceland, and Virginia, she realized no one was coming for her and she decided to settle for domestic bliss.

Christine lives in New England with her husband, three exceptional children, and one crazy, red Abyssinian cat. Freelance technical writing and typesetting jobs constantly interfere with her creation of worlds where she feels more at home. She has three other books available through Hard Shell Word Factory. [For the Emperor](#), her first published book and EPPIE finalist, is a science fiction romance set in the same galaxy as **Highlord of Darkness**. [Through Iowa Glass](#) is a romantic suspense set in another strange and alien world, Iowa. At Your Command, set in her home town, is her fourth book with Hard Shell Word Factory. You can contact Christine at LSComp@aol.com

This story copyright 2001 by Christine W. Murphy. Published by Hard Shell Word Factory.

8946 Loberg Rd.
Amherst Junction, WI 54407
<http://www.hardshell.com>

Electronic book created by Seattle Book Company.

eBook ISBN: 0-7599-1182-7

Cover art © Mary Z. Wolf

All electronic rights reserved.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatever to anyone bearing the same name or names. These characters are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This book is dedicated to my daughter Abigail, who, although too young to read this book, gave me plenty of advice anyway. She always finds time in her busy day to sit down and say, "Mom, let's talk about your book." Abigail, you are a blessing. One of these days, you are going to decide boys aren't so yucky after all. Then we'll really be able to talk. Special thanks to Jan Minter for doing the first read on this book and giving me her honest opinion—"It's great, Christine. Send it out." And to my friend Liz Kading, who listens to my ranting and still accepts my telephone calls.

- [Prologue](#)
 - [Chapter 1](#)
 - [Chapter 2](#)
 - [Chapter 3](#)
 - [Chapter 4](#)
 - [Chapter 5](#)
 - [Chapter 6](#)
 - [Chapter 7](#)
 - [Chapter 8](#)
 - [Chapter 9](#)
 - [Chapter 10](#)
 - [Chapter 11](#)
 - [Chapter 12](#)
 - [Chapter 13](#)
 - [Chapter 14](#)
 - [Christine W. Murphy](#)
-