

DAUGHTER OF THE MOON

THE FOOL



HP MALLORY



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THE FOOL

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CHAPTER ONE

6 of Swords

Embarking on a healing journey...

The winding country road stretched out before me like a ribbon, the vibrant hues of autumn leaves framing the scene like something you'd see in a Hallmark movie.

Well, maybe you would have seen *the landscape* in a Hallmark movie, but you'd never see me in one. Nope—I was like Beavis strung out on too much sugar, only my drug of choice was the four Nicotine patches that were stuck to my upper arms like leeches. Furthermore, I was too stressed out, too cynical and definitely dropped way too many F bombs to ever star in my own happily ever after. But it wasn't like I was sore about that—nah, I didn't even care about a happily ever after—honestly, if I just made it through the day, I'd consider that a win.

While most people would have been oohing and ahing over the pumpkins on the porches and the scarecrows decorating the yards, all set against the uninterrupted flow of white picket fences, all I could think about was how I was a hell of a long way from Los Angeles.

"You're going to be in and out, Kate, in and out," I told myself. *Just like an eager guy on prom night.*

But that wasn't exactly true—I mean, houses usually didn't sell overnight. Regardless, hopefully I could sell this place fast and then I could get back to my lattes, dog parks and fake conversations pronto.

Not that I liked fake conversations and designer dogs, it was just that I liked change even less. And Vermont was change. Big time.

I was a California native and being out here in the sticks? Well, hopefully I wouldn't end up starring in my very own episode of *Naked and Afraid*. Wasn't it small towns like this—places out in the middle of nowhere—where people got abducted by alien spacecraft? Yeah, not signing up for that any time soon. Sure, I hadn't had any sexual healing in like... way longer than my vagina cared to admit, but that didn't mean I was up for an overzealous alien wielding a probe either, Marvin Gaye be damned.

The road continued to meander through the countryside, bordered by picture-perfect rolling hills, farmhouses of clapboard siding (that were probably older than my state), pastures of corn and hay, and general stores that looked like every Christmas card you've ever seen. Occasionally, I caught a glimpse of a weathered red barn or a charming vintage truck nestled

in the autumn foliage, which made me worry I was going to get pulled over for being the bad apple of the barrel.

All the while, the Beatles belted out “The Fool on the Hill” from the speakers of my Jeep Cherokee as I took one hairpin turn after another and tried not to get sick. Completely oblivious to the effect it was having on my stomach, the road continued to wind through dense clusters of maple, oak, and birch trees, their branches full of leaves ablaze with autumnal hues.

Boy, was I jonesing for a smoke.

As I rounded yet another bend in the road, I came across a, yep—honest to goodness—wooden bridge crossing a bubbling brook, its waters reflecting the surroundings like a mirror. The scene was quaint until I remembered that part in Beetlejuice when the Volvo went crashing through the side of the bridge, sending Adam and Barbara to their forever after.

Well, shit.

I wasn’t normally this macabre but my life had kind of taken a downturn lately. I’d just gotten divorced after a fifteen-year marriage, I’d been diagnosed with my very first cavity, I was having a hell of a time trying to quit smoking, and according to my publisher, I hadn’t written a successful book in the last two years. Then my Aunt Artemis up and died and left me her ‘castle’ in a place called Maplewood, Vermont. And here I was.

At least the cavity was filled.

“But the fool on the hill sees the sun going down,” I sang along softly, feeling like the lyrics somehow mirrored my life. At nearly forty-five, divorced and unsure where my writing career was headed, I couldn’t help but feel like a fool myself, like I was driving headfirst into an uncertain future.

So, how the hell did I end up here? Well, after I’d moved out of the house Greg and I had shared for fifteen years, I’d decided to go on the grand adventure known as ‘what sort of shape is Aunt Artemis’s house in and how quickly can I sell it?’ And today was the first day in this newest adventure—an adventure which (hopefully) wouldn’t last long, because I wanted to spend the least amount of time in Podunk, Vermont as possible.

Right, so I could get back to my life...

What life? I thought to myself with a sigh.

The truth was that I didn’t have much of a life left in Los Angeles, either. No kids, no husband, no close friends. Not even a dog. Or a cat, for that matter. The only thing I did have to keep me company? The spare tire

around my waist. Yep, she and I were the best kind of friends, even if she kept demanding a pint of Ben and Jerry's every three days. Now, Spare Tire Sandy (as I'd affectionately called her) was a bit of a surprise, given the fact that I was only 110 pounds and five-foot-one. The truth of the matter was that I was built like a tree stump—with no boobs, waist, or hips to speak about. And when you weren't blessed with an especially feminine body, the next best thing is to keep yourself in shape—hence I was more Cypress tree than I was Sequoia.

“Well on the way, head in a cloud...”

As to the ‘castle’ Aunt Artemis had left me—yes, she'd actually referred to it as such in her will—I had no idea what to expect. I could only hope *hope hope hope* that I wasn't really dealing with a castle. Because... well—I mean, who in the hell wants a castle? Unless you're King Arthur needing to house his buttload of knights, castles were just so 1623.

But back to Aunt Artemis—she and I had never been close. Not that we'd had a falling out or anything. We hadn't ever been close enough in order to have a falling out. The last time I'd seen her was when I was just a kid of eight or so. I remembered her generally as an adult who dressed like a whack job (in like, cloaks and hoods and crap) but as adults went, she was always the most interesting. Artemis didn't bother asking you about how school was going or what you wanted to be when you grew up. Instead, she gave you advice on how to avoid getting cursed by a witch, what the hell a skinwalker really was, and why everyone should protect themselves against evil with chicken feet—you know, stuff you could actually use in your day-to-day life.

From what I understood from my mother (another solo drummer), one day Artemis moved to Vermont and just sort of sequestered herself away and no one in the family really ever saw her again. By the time I became an adult, Mom had completely lost touch with Artemis. So, it was a pretty big shock when I found out Artemis had left me her ‘castle.’ Of course, without any children of her own, who else could she leave it to? Apparently not my mother. And, for that matter, not any witches, skinwalkers or chickens either.

“Turn right in a quarter of a mile,” the woman's voice on Waze suddenly called out, nearly giving me a heart attack because the volume was turned up so loud. “On Castle Drive.”

Castle Drive?

“This better not be,” I started as I took the turn in the road and my tires crunched against the gravel driveway leading up to what I really hoped wasn’t a castle. But when I reached the top of the insanely long driveway (that was pitched at such an incline it looked like I was about to arrive in Heaven) I wanted to turn around and drive all the way back to California.

“Son of a bitch,” I groaned, because, it was, in fact, a castle but not like the castle you’re probably picturing—not an ancient, large and imposing Scottish fortress where the Highlander was waiting to plug you against the drawbridge of your very own moat. No, this castle was Highlander free and also completely free of anything close to good taste. It was perched on a hill like some kind of fairy tale gone wrong. Even air-dropping Sam Heughan in a kilt (and minus a shirt) wasn’t going to do this monstrosity any favors.

I put the Jeep into park, turned off the engine, and stepped out, staring up at the behemoth before me as I shook my head and wondered what in the hell I was going to do now. Because unless any witches, warlocks or vampires were currently in the market for a new shithole to call their own, I was going to be stuck with a castle for a hell of a long time.

Christ, I needed a cig.

“What the eff?” I called out to any passing squirrels, birds, or real estate agents who happened to be loitering in the distance. I’d just driven all the way from LA (thinking a road trip would be fun—it wasn’t) and now I just wanted to turn around and drive all the way back.

The thing stood as a flamboyant and ostentatious testament to excess, its exterior a mishmash of architectural styles and gaudy embellishments that did nothing but clash with one another. It was like the styles of Medieval and Kitsch had come to blows and neither had won.

The castle’s outer walls were a chaotic amalgamation of colors, materials, and decorations as though every imaginable architectural element had been thrown together without regard for aesthetics or tradition. The result was a bewildering hodgepodge of styles, including Gothic spires, Romanesque arches, Baroque domes, and even a hint of modernist... whatever you wanted to call it.

Sections of the walls were made of rough-hewn stone, others covered in garishly colored stucco, and still others adorned with faux marble tiles. The windows, of which there were many, came in all shapes and sizes, with some featuring stained glass that seemed more suited to a carnival funhouse than a

castle. Running within the stained glass was a repetition of the number “3” on one window, “6” on another and “9” on yet another.

As I moved closer to the front doors, I noticed elaborate gargoyles with exaggerated expressions leering down at me from the parapets, their features contorted into grotesque caricatures—one of them looked like he was angrily growling and the other one, strangely, like he was mid-puke. The turrets, meanwhile, were complete with oversized pennants that flapped wildly in the breeze, their bright colors clashing against the rest of the discordant mess. And the flags, just like the stained-glass windows, also repeated the numerals 3, 6, and 9.

The entrance to the castle was a grandiose affair, with an enormous set of mahogany double doors, carved with what appeared to be tarot cards. In the top center of one door was a large peephole so I could be sure the DoorDash driver gave me the right password before dropping off my burrito *that I would not be eating* because I was striving to break off this friendship with Spare Tire Sandy.

Above the doors, a massive, ornate canopy extended outwards, providing shelter to those who were courageous enough to approach. The walkway leading to the entrance was paved with faux-gold tiles that glittered like all the fool’s gold in any ghost town’s gift shop.

“What in crap have I just walked into?” I asked myself and no, I didn’t think it was so odd that I was talking to myself—writers were a bunch of eccentric and lonely types and sometimes all we had for company were ourselves. Well, *most* times in my case.

Gripping the key to this heap tightly and striding towards the imposing behemoth that now belonged to me, I put the key in the door.

Well, Aunt Artemis certainly knew how to make an exit.

Hopefully, I could donate the place for a tax write-off, I thought to myself as I turned the key and the door creaked open. Did Habitat for Humanity even accept donated castles?

Stepping into the entry, I stopped in my tracks, momentarily stunned by the sight before me. And not stunned in a good way. No, instead, it was like I’d just walked straight into an art installation dedicated to medieval England mixed with the inside of a gypsy caravan. And, yet again, the repetition of the numbers 3, 6 and 9 was achieved with the black and white wallpaper that covered the walls and the ceiling of the foyer.

On one side of the house was an enormous room (were I writing one of my historical romances, I would have termed it “the great hall”). This room was both massive and cavernous with high stone walls and wooden beams spanning the ceiling. It was decorated with numerous colorful tapestries that were massive—spanning the distance from ceiling to floor. Each one, and there appeared to be nine, depicted various tarot cards and along the corners were, you guessed it, the numerals 3, 6 and 9. The first tapestry—The Empress—was represented by a robed woman sitting on a throne. The second—Strength—appeared to be an overly muscled and virile man who was trying to subdue a lion or maybe he was trying to trim its claws—I couldn’t be sure. Next to that was a tapestry of The Lovers and—

“Oh... Oh, God,” I started with a frown as I took a few steps closer, studying the busy scene as I tried to make sense of it, because surely it couldn’t be...

I turned my head to one side as I attempted to understand exactly what was being depicted because at first look, it appeared like the guy was trying to play “hide my pole” with a woman who was half donkey. “Or, no, maybe that’s not a...”

I turned my head the other way and from this angle, it appeared the donkey was just an innocent bystander. In which case the guy’s pole was coming after the donkey’s ear. But somehow that didn’t seem right either. Regardless, this one looked like an X-rated playing card included with someone’s purchase of the Kama Sutra, farmyard style. Somehow (and I really wasn’t sure how), I’d have to take that one down before Habitat for Humanity arrived to claim their prize.

Moving on from my aunt’s weird artwork, I noticed a large, intricately carved wooden table running down the center of the room, flanked by heavy wooden benches, each carved with yet more tarot cards and more repetitions of 3, 6, 9. A massive stone fireplace dominated one wall, with heraldic banners hanging above it with even more depictions of the tarot.

Underneath the table and running the span of the room was a large rug depicting The Wheel of Fortune. While, above me, a chandelier made entirely of crystal wands dangled precariously, its prisms casting rainbows across the room, as they caught the sunlight streaming through a nearby stained-glass window. The window featured The Hanged Man, who incidentally looked like a medieval window wiper who’d taken a wrong step and was now dangling precariously from the second-floor scaffolding.

Deciding I'd seen enough of the dining room (which I supposed it was), I backtracked into the entryway once more, not really sure where I should go next. I couldn't remember a time when I'd wanted a cigarette more.

It was then that I decided I needed a glass of water and somewhere comfortable to sit so I could have a good cry. So, I hightailed it for the kitchen, which I could glimpse at the end of the hallway.

On the way there, I absolutely refused to look into any of the other rooms, afraid of what I might find. Instead, I made it safely to the kitchen of my newly inherited shitbox. And wouldn't you guess it? The kitchen was just as tacky as the rest of the place, with a truly obscene number of tarot-themed teapots lining the shelves. Who in hell needed that many teapots? Hopefully, someone on Ebay...

I opened one of the cupboard cabinets and found a selection of drinking glasses. Grabbing one, I turned on the kitchen faucet and was relieved to find the water running.

"Welcome to your new life, Kate," I muttered as I filled the glass and then gulped down a mouthful.

As I took another swig, I noticed something odd from the corner of my eye. A letter, seemingly falling from nowhere, drifted through the air and landed on the counter with a gentle thud like there was something heavy inside it. I blinked, half-expecting it to disappear just as suddenly as it appeared, but no—it just sat there like it was waiting for me to pick it up.

I glanced up to see if maybe the letter had been sitting on the blade of a ceiling fan or something but there was no fan on the ceiling so that couldn't be it. Instead, the ceiling inside the kitchen was painted with an enormous rendition of the tarot card of The Star.

Setting my glass of water down, I reached for the mysterious letter, which was addressed to me. On the back, it was sealed with wax, like it had been sent from Jane Austen herself. Feeling like Elizabeth Bennet about to receive a scandalous bit of news, I carefully broke the seal and unfolded the parchment. Inside the letter was the tarot card depicting the 6 of Swords which meant absolutely nothing to me.

For my niece, Catherine, the letter began, no doubt written in Aunt Artemis's overdone scrawl. And, apparently, she hadn't gotten the memo that I didn't go by "Catherine" and never had. I know this castle may seem like a bizarre inheritance, but trust me when I say it's exactly what you need at this stage of your life.

“Right,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “Because everyone dreams of inheriting property that’s unsellable.”

First things first, the letter continued. *You must know that you are not just any ordinary woman, Catherine Murray—you are a Daughter of the Moon.*

I snorted. A Daughter of the Moon? Come on. Actually, I didn’t even know what “a daughter of the moon” was—some kind of secret society for middle-aged divorcees where they could discuss things like Botox and the joy of veganism? Either that or it was a low-budget indie band.

Your skepticism is understandable, Artemis continued, as if she were standing right here and observing my reaction, *but I assure you, this is no joke. Our lineage carries a powerful magic within us, and the time has come for you to awaken yours.*

“Oh, Christ,” I grumbled, shaking my head as I debated whether or not to even finish the letter. Whatever I was or wasn’t, I definitely wasn’t interested in playing daughter to the moon. Yet, I still decided to read—mostly to find out what other ridiculousness Artemis had written.

Of course, embracing your identity as a Daughter of the Moon will require an open mind and a willingness to learn, the letter pressed on. *But rest assured, Catherine, this journey will be more rewarding than you can possibly imagine.*

My fingers then brushed against a small object that had been taped to the back of the letter (and something I didn’t remember noticing when I’d first opened the letter—curious that). It was another tarot card, but this one was attached by a red, silky ribbon to a skeleton key. The card depicted an image of a young man standing at the edge of a cliff, a small dog frolicking at his heels as he gazed up at the sky, seemingly unaware of the precipice before him. The words “The Fool” were written in elegant script across the bottom.

Catherine, the letter continued as if Artemis had somehow timed the exact moment I’d discover the card and key, *the Fool is not just any ordinary card of the Major Arcana. It represents new beginnings, spontaneity, and most importantly, taking a leap of faith. Similarly, when I asked the cards to show me your path, I pulled the 6 of Swords. In case you aren’t familiar with that card—*

I snickered at that. “I’m not familiar with any cards,” I interrupted, shaking my head at the absurd fact that I was even still reading.

—The six of swords is a card that represents you moving forward and finding peace in the present while maintaining hope for the future. It's a card that encourages you to trust that the worst is behind you. I have attached to this letter, a key which will guide you on your healing journey. And it also happens to be a key to your bedroom.

I glanced down at the key. It was a simple, old-fashioned brass skeleton key, slightly tarnished with age.

Remember, Catherine, Artemis continued, you are on the brink of discovering your true potential. This castle will be your sanctuary and guide as you explore the depths of your abilities. You will find the majority of the rooms within the castle locked and only when the house deems you ready will you be able to open them.

Shit! That was probably going to be really bad for any potential open houses...

You stand now at the dawning of a new era in your life. Just as the Fool is the beginning of the tarot deck's Major Arcana, you too must now take on the role of the Fool—you must learn to become open-hearted, curious, and unafraid to leap into the unknown and soon you will find more lessons to follow.

And that's when I remembered the song I'd been listening to on the way here. "The Fool on the Hill." Was it possible...?

No, it wasn't possible.

Catherine, this journey will be well worth the risks. And remember, the magic that runs through your blood, inherited from generations of Daughters of the Moon, will awaken as you work your way through the Arcana and understand each lesson the cards hold. That is the treasure I've left you.

I sighed, crossing my arms over my chest and really had to beat down the driving need to visit the nearest liquor store for a pack of smokes.

Like anything else in life, Catherine, the true value of this journey lies not in material riches, but in the wisdom and self-discovery you'll gain along the way. And believe me, there's no greater treasure than that.

"Um, that's definitely debatable."

Follow the path of The Fool, Catherine, her words danced on the page. Embrace all that it means to be this card, for it is your first lesson in understanding the entirety of the Major Arcana.

“And what if I don’t want to understand the Major Arcana?” I demanded, my disappointment now coming out as anger. “What if I just want to sell this place like yesterday and get back to my life?”

PS, the letter continued, keep a lookout for Rocco who most likely will be in his room watching his reality shows and will only come out for dinner. And when you meet Yolanda, don’t freak out. Keep in mind what Hamlet said: “There are more things in Heaven and Earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

All I could say was that I really wasn’t in the mood for weird letters about weird subjects that meant nothing to me while being quoted Hamlet.

PPS: Here’s a list of people in town I like and don’t.

I like: Mabel at the bakery—she can make one hell of blueberry scone but beware: she’ll talk your ear off if you let her.

The hermit in the bookstore/coffee shop—always full of wisdom, if you can get him to open up... (and speaking of coffee—the tea leaf in town makes a decent brew but no one can beat the coffeehouse in the bookstore, Bronner’s Books). As regards the bookstore—introduce yourself to the owner, Luke Montgomery, as soon as you can. He’s good looking, single, and I’ve heard he’s hung like a horse.

“Oh, my God!”

Dislikes: Ted from the hardware store—rude and always trying to rip people off.

Clarissa at the library—thinks she knows everything about magic, but she’s all talk.

“PPPS,” I read aloud, squinting at the last part of the letter. “Be willing to take risks and don’t be afraid of the unknown. Good luck, Catherine. Until my next letter... yours, Aunt Artemis.”

Tucking the letter into my back pocket, I figured I’d go on the first adventure known as locating my bedroom, hoping on hope that it wouldn’t include any other X-rated and completely horrifying tapestries.

CHAPTER TWO

9 of Wands

Persistence and self-reliance...

One skeleton key and tarot card depicting The Fool in hand, and armed with a mixture of curiosity and reluctance, I began to climb the staircase leading to the second floor of the castle.

The medieval vibe of the ground floor continued onto the second—so did the depictions of the various tarot cards. In fact, if you threw “medieval” in the blender with “Major Arcana,” you’d get this place.

More of the floor to ceiling tapestries hung along the walls (none that looked like donkey stage shows, thank God) while imposing marble statues dotted the space between the doors. I found myself pausing in front of a particularly interesting statue of The Empress, her regal posture and enigmatic smile making me feel as though she were silently judging me from her throne.

Well, let her judge me, I thought to myself (even though it was kind of ridiculous to think a statue was judging you). I’d already put myself through my own wringer where my marriage, my collapsing career and Spare Tire Sandy were concerned. I really didn’t need to hear it from some dumb statue that wasn’t even alive.

Right, and starving yourself and trying to look like a toothpick isn’t doing you any favors, I reminded myself. Hmm, that topic seemed like it was primed and just waiting to be discovered by a shrink somewhere.

With a sigh, I moved on, forcing myself to focus on the task at hand: finding my bedroom and figuring out what the hell I was supposed to do with the inheritance Artemis had shouldered me with.

Maybe I should just write a book about this crazy place, I thought to myself, half-joking. *At least then I’d have an excuse for being stuck out here.*

As the thought lingered in my mind, I realized that maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea. Especially because I had a feeling I was going to be stuck here for a hell of a lot longer than the original two months I’d planned. But, no, I didn’t want to write a book about this place, because it was bad enough that I had to live in it. Furthermore, I doubted my historical romance readers would appreciate a story about a castle that had more in common with The Rocky Horror Picture Show than it did Outlander. But maybe Vermont would inspire me enough to actually come up with a romance novel that

didn't tank as soon as it hit bookshelves. Maybe I could get inspired by maple syrup and start channeling Nicholas Sparks.

Once I walked past the statue of the Empress, my eyes were drawn upward to a mural on the ceiling, depicting a celestial dance of planets and stars. At their center was an angel done in intricate mosaic tiles. She stood with one foot in a river and the other on land, while she appeared to be pouring water from a golden chalice into the river. In her other hand, she poured a stream of fire onto the ground. On the angel's chest was a symbol that appeared to be an amalgamation of sun and moon and below her was the word: Temperance. And all around her were 3s, 6s and 9s.

"What is up with Artemis's fascination with tarot and the numbers 3, 6 and 9?" I grumbled to myself as I faced the expanse of hallway that stretched out before me, a ribbon of shiny parquet wood floors, butting up against walls that were covered in *very* colorful wallpaper featuring a repeating pattern of the sun, the moon and myriad stars along with a representation of all twenty-two of the Major Arcana cards.

Interrupting the flow of gaudy wallpaper were six large wooden doors, three on each side of the hallway, while at the end was another flight of stairs that I supposed led to the third story. Or maybe it led to Willy Wonka's glass elevator. At this stage, anything was possible.

I stopped at the first door and found myself facing a painting of the Justice tarot card. It wasn't like a framed painting that had simply been tacked up on the door either. Instead, the door was the canvas.

Justice was represented as a majestic figure, female, who was seated on a golden throne. Draped in a flowing red robe that covered her body, the chair, and streamed around her feet, she had the expression of someone who'd been sitting on the porcelain throne while battling with their colon for like, over two hours. In one hand, she held a sword, an emblem of truth and impartiality—not that I knew as much—the words "truth" and "impartiality" were painted above her. In her other hand, she held the scales of justice, which appeared to be meticulously balanced, as though emphasizing the importance of fairness in every decision.

Right. Because life was always fair.

Just for shits and giggles, I reached down and tried to turn the door handle but it was locked, just like Artemis's letter had said it would be. Guess she wasn't lying. Regardless, I kept on walking. Door two and the Chariot tarot card stared back at me, its steeds poised for action. I wasn't

sure what this card was supposed to represent, but it just made me grateful we no longer relied on horses to get around. At the center of the mural was a commanding male figure who stood inside the chariot—something which wasn't quite as majestic as the guy's pecs. And I was pretty sure that was an eight-pack he was flashing. Dressed like a warrior (the type you might see on a Chippendale's stage), he radiated confidence and made me consider potentially switching up my Regency romances for a little Roman gladiator goodness.

I tried turning the knob (ahem, not *that* knob) but it too wouldn't budge. My curiosity piqued, I moved on to the next door—The Tower. At first glance, it appeared to be a burning building with a lightning bolt zapping the top of it, but on further inspection—actually, maybe it was a burning building with a lightning bolt zapping the top.

"And that is exactly what needs to happen to this place," I said to myself with a perfunctory nod. "A massive lightning bolt needs to burn it to the ground so I can collect the insurance money and get the hell outta Dodge."

Hmm, insurance money. I made a mental note to later Google "*how to start a residential fire without getting caught*."

Once again, the door remained locked. I wasn't even sure why I kept trying to open each door, although I was aware that Einstein probably would have categorized me as insane. Well, from the looks of it, I'd come from a family of the insane, hence my own breach with reality wasn't technically my fault. Thus, if I wanted to keep trying the door handles, well, then, damn it, I'd keep trying the door handles.

So, screw off, Einstein.

A wry smile tugged at my lips as I continued down the hall, passing Death (which I thought would be a fitting door leading into a bathroom) and The Moon. Finally, I reached the end of the hall and faced the sixth door, this one decorated with a painting of The Fool.

"And that must be me," I said with a laugh I didn't feel. "The biggest fool for ever thinking I might actually have inherited something worth a damn."

Grasping the skeleton key, I slid it into the lock and twisted. The door creaked open to reveal a room that looked like I'd just walked into Jester Central. Only there really wasn't anything funny about it.

The room was a chaotic blend of vibrant colors, patterns, and textures but the central focus was a massive mahogany canopy bed, draped in velvets and

silks of every color of the rainbow that made it look like Ali Baba and his forty thieves had had an orgy on my bed.

Because that was an image I really wanted in my head...

The bed frame appeared to be hand carved and the headboard revealed an image of The Fool about to take a long walk off a very short cliff. A patchwork quilt that was draped over the bed revealed a collage of symbols and images inspired by The Fool: a white rose, a butterfly, a small dog (one of those yippy kinds that drives everyone—except the owner—nuts), and a cliff's edge, along with plenty more 3s, 6s and 9s. Meanwhile a mural of celestial bodies danced across the roof of the bed.

It was enough to make you wish you were blind.

A small writing desk sat in the corner, barely large enough for my laptop but it would have to do in case I caught the writing bug and actually decided to try to get some work done in between my bouts of researching "*natural disasters covered by insurance*." A dresser sat adjacent to the desk, its drawers painted in ways to resemble the patterns on The Fool's robe. It featured brass handles shaped like jester hats that were almost as annoying as the room itself. On top of the dresser was a collection of figurines of, you guessed it, the Fool and those were going into the trash as soon as I could locate it.

Next to the desk were two doors, one which I assumed was the closet (and oh, God, if the closet was filled with Fool costumes, I was going to puke up my intestines right here) and the other one the bathroom. In between the doors and scrawled across the far wall were the words: *Embark on a new journey. Leave the past behind. Bring with you only curiosity to begin again.*

"Ugh, tarot motivational art." I didn't imagine there could be anything worse.

Before I could focus on another Fool themed item, from the corner of my eye, I caught the image of something moving. Turning immediately in that direction, I watched as seemingly out of nowhere, another letter drifted down from above and landed on my bed. I stared at it for a long second, trying to understand how in the world the mail worked here—was there some kind of chute that connected the mailbox on the street to inside of the house? Did the mailman plop the letters into the chute before they automatically and randomly landed in various rooms, a la Harry Potter?

I looked under the canopy of the bed for some kind of explanation, but didn't find anything that resembled a mail chute. I glanced down at the letter

again and lifting it up, realized there was no return address and only my first name scrawled on the envelope. And there was no stamp. So, it had never traveled through USPS in the first place.

So, what the hell was going on?

With no answer for myself but with a hearty sigh, I tore open the letter and unfolded the paper inside. Once again, I found myself reading Aunt Artemis's familiar handwriting.

This is where your adventure begins, Catherine, with the card of The Fool, the letter began, Know you are on the right path, even if you aren't sure where that path is taking you. Embrace the journey. Be willing to take risks and don't be afraid of the unknown. Rely on your intuition—tune into its guidance and heed its messages. Whenever you feel lost, look inside and your subconscious will guide you. Remember: when in doubt, look inward.

What was up with all this self-help shit? Did Artemis think I needed some sort of weird motivational treasure hunt? Had she somehow found out about my divorce, my lack of children, my smoking habit, and my failing career and figured my life was falling apart and this was her answer? Whatever her reasons for all these nausea-inducing letters, I was beyond over them. In fact, I hoped to never receive another personal letter addressed to me ever again. If I only received junk mail and letters from Geico trying to get me to switch from here until eternity, that would be fine by me. Just as I was about to toss the letter back onto the bed, I noticed there was another postscript.

PS: don't forget to get a coffee at Bronner's Books and introduce yourself to Luke. He's the one who's—

"Right," I interrupted, shaking my head. "Hung like a horse."

Exactly, the letter continued, which was weird.

I raised an eyebrow, immediately suspicious of my deceased aunt's matchmaking attempts from beyond the grave. This was even worse than meeting someone on Match.com.

With a shake of my head, I placed the letter on my bedside table (which included a lamp, the base of which was modeled into the likeness of The Fool) and decided to focus on something more important—like unpacking my luggage which was still sitting in the Jeep, as if it wanted nothing more than to get the heck out of here.

Well, that made two of us.

I left the bedroom, my mind still racing with thoughts of Aunt Artemis's annoying meddling and the mysterious Luke and... horses. As I was just about to take the stairs, I glanced down at my feet and noticed that one of my shoelaces had come undone. While images of tumbling headfirst down the stairs played through my head, I knelt down and started to tie my shoelace, all the while trying to ignore the absolute anvil that had settled in my stomach.

"Who the hell are you?" a rough and nasally voice suddenly demanded, sounding from right behind me.

In my complete and total shock, I did three things simultaneously: screamed, lost my balance, and immediately tumbled backwards. All the while, my heart leapt into my throat as I began a graceless descent down the narrow and long staircase. My arms flailed uselessly, trying to regain some semblance of control, but it was no use; it looked like I was going to die and end up haunting this shitbox for all eternity.

Son of a...!

I braced myself for the inevitable collision with the cold, unforgiving floor below, but that collision never came.

###

I'd just fallen down a whole flight of stairs.

Or, I was pretty sure I had and yet... I hadn't felt any pain and I was fairly sure I was still alive. I mean... I was alive enough to think. And wasn't that proof that I was still living? At least to Descartes it was.

You definitely fell down the stairs, Kate, I told myself, even though it still didn't make a lick of sense as to why or how I was standing here now, completely unhurt.

But there was no denying it; I'd felt that sudden loss of balance, the panic of realizing I had nothing to hold onto, and the cold dread when my stomach lurched into my throat like a roller coaster.

I'd braced myself for the inevitable pain of my neck snapping or maybe my spine. But there was no pain and I was pretty sure nothing was broken. That was because rather than hitting each stair on the way down, I'd simply floated down the staircase as if I'd been Ubered there on a memory foam, enchanted carpet.

I glanced back at the staircase, my heart still racing from the fall as I stared at the steps, searching for any sign of what could have happened.

Nothing about the stairs seemed out of the ordinary, except that I'd floated down them like a feather on an invisible cushion of air.

And now? Now I was standing at the bottom of the stairs, blinking up at them in disbelief, my pulse pounding away in my ears. "What the hell?"

"That's what I was gonna say, boss," that same deep voice piped up from nowhere, causing my heart to sink into my toes before it started beating double-time.

It felt like slow motion as I turned my attention to the area just to the left of the top of the stairs. Standing there, looking just as baffled as I was, stood a large, white goat.

A talking goat.

No, it couldn't be a talking goat, because...

"There's no way a goat can talk, Kate," I told myself, wondering if the spill down the stairs might have dislodged a few brain cells along the way.

"False," the goat said and then it bleated at me.

"Did... you just... quote Dwight from *The Office*?"

Never mind asking—*how is it possible that you, a goat, are talking to me? Or: how can a goat can even talk? Or, my personal favorite: what in the hell could be wrong with me that I'd be hallucinating talking goats?*

"Negative," the goat answered. "I quoted myself, fruitcake."

The goat looked like a normal goat (not that I knew what a talking goat was supposed to look like), but it had a sturdy, somewhat barrel-like build, and it was white from its head to its hooves. The animal had large, pointed ears, and its horizontal, rectangular pupils were just as weird as any goat's. Its snout was pinkish, and when it spoke, I could see a set of small, blocky teeth behind its lips.

I shook my head, still suffering from complete shock. "How in the hell are you talking to me right now?"

"Oh, that's real easy," the goat answered in a strangely New York Italian mob sort of voice like he thought he was Tony Soprano or something. "I just put my lips together an' bada bing, bada boom, my tongue does somethin' or maybe it's my vocal cords that are doin' the thing? I ain't really sure, liver lips. Point is—I think an' then I talk, capiche?"

And this was the straw that broke the camel's (or in this case, the goat's) back. Dealing with Artemis's shitbox castle, falling down a flight of stairs only to bounce back up like a stuntwoman, seeing envelopes floating in from literally nowhere and now I was talking to a goat? No, it was too much. I

was on overload and then some and, at the moment, I literally could not handle one more impossible thing.

“I’m done,” I said as I shook my head and started for the front doors, wanting and needing to escape this place asap.

“You can’t be done, sweetheart!” the goat bleated after me as it started coming down the stairs. “Someone’s gotta take care of me!”

Yeah, I definitely hadn’t signed up for that. Just like I hadn’t signed up for this castle and I hadn’t signed up for whatever the hell Artemis had in store for me with all her talk about Moon crap.

CHAPTER THREE

3 of Pentacles

New doors of opportunity are opening...

“Hey, honey!”

“A talking goat isn’t possible, Kate, you know it isn’t possible,” I insisted, shaking my head as I paused at the front door and wondered where the hell I was going? To sleep off this ailment inside my car? Get behind the driver’s seat and immediately head back to Los Angeles? Hell, screw that ridiculously long drive—I should have been headed to the airport to catch the next flight home. Or maybe I simply needed to go and look for the nearest bar where I could drown myself in rum and diet Cokes and a whole pack of cigs...

“Hey ya, Charlie, it’s possible, all right,” the goat called after me. “—about as possible as my groanin’ guts, which leads me ta my next point: what’s for dinner there, swizzle stick?”

“Dinner?” I wheeled around to face the annoying thing, all the while wondering why the hell I was still speaking to it and not getting on the phone with Delta stat.

“Yeah, that’s right,” the goat continued as it reached the bottom step. “What day o’ the week is it, huh?”

“Tuesday,” I answered like this was a normal conversation and not one I was having with a farmyard animal.

“Tuesday?” the goat repeated. “Yeah, that’s right, ain’t it? On Tuesdays, that ol’ broad cooks me up some real nice spaghetti an’ meatballs, ya know?”

“Old broad?”

“Yeah, your, uh, aunt or whatevah.” He paused a second. “You *are* Catherine, ain’t ya?”

“Kate.”

“Right—Artemis’s niece, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The goat laughed and shook his head. “I was gonna say—if you weren’t Catherine—”

“Kate!”

“—Kate—we was gonna have us a real hard conversation.” He paused and looked up at me, narrowing one eye. “So, you wanna do Ol’ Rocco a favor an’ make me up some spaghetti there, boss? I’d cook it for myself but I ain’t gonna get too far with these hooves, know what I mean?”

There was no way I could concentrate on something as normal as spaghetti and meatballs when I was standing here, having a full conversation with a goat who sounded like The Godfather. Not to mention... “Wait, did you... did you see me fall down the stairs?”

“No.”

“You didn’t? I mean—‘cause I’m pretty sure you were standing right there.”

“I mean, I didn’t see you fall down them stairs ‘cause you didn’t fall, now did ya?”

I swallowed hard. Right. The goat (whose name I finally deduced was Rocco) was correct—I hadn’t actually fallen. “So, how is it possible that I didn’t hit the stairs when I know I fell down them?”

“‘Cause the whole house is charmed, that’s why, twinkle toes,” Rocco answered and if goats could shrug, I was pretty sure that was exactly what he did. “You slow or somethin’?”

“At the moment, I don’t know what I am.”

“Well, I’ll tell ya what ya are—too slow with my dinna.”

“How is all of this—” I started as I glanced around myself. “How is *any* of this possible?” Whether I were insane or just experiencing some kind of weird episode, I figured the goat might be able to answer questions I couldn’t.

“How’s what possible, fruitcake?”

“How are you talking? And how did I fall down the stairs but not get hurt?”

“Ah, that’s real easy, bub, on both accounts.”

“Well?” I demanded, once it was clear he wasn’t going to elaborate.

He did that weird goat shrug thing again. “It’s ‘cause o’ your Aunt Artemis, boss.”

Rocco, the talking goat, continued towards me, his hooves clicking on the wooden floor with an odd sense of grace for such a stout creature.

“Cause of my aunt... how?”

“Well, ya know—she charmed the place.”

“An’ she charmed you?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Ch... charmed?” I repeated. My mouth felt like it was full of cotton, and I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the strange creature who was looking at me like I was the one with a screw loose. Now that I was standing beside him, I realized how big he actually was—maybe the size of a very large Saint Bernard.

“Yeah, you heard me,” the goat responded, puffing out his chest. “That auntie o’ yours was a damn good enchantress.”

“By enchanted, are you saying she like, bewitched the house or something...?”

The goat nodded. “Clearly.”

“Artemis did this?” Yes, I probably sounded dumb, but I was having a hell of a time trying to wrap my head around the idea of just what in the hell was going on here and how in the world it was possible. Prior to this exact moment, I’d only thought of magic as something... well, fake.

“Ain’t we been through that already, boss?”

“I guess... so.”

“Right. Now, where’s my dinna? You gonna help me out there or what?” he demanded, his goatish tone suddenly sounding haughty.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” I answered honestly as I shook my head and felt completely defeated.

“Well, I dunno ‘bout you there, sweetcheeks, but I’m hungry, which is the only reason why I paused *The Bachelorette* and walked my ass downstairs!”

Before I could even comprehend a goat watching *The Bachelorette*, Rocco’s gaze fell on something behind me.

“What’s that, huh?”

I turned to see that the letter from Artemis had slipped out of my pocket and now sat in a crumpled heap on the floor. Rocco wasted no time in trotting over, picking the letter up between his teeth, and then proceeded to eat the entire thing.

“Hey!” I started. “That was mine!”

“Relax, boss,” Rocco mumbled through mouthfuls of parchment.

“No, I won’t relax!” The dam that was holding back all the emotions I’d been dealing with started to break. “It could have been important!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what it says. Sheesh—this ain’t my first rodeo, ya know?”

I watched as he gulped down the last bits of my letter, all the while trying to process everything that had happened in the course of the last five minutes. I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone or something. I mean... a talking goat who watched reality TV, plus a charmed staircase, and an aunt who’d woven it all together with—dare I even think it?—magic?

Or was I having some sort of mental breakdown? Schizophrenia? Had I accidentally eaten one of Mom’s pot cookies again and taken the trip of a lifetime? The last time I’d mistakenly come across one, I’d ended up curled into a fetal ball while having a panic attack and I could have sworn I was time traveling. Finally, I’d begged her to take me to the hospital, to which she’d laughed and said “*sleep it off and I’ll see you in the morning.*”

But I hadn’t seen Mom in months. Mainly because I wasn’t a fan of visiting her in the senior nudist colony where she lived.

“Right,” I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. “So what else is lurking in this castle that I should know about?”

“Wouldn’t ya like ta know, eh?” Rocco retorted.

“Yeah. That’s why I asked.”

“Well, I asked for my dinna an’ look where that got me. Nowheres, that’s where!”

“Yeah, yeah, that letter you just downed should keep you going for another minute or longer.”

“Keep me goin’? That was just the appetizer, boss!”

“Anyway,” I continued, frowning at him, “you mentioned that Artemis enchanted the house, right?”

“Right” he replied, flicking his tail nonchalantly.

I then recalled the words from Artemis’s letter (the one that was now sitting in Rocco’s stomach): *be willing to take a risk and don’t be afraid of*

the unknown. At the time I'd read it, I just figured she was a delusional, brain-addled, old woman. Now, with the discovery of this enchanted house and its peculiar inhabitant, the meaning behind her words was becoming clearer. Startlingly so.

As I stood there, allowing the reality of my situation to register (because I was fairly sure I wasn't crazy, but wasn't that exactly what crazy people think?), my thoughts drifted back to the other things Artemis had said in her letter, things I was now worried might actually be... true?

"My aunt had said I was something like a Moon Maiden or a Moon Scout or a Moon something—"

"Moon virgin?" Rocco repeated before he erupted into a peal of bleating laughter—something I didn't find funny, because it was a little too close to the truth for comfort.

"Whatever. What did she mean?"

The goat continued to chuckle. "You're a Moon Daughter, fruitcake."

"Okay, what the hell is that in layman terms?"

"It means you got you a connection to the moon an' its powers."

I was just as lost as I was a few seconds ago. "And what exactly does that mean?"

"It means you got some abilities, ya know?" the goat replied with another goat shrug. "You're special, yeah?"

"Um, no. I have no abilities."

"Well, how 'bout you develop the ability ta get me my dinna?"

Figuring spaghetti was something I could take care of (and hoping to get Rocco off the freaking subject), I started for the kitchen with the weird goat on my heels. Opening the pantry, I rummaged through it, searching for a box of anything I could make for the nuisance creature. Then maybe he'd start explaining just what in hell was going on in this house, er, castle.

As far as the pantry was concerned though, the shelves were filled with dusty jars and cans, but no sign of any pasta, or anything else that appeared edible or even from the last decade.

"Rocco," I called out while bending over to check the lowest shelf. "Who's been taking care of you since Artemis died?"

"The castle."

I raised an eyebrow at him over my shoulder. "How could the castle have been taking care of you?"

Rocco rolled his eyes, as if the answer should have been obvious. “Ain’t you picked up on the fact that the place is enchanted yet?”

“Excuse the hell out of me but I’m still trying to grasp the concept,” I frowned. “Now, answer my question... please.”

“It means the castle provided whatever I needed, courtesy o’ Artemis’s magic. So, when I wanted me a spaghetti dinna, the castle handed it over, capiche?”

“So, where’s your dinner now then?”

He shrugged. “Things are different now.”

“Different why?”

“Now I figure the castle assumes I’m *your* responsibility so it ain’t got to feed me no more.”

“You’re saying you were the castle’s responsibility until I came along, and now you’re mine?”

“Exactly, sweetheart,” Rocco replied, nodding his goat head emphatically. “The moment you stepped foot into this place, the castle stopped feedin’ me ‘cause the duty became yours.”

“What in the hell do I have anything to do with this?”

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger, boss,” he said, holding up his hooves defensively which looked odd, to say the least. “I’m just tellin’ ya how it is.”

Aside from the fact that I had in no way, shape or form signed up for any of this (and, frankly, wanted nothing to do with it,) I really didn’t like the fact that I was now apparently responsible for Rocco, because being responsible for him meant a quick escape from this place wasn’t possible. I mean, who would adopt a talking goat? Furthermore, how would I even explain a talking goat to a potential adopter? As soon as images of laboratories and men in white overcoats flashed through my mind, I quickly pushed them away.

“Fine,” I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. “But what if I don’t want the responsibility of you or this crappy, castle?”

Rocco shrugged nonchalantly. “I dunno, boss. Seems ta me you ain’t got no choice in the matta.”

“Of course,” I groaned, rubbing my temples in an attempt to ward off the headache that was rapidly approaching. “And what the hell are you doing eating spaghetti anyway?” I raised an eyebrow at him. “Shouldn’t a goat be eating grass or something?”

“Hey!” Rocco bristled, his eyes narrowing. “How’d you’d like livin’ on grass, day in an’ day out?”

“I’m not a goat.”

“An’ I ain’t no ordinary goat neither so don’t go tryin’ to put me in no box, all right? I got my own needs too,” he huffed, tossing his head.

“All right, all right.” I held up my hands in surrender. “No offense intended.” Then I took a deep breath. “Okay, so let’s address one problem at a time. We’re out of spaghetti, so can you tell the castle to keep feeding you until I can make a grocery store run... tomorrow?”

“That ain’t how it works, fruitcake.”

“And why not?” I sighed, frustrated.

“Remember the part about *me* bein’ *your* responsibility now?”

“Son of a,” I started but then took a deep breath as I thought a trip to the store might be exactly what I needed—anything to get away from this whole situation for even a few minutes. Maybe I’d be able to think more clearly, come up with a plan on how in the heck I was going to get myself out of this mess. “Guess I’m going to go and pick up some spaghetti then.”

“Sounds like a plan, boss,” Rocco replied, smirking as if he’d won some sort of victory. This goat was definitely getting on my nerves.

“Be back soon,” I called over my shoulder as I started to leave the kitchen.

“I’ll stay here, an’ keep an eye on the joint.” Then I heard his hooves as he followed me into the hallway. “While you’re out, you oughtta stop in an’ see Luke.”

Jeez, what was it with this Luke person and everyone wanting me to meet him? I turned to face Rocco. “Why? What’s the deal with me meeting him?”

“Artemis said it was important,” Rocco explained with a shrug. “She said somethin’ ‘bout givin’ him somethin’ important—somethin’ she wanted you to have.”

“What did she want me to have?” I asked, somewhat intrigued.

“Beats me, boss,” Rocco said, shaking his head. “Guess you gotta find out yourself.”

“Fine,” I sighed, slipping on my jacket as I shook my head and grabbed my keys, wondering how in the world I was reacting to this as well as I was. Maybe shock and denial were just a street away from knocking on my door—I wasn’t sure.

As I stepped out into the chilly air, the scent of damp earth filled my nostrils and my mind raced with questions about this mysterious Luke Montgomery: what kind of connection did Luke have to my Aunt Artemis, the castle, and this whole ‘Daughter of the Moon’ business, if any connection at all?

Only time would tell, I figured.

But first, I needed to buy some spaghetti.

###

The grocery bags rustled in the backseat as I drove into downtown Maplewood, my mind swirling with questions. How was I supposed to approach this Luke Montgomery guy about whatever Rocco believed Artemis had for me? Just say: *Hey there, Luke, my crazy aunt’s talking goat said you have something for me?*

All the while, I had to wonder if this was all just some elaborate prank. Yet, who could pull off such a massive joke? And why would they even bother? Unless it was Artemis’s attempt at revenge from beyond the grave—but revenge for what? As far as I understood it, she was the one who’d separated herself from the family, not the other way around.

The picturesque downtown of Maplewood seemed to have sprung from the pages of a storybook as I drove through its tree-lined streets. Charming brick buildings with ivy creeping up the walls housed quaint shops and cafés, the window displays beckoning to passersby.

It was maybe another ten seconds before I spotted Luke’s bookshop, *Bronner’s Books*, nestled between a flower shop and an artisan bakery, its hand-painted sign swaying gently in the breeze. Taking a deep breath, I parked in the back lot and tried to silence the whirlwind of thoughts in my head—was I about to finally get some answers or just more questions?

“Right, here goes nothing,” I mumbled as I stepped out of my Jeep and made my way toward the bookshop.

The bell above the door chimed when I stepped inside, and I was immediately greeted by the comforting scent of coffee mingling with the aroma of old, leather-bound books. My eyes wandered over to a cozy corner of the store, which housed a small coffee shop where a teenager enthusiastically rang up a group of eager customers, their laughter and chatter filling the air.

I wandered further into the charming store, marveling at how it looked like something you'd find tucked away in an English village. Actually, it was like I'd just walked right into one of the novels filling the shelves. Which reminded me that I still hadn't started the historical romance I'd promised my publisher—where that book was concerned, I had writer's block and then some.

But back to the bookstore—at the rear of the shop was a large desk, and as I approached it, I noticed a man engaged in lively conversation with what I assumed was a customer. My eyes were then drawn to a nameplate on top of the desk, which read: "The Magician."

Cute, I thought to myself.

As if sensing my gaze, the man looked over from his conversation and caught my eye. And then there was this weird thing that happened between us for like two seconds. His expression blanched and there was the sudden fire of recognition in his eyes which made no sense because I'd never seen this guy before. As for me, I was pretty sure my eyes were telling him just how hot I found him. Regardless, he excused himself from his customer and walked toward me, an easy grin on his chiseled face.

"Can I help you?" he asked, his voice warm and inviting.

Taking a moment to completely take him in, now that he was facing me, I was struck by how undeniably handsome he was. Standing at maybe six-foot-two, his wavy brown hair was cut long on top and peppered with gray at the temples, giving him a distinguished air. A slight, graying beard framed his strong jawline, and with his wool sweater and chinos, he was dressed like he'd just stepped out of a J. Crew catalog—effortlessly stylish.

"Um, I don't actually know if you can help me," I started before taking a deep breath. "I'm looking for Luke Montgomery."

"Well, guess what?" he replied, his eyes dancing with amusement as a boyish smile lit up his mouth. I didn't fail to notice a dimple on his left cheek.

"What?"

"You found him."

"Great," I said, trying to keep my voice steady, because my mind was already racing with questions for him about weird castles and talking goats, which, of course, I couldn't ask unless I wanted him to think I was totally bonkers.

“You must be Catherine?” he asked, clearly attempting to break the awkward silence that had suddenly descended on us.

“Kate, actually,” I corrected. “But, uh, yeah, that’s me.”

“Ah, Kate,” he repeated and that warm smile of his seemed to instantly put me at ease—in a weird sort of way. It was as though one second my heart was pounding and I felt lightheaded, and the next second (as soon as he smiled at me), I felt like I was completely relaxed. Hmm.

“Artemis’s niece, right?” he continued.

“Yep, that’s me.” Then I smiled awkwardly. “Nice to, uh, meet you.”

“Likewise,” he responded as he took a step closer and I was suddenly very aware of the scent of his crisp aftershave and his very pretty gray eyes.

“So, you’re here because your aunt mentioned I have something for you?”

Right—that’s why I was here. I’d forgotten for a second. “Yes, right—that’s, uh, why I’m here,” I said, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks as I stumbled over my words. I didn’t know what it was but this man was suddenly making me all kinds of nervous again. And it wasn’t because he was handsome and sexy in a collegiate sort of way. I mean—coming from Los Angeles, I saw ridiculously handsome men every day—it seemed a prerequisite to living there. But this guy—well, there was just something different about him. I couldn’t really put my finger on exactly what that difference was though.

Regardless, Luke’s piercing gaze seemed to see right through me—maybe that was the reason I felt and sounded like a bumbling teenager.

“Your aunt was quite a character,” Luke remarked as he gave me another of those boyish grins and I immediately calmed down once more. Strange that.

“Sounds about right,” I agreed.

“Anyway,” Luke continued, interrupting me from noticing the way his gray eyes almost appeared blue as he stepped under the overhead lights.

“The thing Artemis wanted me to give you—”

“Yes?”

“—is downstairs. Can you give me a minute to ring up a customer and then I’ll lead the way?”

“Sure,” I agreed, nodding as I watched him head towards the customer he’d been tending to earlier when I’d first walked up to the counter. Now no longer the object of Luke’s attention, I felt strangely empty—something

which made zero sense. But I was starting to realize that nothing made any sense lately.

CHAPTER FOUR

3 of Cups

Celebrate friendship, community and togetherness...

I took the opportunity to explore the bookstore further, walking up to one of the shelves, running my fingers gently across the spines of well-loved classics and obscure gems alike.

While Luke's attention was still with his previous customer, I continued admiring his collection. There were classic novels from all over the world—including Dickens and Cervantes and Dostoevsky—each one holding stories that had captivated generations and would continue to do so. There was something magical about being surrounded by these literary masterpieces, and for a moment, I forgot my own bizarre predicament. Well, for a very short moment, anyway.

I proceeded to peruse the titles on the shelves until I found I'd worked my way back around to Luke's desk. Then I just waited there, busying myself by looking through a stand of bookmarks at the side of the large desk.

"I can help you now," Luke announced as he returned and the butterflies in my stomach started up again.

"Great," I answered as I glanced back at the placard on his desk. "The Magician, huh?"

I wasn't sure why I'd thought to ask that question and what struck me as even more odd was the fact that I might have been, God, dared I even admit it? *flirting* with him? Whatever it was, I was so out of practice, it only came off as sounding ridiculous.

But Luke was polite enough that he pretended not to notice. "Something like that," he chuckled, and with a glint in his eye, he opened the cash register, grabbed a key, and gestured for me to follow him towards the rear of the bookstore.

As we walked, I noticed how every detail of Luke's shop seemed to be meticulously curated—from the carefully arranged stacks of books to the strategically placed vintage knickknacks, which added a touch of whimsy to the atmosphere. The soft glow of the fairy lights strung across the ceiling cast a warm ambience throughout the room and made it feel like something you'd see on a postcard.

"Your shop is really cute," I said, almost involuntarily.

“Thanks,” Luke responded, his face lighting up with pride as he looked over his shoulder at me. “I’ve put a lot of work into it over the years.”

He unlocked a door at the very back of the shop, revealing a narrow set of stairs that descended into darkness.

“The stairs are very old so please hold onto the railing,” he informed me.

I didn’t say anything, but just nodded and with a deep breath, followed him down the steps, my hand running along the cold metal railing to steady myself. All the while, I wondered what kind of treasures would be hidden away in such a secretive location. And what in the world could Artemis have entrusted him with that required it be kept down here? Maybe it was something expensive? But if so, why not just give it to the probate lawyer who was handling her will? Unless the thing was magical...

As we reached the bottom of the staircase, Luke flipped on a switch, and a dim neon light flickered and blinked on overhead, making zapping noises.

“Let there be light,” he said with a chuckle.

Now able to see our surroundings, I noticed the room was large and chilly, the stone walls giving it a dungeon sort of feeling, but the air seemed to be heavy with a sense of mystery. Or maybe that was just the writer in me.

There were bookshelves lining the stone walls, each shelf protected by glass casing and in the center of the cold room stood a large cabinet.

“Going for Dr. Frankenstein’s lab?” I asked Luke with a laugh, trying to ease the tension building inside me.

“Did I achieve it?”

“I’d say so,” I admitted, smirking as I again wondered if I was actually flirting with this guy? Me—someone who hadn’t so much as even looked at a man with any sort of interest in years.

“Well, welcome to my secret lair.”

An icy draft seemed to seep through the cracks in the walls, wrapping its cold tendrils around me and sending shivers down my spine. I hugged my arms around myself, trying to ward off the chill. Luke glanced over at me and, clearly noticing my discomfort, offered an apologetic smile.

“Sorry about the cold,” he said. “Most of the items down here are delicate and need to be kept in a controlled environment—which isn’t ideal for visitors.”

“Delicate?” I questioned, my curiosity piqued even further.

“Right,” he nodded.

I looked around myself once more. “Is this where you keep all the rare books?”

“Yes—first publications, others that have been out of print for a very long time—and others that are just super old. That sort of thing,” he explained, his voice barely above a whisper, as if the walls had ears.

“And these books are for sale too?”

He shook his head. “Oh, no, these are my personal collection.” He looked around the room then with an expression of pride. “I’d never want to part with anything in here.”

I frowned at that. “Why keep them here and not in your own home?”

He returned his attention to me. “This *is* my home.” He started laughing at my reaction. “Well, not this exact room. I actually live on the top floor, above the bookstore.”

“Oh.” I gave him a quick smile. “Well, you appear to be quite the dedicated collector,” I continued with a shrug, wondering what sort of titles I might find in this private collection of his.

I wonder what other things you’d find in his ‘private collection’, I suddenly thought to myself and then blushed furiously.

“I would say I am a dedicated collector,” he answered on a laugh. Then he looked at me. “And what do you do?”

I was somewhat surprised Artemis hadn’t told him, but then I wondered if Artemis even knew I was an author. “I’m a novelist.”

He frowned for a second and then eyed me more narrowly. “Are you really an author or are you just putting me on?”

“No, I am—for real,” I answered with a weak, embarrassed laugh. “Although I will say I don’t write the sort of stuff that would end up in here.”

“What do you write?”

I colored a little more. “Historical romance.”

“Ah,” he replied as he gave me funny expression I wasn’t sure what to make of. “Well, I’m sure you must be getting all kinds of inspiration from Artemis’s castle?”

“That’s one word for it.”

We continued to navigate the maze of bookshelves, our conversation flowing more easily as we discussed our shared love of literature. With each passing moment, I found myself growing more and more comfortable in Luke’s presence, despite the bizarre circumstances that had brought us

together. He was just easy to talk to and no, Artemis's line about him being 'hung like a horse' didn't once cross my mind.

Honestly.

"So... uh, what's the deal with the castle?" I asked, eagerly changing the direction of my thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, it's kind of a weird place."

He looked back at me and gave me a grin. "That's one way to put it."

"It's like twenty-four/seven tarot cards plus the constant repetition of—"

"—3, 6 and 9?" he finished for me with a knowing smile.

I nodded. "Yeah, what's the deal with that?"

"Well, your aunt was a... spiritual woman, certainly."

"Now, you're just being polite," I said as he chuckled. "You mean she was a nutcase."

He cocked his head to the side. "I wouldn't say that, exactly."

Then there was a pause of a few seconds as I tried to remember what it was we'd been talking about. Jeez, what was it about this guy that had me so off my game? Not that I was on my game—I mean, I figured in order to be on one's game, one needed to be dating and having sex and all that sort of stuff. Something I decidedly was not.

"So, what do you know about the castle and Artemis?" I asked, finding our previous conversational string.

"Well, I can tell you the significance of the repetition of numbers, if that's what you mean?"

"Sure, that's a good place to start."

Amidst the lighthearted banter, one question still lingered in the back of my mind: What could my aunt have possibly left for me here, and why? Luke led me further into the dimly lit room, my eyes struggling to adjust to the murky shadows beyond the fluorescent hanging light. All the while, the shadows clung to the corners of the room like cobwebs. Had I been a horror author, this place would have provided plenty of eerie inspiration.

"So, the significance of the numbers 3, 6 and 9 have their base in various different places and religions," Luke started. "In Christianity, the number 3 is associated with the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

"Right."

"And in Hinduism, there's a concept of *Trimurti*, representing the three aspects of the divine: Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva,

the destroyer. And in Chinese culture, the number 3 is considered lucky and normally associated with harmony.”

“Wow, you must read a lot,” I said on a laugh.

He chuckled on a shrug. “Guilty as charged.”

“So, was my aunt a religious woman?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so—well, not in the way of traditional religion, anyway.”

“Ah—okay.”

“But going back to the numbers, there’s also the significance that Nikola Tesla gave the numbers 3, 6 and 9 when he said, *‘if you only knew the magnificence of the 3, 6, and 9, then you would have the key to the universe’*.”

“That’s interesting.”

He nodded. “And there are also some proponents of numerology and sacred geometry who believe the numbers hold special significance due to their mathematical properties. In numerology, each number is believed to carry unique vibrations and meanings.”

“Do you know what those meanings are?” He looked over his shoulder at me once more with a certain look that made me laugh. “Of course, you do.”

He chuckled and nodded. “The number 3 is associated with creativity and communication, 6 with harmony and balance, and 9 with completion and spiritual growth. And other traditions place significance on the numbers as representing spiritual enlightenment, balance, and cosmic order.”

“And Artemis must have been one of those people.”

“Right.”

He approached the cabinet at the back of the room, squatting down and fumbling with a key before unlocking it.

“And the tarot card stuff that’s all over the castle?”

He shrugged. “Artemis just loved the tarot, I guess.” Then he looked up at me. “By the way, I was very sorry to hear about her passing away,” he offered, his voice soft and somber, a stark contrast to the jovial tone he’d used earlier. “Everyone in Maplewood was touched by her in one way or another.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, watching as he reached inside the cabinet and pulled something out that was wrapped in thick, navy blue velvet. He unwrapped the velvet to reveal a leather-bound book and, strangely, as soon as I rested my eyes on it, my fingers started to itch with the need to touch it.

“Artemis was one of a kind,” he added, a wistful smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as he looked at me.

“Thanks,” I responded, not really sure what more to say, because it wasn’t as though Artemis and I had been close by any stretch of the imagination. “How well did you know her?”

Luke straightened, his eyes briefly flickering with a distant memory. “Oh, decently well, I’d say. We worked on a couple projects together.”

“Projects?” I asked, raising an eyebrow, because it sounded just general enough to be hiding something specific. “Like what?”

He grinned, revealing a set of perfectly aligned and white teeth along with that damned adorable dimple. Not that I was interested in him, because I wasn’t. All I was interested in was figuring out how to get out of this tiny town stat and also figuring out what the hell to do with Rocco. Hmm, maybe Luke was in the market for a talking goat...

“Let’s just say our projects involved research into some... unique areas of interest.”

“Unique as in... cosmic numbers and the tarot?”

“Something like that,” he replied, his eyes crinkling at the corners as if he were enjoying a private joke.

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at his evasiveness. But then again, given the talking goat who was waiting for me, and more specifically—*his spaghetti*, back at the castle, maybe Luke working on a ‘unique project’ with Artemis wasn’t so strange.

“Ah,” I said, trying to maintain a casual tone despite the curiosity gnawing at me. I glanced around the dimly lit room again.

“Were the two of you close?” Luke asked me, probably surprised by the fact that I really didn’t know much about my aunt.

I shook my head, letting out a bemused laugh. “No, I only met her a few times when I was just a kid. Then she sort of lost touch with the whole family.”

“Ah, that’s a shame.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “So you can probably imagine my surprise when I learned I’d inherited her... castle.”

“Pretty interesting place, isn’t it?” he asked, and even though there was a certain detachment to his tone, the look in his eyes was anything but casual. It was almost like he was asking me how much I knew about the castle.

“*Interesting* doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

“Right.”

I had to wonder just how much in the know Luke actually was. Did he know the castle was enchanted? That Artemis was some kind of witch or something? Did he know about Rocco? If he did, his expression wasn't giving anything away. Yep, we were both being guarded, which I figured was to be expected—I mean, if you walked around talking about those sorts of things, most people would assume you were nuts.

“The castle wasn't what you were expecting, I take it?” he asked.

I nodded with a laugh. “Definitely not what I was expecting.”

Luke returned his attention to the book before him, allowing me to give it another once-over. The cover was scuffed and worn, the spine cracked, but there was an undeniable aura of power surrounding it, as if it were pulsating with hidden knowledge. It might have sounded strange, and it was strange, even as I thought about it, but I could literally feel the energy pouring off the thing. Which made just as little sense as a talking goat and a danger-free staircase.

“Artemis always did have a flair for the dramatic,” he said, finally handing the book to me.

With the energy already vibrating from the thing, I was almost afraid to touch it. But I did and once my fingers met the book's cover, the energy seemed to travel right up my arms.

“I would say she had a flair for the very dramatic,” I continued. “So, what is this thing anyway?” I asked, looking down at it.

He shrugged with a smile. “A book?”

“Thanks,” I frowned up at him as he chuckled.

Then he shook his head. “I don't know what it is, because I didn't snoop. All I know is Artemis asked me to keep it here for you and that you'd be coming around for it eventually.”

“And here I am.”

He nodded. “Here you are.”

There was something uncanny about him—some mystery that seemed to burn in the depths of his eyes—something that made me want to continue our conversation. Yes, I wanted to find out exactly how much Luke knew about Artemis and whatever the hell was going on inside that castle, but there was more to it than that. For some reason, I found this Luke guy pretty... interesting, all on his own. “So, you said you've visited the castle?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Many times.”

“Ah, then... you must’ve met Rocco, the goat?” The way I said the words was purposefully shrouded because I wanted to see if I could pick up anything from his reaction. And as to the book that was still humming in my hands, I decided not to open it here—not when I wasn’t sure what I might find on the inside. No, it seemed like something that was better researched when I was on my own, back at Camelot.

“I have,” Luke replied, his voice steady and relaxed. If I’d been guarded with my question, Luke was just as guarded with his response. It seemed we were at a standstill.

“Ah,” I managed, unsure of what to say next. The air around us seemed to thicken, and I found myself focusing on the dust motes dancing in the beam of light filtering through the air. I could feel my cheeks warming, which only made me more self-conscious and all the while, the freaking book was thrumming along as if it had an engine.

“Rocco’s quite the character, isn’t he?” I ventured, attempting to gauge Luke’s reaction.

He just raised an eyebrow and smirked. “He’s definitely one of a kind.”

Damn him for not giving anything away—not even a slight narrowing of his eyes or any telltale sign that might lead me to believe he knew more than he was letting on.

“Yes, definitely one of a kind. What, uh, do you think of him... I mean, beyond that?” I asked hesitantly.

He shrugged. “As far as goats go, he’s a likable enough one, I guess.”

“Right,” I answered, trying to stifle a somewhat disappointed smile as I began to realize that maybe Luke wasn’t hiding anything at all. Maybe he just wasn’t aware of Rocco’s unique ability to talk. And, if that were the case, of course I wasn’t willing to be the one to tell him.

“Or were you referring to the fact that he can talk?” Luke asked, an amused glint in his eyes.

The dim light flickered as my heart pounded in my chest while I tried to process what Luke had just admitted. I didn’t say anything right away—mainly because I couldn’t. I mean, I could barely even think, let alone speak.

Luke knew Rocco could talk. That was like... well, a big deal. And it also led to other questions like what else did he know?

“Uh-huh,” I finally managed to stutter out, my voice barely audible.

“Yeah, that’s what I was referring to—er, that Rocco can... well, speak...

English.” I swallowed hard, feeling the knot in my throat as I realized the secret was now out in the open.

Luke’s eyebrows reached for the ceiling. “Imagine if he could also speak French or Italian or even Dutch.”

I gave him a laugh I definitely didn’t feel. “Yeah, imagine that.”

“Soooo,” Luke started, his eyes twinkling with amusement, like this was a normal, everyday conversation he had with all his customers. And for all I knew, maybe it was. Maybe all of Maplewood was enchanted and magical and everyone’s animals talked to them.

“So... that’s it?”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean—we both just admitted that we know there’s a talking goat in Artemis’s castle—”

“—*Your* castle now, from what I understand?”

“Right—the point is we’re discussing a talking goat like it’s no big deal.”

“Okay.”

He was still wearing that smirk, which was starting to irritate me, because it didn’t seem like he was taking any of this seriously. And, well... I believed it was a serious subject, even if it was also absurd. “Which it isn’t—ordinary or common, I mean.” Then I shook my head as I wrestled with my own words. “Or can every goat in Maplewood talk?”

He laughed and shook his head. “No, Rocco is the only talking goat I know of.” Then he paused. “And have you met Yolanda yet?”

“Yolanda?” I frowned. “No.”

“Then you have even more surprises to look forward to,” Luke chuckled.

“Great,” I grumbled, not even sure I wanted to ask who or what Yolanda was. “Can’t wait,” I finished under my breath, trying to sound like I wasn’t completely thrown off by all of this, which I was.

“Trust me, Kate,” Luke said, his voice serious but still warm. “You’ll get used to it. And you might even find yourself enjoying their company.”

“If I stick around.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Right—*if* you stick around.”

Then there was a pause of a few seconds or more in which we just stared at each other as if each of us had a myriad of questions for the other but both of us refused to be the first to ask. It was weird and uncomfortable to say the least.

“Should I even ask about Yolanda?” I ventured finally.

Luke shook his head with a knowing smile. “Probably best you don’t,” he answered. “Some things are better experienced than explained.”

“Fair enough.” I nodded, still needing to get to the bottom of yet nine million other questions that were currently swirling through my mind. “So... then you know about Artemis and—”

“Her magic?”

My eyes widened at the term, but I figured ‘magic’ was as good a description for what was going on around me as I was going to get, so I just nodded again. “I guess you could call it that,” I admitted, feeling a little relieved that I wasn’t the only one in on this insane secret.

“I know about it, yes.”

“And do you know about the Daughter of the Moon stuff?”

“I do,” he replied simply, his dimple in full effect.

“Can you tell me what that means?” I pressed, desperate to get some clarity on something, anything at this point.

Luke’s smile turned gentle as he shook his head. “I believe that’s something you have to figure out for yourself, Kate.”

“Of course,” I sighed, not bothering to mask my disappointment.

“And on that note,” he continued, “I’ve got to get back upstairs and see what fires need putting out.” He motioned to a stool on the far side of the room that I hadn’t noticed before. “If you pull that stool up, you should be comfortable enough for a bit.” Then he sighed. “Sorry again about the chilly temperature, but there isn’t much I can do about it.”

“No, that’s okay.” I had to admit, my thoughts weren’t really on getting comfy in this dungeon of a room. “I thought I’d just take the book back home with me, er, back to the castle?”

Luke shook his head, his gaze steady as he met my eyes. “Artemis was insistent that the book should never be brought into the castle. That’s why she asked me to keep it here.”

“Oh,” I answered with a small frown. “Why in the world wouldn’t she want it in the castle?”

Luke shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe she thought Rocco would eat it,” I said, trying to make light of a situation that was really starting to unnerve me.

“Maybe,” Luke answered, but I could tell that wasn’t it. “I’ve learned that Artemis had her reasons, and most times, it’s best not to question them.”

“Fine,” I sighed, feeling a mix of disappointment and curiosity. It seemed like every answer I got only led me to twenty more questions. I ran a hand through my shoulder-length, brown hair, tugging on a few unruly strands as I tried to gather my thoughts. “Thanks, Luke,” I murmured.

“No problem,” he continued, “But, I really need to get back upstairs. If you need anything, just give me a shout.”

“Will do,” I responded and I watched as he gave me a little salute of a wave before he disappeared up the stairs, taking them two at a time. As far as Luke went, I was left with feelings of gratitude and frustration in equal measure. Sure, he’d provided me with some answers, but so many questions still loomed over me and I had a feeling he knew the ins and outs of most of those questions. But as with everything else regarding Artemis and her crappy castle, it seemed nothing was easy.

As the door closed behind Luke, I was struck by how eerily quiet the room suddenly became. It was as if my entire world had been reduced to this small basement, filled with dusty old books and puzzling secrets.

CHAPTER FIVE

3 of Wands

Adventure lies ahead with plenty of support...

With a heavy sigh, I walked over to the cabinet and set the book down on it.

The moment I released it, I noticed the sudden absence of that electrical hum that had been pulsating through my fingers. Now they almost felt numb. Leaving that for the moment, I turned my attention to the stool and dragged it over toward the ancient book.

“Okay then,” I muttered to myself as I settled my rear end onto the stool, looking down at the thing with a sense of trepidation. “Let’s see what more crazy shit I’m about to discover.”

I approached the book cautiously, as though it might suddenly come to life and bite me (and for all I knew, maybe it would!)

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered, flipping the book open to the first page.

To my surprise, a letter seemed to almost explode out of the inside cover of the book, complete with the same, familiar wax seal that marked all

Artemis's correspondence.

"Of course, there's a letter," I muttered, rolling my eyes, but I picked it up and carefully broke the seal, unfolding the parchment.

Dear Catherine, I read, I trust by now you have met Rocco and, obviously, Luke. Speaking of the latter, I'm sure you now see what I was talking about when I said he was a catch.

"Oh, God," I grumbled aloud, still completely uncomfortable with the fact that my deceased aunt was trying to set me up from beyond the grave.

If I'd been thirty years younger, I would've given him a ride he'd never forget!

I let out a snort at that, shaking my head, even if I did everything in my power to push the mental image away.

But I digress... The point is, you're in good hands with Luke. The thing to know now is that magic is real and it takes a leap of faith to truly embrace it. Right—I'll say it again: Magic is real. I know you're in denial and probably wondering how any of this can be possible, but just trust me that it is. In time, you'll learn more.

For now, you're at a crossroads. You must make a choice: continue forward into this magical world or turn back to the life you left behind.

"Well, that's easy," I answered, shaking my head and addressing the letter like it was actually talking to me. "I choose to go back to my old life—in a freaking heartbeat."

The answer isn't that simple, the letter continued, like Artemis was reacting to what I'd just said. If you decide to turn back to the life you knew, your recent past, you need to understand what you're going back to.

"Okay," I said aloud, because... well, talking to myself was just something I did.

Can you truly say your old life was fulfilling, Catherine? Was it everything you wanted, everything you imagined your life would be before you became jaded and cynical?

"Who says I'm jaded and cynical?"

Did you wake up every morning feeling a sense of excitement to be alive, with a driving sense of purpose?

"Depends on whether I had a book deadline, I guess."

Was your old life something worth living? Was it a legacy worth recording for later generations?

I paused, letting the words sink in. My old life was predictable and safe, but it lacked the excitement and mystery that seemed to be surrounding me in spades now. Not that that was a good thing. But the point remained: what exactly was I returning to if I chose to leave Maplewood? More of the same, I supposed. And, no, I couldn't exactly say my life in Los Angeles was that great but...

Kate, there is no way you are seriously considering staying here, I told myself as I shook my head. If you're offered a way out of taking care of Rocco and getting stuck with an unsellable castle—then you're going to take it.

I couldn't deny the fact that Artemis had hit a nerve, though. Did I have anything worth going back to? I used to think my writing career was enough, but now, I wasn't so sure. Especially since I hadn't written anything close to a bestseller in a very long time—now I was just happy to make my measly advances back in a timely manner. So, no, my life wasn't going to get me membership into the Adventurers' Club, but it was still *my* life. And the idea of staying here, in this nutty little town... well, that wasn't what I'd signed up for. Furthermore, not once had the thought crossed my mind that I might move to Vermont and start my life over. This stupid trip was only meant to last a couple months and then I was planning to head straight back home.

I mean, I couldn't stay here! Set aside for a moment the ridiculousness that was Artemis's castle and Rocco, the talking goat, I had a home in Los Angeles (granted, one I was renting), but all my furniture was there, my clothing, and everything I owned. I couldn't just uproot myself on a whim.

From this point forward, the letter continued, should you choose to walk the path of your destiny, to become a Daughter of the Moon, your life will be filled with new meaning because you will be bearing the responsibility of something so much larger than yourself. All the decisions you make will be worth a damn because they will bear significant consequences. Your life will definitely matter, Catherine.

"How would I even go back if I wanted to?" I thought aloud. After everything I'd learned about the castle and Rocco and the fact that I was now his caretaker (well, according to him anyway), it seemed there was no escaping this place. And it wasn't like the castle was going to be a quick sale, even if I did find a home for Rocco.

As I glanced back at the letter, I had to blink in disbelief, because the ink on the paper began bleeding through the parchment, forming words right in

front of my eyes, as if from an invisible pen.

If you choose to return to your old life, once you make that decision, you will be returned but without the knowledge of anything that has happened since you arrived in Maplewood. You will return to your old life, yes, but you won't remember anything that happened to you here.

"Except for the fact that you left me the castle in your will," I pointed out. "Which means I'll be stuck in this situation all over again." I had to quickly banish the image of Bill Murray in Groundhog Day.

Glancing down again, the letter continued writing itself. *If you choose to return to your old life in Los Angeles, you will never know of Maplewood or the castle, because you won't be included in my will.*

"Um, you already included me in your will," I muttered, rolling my eyes as I realized I was actually having a conversation with a letter. But I supposed as things went, conversations with goats were even weirder.

You are assuming time is linear, Catherine, the letter responded. But time doesn't exist in such a way. Instead, the future, the present and the past are all occurring at the very same moment—which is now.

"And that makes zero sense," I responded, shaking my head.

The point is, the letter continued. That if you make the choice to go back to your old life, this life won't be a consideration or even a thought to you any longer, because you will never know it even existed.

"What, you're going to wipe my mind blank or something?"

Your mind won't be wiped, because that sort of thing isn't possible—

"Though time travel is?"

Yes! Time travel certainly is possible. But, alas, that is an ability you will have to learn and one that will take time to master.

"I don't even know what to say to that," I answered honestly, wondering how my life had completely been turned not only upside down but inside out in the course of a single day.

If you make the decision to continue this journey, you will leave your past behind you forever. And what will open up to you will be a world you never dreamed possible.

Well, that was all fine and good, but my mind was still made up—if there was a way out of this, I was going to take it. But even with that decision made, what did still bother me was the idea of forgetting everything, losing all knowledge of the incredible things I'd experienced here (things I'd previously never believed possible). I didn't like the thought of having my

mind erased or whatever the hell Artemis or the castle or Luke or Rocco or the mind police were going to do to my brain.

“Okay, Aunt Artemis,” I sighed, tapping the letter against my chin as something else occurred to me. “How can I decide between two lives when I don’t even understand what being a Daughter of the Moon means?”

But there was no response from the letter to that, just the silent weight of my decision resting heavily on my shoulders. I glanced around the room, as if expecting some magical sign to guide me, but all I saw were the shelves of books separated by glass and the mysterious book on the table before me.

With a deep breath, I weighed my options. A life filled with magic, with a weird castle, talking animals, and who knew what else? Or returning to my former mundane existence, where the most exciting thing was choosing which coffee shop to write in?

Forty-five is a bit late for a midlife crisis, isn't it? I thought to myself, shaking my head, because the decision wasn't an easy one. Granted, I didn't have much pulling me back to LA, but what existed here, so far as I could tell, was a future of looney tunes. And that was a future I wanted no part of.

As your consciousness evolves, so too will your experiences and your maturity, the letter continued. *You will be prepared for everything you'll find yourself facing. This path is not one you will walk alone. You will be provided with a guide, a guard to protect you and a friend to act as confidante and advisor.*

“A guard to protect me? Against what?”

But the letter conveniently left that part out.

Two options face you now, Catherine, and that is the only thing that matters at this junction. You have to make the choice between a brand new world filled with possibility or the return to the safety of your old life.

“Easy for you to say,” I grumbled, feeling a mixture of irritation and confusion bubbling within me. “You’re not the one who still has zero clue what it means to be a Daughter of the Moon.”

All will become clear once you make your decision. And when you do make your decision, you must do so in witness of the full moon and you must do so buck ass naked.

“Witness of the full moon and naked?” I repeated, shaking my head because this sounded like some weird ritual you’d find in a coven full of wannabe witches. Then I wondered when the next full moon was even supposed to occur so I could figure out how much time I had to wrestle with

this messed up decision I had to make. Grabbing my phone, I tried to search Google, only to find there wasn't any service in Luke's dungeon.

"Maybe this thing has some answers," I thought as I faced the leather book below me. But as I started thumbing through the pages, my hopes were quickly dashed because every single page was blank. Not a single word or image appeared on the faded paper. So what was the point of keeping the damned thing locked away down here anyway? And why had Artemis told Luke to keep it for me when there was nothing in it? Was it possible he'd given me the wrong book? At this point, I didn't even care to find out.

"Artemis, if you're out there and you can hear me, which you obviously can since your letter keeps basically writing itself, will you please tell me what in the hell a Daughter of the Moon even is? I mean, how the hell do you expect me to make a choice when I haven't been given all the details? That's hardly fair!"

Nothing will be explained unless and until you decide to move forward with your calling. Trust in the process, the letter responded, completely unhelpfully.

Should you choose this path, the tarot will be your teacher, taking you through the lessons of each card and bequeathing upon you the knowledge of the Daughters of the Moon. To choose the path of the fool is to take a leap of faith, but trust that you will have support. You are at the dawning of your own personal and spiritual evolution, but you must make a decision, Catherine.

"For the last freaking time, it's Kate," I managed with a frown as I quickly closed the cover of the book and left it lying on top of the cabinet as I scooted my stool back and stood up. Thinking I probably shouldn't leave Artemis' letter lying around, I grabbed it and tossed it into my purse before deciding I'd had enough of blank and useless books, letters that didn't answer any of my questions, and this freezing cold dungeon.

As I walked up the stairs, Luke looked up from whatever he was doing, and I didn't miss the curiosity dancing in his eyes.

"So?" he asked, clearly eager to know what I'd discovered, as he walked around his desk and approached me.

I sighed, feeling an unpleasant mixture of frustration and exhaustion. "So, that was basically a waste of my time," I responded, shaking my head as I released a heartfelt sigh.

"Why?"

I shrugged. "Because the book is completely blank inside."

"Blank?" he repeated, shaking his head as he appeared perplexed.

"Yeah, blank. By the way, I left the book on the counter for you."

The truth was, I'd been hoping for some grand revelation with regard to what in the hell I was doing here—or, failing that, what a Daughter of the Moon was. But, instead, I'd found myself way over my head in confusing riddles and cryptic messages. It was like trying to solve an impossible puzzle with all the pieces missing.

"Anyway," I continued, "thanks for your help."

"Hey, hold on a minute," Luke called out when I started for the front door. The warmth from the bookshop seemed to cling to my skin, and knowing that once I stepped outside, the chilly air would wrap around me like an icy shroud, wasn't exactly thrilling. Reluctantly, I turned back to face him.

"Why was it a waste of your time?" he asked, genuine concern etching deep lines into his forehead. It was then that I realized he was standing so close to me, I could smell his crisp aftershave once more. Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, I took a step back.

"Because it looks like until I make a decision, I'm sort of stuck... but I don't have all the facts in order to make a decision so it's like a—"

"—Catch-22," he finished for me, nodding knowingly.

"Exactly," I sighed taking another step closer to the door until my breath fogged up the glass panes. I stared at my distorted reflection, wondering how in the world I could get back to LA and leave all this mumbo jumbo behind. I mean, Artemis had mentioned something about stating my intention in front of the full moon—did that mean I was supposed to recite whatever decision I'd made—even if it was to return home again? That's what it had seemed like...

"Kate," Luke said gently, pulling me from my thoughts as I turned to face him once more. "Sometimes, there are no easy answers. Life is messy, and we have to muddle through it the best we can."

I looked at him with arched eyebrows. "Thanks for that rousing speech."

He smiled and there was something in his eyes that said he didn't want me to leave, not yet anyway. There was just something warm, something kind in his expression. Or maybe I was just imagining it and he wanted me out as much as I wanted to get out.

“My advice? Trust your instincts, and try to take things one step at a time.”

“Right,” I said, giving him an expression that said exactly how helpful I found his advice to be.

“Your aunt left you her castle for a reason,” he continued, his voice softer. “She obviously thought you could handle all of this.”

“Well, I don’t think I can or even want to,” I answered, glancing around the bookshop one last time. The warm glow of the lamps created a coziness throughout the room, the light reflecting off the spines of countless books that promised all kinds of new adventures. “Anyway, thanks for your help.”

“Anytime.” Luke’s eyes were full of a mix of understanding and disappointment. It was clear he knew more about my situation than he was letting on, but I couldn’t fault him for that. I mean—whatever this magic business was, I guess it made sense that those who knew about it would be protective of such information. I didn’t imagine it was something they wanted getting out.

As I reached for the doorknob for the second time, Luke placed his hand over mine in a motion that surprised me.

“Why don’t you swing by in the morning for breakfast? We make a mean blueberry muffin.”

“Thanks, but I’m not really a breakfast eater.” I shrugged, suddenly feeling incredibly nervous with him so close to me. He sidestepped me and then leaned against the door frame, his arms crossed over his chest as he looked down at me with eyes that glinted with both humor and challenge. Clearly, he didn’t want me to leave. But whether that was just his bookshop or Maplewood was anyone’s guess.

“Most important meal of the day, you know.”

I shook my head. “Not when you’re an intermittent faster.”

“Whatever that is,” he quipped with a laugh, raising an eyebrow as he grinned down at me and I couldn’t help but return his expression. There was just something about this man that was pretty damned sexy, I had to admit.

With a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth, I looked back at him and pushed him aside as I pulled the door open. “I’ll think about it.”

“Fair enough,” he replied, his tone light before he finally unblocked my path and allowed me to leave.

As I stepped outside into the brisk night air, I couldn’t help but shiver. The chill seemed to seep right through my bones, a stark contrast to the

warmth that lingered inside the cozy bookstore behind me. Or maybe it was the warmth of Luke's eyes. Either way, I had no business getting comfy here. This wasn't where I belonged.

CHAPTER SIX

Knight of Swords (the 12th card)

The quest for truth pushes you forward at all costs...

After setting a heaping plate of spaghetti and meatballs on the table in front of Rocco, the goat eagerly downed the whole pile in about thirty seconds flat, then he belched, and with an air of nonchalance, announced he was retiring to his bedroom because he didn't want to miss Survivor.

As for me, I had three days left to make my decision regarding whether to return to LA or stay in this batshit crazy situation, because according to Google, the next full moon would occur in exactly three nights. Apparently, the current moon was a 'waxing gibbous,' which for some strange reason, brought to mind a monkey practicing wax on, wax off.

But with regard to the full moon in three nights, I was pretty sure that was my deadline, the time when I'd have to speak my choice to the moon itself. Or at least, that's what I'd gathered from Artemis's letter.

With dinner behind me and thinking about heading to bed, I walked out to the Jeep to grab the baseball bat I'd brought with me all the way from LA as a form of protection. I mean—who knew what weird things happened in this castle at night? I figured it was better to be armed with something somewhat protective than not to be armed with anything at all.

Once I had the bat in hand, I retreated to my bedroom, practically collapsing onto the massive bed. But I was one of those people who couldn't go to bed dirty so a hot shower it was. The shower helped wash away some of the day's exhaustion, but once I crawled under the covers of the overly large and exceedingly ostentatious (like everything else in this Fool-themed room) bed, I felt like I was on Cloud Nine. How it had only been a day since my arrival here, I didn't know, because it felt more like I'd been here a week. Or maybe even a month. Even a year wasn't so long a stretch.

Leaning the baseball bat against the wall just beside me, I flicked off the lamp on the table, plunging the room into darkness. The cool sheets felt like heaven against my weary body as I snuggled into them, eager for a good night's sleep. But sleep didn't exactly come right away. Instead, I had to sort through the whirlwind of emotions over the events that had transpired since my arrival in Vermont. It was hard to believe that just yesterday, my life was nothing more than writing and solitude. Now, I had a talking goat for a housemate and a mysterious legacy to contend with.

Just as I was finally starting to drift off, a high-pitched, nasally voice pierced through the silence and about gave me a heart attack.

“You must be Catherine, the niece!”

I gasped, sitting up abruptly as I immediately spotted a small, round object about the size of an apple floating directly above me. It took me a moment to register what I was seeing—a shrunken head with a shock of curly reddish hair. The stitching that was meant to hold its eyes closed had been cut but only black holes existed where its eyeballs should have. Its mouth, too, had broken free of its stitches and was now gaping open in something that resembled a weird, toothless smile. The thing was hanging from what appeared to be a looped twine cord.

After my mind took about 1.5 seconds to grasp what this thing was, my first instinct was to shoot my hand out, groping for the baseball bat I’d left on the floor beside the bed. Gripping the bat with white-knuckled determination, I swung as hard as I could, sending the object hurtling across the room.

“Yowza!” the thing shrieked as it sailed through the air, screaming all the way, and plowed into the wall before dropping down into the pile of dirty laundry from my road trip. Before I had a chance to investigate, there was a deafening crash that sounded from the closet. Shocked, I turned to face the double doors and stared wide-eyed at the sudden brilliant light that was pouring out from behind them. It was then that the closet doors splintered apart, flying outward, and a colossal figure emerged, his broad shoulders nearly reaching the ceiling.

The garish light from behind him danced off the well-worn armor that adorned his broad shoulders, tapering down each of his arms. His chest was bare, as were his legs, but he wore a skirt or kilt like he was a Roman soldier or something. But I was pretty sure he wasn’t a soldier—he looked more like some sort of medieval nomadic warrior. On his legs he wore massive boots and the hilt of a formidable sword protruded from a sheath strapped to his side.

A rugged, black beard framed his strong, square jawline and matched the darkness of his long, flowing hair. It was then that his eyes met mine and narrowed as he sneered at me while releasing his weapon from its sheath. He raised the enormous blade (that was literally as long as I was tall) above his head, the swollen muscles in his powerful arms flexing and I was fairly sure they were bigger than my head.

Stop checking him out, you dumbass, he's going to kill you! I yelled at myself.

Right. Half a second later and panic seized me as my grip tightened on the baseball bat, my knuckles white and trembling as I jumped out of my bed, ready to confront the giant. And, yes, it wasn't lost on me that it wasn't the best idea to bring a baseball bat to an incredibly large and intimidating sword fight, but there it was.

"I am Magnus—"

"I don't care who the hell you are—just stay away from me!" I screamed at him, wielding the baseball bat just to make sure he could see it.

"Your fear is misplaced, small woman," the giant said gruffly, his expression unreadable. But he did lower his sword, so there was that.

Meanwhile, the sounds of the shrunken head's muffled cries of indignation rang through the room, muted by the fact that I was pretty sure it was lying face down in my dirty laundry. But I couldn't pay it much attention at the moment—the sheer size of the man who'd burst from my closet now demanding my full consideration. Gripping the baseball bat tighter, I squared myself up.

"Stay back!" I warned as he took a step toward me. "I'm not afraid to use this."

His eyes flicked to the bat and then back to me and he laughed, as if to say he could make mincemeat of me and my baseball bat in two seconds flat. Maybe one. "I am Magnus Stormr—" he started again, taking another step towards me.

"Stay back!" I yelled at him again. "Or I will bash your brains in!"

The man stared at me for a moment before reaching out with lightning speed, snatching the bat from my hands, and snapping it in two like it was nothing more than a twig. And it wasn't a twig! It was a freaking Louisville Slugger!

"I do not have time for your silly games, small woman," the giant said in a very deep voice as he took another step closer to me.

Terrified, I glanced out the window, spotting the glow of the yellow moon and decided it was my only chance. I knew Artemis had been clear about the full moon's role in this whole mess, but I couldn't just stand here, waiting for this monster to crush me like a bug.

So, spinning on my toes, I bolted for the door.

I heard the sound of the giant's deep voice booming out angrily as he followed me. But there was no time for waiting around to find out just what sort of death he had in store for me—I needed to make my choice now, full moon or not.

So, I tore down the stairs, my heart pounding so hard, I could barely hear anything else. Just as I reached the bottom step, Rocco emerged from his room, sounding irritated.

“Hey, what’s with all the racket, huh?” he demanded. “I’m tryna watch The Real Housewives here!”

“Rocco, stay in your room!” I yelled, breathless. “We’re being attacked by giants!”

“Giants?” He snorted, clearly unimpressed as he then spotted the enormous man who thundered past him. Rocco frowned and shook his head, like he saw furious giants all day everyday. “Fogget about it,” he finished, sounding completely disinterested as he closed the door behind him.

I couldn’t think much more about Rocco, because I was already sprinting toward the kitchen door that led outside to the back yard. My lungs burned as I threw the door open, and faced the thoroughly overgrown yard. The giant’s thundering footsteps continued to sound from behind me as my heart pounded through my ears and I faced the labyrinth of tangled underbrush and towering trees, their twisted branches completely obscuring the moonlight overhead. So this spot wouldn’t do—I was fairly sure I needed full moonlight.

Through the gloom, I spotted a path that seemed to lead toward a small hill not far in the distance. At its crest, there was a circular stone structure bathed in silvery moonlight, with nothing else around it.

I glanced over my shoulder, eyes immediately widening at the sight of the giant warrior barreling towards me like an enraged bull. With no time to spare, I scrambled through the overgrown trees, my small frame giving me some advantage as I weaved between the narrow branches. The giant, meanwhile, cursed up a storm as he battled with the branches, which were doing a great job of helping me advance my lead.

The moonlight illuminated a path towards the stone building at the top of the hill, and I figured it must be the place to go, since it looked like an altar of sorts and there were no trees to block the moonlight above. So, breaking free of the trees, I sprinted up the hill, aiming for the stone platform, my breaths coming in ragged gasps as my legs threatened to collapse. A couple

of seconds later, the giant emerged from the trees, clearly having cut them out of his way, if the leaves still attached to his blade were anything to go by.

But he was too late because I'd already reached the stone building, where I skidded to a halt in the center of the stone columns and looked up at the moon. It was almost full, and that would have to be good enough.

"I don't..." My voice trailed off as the ground shook beneath my feet, clearly pointing to the fact that the giant had almost caught up to me. I craned my neck upwards once more. "Wish," I shouted, forcing confidence into my voice as I glanced back at the giant once more, who was now almost on me, "to be a Daughter of the Moon!"

The words hung in the air, and for a moment, everything went still. The giant halted just steps away from me, his eyes filled with visible anger and desperation as he faced the moon, his expression one of bafflement. For a second, I wondered if I'd made a terrible mistake in judging this as my only way out.

But then there was a bright flare that erupted like a supernova, momentarily blinding me. I threw my hands up to shield my eyes, but the light was too intense, searing through my defenses. The air around me seemed to crackle and hum with electricity, and before I could even blink, I felt myself being lifted up above the ground, like I was inside the magnetic pull of a tractor beam.

"Wha—!" I gasped, feeling like an invisible force had grabbed hold of me, lifting me high above the ground and through the circular opening of the altar below. If I hadn't known better, I would have assumed I was in the process of being abducted by an alien spaceship, but there was no spacecraft to be seen.

Nothing but the bright, yellow moon and the beam it was currently aiming at me. Panic surged through me as my heart thudded in my chest, and I fought the urge to scream.

I flailed my limbs wildly, desperate for something to hold onto, but there was nothing. Just the cold void of empty space and the relentless pull of the moonbeam that now had me securely in its grasp.

The moon's tractor beam continued to pull me upwards until I was floating maybe six feet off the ground. I had to admit, this wasn't what I'd expected to happen after announcing I didn't want to be a Daughter of the Moon. Instead, I'd anticipated a speedy trip back to Los Angeles or maybe an uncomfortable but hopefully brief encounter with some memory-sucking

probes *before* the speedy trip back to L.A. But to my dismay, I found myself suspended midair with no understanding as to why or what in the hell was the reason it was happening.

As I hung there, it occurred to me that maybe Artemis's point about the moon needing to be full when I voiced my decision hadn't been just a suggestion. Maybe I'd somehow screwed up the moon's magic by calling on it during the *waxing gibbous* phase and this was the result—was it just as confused as I was? Maybe whoever was in charge of the moon on the waxing and waning days wasn't as bright as the operator during the full moons?

Regardless, there was something definitely wrong going on here. I took a deep breath and that was when I noticed a sudden definite warmth surrounding me—kind of like being bundled up in a cozy blanket. It was strange, because I wouldn't have associated warmth with the moon, but there it was. It was a feeling of happiness and joy that was engulfing me, like little molecules of contentedness knocking on my door, begging to get in. It almost felt like I was being cradled by invisible hands in a large hug, that I was being embraced by, dare I even think it, *love*?

I glanced down at myself, and only then did I realize I was stark naked.

“What in the actual f—” I started, shaking my head because I'd never felt my clothing being removed, but there was no doubt that I was undeniably naked. I felt like some kind of weird human kite just hanging out in my birthday suit. Even worse, my clothing wasn't anywhere to be seen—not lying in a heap on the ground beneath me, but completely gone—like it had dissolved right off me and disappeared into the ether.

So, here I was, naked as the day I was born, floating in the sky and backlit by the moon's glow so anyone randomly taking a gander at the stars would get way more than they bargained for. That was when I recalled the part in Artemis's letter about being ‘buck ass naked’ when I made my declaration. Apparently, when addressing the moon, it preferred you be as naked as it was. Jeez, I'd really botched this whole thing, hadn't I?

Well, it wasn't like you planned to be assaulted by a giant, did you? I reminded myself.

Right. Speaking of, I glanced down and found the man standing there beneath me, staring up at me in wonder, or maybe he was staring at the moon, or maybe *I* was mooning *him*. I wasn't exactly sure. Point was—he was still there, but it wasn't like he was trying to get to me or anything.

Instead, he was watching the sky and appeared to be just as confused as I was.

As if losing my clothes wasn't enough, a tingling sensation began to creep along my skin, like a million tiny ants crawling over every inch of me. The sensation didn't hurt, but it felt really weird—like nothing I'd ever experienced before. I glanced down at myself, only to find that my body appeared to be changing right before my eyes. As I watched, my boyish hips expanded outwards on either side, and the girth of my thighs seemed to be growing along with them. But there wasn't any pain—nor any sensation of my skin stretching or my bones popping out of place or anything like that. Not that I had a lot of experience with this sort of thing—just watching cheesy werewolves in TV and movies. And that sort of morphing seemed super painful with all the popping bones and splitting skin and bristling fur, etc. This was nothing like that (thank God), but merely a sensation of energy creeping along my skin.

All the while, I battled to understand what was happening to me. Was my body really changing, or was I just having some kind of hallucination? I didn't have an answer for myself (of course), but I was getting more anxious with every second that passed.

I continued to watch myself growing fuller in pretty much all my areas, like I was having an out of body experience. My hips were now twice as broad as they had been, making my waist appear tiny in contrast. Then my tiny breasts seemed to get the message as they, too, started to feel much heavier as they expanded outwards, before they dropped down, growing much rounder and fuller as they did. I was growing wider and bigger everywhere all at once, like watching a flower bloom on time-lapse photography.

I had to wonder what sort of lewd show I was giving the giant below me, whom I figured was still standing there, probably just as bewildered as I was. Looking down at him, I noticed he'd dropped onto one knee with his head bowed low, as if he were paying homage to a deity. Or maybe his neck was aching from staring at my naked and now enormous ass.

As if sensing my disorientation, confusion, shock, and now, even fear, the beam of moonlight that was holding me aloft began to gently lower me back toward the ground. All the while, I continued to feel that same sense of love and warmth enveloping me and I had the strange feeling that the moon

had just bestowed some sort of gift on me. Well, at least, it seemed like *it* believed it had. That is, if the moon believed anything.

It didn't matter, really, because I now was compelled to try to make a quick getaway from Gigantic George below me. Seeing that my body was significantly larger than it had been, I wasn't so sure how easy that was going to be.

Once my toes touched the stone of the alter underneath me, I readied myself to sprint for my life, but then I sensed a hush all around me, as if the wind were whispering through the tree and telling me not to worry. It immediately calmed me, and I somehow received the innate understanding that the man wasn't going to harm me.

The giant was still kneeling on one leg and his deep voice echoed through the air: "I vow to protect her against any and all threats and I shall guard her with my life."

Who the hell was he talking to? The moon? And was he talking about me? I mean, that might have been a series of stupid questions, since I was the only one here with him, but I'd been pretty convinced that only seconds earlier, he'd been trying to end my life.

And that was when it all dawned on me: this whole experience had gone completely, undeniably and totally wrong!

"No, you don't understand!" I yelled up at the moon, my heart pounding loudly inside my chest. "You didn't hear me right! I said I *didn't* want to be a Daughter of the Moon!"

But there was no response, no disembodied voice replying: *No prob, we'll take care of that right away for you—one Daughter of the Moon in exchange for a return to Normalville.* Instead, the moon remained aglow as if it were deliberately turning a deaf ear to me and my ridiculously wide new body.

"Hello!" I continued, deciding to wave at the moon in case it might respond to sign language better. "This isn't what I chose! And now... I'd like to return to Los Angeles! Los Angeles, California! And preferably, return to my old body as well!"

But my entreaties went unnoticed and my protests were useless; the celestial orb seemed completely uninterested in me and my plight. "Hey!" I called out again, audible desperation creeping into my voice. "You didn't understand what I meant!"

“Daughter of the Moon,” the giant then rumbled, his deep voice commanding my attention. I turned around to find him now kneeling at my feet, his massive form dwarfing me just as much as he had before. So, the moon had given me massive hips and thighs and boobs without increasing my height. Thanks a lot!

“I am *not* a Daughter of the Moon,” I insisted.

But the giant didn’t bother looking up, which was a good thing since I wasn’t exactly comfortable standing there naked in front of him, even if I weren’t inside my own body.

“I am Magnus Stormrider,” he announced. “And I hereby pledge myself to you, Daughter of the Moon. I vow to protect you and guard you with my life... now not so little woman.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

6 of Wands

Your hard work is being rewarded...

“No!” I snapped back haughtily, my frustration boiling over.

The giant’s head shot up at that, and his eyebrows arched in surprise, which was a funny expression to observe on a giant’s face, if I were in the mood to notice such things, which I decidedly was not. “You can’t pledge yourself to me, Magnus—”

“—Stormrider—”

“—because I’m not now and never will be a Daughter of the Moon!”

Magnus Fart-sniffer or whatever the hell he called himself simply shook his head at me. “The moon has already chosen you.”

“But I haven’t chosen the moon!”

“The Daughter cannot choose its mother.”

“Don’t argue the semantics, this wasn’t supposed to happen!” I continued, throwing my hands into the air as I faced the responsible party in the sky once more but it just innocently glowed right back at me like none of this was its doing. “This wasn’t what I chose!”

But how could I prove that? The evidence was clearly and irrefutably there—my changed appearance, the strange, warm sensation that still

surrounded me, Magnus Snot-blower's sudden vow of lifelong devotion. It all pointed to one conclusion: I'd become the exact thing I didn't want to be.

I was now apparently a Daughter of the Moon. The truth was as obvious as the enormous boobs swinging off my previously flat chest. My mind raced with the implications of such an unexpected transformation. How could I possibly return to my former life? I mean, everyone would think I'd left the state merely for the purpose of getting major plastic surgery. This was terrible!

"If you are not a Daughter of the Moon, then why has the moon bestowed its blessing upon you?" Magnus Crotch-itcher asked, his voice filled with genuine curiosity and a bit of amusement. It was a good question, and unfortunately, one I didn't have any answer for.

"Maybe it's a cosmic mix-up," I suggested, shaking my head. "Or maybe I was never meant to have a choice in the whole stupid situation," I rambled, now fully feeling sorry for myself. "But I don't want to be a Daughter of the Moon," I sighed. "I'm a freaking romance author, for chrissakes!"

His gaze wandered down my naked form as he continued to kneel before me and, in response, my face flushed with heat, but it wasn't from embarrassment—it was anger. I was angry at the moon, angry at my aunt, angry at Magnus Nut-grabber, and most of all, angry at the whole screwed up situation.

"Hey!" I snapped when I caught him ogling my breasts. "My eyes are up here!"

I raised one arm to cover my chest and used the other to shield my lower parts. It wasn't that I was ashamed of being naked, but I certainly didn't appreciate being gawked at by Conan the Barbarian.

"My deepest apologies, Daughter of the Moon," he said, looking away immediately. "I meant no disrespect."

"Enough with the Daughter of the Moon stuff already!" I cried out in exasperation. "I told you, I'm not—" But what was the point? He wouldn't believe me anyway, just like the moon didn't care what I'd really said, and now, even I was beginning to disbelieve myself.

"The moon knows you better than you know yourself, much larger woman," the bastard mused, his eyes appearing friendly for the first time ever. He had a strange voice—he spoke in a pure monotone with no inflection whatsoever but also completely lacking any accent. Truly, I had no idea where he might've come from.

I frowned at him. “Hey, what do you care anyway? You broke into my house, er, my aunt’s castle, nearly giving me a heart attack, and then you tried to kill me—”

“I never tried to kill you.”

“You were chasing me like you fully intended to kill me.”

“No, I was merely attempting to introduce myself.”

“By attacking me? You have an odd way of trying to introduce yourself.”

“I never intended to attack you, obstinate woman,” he responded, still assuming his one- legged bow. In fact, he’d been in that stance for so long, I could only imagine it had to be getting uncomfortable. Well, it served him right.

“When a giant man who looks like a barbarian is chasing you, any woman in her right mind is going to run the other way, *you enormous man.*”

“Regardless, I am pledged to you. That means, I am your bodyguard.”

“Ugh,” I grumbled, shaking my head as I wondered how in the world I could manage to get myself out of this horrendous mess. “First things first,” I muttered to myself, glancing down at my ridiculous body. “I need to get dressed.” And after that, I had to pay a visit to the only person I could think of who might be able to tell me what in the hell had just happened to me. I turned to look at the giant then and found him still on one knee. “God, will you stop kneeling and just get up?”

He shook his head. “I cannot move from this stance until the Daughter of the Moon accepts me as her lifelong guard.”

“Jesus.” I breathed in deeply as I tried to decide what to say. Maybe I might like it better if he were stuck on one knee permanently, because then I could just basically leave him here for all eternity (unless he hobbled away, I supposed). But then I started to wonder what it was he thought he had to guard me from. “Fine. I accept you. Now get up.”

“No. You must say the words.”

“Ugh—Can nothing in this shit show be easy?”

“A Daughter of the Moon does not curse.”

“Another reason I shouldn’t have been burdened with all this crap.”

“Say the words.”

I glared at him. “What do you want me to say?”

“That you, the Daughter of the Moon, do accept Magnus Stormrider as your personal guard.”

I rolled my eyes. “I, Daughter of the Moon, do accept Magnus Stormrider as my personal guard,” I recited. “There, are you happy?”

“No,” the pain in the ass responded. “You must believe the words when you utter them.”

My lips tightened into a straight line and I had to battle down the desire just to walk away. “I can’t believe the words because I don’t want any of this, so, no I can’t do that.”

“Then I will remain in this exact location, upon bended knee, waiting to assume my role, until you do.”

“You are not making this any easier for me.”

“Obey your duty, Daughter of the Moon.”

I breathed in deeply and did my best to appease the son of a bitch. “I, Daughter of the Moon, accept Magnus Stormrider as my personal guard.” I tried to make my voice as pleasant as possible, even though I was crossing my fingers in my mind, if not physically.

“That will do,” Magnus Gas-passer announced as he stood up from his crouching position and gravely nodded at me. “I am ready to be introduced to the others of our tribe.”

“Our tribe?” I repeated, frowning in puzzlement. “Look, I don’t know about you, pal, but I’m going inside to get dressed and then I’m going to pay a visit to a bookstore owner who has a hell of a lot to explain.”

“My name is not ‘Pal’.”

“Well, it’s a lot better than all the other names I’ve been thinking of calling you.”

With that, I turned on my toes and started back down the small hill, eager to get dressed asap so I could drop by Luke’s bookshop and demand answers. Hopefully, he hadn’t retired to his house above the shop yet, but even if he had, I didn’t care. I was going over there to get a full explanation about all this crap.

As I walked, my mind raced with questions, questions, and more questions. Was this really happening or was I simply imagining it? Had my physical body really changed or was I just imagining that too? Was I doomed to remain saddled with my very own giant, or was there some kind of way to get rid of him? What about my former life? Was there a spell that could take me back to it? Or was this it for me from now on? What did it mean to be a Daughter of the Moon and how could I back out of it? Above all, had I finally lost my mind entirely?

As I neared the house, anticipation coiled in my stomach like a snake—first things first, I needed to know if my face had also changed. What if the moon had turned me into a totally different person? Or had my soul been extricated somehow from my previous body and dropped inside someone else's body? And if that was the case, where was the other person's soul? Mostly, I wanted to know if the reflection staring back at me in the mirror would be that of a stranger?

"Here goes nothing," I whispered to myself, reaching for the door handle.

It took me about a minute to reach my bathroom mirror and with a deep breath, I turned to face it. The reflection that stared back at me was both a relief and a shock all rolled into one. My face was still my own, and I was beyond relieved to still be the same me, even if I was shocked that that part of me hadn't changed. But if I'd come away looking like a totally different person, it would have been crisis time. But, no, my face was still my own—and I still had the same big, round, brown eyes, the same plump cheeks, the same small nose, and even my hair was the same shade of brown it always had been—still falling right around my shoulders, although it did appear to be a bit shinier.

But my body? Now that was a whole different story. I looked like I'd become a relic of a fertility statue unearthed from the remains of an ancient, long-forgotten civilization. I wasn't sure what to make of that, but I would have appreciated one thing: a little help in the height department.

Okay, I thought to myself, now it's time to try and find something to wear that will still fit.

Walking out of my bathroom, I grabbed a pair of jeans from the chair near my bed, but when I attempted to pull them on, ha! Yeah, no chance. The stupid legs wouldn't slide up past my knees. These new thighs of mine were no joke. Groaning, I tossed the jeans aside and tried on my favorite sweats. Same story.

My wardrobe had become a cruel joke in a matter of literal seconds.

"Fine," I huffed, reaching for the biggest pair of yoga pants I owned. As I wriggled into them, they stretched tightly across my ass like a second skin, and I was genuinely afraid the seams were going to rip apart any second. But they were the only option I had, so they'd have to do. For now, anyway.

Facing the task of trying to cover the monstrous mounds on my chest, I surveyed the heap of clothes that remained unpacked inside my suitcase and

pulled out my favorite sweatshirt—a remnant from my years at UCLA—and tried to squeeze it over my gigantic chest. At a size XS, there was no way that was going to happen. The damn thing clung to my chest like a contracting boa constrictor, squeezing the life out of me until I could hardly breathe.

Gasping for air, I yanked off the sweatshirt and tossed it aside. Then I scoured my suitcase for the loosest piece of clothing I owned and found a size medium t-shirt buried at the bottom—my sleepshirt. As I slipped it over my head, it hugged every curve, fitting me like a latex glove. But it would have to do until I could sort this mess out and hopefully reverse everything that had just happened to me. Of course, that was still a big if, but hope springs eternal in the human breast and these breasts were brimming with lots of it.

As to a bra, that was another cruel joke. The ‘bralette’ I used to wear would simply be laughed at by the behemoths that were now attached to my chest. So, yeah, I was going to have to go commando—upstairs and downstairs.

Just then, the giant who was now my guardian hulked into my bedroom, his massive frame filling up the doorway. I spun around to face him, feeling my cheeks flush with anger as he stood there, giving me a blank expression.

Yes, I’d noticed that Magnus Pimple-popper was pretty handsome, as far as giants went, but now in the light of my bedroom, I realized just how striking he actually was—that is, in a gladiator, barbarian, savage, warrior sort of way. He was basically a frame of swollen muscles on top of swollen muscles and the guy was easily more than seven feet tall. He reminded me of a Viking, or what I imagined one might have resembled back in the day. But that didn’t excuse my irritation at his strikingly obvious lack of manners.

“Excuse me?” I snapped. “What gives you the right to barge into my bedroom?”

He arched an eyebrow, not the least bit fazed. “I am your bodyguard. Wherever you go, I too must go.”

“I’m in my own house, er, my aunt’s house! That means I don’t need a guard and I definitely don’t need one right now—especially when I’m trying to get dressed!” I crossed my arms over my ample chest, channeling every ounce of indignation I could muster. “And in the future, you have to knock on the door before you just walk in, do you understand?”

“Your safety is my priority, Daughter of the Moon,” he said, his voice low and steady.

“Stop calling me that!”

“I cannot fulfill my duty if I am not close by you at all times.”

“Ugh!” I threw my hands up in exasperation. “Then post yourself outside my door, but you aren’t allowed to just walk in here, without first knocking and receiving my permission to enter!” I shook my head. “God, where the hell were you raised?” Which brought up another interesting topic. I looked up at him once more. “Yeah, where did you come from?”

“Your closet.”

I wasn’t sure if that was his feeble attempt at humor but I didn’t find it very funny—not at all. “I meant before that.”

“I am from a different dimension to this one.”

“Which dimension?”

“One you would not know.”

I breathed in deeply. “Try me. What’s it called?”

“It cannot be pronounced in your language.”

“God, you are impossible!”

“No, I am your guard.” This freaking man was going to be the death of me.

“So, what are you then? Some kind of alien?”

“I suppose you could consider me as such, because I do not hail from this dimension, but one close by.”

“Have you been to this dimension before?”

“I have not.”

“Who sent you here? Or should I ask, who brought you here?”

“The Moon.”

“And did you come here because of me?”

“That is correct, Daughter of the Moon.”

“Stop calling me that!”

“It is your proper title.”

Hopefully, not for very much longer. “Okay, then make yourself useful and explain to me what it means for me to be a Daughter of the Moon. I basically know nothing about it.”

“That is not my role. I am merely your guard and nothing else.”

I was starting to wonder if it were possible to replace one’s guard. Could I file a complaint with the moon and exchange him for a guard who was

less... Magnussey?

"If you're going to insist on being completely useless and totally annoying, then leave me alone," I said as I waved him away. "And close the door behind you."

Magnus said nothing but simply turned around and strode back through the door, taking up a position beside it, but he didn't bother to close it, like I'd asked. I frowned, shook my head and walked over to the door, but just as I was about to close it in his face, Rocco sauntered in.

"God, does no one in this freaking castle believe in knocking before entering?"

"How am I gonna knock, eh?" Rocco asked, giving me a goat frown as he walked right up to me before plopping his big goat butt on my chair.

"Ugh, what do you want?"

He glanced over at Magnus, who was still posted outside the door. "First off, who's that enormous mountain lurkin' outside yer door—the one that looks like he's real angry that someone stole all his trees?"

"That's Magnus Shit-helper, my personal bodyguard."

Magnus then strode back into my room, again without knocking. He pointed at Rocco. "What manner of creature is that?"

Rocco looked back at me. "Why's he talkin' like that? He slow or somethin'?"

"Is this beast a threat to you?" Magnus inquired, eyeing Rocco like he wasn't sure whether or not to behead him.

"First off, bub, I ain't no 'beast'."

"No, he's not a threat. Jeez, calm your gonads," I grumbled, shaking my head.

Magnus then stepped fully into the room and walked up to Rocco, getting down on both knees until they were eye-level. "I am Magnus Stormrider, sworn protector of the Daughter of the Moon and guardian of this castle."

"*No*, you are *not* the guardian of this castle," I corrected him.

Magnus looked up at me from where he remained on both knees. "I am guardian of wherever you are and for whatever you own."

I glared at him. "Then, what, are you also the guardian of my Jeep?"

"I do not know what or whom that is, but if you own it, then yes, I must be the official guardian of it."

Great, then he must be the guardian of my tampons too. And the guardian of the toilet paper, and guardian of the Drano, and guardian of the

“Who are you and what role do you play to the Daughter of the Moon, strange creature with irregular eyes?” Magnus asked Rocco and I couldn’t help but smirk at that—‘strange creature with irregular eyes’ was one of those descriptions that needed to stick. Well, if I were planning on hanging out here for any length of time—something I unquestionably was not. If I could help it, anyway.

“Hey, why you gotta get all rude, huh, wiseguy?” Rocco asked before he bleated at Magnus.

“Rocco is what’s called a goat,” I explained to the enormous man. “And don’t be rude to him.”

“I mean no offense, small and fat creature,” Magnus responded as he then looked up at me. “Then the creature is of equal standing to we humans?”

“I guess so,” I answered with a shrug, not really sure what to make of Rocco, myself.

Magnus faced the goat again, who was looking up at him with a strange expression on his hairy face. “If you *are* an equal, you must forthwith introduce yourself as one.”

“Yeah, okay.” Then Rocco cleared his throat. “I am Rocco Scarpelli,” he started in the same monotone as Magnus. “I’m resident of this castle an’ observer of reality TV and eater of all things good.”

“I am honored to make your acquaintance, Rocco Scarpelli, goatman,” Magnus said as he nodded and stood up.

Rocco then turned to face me. “So, what’s all this hubbub about anyway, uh? How’d ya end up with this weirdo?”

“There’s been some sort of mistake,” I answered, not even sure where to start my explanation.

“A mistake? An’ then what—the juggernaut ova here’s gonna hit the road?”

“I go only where the Daughter of the Moon goes,” replied the juggernaut.

“Daughter of the what now?” Rocco asked, clearly amused, until the meaning of what Magnus had just called me sunk in and Rocco’s eyes went wider. “Does this mean what I think it means?”

“Well, if you think it means—”

“An’ since when did ya get such a ‘uge ass, eh?” Rocco observed, his eyes widening even further as he apparently took a good look at me for the first time since he’d entered the room. “Hey, you’ve even got a nice set o’ hooters. When the hell’d that happen?”

“Look,” I sighed, running a hand through my tousled hair. “I don’t have time to explain any of this right now. All I know is that something happened to me that wasn’t supposed to, and I need to talk to Luke so he can tell me what the hell is going on.”

“Fine, fine.” Rocco raised one hoof defensively. “No need to get your panties all in a twist, boss.”

“My panties aren’t in a twist, thank you.” Mainly because my butt was too big to fit into any of my panties.

“An’ fer what it’s worth,” Rocco continued, “you got a way betta shape now—them curves look good on ya.”

“Well, I don’t know how long they’re staying, but thanks for the compliment.”

“What, do they got like an expiration date on ‘em?”

“No, but hopefully *I* do—where this town and this castle are concerned, anyway and definitely where he’s concerned,” I finished as I motioned with my elbow to Magnus. I took a deep breath and realized the two of them were completely wasting my time and the sooner I got to Luke’s bookshop, the better. “Now, I need to head over to Luke’s bookshop.”

“Hey, you didn’t answer me: what’s up with this new bod o’ yours, huh? You go like, boob an’ butt shoppin’ or what?” Rocco persisted, looking at me from head to toe and back again.

“Rocco!” I snapped, feeling the heat rising in my cheeks. “Can we please not discuss my body right now? I have enough to deal with!”

“Sheesh, bite my head off, why don’tcha,” he replied defensively, his goat pupils narrowing into a vertical line. “Excuse the hell outta me fer tryna give ya some flippin’ flattery.”

But before I could retort, we were interrupted by a muffled sound from the corner of the room. Rocco cocked his head, listening intently. “Say, what the hell’s that?” He paused. “You hear that?”

I nodded. Following the sound, Rocco trotted over to my pile of dirty laundry and started nosing through it until he yanked out the shrunken head (which I’d incidentally forgotten all about) that was nearly buried beneath

the heap of clothes. He pulled the head up by its loop, dangling it in front of him.

“Eez about time!” the head yelled out, in a voice that sounded strangely like Rosie Perez.

“What is that foul-appearing object?” Magnus inquired, sounding almost outraged as he glared at the disembodied head. “Is it a threat to your person, Daughter of the Moon?” Then he suddenly leapt in front of me, his hand on the leather scabbard at his side, like he was about to draw his behemoth sword.

“Ain’t no threat,” Rocco answered. “It’s just Yolanda, gabber-guts.”

“Oh, my gawd!” the shrunken head exclaimed, its mouth opening wide. “I haven’t been able to breathe a whiff of fresh air in like, two hours, I swear!”

“You’re a shrunken head! You ain’t foolin’ no one about breathin’ when ya ain’t got no lungs!” Rocco scolded her as he dropped Yolanda’s loop that was attached to the top of her head. It landed on the tip of one of the chair points and she dangled there.

“What is that?” Magnus asked as he pointed his blade at the head he clearly found so offensive, but no one had the chance to respond because Yolanda was still talking.

“I come here ta introduce myself ta our new owner an’ this is how I’m treated? Like I’m some kinda baseball?”

“Look I’m sorry about—” I started.

“Then I get heet in the face with a sledgehammer!”

“It was hardly a sledgehammer,” I started to argue.

“Then I’m catapulted right into the wall an’ then I land in a pile o’ stinky clothes an’ you just leave me there for hours! Where’s the respect in that? I tell you what, Artemis neva woulda treated me like that, no she wouldn’t! Launchin’ me inta a big pile o’ dirty laundry like I’m yesterday’s socks?!”

Magnus, meanwhile, tilted Yolanda one way with his blade and then the other, studying her with undivided concentration.

“Yeah, an’ I got me a mind ta stick one o’ them dirty socks back in yer blabbermouth,” Rocco said dismissively, rolling his eyes at her.

“Oh, no, you wouldn’t!”

Then Rocco turned to me, looking slightly hopeful. “Say, can I come with you on your field trip, boss?” He jerked his head toward Yolanda. “I

ain't got the time to listen to this yakkety-yak babble at me for the next hour or more."

"How can it speak without any body?" Magnus asked, mostly to himself as he continued to study Yolanda.

"Oh, so *you* ain't got the time?" Yolanda crowed. Although I was fairly sure she couldn't see, she appeared to be talking to Rocco. "What could possibly be keeping a goat so busy?"

"Plenty o' things, an' don't you botha yerself to about none o' it," Rocco responded as he turned to face me again. "So, whaddya say?"

"Field trip?" I frowned. "You mean, when I go to Luke's bookshop?"

"Exactly, sweetheart," Rocco nodded eagerly before he angled his head in Yolanda's direction. "You can't leave me here with her incessant jabberin'."

"Where you go, Daughter of the Moon, I too must go," Magnus interjected after apparently deciding Yolanda was no longer a threat. He seemed to have lost all his previous interest in her because he placed his sword back into its scabbard and faced me resolutely.

"An' I go too," Rocco said.

"I don't wanna be left here all alone!" Yolanda wailed.

"NO!" I shouted, surprising myself with my sudden outburst. "No one is coming with me!"

"Why's that?" Rocco asked.

"Because I need some time and space to my damned self, that's why!"

"Sheesh," Rocco responded, his goat eyes widening with obvious surprise. "Who the hell split your panties?"

"Never mind that," I muttered, my cheeks burning with embarrassment as I tried to shift the focus away from my skin-tight clothing. "The point is, I'm going to see Luke *alone*."

"I go where you go," Magnus firmly insisted, stepping forward. His massive frame seemed to fill the entire room, and I couldn't help but feel a little intimidated.

"Look," I said, trying to keep my voice steady as I faced him, "I appreciate your loyalty, or whatever it is you think you're doing for me, but you can't just follow me around like a shadow."

"I *am* your shadow."

"No, you aren't." My jaw was clenched tight.

"Yes, I *am*." His jaw was even tighter.

I glared at him. “What if I have to use the bathroom? Are you going to accompany me there too?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t recommend it,” Yolanda started to reply.

“As I said: where you go, I go,” Magnus replied matter-of-factly, completely missing the sarcasm in my voice.

“This sucks,” I grumbled under my breath, fully realizing that if Magnus wanted to come with me to see Luke (or anywhere else, for that matter) there was no way of actually stopping him. I mean, he was easily the size of a small elephant. Turning to Rocco and Yolanda, I added, “The two of you are staying here at the castle. No arguments.”

“Well, isn’t she the bossy one?” Yolanda sighed. Rocco merely rolled his eyes again and shook his head, muttering something about bossy broads under his breath.

“Let’s go, then,” I said to Magnus with firm resolve.

Come hell or high water, I had to find some way out of this shitshow. And if anyone tried to stop me, they’d see just how much of a force I could be—even with my pants nearly bursting.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Knight of Cups (the 12th card)

Hasty, emotional decisions are being made without careful consideration...

I stood in front of Bronner's Books, peering into the darkened window while the 'Closed' sign hung dismissively in front of me.

Meanwhile, my now much expanded body continued to bother me and I shivered beneath my thin t-shirt while goosebumps covered my skin. The theory that extra fat helps to keep you warm was B.S. and then some!

The frigid wind whipped across my face, making me regret not grabbing a jacket before running out of the castle, but then I remembered that none of my jackets would fit me now anyway.

"Damn, it's so cold out here," I grumbled, before remembering that Magnus Butt-scratcher was also basically shirtless (unless you considered that leather ensemble covering one shoulder and arm as a garment), and I looked back at him. "Aren't you freezing?"

He peered down at me as if I were barely worth the time it took to respond. "Magnus Stormrider does not react to the cold or any other element."

"Of course, you don't," I grumbled, shaking my head as I wondered how in the world I could ditch him. He was seriously beginning to cramp any style I might have had. Was there a way to Uber him back to whatever dimension he'd emerged from?

But that would have to wait until later—one crisis at a time.

I knocked on Luke's door again and then began trying to rub some heat back into my arms. Of course, given how late the hour was, I knew Luke's bookshop would be closed, but I was still determined to see him. Raising my fist, I knocked on the door again, listening to the hollow sound echo into the night.

"Come on," I muttered under my breath as I rapped on the door once more, louder this time.

"I believe the establishment is closed," Magnus said. I glanced over my shoulder, giving him a frosty frown to match the chilly air.

"Thank you, Captain Obvious." My patience was clearly wearing thin, and the cold wasn't helping—in fact, I was pretty sure I was about to expire from hypothermia. Vermont in autumn wasn't a comfortable place to be by any stretch of the imagination. God, why had I ever left Los Angeles in the

first place? This road trip idea had turned out to be the worst one I'd ever had.

"I do not know this Captain Obvious. Be he a friend or a foe?"

Ignoring Magnus, I knocked once more, much harder than before, and finally saw a light flicker on at the back of the shop. Relief washed over me then, followed by another shiver as I wrapped my arms around myself even tighter and resumed rubbing them like I was trying to start a fire. It was then that Luke, his keys in hand, appeared in the distance as he made his way towards the door.

Once he was close enough to the front of the store, he pointed to the 'Closed' sign and then mouthed, "We're closed," just in case I couldn't read. Clearly, he was annoyed at having been roused so late. And I got that, I really did, but this was important and he was the only person I could think of who might be able to help me. I could only thank my lucky stars that he was still awake.

"I know you're closed, Luke, but this is kind of an emergency," I said, getting up close and personal with the window pane in the door so he could hear me.

"Kate, is that you?" he asked, squinting through the glass as if to confirm my identity.

No, it's the Easter Bunny, I thought but I kept the snide comment to myself. "Yes, it's me and I'm freezing my ass off out here," I replied, trying to sound less irritated than I felt. "But this is important, and I really, really need to talk to you."

"Are you aware of what time it is?"

"Um, no, actually, I'm not," I started to reply. Even though I'd known it was late, I'd been in such a panic to get here that I hadn't actually even bothered to check the time. However, even if I'd known how late it was, nothing could have stopped me from coming.

"It's past midnight," he informed me.

"I'm sorry, Luke—but, well, this couldn't wait."

With a sigh, he unlocked the door and opened it wide, motioning for me to come inside. The warm air that enveloped me as soon as he unlocked the door was like a bear hug from the bookstore gods.

"Thanks, and I'm really sorry to be bugging you so late, but like I said, it's really important." I was already grateful beyond measure just for getting the reprieve from the frigid cold.

“What’s going on? Is everything okay?” Luke asked, prompting me to think about everything that had happened and all I had to explain—something which suddenly seemed like a monumental task. It was then that he noticed my teeth were chattering or maybe it was the goosebumps that had to be standing six inches at attention. “Come in, God, you must be freezing,” Luke remarked as he took me in from head to toe. “Why are you wearing a t-shirt? It’s got to be barely ten degrees out there.”

I allowed Luke to grip my arm and usher me inside before taking a deep breath of the warm air and relishing the sensation as it began to thaw me. At the same time, Luke looked up at the enormous hulking figure that had been looming directly behind me.

“Who is that with you?” he asked me, his eyes widening slightly as they continued to study Magnus. The barbaric man entered the shop right behind me without any preamble or comment. Luke quickly closed the door and turned around to face us both.

“Oh, just ignore him,” I said dismissively, continuing to rub my arms in my effort to bring some life back into them. And, of course, I couldn’t help but feel self-conscious about my inappropriate outfit, but that’s how it was.

“I am Magnus Stormrider, Guardian to the Daughter of the Moon,” Magnus announced, puffing out his chest like it would make him even more imposing than he already was.

“Um,” Luke started as he looked at me again, his eyebrows stretching up to the ceiling. “The guardian to the Daughter of the Moon? You want to explain that to me, Kate? Hopefully in terms I can understand?”

“Yes and no,” I managed, sighing. “I just need a minute to catch my breath and warm up long enough for my jaw to unhinge,” I answered, honestly.

“Come stand next to the fire,” Luke offered as he motioned to the center of the room where a small, leather couch and two armchairs occupied the area directly in front of the fireplace. “The fire is nearly out but it’s still emitting some heat,” he finished as he led the way there. I immediately stood in front of it, soaking in as much warmth as I could—which wasn’t as much as he’d said. Inside the fireplace was the remains of a blackened and mostly charred log, but the embers were still flickering and it was generating something, so I figured beggars couldn’t be choosers.

I noticed Magnus stood a good foot or two away from me, his hand resting on the hilt of his blade as he glanced around the store and eyed Luke

with unmasked suspicion. Unlike me, there wasn't a single goosebump visible on any inch of his mostly unclothed body. The bastard! God, he was so going to drive me to drink.

At that moment, I realized I should have been dying for a cigarette after everything I'd gone through in the last twenty-four hours. Yet there was nothing further from my mind. Not only that, but I had no urge to smoke! Hmm, another strange occurrence.

"Kate? Is everything okay?" Luke repeated.

"Yes and no, but mostly no."

That was when I turned from the fire to face Luke, extending my arms out beside me so I could continue basking in what little heat the burnt log was still giving. Luke's eyes immediately darted from my face and landed on my chest. Heat flooded my cheeks as soon as I realized my breasts basically looked like they were trying to burst through the flimsy, tightly stretched material of my t-shirt. My alert nipples were practically piercing the skimpy fabric.

"Jesus, Kate, you can't dress like that around here," Luke scolded me, his voice strained as he fought to return his gaze to my eyes and I watched him swallow hard. "You're going to give everyone in this tiny town a heart attack."

"Ugh," I grumbled, feeling a flush of embarrassment creep into my cheeks as I immediately wrapped my arms around my chest once more. "Listen, I didn't dress like this on purpose, but this was the only shirt I could find that would...well, fit me in my... present state."

"Here," Luke said as he shrugged off his sweater and handed it to me. Ordinarily, I would have refused someone literally taking the shirt off his back, but in this case, I was more than happy to accept any article of clothing he was willing to donate, even if it was scratchy wool.

"Thanks."

Luke's eyes dropped down to the rest of me, pausing briefly at my hips, then he nodded slowly, his eyebrows rising in surprise before his gaze finally settled back on mine. "Yeah, you, uh, look like you filled out quite a bit."

"Filled out?" I laughed bitterly, gesturing down at myself. "I'm sporting the Rocky Mountains on my chest and my ass is now the size of Georgia!"

He chuckled at that but couldn't deny it. "Okay, then I'm guessing you must've taken your oath?" He turned around to glance out the window at the moon, which hung in the sky as a crescent, and was clearly not full.

“Right.”

He looked at me again. “But you did it too soon?”

“Right again.”

“I thought Artemis’s letter explained everything clearly?” Luke asked, shaking his head as he seemed somewhat cross with me, which only further irritated me. “Kate, you were supposed to make your decision *on the full moon*, not before it.”

I felt my eyes narrowing. “How do you know what her letter said?” When I’d read it, as far as I knew, I’d been by myself in his dungeon.

He nodded as if the question had merit. “Let’s just say my *abilities* facilitated Artemis’s capacity to connect with you in the here and now—so I was also aware of the conversation going on between the two of you.”

“Your abilities?” I repeated. “So... what does that mean? That you’re magical too?”

“I suppose you could call it that.”

“So what—you’re like a witch-doctor or a fairy or a warlock or something?”

He gripped the back of his neck as his entire chest shook with the raucous intensity of his laugh. “No, I’m not a fairy or a warlock or a witch-doctor!”

“Are you a threat to my ward?” Magnus demanded as he took a step nearer to Luke and began to pull out his sword.

“Calm your anus, Magnus, Jesus,” I said, shaking my head as I frowned at the man in question. “Not everyone is trying to kill me—God you are so annoying!”

Luke looked over at Magnus, who still had his hand on the hilt of his sword, but hadn’t yet unsheathed it, and Luke held his hands up in obvious surrender. “I’m not any threat—I’m on her side... er, I’m on your side too, for that matter.”

“Can you please explain what the hell you are before my dumb-ass guard over here decides to run you through with his sword?”

Luke nodded as he pulled his attention from the dumb-ass guard in question and looked back at me. “You already know what I am.”

“The Magician?” I responded, remembering the placard on his desk.

“That’s right.”

“Like the magician in the tarot deck?” He nodded again. “Then you are fully in cahoots with my aunt and all her crazy tarot card shit?”

“It’s actually not so crazy.”

“Well, that’s your opinion,” I started, but then shook my head, because this wasn’t the conversation I wanted to have at the moment. I summarily launched into an explanation of how taking my oath too soon beneath the moon had landed me in a whole lot of trouble.

“Then you didn’t actually take your oath?” I shook my head. “Not at all?”

I shook my head again. “No, I said I *didn’t* want to become a Daughter of the Moon, but the moon somehow got confused and thought I wanted just the opposite. I mean, I have to admit that I was kind of... well, distracted at the time, because I was trying to escape from Magnus.”

“Trying to escape from Magnus?” Luke repeated, frowning as he motioned to the man in question. “That Magnus?”

I nodded. “Right, because, at the time, I thought he was trying to kill me.”

“The Guardian made no attempt to kill the Daughter of the Moon,” Magnus interjected, his voice low and steady, although an edge of irritation was audible in his tone. “I am sworn to protect her, not to kill her.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I said, shaking my head. “I was trying to get away from you before I knew all that,” I grumbled, rolling my eyes and giving him a sideways glance. Then I looked back at Luke. “The point is—I might not have said the words in the—well, in the proper order or the way I should have to the moon, because I wasn’t fully focused on them, not as clearly as maybe I should have been.”

It felt surreal, standing here, discussing something that sounded like it belonged in a bad dream rather than my actual life.

“Okay, that doesn’t sound right,” Luke responded.

“I agree,” I nodded. “Anyway, that’s why I came here—because, I need your help.”

“My help?” he asked like I’d come to the wrong place.

“Right. Is there any way to reverse whatever I did or said? I mean, I need to get back to my old life and get the hell out of here like yesterday.” Then I glanced over at Magnus. “And this guy’s definitely got to go.”

“I am not ‘this guy.’ I am Magnus Stormrider,” he corrected me, his deep voice rumbling with indignation.

“Yeah, we got that the thirtieth time you mentioned it,” I muttered, rolling my eyes as I turned back to Luke, my expression now pleading.

“Please, there has to be a way to reverse whatever I did to myself so I can return to my former life.”

“The guard must go wherever the Daughter of the Moon goes.”

“He’s seriously making me want to murder him,” I continued, giving Luke a pained expression that I hoped could convey how much I needed his help and then some.

“Okay, so to paraphrase: you actually don’t want to become a Daughter of the Moon, but you said something that made it sound like you did?” Luke asked.

“Right, but all I want is to go back home—to Los Angeles—and forget that any of this ever happened. So, if you need to wire me up to whatever brain-wiping device you guys use to make people forget visiting, go for it.” I barely glanced down at my newly voluptuous form and sighed. “And I seriously need to do something about this! I feel like I’m a walking fertility statue.”

“I think I need a bit more information before I can help you,” Luke said. “I want you to explain everything that happened from the moment you said whatever you said to the moon. Start from the beginning and don’t leave out any details.”

I took a seat on the couch then, feeling like my knees were ready to buckle and sank into the plush cushions. Then I proceeded to tell Luke the whole, sordid tale again—from the very beginning and he listened to every word, pausing every now and again to ask me a question. When my story was finally completed, Luke sat there, apparently digesting it, so I asked, “Why did the moon go ahead and change me like this when I clearly explained it *wasn’t* what I wanted?”

Luke leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and his fingers steepled in thought. “It’s hard to say,” he admitted. “It could be because you didn’t say the words exactly the way you were supposed to, or because it wasn’t a full moon so the magic wasn’t at its highest apex, or maybe this truly *is* your destiny, Kate. And, if that’s the case, there’s a lot of energy driving you in this direction.”

My stomach twisted into knots at the idea that some cosmic force might be pushing me into a life I didn’t want or choose. But I couldn’t dwell on that possibility now; I needed to concentrate on finding a way out of this mess.

“Wait,” I said, shaking my head as I tried to reconcile what Luke was telling me. “I thought I was supposed to have a choice—at least, that’s what Artemis had said in her letter.” Then I paused. “Or, was that you responding to me?”

He laughed and shook his head. “No, it wasn’t me. It was Artemis. It was just my magic that basically served as a bridge to connect the two of you.”

“Because she’s dead.”

“Right.”

“And that means she’s in like, what? The dead zone?”

He chuckled again. “Something like that, yes.” Then he took a breath. “But getting back to your question—yes, you *do* have a choice in all of this,” he continued, his tone becoming more serious. “But that doesn’t mean the moon won’t try to sway you from your decision. It has its own agenda.”

“Which apparently involves making me look like... this?” I gestured to my recently formed curvaceous figure. “I still don’t understand why it changed the way I look. I mean, where is that written? Does being a Daughter of the Moon mean you have to be shaped like an hourglass?”

Luke sighed, running a hand through his tousled hair. “In the tarot, the moon illuminates whatever has been hidden, and brings the shadows into the light. It’s about embracing and integrating all the parts of yourself that usually reside in the darkness.”

“What?” I asked, (intelligently, I might add).

“Whatever portions of yourself—meaning, the old you that you didn’t appreciate or like, the moon illuminated those parts, bringing them into your view so you could heal whatever you deemed unlovable or unacceptable about yourself. So, it wasn’t actually the moon who changed your shape—you did. The moon just granted your wish.” He paused as I strained to understand exactly what he was saying. “Under the light of the moon, all secrets are revealed.”

“So, what? The moon thinks I didn’t like the way I looked before?”

“It doesn’t *think*. It knows.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t ask to have hips so wide they require their own parking sensors!”

He chuckled at that. “The moon highlights all the hidden things that exist in the dark shadows. This was probably its way of alerting you to something you might not have ... formerly *appreciated* about your old body.” Then he cocked his head to the other side and his eyebrows rose to the ceiling. “Not

to mention that the moon has also historically been a symbol of femininity and fertility. So, maybe now that it considers you as one of its own, it's basically endowing you with its own lunar sense of fertility, making your body much more... baby-friendly than it was before."

"Baby-friendly?" I sputtered, now way beyond appalled. "I'm almost forty-five years old, for crying out loud!"

Luke laughed again, clearly amused by my reaction. "I didn't mean to imply that you're going to start popping out kids left and right."

"Well, I assume one needs to actually have sex in order to do that," I said, biting my lip as soon as I realized what I'd just blurted out. This conversation was quickly degenerating into something morbidly embarrassing.

"Right," Luke replied, giving me a strange expression that hovered somewhere between amusement and sympathy. He cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"Moving right along," I said before waving my hands to indicate just that.

"Right," he said again.

"Magnus Stormrider can offer the Daughter of the Moon the most superior sperm so she can successfully create mighty warrior offspring," my guardian declared from behind me, puffing out his chest with pride.

At hearing that egotistical announcement, my jaw nearly dropped to the floor, and I felt my face flush a deep shade of crimson. "Oh, my God," I groaned, so thoroughly embarrassed that I hid my face in my hands, wishing I could just disappear under the floorboards.

"Um," Luke started.

When I finally managed to look up at him again, I noticed Luke was trying—but failing miserably—to suppress a grin.

"Does the Daughter of the Moon require the superior sperm of her guardian?" Magnus Jizz-donor demanded of me.

"No, she absolutely does not!" Shaking my head once more in exasperation, I inhaled a very long and deep breath, before asking Luke, "Do you have a gag you can donate to a good cause?"

CHAPTER NINE

9 of Pentacles

Feel gratitude for all that you've been able to achieve...

The smell of old books permeated the air as I sat glumly in Luke's shop, feeling more than a little overwhelmed.

"Before we can figure out how to free you from this..." Luke started, and I could see he was clearly trying to find the right words

"Mess," I finished for him with a shrug. "Let's call it what it is."

"Okay—this *mess*," Luke continued, his warm eyes studying me from where he was sitting on the armchair beside me. "I need to understand exactly how far you're already dug in."

"What do you mean?"

He glanced up at Magnus, who stood behind me like an imposing warrior statue. "The fact that you've been provided with a guard... well, I have to wonder just how far into this process you've already gotten."

"The process of becoming a Daughter of the Moon, is that what you mean?" I asked, frowning.

"Right."

"And can you explain to me just exactly what that means?"

He cocked his head to the side. "That depends."

"On what?"

"Put it this way: I don't want to go into the ins and outs if you're just going to turn tail and run back to your old life anyway."

"That's a nice way of putting it." I frowned.

He gave me an apologetic look. "You get my point—I don't want to waste your time or mine."

"Yeah, I get it." I breathed out in a sigh. "So, as far as figuring out how deeply into it I already am, how do you intend to determine that?"

"By reading your tarot cards," he replied with a shrug and a smile that indicated the joke was on me.

"Great," I muttered, shaking my head again at how ludicrous this whole thing was becoming. But the joke really was on me, because everything wasn't ludicrous, considering it was all real. And I was stuck in the middle of it.

"Are you good with that?" Luke asked.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Luke arose from his chair then and disappeared into the back of the shop for a couple seconds, quickly returning with a deck of what I assumed were his tarot cards. They were wrapped in a black, velvet cloth and as he approached Magnus and me, he carefully unwrapped the cloth. But before he

could place it on the small coffee table before us, Magnus (who had previously unsheathed his sword when we'd first walked in), reached out with the tip of the blade, trying to poke at whatever was inside the velvet.

"Really?" I asked as I glanced over my shoulder at him.

He just looked at me and shrugged.

"There's nothing in here that will hurt her," Luke said to the much larger man. Magnus simply responded by dropping his sword to his side before resheathing it. He nodded at Luke, who then handed the stack of cards to me. Glancing down at them, I immediately took in the intricate artwork on the backs of the cards—a complex pattern of stars and moons that seemed to dance before my eyes.

"What am I supposed to do with them?"

"Just hold them for a few seconds and close your eyes," Luke instructed. "While you hold the cards, concentrate on imbuing them with your own magic."

"I have no magic."

"We *all* have magic, Kate," Luke insisted, his voice gentle but firm. I wasn't sure if he meant everyone in the room had magic or more the general 'we,' but I also didn't bother to ask because he was already moving on to his next topic. "I've already cleared the cards of my own energy," he started to explain.

"How'd you do that?"

"With a quartz crystal."

"Oh." Another answer that meant absolutely nothing to me, but I figured now wasn't the time to admit that.

"I freed the deck from anyone else's energy, so the cards will absorb only yours, and that means they'll tell us what we need to know."

"Okay," I sighed, feeling silly but willing to play along. What better alternative did I have? Closing my eyes, I tried to imagine whatever potential for magic that might exist within me and then I envisioned that magic flowing from my fingertips into the cards. After a moment, I opened my eyes and looked at Luke expectantly.

"I think I did what you wanted me to..."

"Okay, great."

"So is that part over?" I tried to hand the cards back to him but he shook his head.

“Not quite. I want you to keep your eyes closed as you shuffle the cards and then cut the deck a few times. Remember to keep focusing on imbuing each card with the questions you wish to have answered.”

“Okay.” I closed my eyes again and felt the weight of the cards in my hands. I shuffled them awkwardly at first, cutting the deck a few times as he instructed while concentrating on sending my energy into the cards. Putting them back into a pile again, I opened my eyes and glanced up at Luke. “Now am I done?”

He nodded. “That’s good. Now come with me and,” he started to say, but when I went to hand him the cards again, he shook his head. “Kate, if I touch the cards, they’ll absorb my energy instead of yours.”

“Oh... right.”

He nodded. “I only want your energy in the cards or it’s going to screw up the whole reading.”

“Got it,” I answered as he led me (and, in turn, Magnus) to his desk at the back of the store. He cleared away some of the books and other knick-knacks that were filling up the space, making room for the cards on the polished wood surface. Then, pulling up a chair for me, he motioned for me to sit down.

“Okay, now I want you to take a few deep breaths,” he advised me, his voice soothing and calm. “Clear your mind and feel your breaths filling your body. Imagine the air entering your mouth and filling each part of you with vitality, from your head to your toes.” I obeyed his instructions, inhaling deeply while also attempting to release any skepticism I was still holding. Prior to coming here, I’d never believed in this sort of hocus-pocus. Haunted houses, magic, talking animals and shrunken heads—those were unreal things that only happened in movies and fictional books. And even now, knowing the truth about such things, I still couldn’t fully accept or comprehend them. Apparently, it’s not an easy task to completely ignore the box you’ve always lived in, even when you realize something could exist beyond it.

“Now,” Luke continued, “imagine your feet are connected to the ground by roots. Think of them springing up from the dirt to connect to your body.”

“Like a tree?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Exactly,” he replied, nodding at me encouragingly. “Once you can see the roots connecting to your feet and you feel stabilized with the earth, tell the cards that your intention is to receive clear messages from them.”

“All right,” I said hesitantly, feeling silly as I imagined roots connecting me to the floor of the bookshop. But then I assumed Luke meant he wanted the roots to connect my feet to the ground *beneath* the bookshop, so I imagined them pushing through the wood planks and piercing the cement of the foundation, winding around the rebar, and finally grasping the soles of my feet, connecting them to the earth. Then I took a deep breath and said out loud, “Cards, my intention is to receive clear messages from you... please.” I added, figuring it was probably good to be respectful and polite.

“Good,” Luke said approvingly. “Now spread the cards out before you on top of the desk and make sure none are overlapping.”

I slightly opened one eye in order to peer up at him. “Can I open my eyes while I do it? Otherwise, it might be hard to do—I mean, to avoid overlapping any of them.”

“Sure,” he laughed as he watched me closely. I pushed the cards out into a mess before me, being careful to separate them so I could clearly see each card—some were vertical and some were horizontal, but I didn’t think that mattered. Once I was finished, I looked up at him, my eyebrows arching as I awaited his next direction.

“Now, close your eyes and concentrate on selecting only the cards that speak to you.”

“They’re supposed to talk?” I asked, unable to conceal my disbelief.

“Not literally,” he chuckled. “When I ask you a question that you will, in turn, address to the cards, I want you to rely on your instincts to guide you to the card that feels the most right to you.”

“Okay,” I agreed, still not entirely convinced this was going to accomplish much, but I trusted that Luke knew what he was doing, because I certainly didn’t. Meanwhile, Magnus appeared to be in his own world, no doubt daydreaming about very large women. “Do you want me to close my eyes again?”

“Yes, please.”

So, I closed my eyes and waited for Luke to tell me what to do next. He was quiet for a few seconds, and the silence in the shop was only broken by the soft ticking of a clock somewhere.

“Are you ready to begin?” Luke asked me gently.

“Sure.”

“Ask the tarot to show you the card which signifies where you are in your life path at this exact moment,” he instructed. “And when you pull the

card that you feel has the answer for you, use your non-dominant hand—which is called ‘the hand of intuition’—okay?”

“Okay.” Taking a deep breath, I repeated Luke’s question to the cards, all the while trying to clear my mind and focus on the cards spread out before me, even though I couldn’t see them. My left hand hovered over them, hesitating for a moment before I felt an inexplicable pull toward one card in particular—at my far left side.

“I feel like choosing this one,” I said as I placed my index finger on the card in question and then opened my eyes.

“Okay, pick it up.”

I held the card up for Luke to see, with the back still facing me.

“Let’s see where the tarot says you are currently,” he replied, taking the card from me. Turning it over, he revealed the image of The Fool: a young man standing at the edge of a cliff, seemingly oblivious to the danger before him. It was an image I’d grown exceedingly familiar with already, owing to the décor in my bedroom.

“Wow, that’s pretty nuts that out of all these cards, I pulled that one,” I said, surprised.

“I wouldn’t say it’s nuts,” Luke responded on a shrug. “The cards are simply giving us the answers we’re asking for, right?”

“I guess so.”

He nodded as he placed the card of The Fool down on the desk before us. “That’s the card I was actually hoping you’d pull,” he continued. “The Fool represents the beginning of a journey, which is exactly where you are right now; and it simply means that your energy is gelling with that of the cards.”

“Okay, I hope that’s good.”

“Yeah, really good.”

Luke pointed to the card of the Fool as he faced me once more. “We’ll use this as your significator card.”

“My whatinator card?”

He chuckled. “It’s a card which will guide the rest of the reading—it will help to call forth the other cards that will assist us in understanding where you are on this journey and where you’re headed.”

“Hopefully, I’m headed back home... to Los Angeles.”

“Right,” he said, but he didn’t appear convinced. Then he looked at me intently, his gray eyes full of kindness, but there was also something else there—something much more intense. I had the strange feeling that this card

reading wasn't just for me—but also Luke. I sensed he wanted to find out how deeply embroiled I was in this whole matter just as much as I did. But most likely, he had different reasons. I was fairly sure that because he was a 'friend' of my aunt's, and had his own form of magic, Luke was probably rooting for me to accept myself as a Daughter of the Moon, while I was trying my best to get away from all of it.

"Okay, close your eyes again, Kate, and this time, ask the cards to show you the people who have already come into your life to aid you in your trials and tribulations while you're on the path of the Fool."

"Okay," I answered, closing my eyes again as I repeated to the cards exactly what Luke had just said to me.

"Now ask the cards who is playing the role of your protector," Luke said.

"You do not require a response from the silly cards, for *I* am the Protector for the Daughter of the Moon," Magnus, unsurprisingly, piped up. I opened my eyes and gave him a look to indicate how irritating I found him. Not that he gave a crap because he didn't.

Luke just held a hand up to the much larger and broader man. "Please, Magnus, let her concentrate." Then he faced me. "Go ahead, Kate."

"Cards, can you please tell me who is acting as my protector?" I whispered, my left hand hovering over the spread once more as I closed my eyes and allowed my inner *whatever* to lead me to the card that felt right. Finding it, this time directly in front of me, I picked the card up and handed it to Luke. He turned it over, revealing an image of a woman taming a lion.

"Strength," Luke said as he placed the card down next to the one of The Fool.

"Well, that's clearly Magnus," I answered, frowning.

"I am not a woman."

"Right," Luke nodded as he exhaled, clearly ignoring He-Man behind him. "That card definitely represents Magnus, as you say."

Magnus then stepped forward to peer over my shoulder and made a face as he extended one very long index finger and flicked the card. "*That* is a woman. *I* do not have breasts."

I said nothing, instead choosing to ignore *he who was not a woman because he did not have breasts*, even though he was still glaring at the Strength card from behind me. "What's the next question, Luke?"

"All right," Luke said, nodding. "Now, let's see if you've already met the person who will exist as a symbol of friendship and moral support to you in

your journey.” He gestured towards the cards, urging me to continue.

“The friend, you mean?” I asked, remembering how Artemis had mentioned in one of her many letters that I would come across a guard, a friend and a guide.

“Yes, exactly.”

“Okay...” I mumbled, feeling the weight of my previous selections bearing down on me. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and asked the cards to direct me to the card that represented this so-called friend. My fingers found their way to a card just beside my right hand that felt different from the others, like it was radiating its own warmth. I pulled it up and handed it to Luke.

“The Hermit,” he said, his voice tinged with curiosity as he studied the card with an interest that only made sense to him. “This is a wise person—someone who understands the difference between *being alone* and being *lonely*. Their solitude fuels their bright mind.”

“Who is that supposed to be?” I asked, racking my brain for someone in my life who fit the description, but coming up empty.

“Only you can answer that,” Luke replied cryptically. “But if you can’t think of anyone, perhaps you have yet to meet them?”

“Which would be a good thing, because it would mean the moon hasn’t yet sent them to me?”

“Right,” Luke responded, but the expression on his face told me he didn’t necessarily agree with me that it was such a good thing.

“Another mystery,” I sighed, but inwardly I was pleased because I imagined this was one less path left to untangle from around me. And the fewer ties I had to this place, the better I felt.

“The Daughter of the Moon should not be attempting to flee her responsibility,” Magnus Mood-ruiner suddenly piped up. I’d actually wondered when he was going to catch on to what was happening with me.

“She’s not,” Luke answered immediately and then gave me a look. “Are you, Kate?”

“No,” I answered instantly. “I’m just getting my cards read, that’s all.”

Magnus didn’t say anything more but continued giving me a stern expression.

“Let’s move on,” Luke said as he studied me once more. “Ask the cards if you’ve met your guide.”

I did as he instructed, focusing on the question and allowing my intuition to steer my non-dominant, left hand. When I selected the card that felt right to me, I handed it to Luke, wondering whether or not I'd already met this particular person, but hoping I hadn't.

"The Magician," he said, nodding slowly as he turned the card over to show it to me. The card featured an image of a figure standing confidently with one arm raised towards the heavens and the other pointing downward. "Symbolizing the connection between the spiritual and earthly realms," Luke explained.

"The Magician?" I repeated, frowning up at him. "Is that you?"

He chuckled and met my gaze. "I think it must be, Kate. And that means you've already called in two of the three important players in your life as a Daughter of the Moon."

I leaned back into my chair, not exactly pleased to hear this. Not pleased at all actually. "Then it sounds like I'm in this pretty deep already?"

Luke cocked his head to the side. "Potentially."

As I stared down at the cards spread before me, I felt a strange mix of excitement and dread—as if all the answers to my future lay here in this pile of stars and moons and that there really wasn't much I could do to change those answers. "Are we done then?"

"Do you want to be done?"

"Well, no, I guess not. I mean... is there more to know?"

He smiled at me. "Do you have more questions you'd like answered?"

"Yes."

"All right then," he continued with a gentle smile that was undeniably handsome. If nothing else, I was grateful that I'd met Luke—he seemed to be a decent enough guy. When I returned to LA, I'd send him a fruit basket or something—just as a little token of my appreciation. And maybe we'd keep in touch. Or, I figured maybe we wouldn't—if he had to subject me to the mind-wiping pods, that is. Then we wouldn't stay in touch and there wouldn't be any fruit basket. Oh, well, it was a nice thought while it lasted.

"Let's keep going," he said. "How about asking to see the card that represents your old life and what it will look like if you return to it?"

"Do you think that's still an option, given the fact that I've already met two of my three attendants?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, but wouldn't you like to know what that option looks like in case it's still on the table?"

“I mean, I guess so,” I answered before hesitating for a moment, when a knot of apprehension began to churn inside my stomach. Did I really want to know what lay in store for me? That is, if it were still possible to return to that familiar, safe existence in California? Or was it better simply to live my life without knowing what the future had in store for me? Just to take each day as it came? I wasn’t sure, but it seemed like this subject was very important to Luke, since he’d brought it up. So, closing my eyes, I allowed my hand to drift over the cards until I felt a subtle pull towards one in particular. When I picked it up and handed it to Luke, he turned it over to reveal the Judgment card—but the card was turned upside down.

“Reversed Judgment,” Luke mused, his brow furrowing slightly as he considered it.

“Does it mean something when the card is upside down?”

“Yes.”

“What does it mean?”

“This card references self-doubt and resentment when it’s reversed. It signifies you repeating patterns without learning the important lessons you need to know.”

“And that’s specifically describing my path if I choose to return to Los Angeles and resume my previous life?”

“Right.” He paused as he looked at the card again. “I would say this card indicates that by returning to your past life, you will be ignoring a higher calling, Kate.”

“Hmm,” I said, not really sure what to make of that. Was it really the cards speaking to me and telling me as much or was Luke also affecting them? Was he turning the tide of each card I drew with his own magic? Or could he be botching the meaning behind each card with his own interpretation? What if he were trying to get me to believe that I was better off here, doing whatever the hell the moon wanted me to do? I figured there was no way for me to know for sure what his M.O. was, but I’d noticed one thing that struck me as peculiar. “Isn’t it odd that I keep pulling the face cards?”

“Face cards?”

I nodded. “You know, instead of pulling something like the four of hearts or the two of clubs or whatever?”

Luke laughed. “The four of hearts and the two of clubs?” He shook his head. “You’ve got your card decks mixed up, Kate. There are no hearts or

clubs in the tarot.”

“Whatever, my point still stands.”

He sobered a bit, considering my question. “I would say it’s unusual that you’re pulling so many *Major Arcana* cards, but then again, it doesn’t seem that unusual, given who you are now or whom you could become.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

He gave me a knowing smirk. “Pull the next card and find out.”

Reluctantly, I reached out with my left hand, the one Luke referred to as my ‘hand of intuition’ and let it hover over the spread of tarot cards lying before me. My fingers brushed past several cards, until I sensed a slight electric charge when I touched one card in particular.

“This card is answering the question of what I could become if I stay on this path, and fully became a Daughter of the Moon?” I double-checked. Luke nodded as I handed the card in question to him.

“The Empress,” he said, nodding as if he’d expected to see that exact card. “It’s a symbol of creativity, growth, and expansion.”

“Okay and what does it mean when applied to this path?”

He nodded again. “I would say the card is telling us that if you stay on this path, it will direct you towards the place where you will embrace your full power and potential.”

“Hmm.”

“Pull another card and ask the same question,” he continued.

“Didn’t we just answer that question?”

“I have a feeling there might be something more—another answer.”

I frowned and had the feeling that where this particular topic was concerned, Luke was much more interested in the answer than I was. I mean, what did I care where I’d end up if I stayed on this path? As far as I was concerned (if I were able to make the choice), I had no intention to stay on this path. If I had it my way, I was blowing this joint stat.

“All right,” I sighed, doing my best to ignore my lingering doubts and just trust in the process. Once again, I felt the now-familiar tingling sensation as my fingers found another card that seemed to call out to me. I handed it to Luke, watching his reaction closely.

“Wow,” he whispered, his eyes going wide as he stared at the card. I was suddenly struck with the feeling that it probably took quite a lot to surprise Luke. It just seemed like he’d been around the block a few more times than most people. “The High Priestess!” Then he looked up from the card to me,

like it was a big deal. I looked over at Magnus to see if he'd caught onto the same thing, but Magnus was busily staring at one of the muffins neatly displayed behind the glass in the coffee section of the bookshop.

"Okay, what does the High Priestess mean?" I asked, pulling my attention back from the overgrown ape to Luke.

"The High Priestess represents a deep connection to the divine through intuition and self-knowledge," he explained, staring down at the card again as if it held some great secret. "It's the card that's closest to the moon, itself."

"Hmm," I said, hoping to reflect my utterly undivided disinterest.

"Kate," Luke said as he looked up at me with searching eyes. "You have no idea how special you are."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I replied, really not needing a 'you're so money and you don't even know it' speech.

"No, I'm being serious," he insisted, his eyes meeting mine with an intensity that made me squirm. "Not even your aunt could assume the mantle of High Priestess."

"Well, it's not like I've assumed it! Jesus!" I grumbled. "Maybe the cards made a mistake."

"The cards never make a mistake."

I frowned at him. "So?"

"So, it's something to think about. Something to *really* think about."

"It means nothing to me."

"Because you don't understand how important it is."

I laughed at that. "Luke, when it comes to all this mumbo jumbo, I don't understand any of it, because no one has explained a damn thing to me yet."

He nodded, appearing unsurprised to hear that. "I wonder," he started as he soon swallowed his own words and then just studied me for a moment or two. "I'll be right back," he said. But before I could ask him where he was going or why, he disappeared into the rear of the shop.

CHAPTER TEN

Knight of Wands (the 12th card)

Take the lead, delivering swift results...

The crackling, dying embers of the fire continued to warm me as I sat in the chair, while Magnus stood at my back like a silent sentinel.

“Here,” Luke said, returning with the book Artemis had entrusted to him, even though I wasn’t sure why he’d gone to retrieve it.

“I don’t know why you even bothered, considering there’s nothing in that book but blank pages,” I said, unable to hide the skepticism in my voice as I frowned when I looked up at him.

But Luke shook his head as he placed the book in my lap with the care of someone handling a priceless artifact. Then, he crouched down in front of me, his face serious but also encouraging. “Open it,” he urged.

“Okay, but,” I started hesitantly.

“Just trust me... please.”

Still not convinced that anything would come of this, I kept my disbelief to myself and, instead, allowed my fingers to trace the smooth leather binding before I finally opened the book.

Just like before, the pages were still blank, mocking Luke’s foolish hope that something might have changed. Annoyed, I looked up at him and said, “See? There’s still nothing there.”

Luke furrowed his brows, a frown contorting his otherwise handsome features. “You can’t see any of the words or the pictures?”

“Um,” I started as I shook my head, glancing down at the book again, just in case a bunch of writing had suddenly filled the page. But, no, it was just as blank as it had been. Even when I flipped through the pages, hoping to catch a single word or image, I found nothing.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing,” I answered, shaking my head once more. “Do you see something in it?”

“Kate,” he started, his voice gravely serious, “the book is full of Artemis’s notes—every single page.”

I swallowed hard at that revelation. “What does it mean if I can’t see any of them?”

Luke shrugged, looking thoughtful. “I think it means you’re not as far into this process as maybe we thought you were.”

My heart pounded with hope as I considered the implications of his statement. That meant, maybe I still had a chance to change things, and avoid whatever fate Artemis and the moon had planned for me. “Do you

think... I have a chance to still change things?" I asked, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

"I think that maybe you do," Luke replied with a quick nod, meeting my gaze steadily. "With my help, of course."

I sighed, feeling a mix of relief and apprehension. I mean, on the one hand, it wasn't every day you learned magic was real or that you were somehow part of it all. But, on the other hand, it also wasn't everyday you were granted a (potential) reprieve from that magic life that would otherwise be your destiny.

"All right," I said, more determination settling in my chest. "I'm definitely really happy to hear that, but... how are you planning to cancel out everything that's already happened?"

Luke paused a moment and his attention turned to Magnus. I instantly understood that Luke was reluctant to continue the conversation, because Magnus, as my guard and protector, was clearly biased toward the moon and Artemis. Would he get in the way if I attempted to shirk that responsibility? I wasn't sure, but I also didn't want to find out. And, clearly, neither did Luke.

"Hey, Magnus?" I said as I glanced over my shoulder at him. He immediately looked at me. "You were eyeing that blueberry muffin earlier. Are you hungry?"

"I do not bow to my need for sustenance."

"Jesus freaking hell!" I grumbled, shaking my head. "Do you want the damned muffin or don't you?"

Magnus paused a moment. "I do."

Then we both looked at Luke who nodded. "It's all yours—have whatever you like."

Magnus merely nodded before leaving my side, intent on raiding Luke's generous stash of sweets. Once the oaf was no longer in hearing distance, I nodded to Luke. "So, how are you planning to help me?"

He breathed deeply as he walked over to the fireplace and leaned against the mantel, turning to face me. "Leave all the means and methods to me," he said, his eyes locking onto mine with a reassuring intensity. "The only thing you need to know at this point is that in three nights, the moon will be full, which means its power will be fully at its zenith."

"Okay," I replied slowly, trying to understand what that had to do with anything.

“If we intend to reverse what’s happened to you so far successfully, the reversal can only take place then.”

“How—I mean, what exactly do you want me to do?”

He nodded as if that was the next question on his list to answer. “You’ll have to forsake the oath that the moon believed you made and instead, announce that you *do not* wish to accept this responsibility.”

I furrowed my eyebrows, mulling over his words. “And that’ll happen in three nights?” I asked, feeling frustrated that it wasn’t something we could fix like, well, right now, for instance.

Luke nodded. “Yes, in three nights.”

“What am I supposed to do until then?” I suddenly felt restless—even anxious to take some sort of action in the meantime.

Luke just smiled. “Maybe you could work on a book,” he suggested, a hint of playfulness in his voice. “Or go shopping for some new clothes that might fit you better.”

I laughed at the suggestion, fully realizing how ridiculous I looked in my current attire, well, minus Luke’s sweater, of course. Starting on my book did sound like a good idea, though. I was way behind, and the last thing I wanted to do was turn in a mediocre manuscript to my publisher not to mention, late. That would probably be enough justification to let me go for good and I was already too close to crossing that very thin line.

“Yeah, good points,” I decided, smiling at the odd blend of mundane and magical concerns now occupying my thoughts.

“Kate,” Luke started, pulling my attention back to him as his gaze landed on mine with a look of unwavering intensity. “I hope you’ll take the next three days to seriously think about your life’s path and decide what you really want for yourself.”

“I already know what I want,” I began, but Luke shook his head like he had another point to make.

“The cards made it pretty clear that going back to your old life will only lead to disappointment and discontent, so I hope you will really... think long and hard about that.” He paused, then added softly, “But if you stay on this path, I can promise you that your life will be an exciting adventure—one you could never even begin to comprehend.”

His words echoed in my mind, stirring up my interest as well as some uncertainty. Did I dare to step off the well-trodden path of my ordinary existence and embrace a world of magic and mystery? It was a tantalizing

thought, but it also wasn't a realistic one. It was one of those choices the heroine in movies or novels has to make. It's never one you actually face yourself—well, I guess I couldn't say that now. Regardless, my answer was *thanks, but no thanks*.

"See, the problem is that I don't know enough about the life on offer to want to even consider choosing it," I started. "And unless someone has all the pieces to the puzzle, how are they supposed to make a choice?"

"Fear of the unknown is the single worst obstacle to learning," Luke answered, rather unhelpfully.

"Still, it's a pretty good motivator to select a life without so much risk."

"You only have one chance to make this decision, Kate, and that opportunity will occur in three nights' time. After that, this path and everything you've been awakened to will disappear forever."

"Hmm," I answered, wanting to appear as if I cared.

"Is that a chance you really want to refuse? Returning to everything you've known after all the new possibilities you've been awakened to?"

"I can't answer that yet... but I will admit that going back home is beginning to look pretty good to me, I have to admit."

"The single biggest mistake you could make is if you take that choice just because it's familiar and safe and then find out you regret it."

"But how would I regret it if I won't even remember coming here?" He was quiet a moment as I studied him. "Or are you saying I *wouldn't* forget coming here—that you, or whoever is in charge, wouldn't erase these memories from my brain or whatever?"

"I... don't know yet." All at once, he seemed somewhat irritated with my question. "All I'm asking you to do, Kate, is to really consider what you're leaving behind and what you're returning to. Ask yourself if your old life satisfied you and made you happy—did it give you a reason to wake up every morning? Did you feel fulfilled? Did you believe you were making a difference in the world?"

"Okay, Tony Robbins," I started with a laugh. "I promise I'll think about it."

He frowned at me. "I'm being serious."

"Okay, okay," I said, holding up my hands in faux submission. It was then that something occurred to me. "Luke," I started hesitantly, a question forming in my mind. "Were you ever given this same choice?"

He seemed taken aback by my question, and his eyebrows rose in surprise. “Some people are born into the roles they are chosen to play,” he explained, his voice gentler. “I’m one such person.”

My curiosity was piqued, so I couldn’t help but ask, “Do you ever regret that you don’t have a normal life now?”

“Never,” he answered without hesitation, his eyes brightening with conviction. “Not for one minute—because doing what I do now—well, it gives me and my life so much meaning. It’s important to me that I know I’m working to *improve* the world I live in. I know for sure that I’m making a difference for the better.” He paused as if weighing what he could and couldn’t tell me. “I firmly believe you wouldn’t regret choosing this path or denying yourself this opportunity.”

For a moment, I let myself imagine it—a life where I embraced my newfound abilities, a life filled with adventure and maybe even a little risk and danger. That sort of life was a far cry from my day-to-day routine of deadlines, writer’s block, and downing endless cups of lukewarm coffee. But could I actually leave behind everything I’d known for something I really knew nothing about?

As I mulled over that thought, I realized how much of my identity was tied to my writing career, Los Angeles, and my whole existence there. Even though that identity wasn’t necessarily a great one. I mean—I was a writer with a mediocre career, no children, and I had absolutely zero prospects in the love and relationship department, which I hadn’t had for years. Not that I thought choosing another life could change any of that (even if Luke was pretty hot and tempting). But I was pretty sure that becoming a Daughter of the Moon would define me in a way my previous life didn’t and couldn’t. Honestly, I didn’t want to define myself as a mediocre writer with a mediocre life. But I also didn’t want to start slaying dragons or lead an army of Valkyries or whatever the F would be expected from me as a Daughter of the Moon. I mean, I was middle-aged, for crying out loud—I didn’t have the energy for any of that shit.

“Whatever you choose, Kate,” Luke continued, his voice warm and sincere, “you can trust that I’ll be here to support you.”

“I appreciate that,” I said honestly as I glanced over at the gorilla known as my guardian, who was busily stuffing his mouth that was already so full, his cheeks looked like two round balloons. Additionally, there were crumbs all over his face and chest. And half the goodies in Luke’s glass case were

now missing. “How much do I owe you for Gubby Guts over there and the complete obliteration he’s currently waging on all your breakfast goodies?”

He looked up at Magnus who was busily wiping his mouth on his arm, the one that wasn’t covered with leather before he pilfered the next treat.

“Wow,” Luke said, his eyes going wide.

“Yeah, he might have just bankrupted you.”

Luke chuckled and shook his head as his eyes settled back on mine.

“Nah, he’s fine. Those are on the house.” He looked up at Magnus Muffin-guzzler again and then cocked his head to the side. “Although you might want to stop him before he starts eating the racks.”

I laughed. “So, are we done for tonight then?”

“Indeed, we are,” he replied with a smile.

“And I’m guessing you won’t tell me anymore about all this magic mumbo jumbo until I finally make up my mind?” I joked, hoping to lighten the mood. His eyes twinkled with amusement but he nodded.

“That’s about right.”

“Fair enough,” I sighed, running a hand through my disheveled hair. “All right, well, I better get going,” I said, standing up from the cozy armchair.

“Magnus!” I called out, turning to watch him slam an entire scone straight into his mouth like he was trying to fatten up before hibernation. “Jesus! Leave the rest of the muffins and scones alone and step away from the glass case!” Then I turned to face Luke again. “I’ll bring your sweater back as soon as I can buy some clothes... if that’s okay?”

“Please, don’t worry about it,” he reassured me, his voice even gentler as he gave me a kind smile. “The sweater looks better on you than it did on me anyway.”

“Ha! We both know that’s a lie.”

I wasn’t sure why I said it or how Luke was meant to take it, but he just gave me a strange expression that indicated he wasn’t sure how to respond. Whatever, it was super late and I was exhausted. I just needed to collect my enormous vacuum and get the hell back to the castle.

As we walked toward the front door, Magnus suddenly appeared beside me and it was all I could do not to reach out and brush off all the crumbs covering him from head to toe. “God, don’t they teach you table manners in Middle-Earth?”

“Table manners are unimportant to the warrior,” he managed, spraying himself with a new round of crumbs.

“Gross,” I grumbled, shaking my head. “Remind me never to visit the Planet of the Apes,” I said, still shaking my head and rolling my eyes. When I turned to face Luke once more, he was doing his best to restrain a laugh. “Is there, by any chance, a mall or something around here where I can find some new duds? I’m not sure where to shop in this town.”

“A mall?” he asked while looking at me like I was dumb. “We don’t even have a clothing store.”

“Great.”

“Amazon Prime is your best bet. They still provide overnight delivery, even out here in the sticks.”

“Great. Then Amazon Prime it is,” I muttered, wondering how in the world I could possibly survive the next three days with Rocco, Yolanda and Magnus. They were like the Three Stooges only a million times worse.

“Good luck with your shopping, Kate,” Luke said as he opened the door, and I shivered when the chilly night air seeped in. “And please remember what I said.”

“I will.”

“Seriously consider all the things that you want for yourself.”

“I promise I will,” I answered, giving him an apologetic, little smile, because my mind was already made up and there was no changing it.

“Thanks, Luke—for everything.”

“No problem,” he replied, managing a weak smile in return. “Take care, Kate. And don’t forget, I’m here if you need me.” Then he reached out and produced his cell phone. “We probably should exchange numbers?”

“Right,” I nodded, giving him my number.

“I’ll text you so you have mine,” he said.

I nodded again, said goodbye and taking one last glance at him, turned and walked away. Magnus kept pace beside me and smelled like cinnamon and apple turnovers.

###

The moment I stepped through the castle door, Rocco was already there with a look of utter exasperation on his goat face. Yolanda, meanwhile, dangled from one of his horns, chattering away like she’d never paused for breath.

“Finally, you’re back! Listen ‘ere, boss, you can’t leave me alone agin like that with jabber-jaws ova here,” Rocco complained, flicking his head

and trying hard to dislodge her as she continued her tirade about whatever subject she'd been previously rambling on about. "She's enough to make any poor goat wish 'e were dead, ya get me? I mean—come on, it's nonstop! She just yaks an' yaks an' yaks about this an' that and the otha thing an' the thing afta that! So much that I can't get even a single moment's break—ya know what I'm sayin', boss? An' even when I manage ta find me some alone time, it still ain't good 'cause I can still hear 'er damned voice yakkin' away in my 'ead! I'm losin' my mind ova here, sweetcheeks! Ya get me? I swear it, boss, that shrunken 'ead's gonna make me commit myself ta the looney bin!"

"The looney bin doesn't allow goats," I said, trying to keep a straight face. Meanwhile, Yolanda took the opportunity to launch into yet another rant as she faced me without eyeballs—something I still couldn't understand, nor did I want to.

"Hey, don't listen to him, gurlfriend," she snapped. "Rocco's exaggeratin' again just like all men do 'cause they can't accept the fact that I'm a modern woo-man with my own opinions! Instead a just agreein' with everythin' he says, like he wants me to, I stand up for myself an' tell him where he can shove it, you know? Which is right up his goat ass, right? Yeah, right! It's how most men are these days, you know? Stuck in their old, traditional ways a thinkin' an' totally unwillin' ta deal with a strong, independent woo-man when they encounter one."

"Strong, independent woman?" Rocco scoffed. "You're a shrunken head, fruitcake!"

"Oh, so I'm a shrunken head, am I? Well, at least I'm notta old billy-goat that can't even fit into his kennel no more!"

"You take that back!" Rocco demanded before he bleated at her in exasperation. Then he started twirling in a circle, first in one direction, then veering instantly in the other direction, clearly attempting to dislodge her from his horn. But he only managed to make himself dizzy and had to pause for a moment, splaying his front legs before dropping his rear end onto the floor and landing with an audible thump. As to how in the hell Yolanda could have even managed to wind up dangling off his horn was anyone's question, but not a mystery I had any interest in solving at the moment.

"Okay," I interrupted, rubbing my temples. "I'm not dealing with this right now. In fact, it's time that everyone went to sleep. I'll volunteer to go first."

“Sleep?” Rocco nearly yelled at me. “How the hell’m I gonna sleep with yakkety-yak over here doin’ nothin’ but talkin’ at me all night, huh?”

“Hey, goat face, don’t you blame this independent, modern woo-man for all your problems!” Yolanda shot back, starting another round of bickering. I literally felt like an ice pick was being shoved straight into my brain.

“Enough!” I shouted, cutting them off before their insanity could escalate any further. “For the love of all that’s holy, will you both give it a rest!?”

“Does the Daughter of the Moon wish for her guard to sever the offending creatures in half?” Magnus suddenly chimed in.

“Jesus, Magnus, no!” I answered as I shook my head at him. “God, you need a therapist like, stat.” Meanwhile, Rocco and Yolanda stared at me, momentarily silenced by my outburst or maybe it was Magnus’s threat to turn the two of them into four. I took a deep breath, trying to regain my composure as I turned to face them once more. My patience was now hanging by a thread. “I can’t deal with either one of you right now,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. Then I looked at Magnus, whose arms were crossed over his massive chest. “And I can’t handle you either. I’m done.”

“What’dya mean by that?” Rocco demanded, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. Yolanda and Magnus were also both looking at me expectantly.

“It means I’m going to lock myself in my room so I can try to get some sleep. That’s what it means.”

“The Daughter of the Moon does not lock herself away from her guard,” Magnus stated sternly, his jaw set in a straight line.

“Yes, she does! Especially when she needs a break from her guard because he is becoming a serious pain in her ass!” I snapped back, meeting his intense gaze.

“Then the guard will knock the door down,” he warned me, and his voice became lower and more threatening.

I just glared back at him in unconcealed annoyance, and a migraine headache began to form behind my eyes. I shook my head and started for the stairs. In a whisper barely audible even to myself, I muttered, “There must be a spell or something Artemis has lying around that I can use to either make him disappear or turn him into something like a little mouse.” A tiny smile tugged at the corner of my mouth as I imagined Magnus, the fearsome warrior, reduced to a small, harmless rodent. *Magnus, the mouse* would be much easier for me to handle. *Magnus, the barbarian*, not so much.

“Hey, what’s for dinner, huh, fruit loop?” Rocco suddenly shouted, his voice echoing through the castle halls as I paused at the base of the stairs.

Yolanda chimed in from her suspended position on Rocco’s horn, “Yeah! I’m starvin’ too!”

“How ya gonna eat, dunderbrain? Ya ain’t got no belly.” Rocco shook his head again, looking at me with a quick shake of his head before Yolanda continued her bickering with him. The cacophony filled the room with a clattering noise that made my head pound.

I stared incredulously at the unlikely duo. “It’s like two in the morning and you ate a whole package of spaghetti just a few hours ago!” I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to will away my splitting headache. “The kitchen’s closed until further notice! Everyone, go to sleep!”

“I told ya, I ain’t gonna get no sleep with this yakkin’ head hangin’ on me, capiche?”

Enough was enough. Ignoring their ongoing argument, I turned on my heel and marched up the stairs, desperately seeking the sanctuary of my bedroom. The steady sound of Magnus’s heavy footsteps followed like a bomb going off inside my head.

“You’re not sleeping in my bed with me, Magnus,” I said once I reached the top of the stairs as I wheeled around to face him and found myself up close and personal with his nipples. I looked up and up and up some more until I met his eyes.

“The guard to the Daughter of the Moon must sleep beside her,” he replied, his tone leaving no room for negotiation.

“No, you’ll be sleeping out here in the hallway,” I countered, hoping to regain some semblance of control.

As I launched myself into my bedroom, closing the door behind me (which Magnus immediately opened), I couldn’t help but wonder how my life could have turned into such a bizarre circus. A talking goat, a disembodied head, and a stubborn warrior from another dimension—it was like the lead-in to a corny joke.

But I definitely wasn’t laughing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

9 of Cups

Gratitude increases the flow of success...

The morning sun filtered through the curtains, bathing the room in a warm glow.

As I sat at the desk in front of my laptop and stared at the screen, all I could think about was the impending deadline pressing down on me with the weight of a heavy storm cloud. I was already way behind and my manuscript was due in a little over a month. So far, I'd managed to write the first two paragraphs of my new Scottish Highlander romance, but for some reason, I just couldn't find the words to continue.

Glancing at the blinking cursor, I reread the paragraphs I'd just finished writing: *The Scottish Highlands unfolded before Evelyn like a masterpiece painted by the gods themselves. The lush meadow, kissed by the golden hues of the setting sun, stretched as far as her eyes could see. In the midst of this breathtaking panorama stood a towering Highlander, a vision of raw masculinity. His chiseled chest glistened in the warm glow of the sun, interrupted only by the traditional kilt that swirled around his hips in the gentle Scottish breeze. The air was thick with tension, charged with an unspoken desire that hung between them.*

Evelyn MacIntyre, an innocent lass with fiery red curls that cascaded down her shoulders, found herself captivated by the presence of this Highland giant with shoulders that easily spanned the width of the largest tree she'd ever seen. Her hazel eyes, wide with both curiosity and trepidation, could not tear themselves away from the sight before her. Her heart pounded like a drum, echoing the rhythm of the ancient land beneath her feet. She fought against the sensations stirring within her, a tumult of emotions that made her want to tear her clothes off and bare herself to this rogue.

But that could not happen, for it was a forbidden attraction between the two of them. Not only was her heart pledged to another, a man chosen by her father to facilitate an alliance of clans, but she had never experienced physical love with a man and she felt sure this one would certainly rip her in two. Her thoughts spiraled into a whirlwind of conflicting desires as she attempted to resist the pull of the Highlander's gaze.

I paused, thinking that might make a good title—'The Highlander's Gaze'. Yeah, it had a certain ring to it. Or had I already written a book with

that title? Hmm, I'd have to check.

Yet, every stolen glance at his towering figure ignited a fire within Evelyn, a fire that defied the constraints of duty and obligation.

As the Highland warrior approached her, his eyes locked onto hers, and a mischievous glint flickered in their depths. The meadow seemed to whisper secrets of the passion she would experience whilst in his arms, and Evelyn's resolve wavered with each step he took. His presence enveloped her, and the magnetic force between them grew stronger, pulling her closer to the edge of forbidden temptation.

In that moment, she wondered about the mysterious secret concealed beneath his kilt—his Scottish snake.

"His Scottish snake? Ugh," I muttered as I leaned back into my chair and shook my head, my own frustration bubbling up inside me. This was just going to end up being another crappy book with crappy sales, which would most assuredly constitute the end of my crappy career.

You can't just give up, Kate, I told myself as I bobbed back and forth in my chair, trying to get back into the flow of the story. I began by attempting to bring the image of the enormous Scotsman to my mind, but all I could think about was, randomly, eels!

"Okay, forget the Scottish snake," I said to myself as I went back and deleted that bit. "Now, just describe the Highlander instead." So, I closed my eyes and tried to bring to mind some hot and sexy guy wearing nothing but a kilt and a smile, but instead, an image of Magnus slammed into my brain—no doubt because I could hear him traipsing up and down the hallway outside my bedroom while he practiced his swordplay.

I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the task at hand once more. I needed to write this book, no matter how uninspired I was. I mean, my career was on the line here! But every time I closed my eyes and tried to envision the scene I was supposed to be describing, it was Magnus who filled the role of the lead character, not the brooding Highlander I was trying my hardest to channel.

"Son of a bitch," I grumbled before leaning back in my chair so far, I was worried it might fall over, as I yelled out the open door, "Magnus, can you stop being so loud!"

"No," came his booming response.

God, he sounded like a stampeding herd of cattle, the pain in the ass.

I tried to focus again, closing my eyes as I willed an image of a Scottish Highlander to please visit me. But, nope, just freaking Magnus and his thunderous, clomping feet.

“Maybe,” I thought to myself, “I could use this to my advantage.” If Magnus kept lending his face to the Highlander, then why not take advantage of it and incorporate some of his masculine traits into my character? I mean, shit, one had to exploit one’s inspiration wherever one could find it, right?

Feeling a renewed sense of determination, I leaned forward and began to type again, transforming my Highlander into a brooding warrior with a mysterious past and an unwavering commitment to the woman he was sworn to protect.

My fingers began flying across the keyboard as I rewrote the opening paragraphs. Before I knew it, the scene had transformed entirely. Gone were the grassy meadow and the loch, replaced by the dimly lit hallway outside the bedroom of my inherited Vermont castle.

Feeling sorry for the warrior outside my bedroom, I stood up and grabbed a spare pillow and a few blankets, which I promptly carried out to him, I typed.

And that was exactly what I’d done last night. As soon as I’d retired for the night—while thinking about Magnus lying on the hardwood floor—I’d pitied him. After finding a couple of extra blankets and a pillow from my bed, I brought them out to him. Only, in my story, I wasn’t going to explain the way Magnus had startled awake and before I’d been able to so much as say ‘mistake,’ his sword was pointing beneath my chin like he was ready to cleave my head right off my shoulders.

In my story, I decided to take a different approach: *Magnus stood up from where he was lying against the cold, hard floor and accepted the proffered blankets and pillow. “Thank you,” he said in a deep voice as he bowed his head ever so slightly. He then gave me a look that told me, in no uncertain terms, exactly how he’d prefer to repay me.*

“Wow,” I whispered, leaning back into my chair as I thought about how much better the scene read after the changes I’d made. What was more, I felt a spark of excitement for this story that hadn’t been there before. Truly, it was a feeling of intrigue and enthusiasm I hadn’t experienced in my writing for some time, to be perfectly honest. Maybe I’d written one too many historical romances and my inner muse was rebelling?

Leaning forward again, I continued typing. *Magnus, the enormous warrior from—*

“Hey, Magnus,” I called out, leaning back in my chair again as I spied the empty hallway once more. I caught a flash of the tip of his blade and a glimpse of a leather boot and then nothing.

“What?” he called back.

“What’s the name of the dimension you’re from?”

“Galaxy Nine,” he replied without missing a beat as he appeared in the doorway once more, his eyes never leaving the invisible opponent he was dueling with.

“Thanks,” I leaned forward again, typing: *from Galaxy Nine. And although I could appreciate the barbarian’s tight and round ass, I couldn’t say I appreciated the situation I was now facing because I was at a crossroads. Should I return to my old life—the bakery, where all I’d ever known and would know were scones? Or should I become the demon slayer I was destined to be? A demon slayer protected by Magnus who would also be my guide?*

Not that I thought as Daughter of the Moon, I was going to become a demon slayer or anything. But, hey, it had worked with Buffy, right? Or, wait, that was vampires. Ah—same thing.

I faced the document before me, watching the cursor blink once more, like it wanted to know as much as I did where I was going with this.

“Hmm,” I said to myself as I was gifted with another thought.

I leaned forward and started typing once more, answering the question of just who would be my character’s guide: *Rocco*. But then I decided to add an ‘oan’ to the end of it and ended up with: *Roccoan, the dwarf troll with a long white beard and matching hair. Roccoan was a witch-doctor of skilled magic who carried around his neck the enchanted, shrunken head of his predecessor, Yoland—Yolan, who guided Roccoan’s magic.*

I sat back and thought more about what I was doing. And after really thinking about it, I decided my publisher, Janice, was going to kill me. Not only was I not working on the Scottish Highlander romance, but was I actually thinking about turning in this (whatever ‘this’ was) instead? I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my temples, fearing I was basically writing my own epitaph.

Yet the idea of going back to my staid historical romances was settling in my stomach like an anvil. Furthermore, I just didn’t think I could do it—I

couldn't write another word of some boring ass story. Because what I was writing now was way more interesting than (yawn) another tale of forbidden love on the windswept moors.

Besides, I thought, if I'm going to get the ax anyway, it might as well be for something I actually enjoyed writing.

With a sigh, I leaned forward again and resumed my typing, the newest muse within me making my fingers fly over the keyboard.

It had been a long day and I'd finally decided to follow the path that was destined by the stars—I would become the demon slayer I was meant to be. And with the weight of that decision, I decided to take a shower to clear my head, leaving Magnus to sleep in the hallway outside my bedroom while Roccoan continued to bicker with Yolan about magic in the kitchen downstairs.

As I typed, the shower scene in my mind unfolded. The steamy water cascaded down the protagonist's body as she tried to make sense of her new reality. Then there was the soft sound of Magnus's footsteps approaching the bathroom, his warrior instincts never allowing him to stray too far from his charge. And then, just as she began lathering shampoo into her hair, the sound of the door creaking open before Magnus joined her in the shower.

"Magnus?" I stammered, my cheeks flushing scarlet as I realized he'd entered the shower with me. "What are you doing?"

"Protecting you," he replied gruffly, his eyes never straying from the task at hand as he grabbed a bar of soap and began to lather up my back.

"Um, thanks?" I managed, trying not to think about the intimate nature of his actions. But as the water continued to pour over us, I couldn't deny that I felt a strange sense of connection to this otherworldly warrior.

"Is this what you truly want?" Magnus murmured, his voice barely audible over the sound of the water. "To become a demon slayer with me?"

"I was born to do this—it's my destiny," I whispered, my heart pounding in my chest as he brought the soap around to my breasts and began lathering them roughly.

"You must first make the choice..."

And I paused as I wondered what I should name my heroine. I mean, it wasn't like I could name her Kate, right? Hmm...

"Caterina," he whispered, his fingers dipping between my thighs before I arched my back against him.

“Yes!” I called out as my body shook with the pleasure he was giving me. “Yes, this is what I choose! To be a demon slayer with you and Roccoan!”

Yes, I thought to myself, reading over the scene I’d just written as my cheeks flushed. And then I imagined Janice’s reaction. I could almost hear her voice, dripping with disapproval. *“Kate, this is not the Scottish Highlander romance we agreed on!”*

Right. I was taking a very big risk.

I took a deep breath as my gaze flicked between the words on the screen and the open door of my bedroom. Magnus kept appearing and disappearing as he continued working on his footwork or decapitating the little round wooden balls of the banister railing—I really wasn’t sure what he was doing out there, but he was making a lot of noise while doing it.

But back to my crucial question—would I write this new story or not write it? And would I turn it over to Janice or not turn it over to her? The idea of returning to the Highlander story made my stomach churn before that damned anvil settled into my gut again. Conversely, the idea of working on this new demon slayer story gave me a thrill and a fresh sense of defiance surged through me.

“So?” I asked myself.

I took another deep breath and then I began nodding. Yes! I *was* going to do this.

After all, they say you should write what about you know, right?

###

After another hour of writing the adventures of Caterina, Magnus, Raccoan, and Yolan, I needed to take a break. The creative juices were flowing, but my body was starting to ache from sitting in one position for so long. I could definitely use a shower too.

“Hey, Magnus!” I called out, and he instantly appeared in my doorway, fresh beads of sweat rolling down his chiseled face. Apparently, practicing one’s swordplay was a strenuous workout. “I’m going to take a shower, and you better not destroy the door if I lock it.”

“Do not lock it and I will not destroy it,” he replied gruffly, his eyes narrowing with renewed suspicion.

“Seriously?” I sighed, frustrated but not wanting to challenge him. I mean, I was pretty sure he’d knock the door down if I did. From what I could tell so far, Magnus wasn’t exactly subtle in any manner of speaking.

But how was a woman supposed to relax, knowing that an enormous warrior could barge in on her at any moment?

“Fine.” Rolling my eyes, I walked into my bathroom and shut the door behind me, careful *not* to lock it. Then I grabbed my phone and clicked over to the music button, choosing my most relaxing playlist. Soon the smooth sounds of Kenny G. filled the room and I could breathe a little more easily. As the soothing saxophone melody played in the background, I undressed, feeling the tasks of my day slipping away with each article of way-too-tight clothing.

Then I stepped into the shower and sighed as the hot water flowed over my body. It felt like heaven—I hadn’t realized how tense I’d been until the warmth started to loosen my muscles. The combination of the hot water and Kenny G lulled me into a sense of peace and calm, which had become so rare during the last twenty-four hours of my life.

I reached for the soap, determined to enjoy the rest of my shower in serenity—or as much serenity as I could muster, despite an unlocked door and a warrior lurking nearby. As the minutes ticked by and the delightful water poured over me, I strangely found my thoughts returning to the scene I’d just written—how Caterina found herself in the shower with Magnus, well not the *real* Magnus, not the brooding behemoth outside my bedroom door, but the fictional one who had now become a prominent character in my story.

As I continued to lather myself, my thoughts drifting back to the character of Magnus and his strong hands gliding across Caterina’s body, I felt something I hadn’t felt in a very long time—the almost foreign sensation of desire. It had been a long time since I’d been turned on (and even longer since I’d actually done something about it), but now, under the hot spray of the shower, I couldn’t ignore the tingling sensation that was already spreading through my body.

There’s always the shower head, I thought to myself as I glanced up and noticed it was the detachable kind, which could make for a very easy and convenient, not to mention quick, little escapade. But then I got suddenly embarrassed by my own boldness.

Not a good idea, I thought to myself. Not only was Magnus still lurking in the hallway, but Rocco and Yolanda were downstairs, no doubt, in the midst of another ridiculous argument.

So, instead of easing the sudden embers of desire that had somehow lit themselves in my belly, I reached for the shampoo bottle, trying my best to push the tantalizing thoughts away. It was then that I realized Spare Tire Sandy was nowhere to be seen—instead, my stomach was flat and led into my hips and rib cage without any lumps, bumps or other detours. Hmm. And I had to admit, I was getting used to my enormous ass. Enough to want to keep it? Not sure.

There was a sudden, slight cool breeze that surrounded me so I just stepped back into the flow of the hot water and focused on my Amazon Prime delivery, which couldn't come soon enough. As soon as I'd gone to bed last night, I'm immediately awakened to place an order for various sizes of bras, t-shirts and sweatpants—just enough to last me for the next few days. Then I was getting back on the road as quickly as I could. As to whether or not Luke planned to wipe my mind of my memories of this place, I wasn't sure. But, at this point, I didn't even care. I just wanted out.

I was just about to rinse the shampoo from my hair, my eyes squeezed shut, when I felt a pair of large, strong hands suddenly reaching around me to palm my breasts.

“WHAT THE HELL?!” I screamed, instinctively backing into whoever was behind me. My back collided with a solid wall of familiar muscle, and I felt an unmistakable erection pressing against my butt.

“Jesus, Magnus!” I shrieked, throwing his hands off me. “What the hell are you doing?!”

I opened my eyes, just in time for the suds to swarm them and start stinging like all the pins from hell. Blinking furiously as I tried to see through the pain, I screamed out, “Aahhkk! I've got suds in my eyes!”

Magnus, in his apparent attempt to try and alleviate the situation, shoved me forward into the water's flow with far more force than necessary, causing me to reach out to grope for the shower wall, and in the process, I knocked the soap onto the bottom of the tub. Then I promptly slipped on the bar, my feet flying out from under me as I fell forward. This time, I felt Magnus's arm around my middle, trying to pull me back upright, but I'd already collided with the tub spout, cracking my forehead painfully on the metal fixture.

Magnus released me so I was now down on all fours. I somehow managed to turn myself around so my butt wasn't facing him (because that was way too much of an open invitation!) With my hair still covered in suds

(which were continuing to do a great job of invading my eyes), and my forehead aching like a son of a bitch while Kenny G's sax wailed in the background, I managed to locate Magnus's ankles. Grasping them tightly, I pulled myself up, but as soon as I stood, my head connected forcefully with his groin. He immediately let out a strangled cry as he stumbled forward, bending over (probably to cradle his enormous balls) and landed heavily on my bent back, sending my face slamming down into the elephant's trunk beneath me.

"Ouch!" I screamed out in pain, my hands instinctively flying up to my face. "Your erection just broke my nose!"

"And your head just broke my erection," Magnus managed to retort, in a rather high-pitched voice as we separated from one another, me covering my upper and lower areas while Magnus doubled over even lower, clearly in pain.

"GET OUT!" I yelled as I gripped the shower curtain, yanking it off the rings and wrapping it around me. I glared at Magnus who was still bent over, his face as red as the blood which was probably running down my face. But when I ran my hand across my nose, there wasn't any blood... Hmm, so my nose probably wasn't broken. But, shit, it still hurt!

Magnus hesitated for a moment, likely assessing whether or not he'd be able to stand on his own.

"NOW!" I screamed.

Then while still completely bent over, Magnus hobbled out of the tub at the exact moment that Rocco, still wearing Yolanda on one of his horns, appeared in the doorway, chewing on God only knew what.

"What's all the hubbub—?" he started as his eyes went from me wrapped up in the shower curtain like a burrito, to the naked Magnus who was still doubled over, to the elephant's trunk dangling between his legs.

"Holy sonova—that thing's gotta be a mile long! Maybe two!"

"Oh, my gawd!" Yolanda said at the same time.

"You seein' what I'm seein', jabber jaws?"

"Oh, yeah! I'm seein' what you're seein' all right!" And she seemed very pleased to be seeing what Rocco was seeing. Rocco didn't seem so much pleased as he was mystified.

"EVERYONE OUT!" I yelled, completely frantic by now.

"You should be in the circus, tough guy. You could be the headliner—*'come an' see the amazin' mile-long schlong'*," Rocco prattled, walking

around Magnus like he was trying to get a better view. Yolanda was definitely trying to get a better view.

“OUT!”

“A’right, a’right,” Rocco said as he gave me a frown. “An’ what the hell’s this crap you’re listenin’ to anyway?”

“NOW!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m goin’, I’m goin’,” Rocco finished as he clomped back out of the bathroom, Yolanda swinging around on his horn so she could get another good look at Magnus’s ‘mile-long-schlong.’

Magnus didn’t say anything, but thankfully, followed Rocco while doing a weird crab walk sideways. I, meanwhile, just stood there for another few seconds in utter disbelief, trying to register everything that had just happened.

CHAPTER TWELVE

COUNTDOWN TO THE FULL MOON: DAY 1 OF 3

6 of Pentacles

Always give what you would like to receive...

“Why in the world did you think it was okay to get into the shower with me?!” I demanded from Magnus who was seated at the kitchen table across from me.

His enormous sword was leaning against the tabletop. He shifted uncomfortably, reaching down to adjust himself for the umpteenth time. Apparently, my head had done quite a number on his.

“I assumed that was what you wanted.” His voice was strained and a little higher than usual—not that I cared, because I didn’t. All I cared about was the disarming fact that my privacy had been rudely and thoroughly invaded.

“You assumed?!” I practically shouted, trying to keep my cool as Rocco and Yolanda howled with laughter in the living room. They were parked on the couch (well, Yolanda was still hanging from one of Rocco’s horns), watching *The Office*. “What on Earth would make you think I wanted you to come into the shower with me?” I demanded, pausing to remove the bag of ice cubes I’d been holding against my nose. No, my nose wasn’t broken, but it still hurt like hell.

Magnus shrugged, wincing slightly as he moved. “You made it clear in your technological journal.”

“My what?”

He frowned at me, like I was the slow one. “The box in which you write your innermost thoughts.”

The box in which I wrote my innermost thoughts? Apparently, the jolt to his lower brain must have affected the upper one. But then it dawned on me. “Do you mean my computer?”

“I do not know that term.”

And then a horrible realization washed over me when I connected the dots. Magnus must have read my story on my laptop while I was in the shower and in doing so, he must have deduced that it was about the two of us. Which, in a twisted way, I guessed it was, but... well, not really. Certainly not in the way he’d taken it at any rate. For all intents and purposes, Magnus was basically serving temporarily as my muse, not as... well, not as anything more than that.

“However you choose to refer to your journal is your own business,” he replied defensively, crossing his arms over his ridiculously broad chest. “When I read what you had written, it appeared that you clearly desired the two of us to exchange body fluids. Thus, I naturally believed you were ready to accept my generous offer of providing you with my superior sperm.”

I sighed, holding the ice back up to the bridge of my nose when it started aching again. From the other room, Rocco’s laughter boomed like thunder, momentarily making me ignore my well-earned frustration.

But back to Magnus, dealing with someone from a different dimension or planet or galaxy or whatever the hell I was dealing with was exhausting to say the least. “Magnus, it’s not okay to just walk into someone’s bedroom, their *private* space, and read their computer!”

“Your technological journal,” he corrected.

“Whatever. It’s called a computer—a laptop, actually.”

“Your *laptop* was unguarded and defenseless.”

“That wasn’t an invitation for you to read what I wrote on it!”

He glared at me. “Then why was it left open and unattended—for any passerby to view?”

“Because I was still working on a story I was writing! I only wanted to take a break from it to have a shower. Jesus!”

He gave me a look that indicated it was all my fault and he was actually the more injured party. “You wrote the words which imparted a definite picture of what you desired,” he continued, now frowning at me. Then, he shifted in his seat once more and reached down to once again, adjust himself beneath his skirt. I was fairly certain the only body parts causing him any level of discomfort were his gonads. Or maybe it was his gigantic...

“Well, I’m telling you here and now as directly as I can possibly express that I didn’t desire it and I never wanted you to get into the shower with me in the first place!”

“Then why did you leave the memorandum out there for me to read?” Magnus demanded, his expression a mixture of confusion and annoyance.

“I didn’t leave it there for *you* to read!” I snapped, feeling my cheeks heat up with embarrassment. “You’re just nosy and took the liberty of walking into *my* bedroom and reading *my* laptop! But I didn’t mean for you to act my story out! It was entirely make-believe, Magnus!”

“Make-believe?”

“Yes! Fake! Fiction! *Not intended to be real.*”

“Then why were both of our names included in it?”

“Well, my name isn’t technically in it,” I replied under my breath, avoiding his gaze.

“Mine is,” he pointed out, as though he’d caught me in some sort of lie.

“Look, I was just writing a story,” I explained, trying to regain my composure.

“A story?” He frowned, clearly not grasping the concept.

“Yes, a story—you know, something fake? Something that isn’t based on truth or reality?”

He studied me for a moment, as if trying to determine whether or not I was being truthful. His piercing eyes seemed to see straight through me, making me squirm in my seat.

“I do not understand how that bears any relevancy to—”

“Ugh! Never mind.” I shook my head, feeling exasperated, as usual. How was I supposed to explain human boundaries to someone who wasn’t even from this dimension? I could feel my face heating up with anger and embarrassment (mainly at myself, because I should have known by now that privacy wasn’t possible in this freaking castle), but there was no way I was going to let him know that. But one way or another, I needed to set things straight, to make sure he never walked in on me again; well, at least for the

next two days anyway. After that, he'd be a thing of the past, and boy, was I looking forward to that moment with bated breath. "Look, just because I write something doesn't mean I expect or *want* it to happen, okay?"

"Then why would you write it?"

"Because it's what I do—I'm what's called a writer, or an author. That means, I create fictional stories for people—particularly for *women*—to read."

"Why would you create such lies?"

"Stories aren't lies," I shrugged. "They're a form of entertainment. And as to why I write them—well, because it's my job—it's how I support myself financially."

"I see." He was quiet for another second or so, his brow furrowing because he was clearly bewildered by the concept. "There are no such things in Galaxy Nine," he said, shaking his head. "We do not lie about life. Nor do we *pretend* to live it. We actually live life."

It was hard not to be annoyed by his judgmental tone, especially after learning that he'd been the one snooping through my personal belongings in the first place. But I knew that if I wanted to get through to him, and make him understand that no man should *assume* he could step into the shower with a woman he barely knew, I had to try a different approach.

"Okay, let me put it this way," I began, leaning forward and looking straight into his eyes. "You're a warrior, right? You protect people, and fight battles, and do all that stuff?"

"I do not protect 'people.' I protect the Daughter of the Moon exclusively."

"Right. Whatever. My point is this: being a writer is kind of like being a warrior...but I'm a warrior who uses my words, not a sword."

He frowned at me more deeply, his eyes narrowing. "I cannot use words to behead my enemy."

"Oh, my freaking God, you're like trying to talk to a rock," I started to complain, shaking my head as I attempted to find my patience, but hot damn! There was so little of it left in me.

"And you are like trying to converse with an irritating *shogran* that does not possess an ounce of sense."

I took a deep breath. Then another one and wasn't about to ask him what in the F a *shogran* was. "The point is, Magnus, that I use my imagination to

create stories in order to entertain people, stories that allow them to escape their everyday lives for a little while.”

“I do not understand how that is in any way akin to being a warrior.”

I breathed in deeply and shook my head. “Well, maybe it’s not,” I admitted, realizing I’d had no idea where I was going with that one.

“No, it is not.”

“Fine,” I said, clapping my hands together and giving him a false smile. “Let’s just please agree that from now on, you won’t assume that everything you read on my computer, or my technological journal, is an open invitation for you to... act on or participate in?”

He let out a long-suffering sigh but nodded. “I will agree.”

“And if, by some miracle, I ever decide I would like to ‘exchange body fluids’ with you, I’ll be sure to let you know in no uncertain terms. In the meantime, you keep your hands and your ‘superior sperm’ to yourself!”

“Understood.”

“Good,” I said, my voice still shaking with frustration. “Now, can we please just forget this ever happened and move on?”

“I suppose so.”

Just as I was about to excuse myself from the impossible man, something else struck me. “Magnus?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know how long you’re planning to be here—I mean, in this dimension or on this planet or whatever—”

“I shall remain as long as the Daughter of the Moon remains.”

“Right, well, you should know that if you ever meet another woman and want to... you know, date her—”

“Date her?”

“Um, you know, to court or woo her,” I clarified. He nodded slowly, urging me to continue with a wave of his fingers. “Just make sure you ask her permission before you decide to take any liberties, er...” I continued, realizing he wouldn’t know the meaning of the word, “before you make any *advances* on her person.”

“Advances?” He appeared utterly baffled now.

“You know, like touching her... or trying to kiss her or getting into the shower with her and touching her breasts—that kind of stuff—anything that invades her personal space,” I explained, thinking that was probably a very important point to make. I mean, the last thing I wanted was to be walking

through the grocery store with Magnus molesting or accosting some poor, innocent woman. “Women, in general, don’t like that sort of thing.”

Magnus stared at me for a moment, his jaw and lips just as tight as they had been. “I will not attempt to woo or court another woman,” he declared solemnly. “Not while I am protecting the Daughter of the Moon.” There was a pause, and then he added: “There might come a time when you shall request me to provide you with my superior sperm, so I shall reserve it for that glorious day.”

“Right... well, this conversation is over now.”

“Very well. What shall we now discuss?”

I was surprised he didn’t want to get away from me as badly as I wanted to get away from him, but it seemed Magnus was capable of only one emotion—irritation. Well, it also appeared he could get turned on (if that fire hose in the shower was anything to go on)—so two emotions.

“I don’t—” I started to say, thinking of a way to tell him he needed to find someone else to bother when something else occurred to me. I wasn’t sure how much Magnus knew about the role he was fulfilling—namely the ins and outs of it, but I figured it might be a good idea to probe his mind further in order to get a better grasp on the whole Daughter of the Moon business—especially since I’d gotten almost no enlightenment from Luke. “Magnus,” I began, turning to face him again as I lifted the bag of ice off my nose, “what exactly do you know about what it means for me to be a Daughter of the Moon?”

He gave me a skeptical look. “I am well aware of my duties, just as you should know yours.”

I frowned. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then use the proper words to convey your meaning.”

“Ugh,” I grumbled, breathing in deeply as I wondered if all guardians were so disagreeable. “What do you know about the moon, itself, and the reason why it chose me to become its Daughter?”

“You must ask that question to the moon,” he said simply, as if it were the most logical thing in the world.

“Because you don’t know? Or because you won’t tell me?”

“I do not wish to be trifled with your unimportant questions. I am a warrior not a philosopher.”

“You’re a pain in the ass, that’s what you are,” I grumbled, but I still couldn’t help myself; I went on trying to pry more information out of him,

asking him question after question about what it mean to be a Daughter of the Moon. Each time, he responded just as evasively as before.

My frustration grew, and I wondered how I could possibly endure another two days of this when the doorbell rang, heralding the arrival of my Amazon Prime order. Excitement surged through me, momentarily eclipsing my irritation, and I leaped up from the table, pleased to be getting away from the ornery barbarian, even if it were only for a few seconds. But, true to his job description, Magnus was quick to follow close behind me.

As I grasped the large box waiting on the doorstep, Magnus abruptly thrust me away from it, leaving me to careen against the side of the castle, as I banged my elbow against the wall.

“Ouch, Magnus, you asshole!”

But he wasn’t even slightly concerned. Instead, he was busily using the tip of his sword to poke at the box.

“It’s a box, Magnus, not a freaking threat.”

But his jaw was set in a straight line. “It could conceal a *gordevel*!”

“A what?”

“An evil creature with large teeth that drinks blood and eats flesh,” he explained, his eyes never leaving the box. With a swift motion, he sliced open the tape, then, holding the sides open with the tip of his blade, he peered inside cautiously.

“Is there a flesh-eating demon inside?” I demanded angrily, crossing my arms over my chest.

“It appears to be garments of clothing.”

“Yeah, exactly—my Amazon Prime order.”

Apparently satisfied with his inspection, he sheathed his sword and walked past me, back into the castle.

“Thanks,” I muttered as I picked the box up and walked back into the house, kicking the door shut behind me. Once I reached the kitchen, I placed the box on top of the dining table and opened it the rest of the way, pulling out the various items, which I set aside into two piles: one for me and one for Magnus. When I was finished unloading everything, I grabbed Magnus’s pile of clothing and handed it to him. “Go in the other room and try these on.”

“What are they?” he asked, glaring at the pile in my arms like it had personally offended him.

“Normal clothes,” I explained.

“I am already clothed.”

“We’re in a tiny town in Vermont, Magnus. That means you can’t walk around dressed in leather and little else.”

“I dress as a warrior.”

“Right, but no one else knows that.”

“I do not care what other people know.”

“Well, I do and I don’t want to walk around town with you dressed like that.” Then I pointed at his ridiculous ensemble. “People are going to think you’re one of The Village People.”

“Who are the village people? I have not met them yet. Are they friends or foes?”

“Never mind,” I dismissively waved off his questions. “The point is, you need to blend in better if you’re going to hang out with me.”

“My only job is to protect you.”

“And you can do that just as effectively wearing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt,” I countered, gesturing to the assortment of clothing I’d ordered for him. “At some point we’ll need to leave the castle in the next two days to buy food and other stuff, and I don’t want you to stick out like a sore thumb.”

“What does a sore thumb have to do with any of this?”

“It doesn’t. Just try the clothes on and please, for the love of God, shut up!”

He didn’t respond or make any motion to do anything of the sort but just studied me with narrowed eyes for another few seconds. “Last evening, we went into town and I was clad in my warrior attire,” he pointed out, a touch of defensiveness creeping into his voice.

“True, but that was due to an emergency,” I reminded him. “And it was so early in the morning that no one was awake to notice your... unique sense of fashion.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, slowly relenting and thank the heavens for that. “I will dress in these... *normal* clothes, as you call them.”

“Thank you.”

Then, before I could stop him, he ripped off his skirt right there, revealing his colossal member which was dangling right before my eyes as if it were saying, *‘Hey there, remember me?’*

“God, Magnus,” I said, turning around to shield my eyes.

“I have no shame.”

“Apparently not!”

I could hear him ripping open the first bag and from the corner of my eye, I caught him holding up a pair of jeans to his waist. Then with a shrug, he pulled them on.

“Are you dressed?”

“I am wearing the trousers you procured for me.”

I turned around to find that the ‘trousers I’d procured for him’ fit around his waist but were at least four inches too short in the legs.

“These will do.”

“No,” I answered with a laugh as I shook my head. “They’re way too short. But luckily for you, I got you a bunch of different sizes. So try on the rest... but do it in another room!”

“The Daughter of the Moon should be proud of her guardian’s naked physique.”

“Right—well, you can be proud of it for the both of us.”

Relief washed over me as I watched him gather up the bags and the box before he walked into the adjoining living room, where Rocco and Yolanda were still laughing over the high jinks of Michael Scott and Dwight.

“Watch where you point that thing, tough guy!” Rocco yelled out.

“You’re gonna blind someone if ya don’t knock ‘em out first!”

I had to admit I was still laughing on the inside at the image of Magnus in high waters.

###

Magnus towered over me as he basically pushed me out of the way to see his reflection in the full-length mirror. As he did, he looked at his new attire with an expression of suspicion.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“I feel restricted,” he responded before he did this weird little squatting move and then tried to adjust himself for the umpteenth time since he’d put the pants on. He was now dressed in jeans that were long enough and a long-sleeved shirt, so he looked somewhat more normal—although the sword hanging from his waist shattered any illusion of him blending in with normal humans. Not to mention he was still over seven feet tall and had a mane of hair longer than most women’s. Dressed in normal clothes definitely helped though—instead of looking like Conan the Barbarian, he now looked more

like a romance novel cover model from the eighties. He could have passed for Fabio's younger brother. As to Magnus's age, I was utterly clueless.

"Magnus, how old are you?"

He looked at me and frowned more deeply. "Why does—"

"Just answer the freaking question."

"I have survived for five and eighty years."

I felt my mouth drop open on its own. "You're eighty-five?" God, he didn't look a day over thirty-five.

"The aging process is different in Galaxy Nine."

"I guess so."

He looked at his reflection again and scowled unpleasantly. "I do not approve of this apparel," he said rather grumpily as he faced me once more. I couldn't ignore, once again, the ridiculous sheathed weapon he kept strapped to his waist.

"Well, you'd better get used to it, because that's how human men dress in Vermont, but that sword isn't exactly discreet."

"Discretion is not a priority. Protecting you is." His tone was matter-of-fact, but I couldn't help rolling my eyes.

"Right, because we've encountered so many enemies."

"Anything can happen at any moment. You must always be prepared," he responded sternly, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Whatever," I answered as I walked over to my computer to check my email inbox for the thirtieth time, or so it seemed. I was waiting for a response from Janice regarding the opening chapters to the new book I'd just sent her. Granted, I knew she wasn't going to read all fifteen thousand words in five minutes, so I wasn't sure why I kept checking, but there it was.

Well, actually, I was sure why I kept checking—I was nervous at the thought that the first three chapters of the Magnus and Caterina story were now in Janice's hands. That meant she would be very aware that I hadn't started the Scottish Highlander romance and that I was attempting to start something new instead.

And I wasn't sure how to respond if she hated it. My heart continued to race as I contemplated the possible reactions she might have—none of them were good. As I began to pace the room, wringing my hands together, my phone chimed with an incoming text message. When I grabbed it, I noticed the message was from Luke. Strange, but my heart sped up as soon as I saw his name.

Hi Kate, it's Luke, he'd texted. Just wanted to check in on you and ask how you're doing? Did you manage to find some clothes that fit?

I smiled at his concern and quickly typed out a response. *Yes, I did and thank you! All set with enough clothes to last me. Still need to get your sweater back to you, though.*

No rush on the sweater, he replied after a little pause, but I could see the three dots moving on the screen, which meant he was typing out another message. Then the three dots stopped, but there was nothing—no new message came through. When the three dots started up again, they were followed with: *I wanted to ask if you'd like to have lunch with me tomorrow? No prob if you're busy.*

Busy? I thought to myself with a laugh. What could I possibly be busy with? Protecting myself from Magnus intruding on my shower time?

I'm not busy, I texted back, finding it odd that my pulse was quickening so readily like my subconscious mind thought this was a date or something. But my conscious mind new better—this was just Luke being nice. Or was it just Luke asking me to lunch so he could try and talk me into picking up the mantle of this Daughter of the Moon crap? Either way didn't make any difference. I was excited to see him again—that much I couldn't deny.

Lunch sounds great, I texted back. *What time?*

Noon?

Sure, that works for me.

Great, I'll pick you up then.

I sent him a thumbs-up emoji and tried to make my heartbeat slow down, but all the while I wondered: what in the world was I doing, getting all excited about lunch with Luke? It didn't make any sense—especially because I wasn't planning on hanging around here much longer. Right—in two days' time, I'd hopefully be back home, sitting comfortably in my living room in Los Angeles, either with or without my memories of my time here.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

COUNTDOWN TO THE FULL MOON: DAY 2 OF 3

9 of Swords

An anxious mind leads to restless nights...

Day two of the three-day countdown to my potential freedom arrived, and I found myself strangely content.

Maybe it was because I was wearing some sweatpants that actually fit me. I mean, sure, they were a size large, which I'd never thought I could get so excited about, but my newly enlarged butt cheeks were grateful and then some. My top half was now sporting a 38D bra, and I was surprised that a size medium fit me up top, if a little snugly. I also had to admit that I was beginning to enjoy having such big boobs—something else I'd never thought possible.

True to Luke's word, at noon, the doorbell rang.

"I got it!" Rocco yelled out from where he was eating the lunch I'd just made for him (ramen noodles—turned out the goat was a big pasta junkie). I'd just brushed my teeth and my hair and was now on my way downstairs when I heard Rocco's loud voice.

"Hey, good to see ya, Luke, ma man."

I came around the bend in the stairs just at the right time to catch Rocco greeting Luke with a strange cloven hoof-fist pump with his front left hoof. Then he turned around and did the same with his back.

"Hey, Rocco," Luke answered with a smile. "And hello to you, Yolanda," he added, nodding towards the shrunken head, who was already mid-sentence.

"Hey, Mr. Handsome. So, are you takin' our girl out for some grub? Make sure she eats a decent meal? We gotta keep that figure o' hers nice an' round—like a woo-man's oughtta be, you know?" Yolanda advised, earning an amused smile from Luke, who then turned his attention to me as I walked up beside Rocco.

"Hi, Kate, you ready to go?"

"Yep, all set!" Grabbing my purse from the chair beside the entry, I was about to step out the door when Magnus appeared behind me, his massive sword, as usual, unsheathed and at the ready.

"Where you go, I go," he announced, his voice resolute and unwavering.

"We're just having lunch, Magnus."

He turned to look at me with a pronounced frown. "Where you go, *I go*."

"You're *not* invited," I told him, planting my hand on my hip and attempting to look as assertive as possible.

"I will tolerate no arguments," he stated firmly, his icy eyes locking onto mine.

"Kate..." Luke started, giving us both a smile. "Magnus is just doing his job," he continued gently, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

Almost instantly, I felt my anger begin to fizzle and I had to wonder if Luke had just done something to me.

“Doing his job to protect me against what, exactly? The maple leaves?” I asked, waving my arm around the woods outside the door.

“Many dangerous creatures will seek out the Daughter of the Moon,” Magnus replied, his voice just as dull and monotone as it always was. “It is simply a matter of time.”

“Is that true?” I asked Luke, hoping for some reassurance that it wasn’t. Instead, he made a zipping motion across his mouth, like his lips were locked, leaving me more frustrated than before.

I looked at my guardian and frowned. “All right, Magnus, you can come to lunch,” I conceded reluctantly, “but you can’t bring that ridiculous sword with you.” His eyes widened in protest, and he opened his mouth to argue, but I cut him off with a firm shake of my head. “No arguments. Leave it here or we’re leaving *you* here.”

“Kate’s right,” Luke chimed in with a note of authority as he faced the much larger man. “The restaurant won’t allow you inside with that weapon anyway.”

Magnus scowled at both of us. “I will remain outside and ensure the establishment is safe, but where the Daughter of the Moon goes, I too must go.”

“That’s fine,” Luke agreed, offering me an encouraging smile, but I wasn’t sold.

“You know, anyone in their right mind is going to take one look at Magnus and that sword and they’re going to call the police.”

Luke gave me another dimpled grin of his. “I’ll take care of it, Kate. Don’t worry.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means there are certain... *benefits* to being a magician,” he replied cryptically, offering no further explanation.

Just as Magnus was about to close the front door, Rocco’s gravelly voice rang out from the living room. “Hey, don’t forget about me, boss! Bring back some grub for your favorite goat, capiche?”

I rolled my eyes, never ceasing to be amazed at how much food that goat consumed. “I’ll bring you something healthy!”

“Aw, fogget about it!” Rocco scoffed.

###

The sun was streaming through the window as I sat with Luke in Bumble Bee's, a small but quaint restaurant in town that oozed charm and coziness. We'd already placed our orders, and I threw in a to-go order for a couple sandwiches for Rocco and Magnus.

The latter was currently pacing back and forth outside the restaurant, scanning the area as if he expected a flesh-eating Amazon Prime demon to jump out from behind a parked car or somewhere. The sight of him brandishing his enormous sword at anyone who so much as blinked at him should have been enough to send passersby running for cover, but no one seemed to even notice the oaf—something that should have been impossible.

"Luke," I said, turning my attention back to him as I leaned across the table and whispered, "You mentioned something about the benefits of your magic with regard to Magnus. So, what did you do to him exactly?"

"You don't have to whisper," he answered with a self-impressed grin. "I took care of anyone overhearing our conversation."

I leaned back and took a deep breath. "I'm not sure whether to be impressed or just scared."

"I would prefer that you be impressed," he chuckled. "But, to answer your question about what I did to Magnus—absolutely nothing."

I looked at him, my eyebrows reaching for the ceiling. "Um, last time I checked, if anyone saw a seven-foot giant with a huge blade, they'd not only notice him, but they'd do something about it—like calling the cops."

"Right."

I frowned at him. "So?"

"So, I used magic to ensure that anyone who saw him wouldn't think there's anything strange about him. They'll just see an ordinary man standing in front of a restaurant, like he's waiting for someone."

"Really?" I whispered, glancing back at Magnus, who now appeared to be sizing up a nearby tree suspiciously. I looked back at Luke. "As far as guardians go... are some of them... you know, better at their job than others?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... is it like medical school where some doctors graduate at the top of their class and others... not so much?" Looking back at Magnus, he was now brandishing his weapon at the tree. "Because I'm wondering if mine might have gone the online route to get his guardian certification."

Luke chuckled. “Magnus would not have been assigned to you unless he was exceedingly good at what he does.”

“Well, it appears he missed his calling as a lumberjack, because that tree seems to really be pissing him off.”

Luke followed my gaze to where Magnus was now yelling at the tree, demanding that it reveal its true self. Luke looked back at me and shrugged. “Sometimes danger can unfold in different and unexpected ways.”

“As a birch tree?!” He laughed again, but didn’t elaborate, so I continued. “You said Magnus was assigned to me.”

“He was.”

“Who, exactly, assigned him?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

I breathed out a sigh just as the server appeared with our orders—a salad for me and a turkey club sandwich for Luke. Once the server had dropped off our food, I started in again. “Okay, can you tell me more about whatever magic you used to do whatever you did to Magnus so people walk right past him without realizing they’re in the presence of a highly annoying warrior?” Just as I finished asking the question, I watched a well-dressed woman walk past Magnus without giving him so much as a second glance.

“Magic has a way of bending people’s perceptions,” Luke answered, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

“Remember—I’m a novice here! I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He smiled and swallowed his mouthful, before answering. “As I said before, people might see Magnus, but they won’t think anything odd about him.”

“So you... what? Altered their perception?”

“Yes,” Luke replied, taking a bite of his sandwich with a nonchalant shrug. “That’s a good way of putting it.”

“Wow, I had no idea magic could do that.”

“Magic is a powerful thing, Kate,” Luke said softly. “And you have it within you too. You just need to learn how to tap into it.”

“Me? Magic?” I scoffed, trying to picture myself wielding some sort of mystical power. But the only thing I could envision was an image of myself dressed like a wizard, which really wasn’t reassuring. “I can barely keep a houseplant alive.”

“You have the potential to achieve great things,” he informed me, his eyes searching mine earnestly. “You just need the right guidance.”

“And that’s where you come in?”

“Yes, as your guide, I’m here to help you navigate your powers in this new world.”

My gaze returned to Magnus, who was still diligently protecting me from imaginary threats. When I turned back to Luke’s hopeful expression, I almost wished I could follow his advice and take my oath. Especially since he seemed to think it was so important that I do so. But... I couldn’t.

“The hardest part about all of this is not knowing what I’d be walking into if I did take you up, er the moon, er Artemis... if I did take *whoever* up on this offer.”

Luke hesitated for a moment, seemingly choosing his words carefully. “I understand. I can’t tell you much, as you know, but what I can tell you is that you’d be one of the good guys, working for something that benefits any and every one and ultimately, improving the whole world.” His gaze held mine, serious and unwavering.

“But there’s danger involved?” My gaze, once again, drifted over to Magnus who, apparently deciding the tree wasn’t some villain in disguise, now stood in front of us, facing everyone who walked past him. His back was to us, giving me a nice view of his firmly sculpted butt. His legs were shoulder-wide apart as he held his blade menacingly, ready to strike at a moment’s notice. “Otherwise, that guy wouldn’t need to protect me.”

Luke nodded, his eyes following mine to the warrior standing on the opposite side of the glass. “When you’re dealing with something as important as what we’re dealing with, yes, there will always be those whose purpose is solely to thwart us.”

“And by thwart, do you mean kill?”

Luke laughed. “Well, that’s where Magnus comes in... And, in case you haven’t already noticed, he’s not going to let anything dangerous get near you.”

“Right,” I said, rolling my eyes. “And he’s driving me nuts.”

Luke didn’t reply, but grinned as the two of us watched Magnus give a nearby squirrel a warning glare before turning back to his vigilant stance.

I sighed. “So, I’m figuring you didn’t ask me to lunch just to be neighborly.” I looked pointedly at him, and he guiltily dropped his gaze to

his plate. “I imagine you probably wanted to try to convince me with another lecture regarding all the reasons I should accept my post?”

“That makes me sound like a smarmy used car salesman.”

“I think you’re like, maybe a step-up from that.”

“Ouch,” he laughed and I laughed too before we both got quiet again.

“Kate, it’s important that you really consider your options,” he said earnestly, his eyes meeting mine again. “Now that Artemis is gone, you’re very much needed here.”

“Here? Where? In this town?”

“This town, and this world.”

I drummed my fingers against the table top as the pleasant aroma of fresh coffee and baked goods wafted from the kitchen. “You know, it’s hard to believe all of this is happening to me. I mean, three days ago, I was living a quiet life in LA, and now I’m sitting here discussing magic and warrior guardians.”

“Change can be difficult, but it’s also an opportunity for growth,” Luke answered, his voice gentle and understanding.

“It’s just... well, it’s a lot for me to take in.”

“You still have a day and a night before you have to make your decision.”

I frowned at him. “Yeah, all the time in the world!”

He chuckled. “Just remember, you have people who care about you and will support you through your journey.”

I was quiet as I thought about it and my thoughts about it led to other thoughts and many more questions—most of which probably could never be answered. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t try. “Luke, did Artemis die of natural causes?”

He nodded solemnly. “She did. She was an old woman, and her life was a bit more *demanding* than that of the average senior citizen.”

“Jesus, you can say that again.”

He chuckled. “But she certainly lived it to the fullest.”

I sighed, feeling a pang of sadness for the aunt I’d never gotten the chance to know. “And are there other Daughters of the Moon or is it like I’d be the founder, the chairwoman and the only member?”

Luke smiled as he leaned back in his chair and studied me for a moment. There was a strange expression on his face, one I couldn’t read. “There are others, but they live in different parts of the world.”

“Really?” I asked, curious. “What parts of the world?”

“There’s a different Daughter in each hemisphere. Artemis represented the Western Hemisphere when she wore the mantle of Daughter of the Moon—which, hopefully, you will choose to wear next.”

“Who represents the other hemispheres?”

“I can’t divulge their names,” he answered, his voice growing more cautious. “But I can tell you that the Eastern Hemisphere is represented by a delegate from Egypt, the Northern Hemisphere by one from Japan, and the Southern by one from Ecuador.”

“And all of them are women?”

He chuckled. “Well, there aren’t any Sons of the Moon, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I nodded. “Maybe that was a dumb question.”

“The foremost Daughter of the Moon, who has held her mantle the longest, is from Kiribati.”

“Kiribati?” I repeated. “What the hell’s that?”

“An island nation in the Pacific—in Oceania,” he clarified with another chuckle as if he found me amusing. Or maybe he just thought I was a major idiot. Either way, I had to admit my geography wasn’t the greatest. “It’s the only country that exists in all four hemispheres.”

“Wow,” I murmured. “Then she must be important.”

“She is,” Luke confirmed, his voice holding a note of reverence.

I took a sip of my iced tea, the cold liquid doing little to slake the whirlwind of thoughts swirling inside my brain. The idea of belonging to such a powerful and global sisterhood was both thrilling and terrifying. All the same, something deep within me resonated with this newfound knowledge.

“Kate,” Luke began, his earnest gaze meeting mine. “You were right in thinking that I asked you to lunch today to discuss your future. I wanted to make sure you understood that, as your guide, I would be with you every step of the way, should you choose this path. It would be my responsibility to teach you how to master your own magic.”

“You keep saying I have magic, but honestly, I don’t. I’ve never even so much as had a prophetic dream.”

He smiled warmly at me, his eyes filled with a knowing certainty. “You do, Kate. You just haven’t come into it yet.”

I raised an eyebrow, my skepticism evident. “And let me guess,” I started, sarcasm dripping from my words, “I’d develop magical powers tomorrow night—like I’d suddenly be able to shoot lightning bolts from my fingers or something?”

Luke laughed. “Not quite. Your magic wouldn’t come to you all at once. As with all things in life, there are basic lessons that must be learned, and once those lessons are mastered, your true abilities will be bestowed.”

“Even with magic, nothing is ever easy, is it?”

He cocked his head to the side as he smiled at me. “I guess not.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

COUNTDOWN TO THE FULL MOON: DAY 3 OF 3

Knight of Pentacles (the 12th card)

True success is a long game, do not rush the process...

Day three of the countdown found me taking a stroll around the castle grounds, trying not to feel like a prisoner, but with Magnus (aka, my parole officer) clomping behind me, that’s exactly how I felt.

A crisp breeze carried the scent of freshly fallen, damp leaves and the faint aroma of wood smoke rose up from a distant chimney. The landscape was an artist’s palette, ablaze with the warm hues of red, orange, and gold, but that beauty was pretty much lost on me.

The pathway before me, a meandering cobblestone trail, was lined by maple, birch, hickory and aspen trees and led through the expansive grounds, bordered by gardens bursting with the final blossoms of the year. The air was alive with the gentle hum of bees and an occasional rustle of small creatures that grabbed Magnus’s attention every few feet, as if he were expecting a belligerent bunny to go postal on us, Monty Python style.

As we wandered deeper into the estate grounds, I came across a serene pond that mirrored the kaleidoscope of colors overhead. A couple of ducks paddled lazily on the water, creating ripples that distorted the reflection of the surrounding trees. Tarot Castle (as I’d started referring to it) stood in the distance like a sentinel, its stone walls absorbing the sunlight filtering through the canopy of trees.

To the side, an old, splintered, wooden bridge spanned a narrow part of the pond, inviting me to cross it and explore the wooded area beyond. The trees here were much more densely packed and only a few rays of sunlight could manage to penetrate the dense foliage, creating pockets of warmth that contrasted with the cool shadows.

The atmosphere was both tranquil and contemplative. Had this been another situation, I might have even lost myself in this final burst of color before the stillness of winter settled in. But this wasn't another situation, so the symphony of my surroundings was pretty much absorbed by the clashing cacophony of my thoughts.

That and the nagging feeling that I was being watched. Or maybe that feeling was just owing to Magnus who continued to trail a few paces behind me, his eyes searching one way, then the other as he scanned the nearby area for potential threats.

Having finally had enough, I stopped walking and turned to face him. "What exactly, are you hoping to find?"

"I am hoping *not* to find anything."

"Okay, then what are you afraid might jump out at us?"

"Any host of foul creatures."

"But nothing in particular?"

He frowned at me like I was wasting his time and distracting him from keeping an eye on the rodent population. "Nothing in particular, no."

"Great, just checking."

Then I turned back around as we started to ascend a particularly steep incline. Suddenly, my phone buzzed in my pocket with an incoming text message. A flurry of nerves immediately made my stomach twist and churn when I saw Janice's name appearing on the screen.

Kate, just got your sample chapters.

My heart clenched with anxiety as I prepared for and imagined the stern reprimand I was about to receive.

And? I replied, secretly dreading her response.

Obviously, it wasn't what we agreed to in the contract, she wrote and I braced myself for the impending storm of admonishment that was sure to follow.

I started to type: *Right. And that's no problem—I'll get back to the Highlander romance ASAP.*

However, before I could send my text, another message popped up: *But I absolutely loved the chapters!*

I blinked in disbelief. She loved them? Seriously? I couldn't help the bubble of hope swelling in my chest as I texted her back, my fingers flying over the screen. *Does that mean you want me to continue working on it?*

Absolutely, she replied almost instantly. *I don't want you to stop working on it!*

Holy shit, it was a miracle. *I'm really glad to hear that!*

The three dots appeared then to indicate that she was in the midst of typing another message.

The industry is all about contemporary fantasy romance at the moment, and I have a feeling this book might allow you to open yourself into a new genre which could attract lots more readers. And that, naturally, translates to lots more money. So, yeah, this is a good move and now is the ideal time to make it, considering how sales for historical romances are at an all-time low.

Wow, I responded, hardly daring to believe my eyes. I'd been so focused on what I'd been writing for a decade—the stuff I *thought* women wanted to read (never mind that I'd been bored stiff with it for years) that I'd never considered branching out into something different—much less, trying my hand at another genre. Yet, if what Janice said was true—and I had no reason to doubt her—maybe this could be the first book to initiate a new stage in my writing career.

Another text came through. *Can you still deliver the book on time?*

Yes, I assured her, my determination cementing into place, even though I knew I'd have to bust my ass to do it. *I'll work on nothing else to make sure I get it finished in time. No problem.*

Great. That's what I wanted to hear, Janice replied. *Oh, and one more thing—I think there needs to be another love interest, you know, besides Magnus.*

I blinked at the screen, my mind racing as I weighed her opinion. I had to agree—another love interest certainly couldn't hurt the story. Drama was the name of the game in fiction—so was sexual tension and what could be more tense than a love triangle? I glanced behind myself at Magnus, who was dutifully scanning the path this way and that and I couldn't help but smile. Despite his being a major pain in my ass, he'd done me a solid by sparking my muse. And as long as he didn't try to act out any more of my scenes

again, we'd be good. That, however, wasn't even a serious concern to me now, because as far as I could predict, I'd be on my way home tomorrow. Hopefully anyway.

I returned my thoughts back to the book—maybe Janice was right on the money. Maybe my story needed a little more spice, and a little more tension.

Sure, I can do that, I agreed, typing my answer quickly as I chewed my bottom lip, considering all the possibilities for a new love interest. My mind then immediately drifted to the image of Luke and I couldn't say I was very surprised. It seemed my thoughts lately were drifting to him pretty often actually.

What if the new love interest was a magician or a wizard or something like that? I typed.

Oooh, yeah! I like the wizard idea, she replied almost immediately. *But, of course, he needs to be hot. Not like Dumbledore.*

Absolutely, he'll definitely be hot. Not like Dumbledore at all, I replied, picturing Luke's gray, soulful eyes and the way his smile always seemed mysterious in the way it suggested something more profoundly hidden in its depths. Hmm, could he potentially act as my muse number two? I guessed I'd have to sit down at my laptop and find out.

How much longer are you planning to spend on the East Coast? Janice asked.

Not much longer as a matter of fact.

Did you already sell your aunt's place?

I breathed in deeply at that inquiry, because I clearly couldn't sell her place now. I supposed I could walk away from it though. And if what Artemis had written in her letter was true, then she was going to alter history so she never would have left the castle to me in the first place. That meant it wouldn't be my problem anymore.

I haven't sold it yet, I responded, *but I've had my fill of it out here in the sticks. I'm thinking of heading back home in the next day or so.*

A gust of wind whipped through the trees right then, making the leaves dance and flutter like a thousand crimson flames. I shivered as I pulled my jacket tighter around my neck and waited to read Janice's response.

Don't you dare! Whatever's going on there, whatever's in the water, it's clearly giving you major inspiration. I say you should stay there as long as you can and try to soak it all up, because seriously, Kate, you haven't written something this good in a long time.

Right. I tried not to be offended, but it was true.

Sorry, just calling it as I see it.

No, I get it. I sighed as I continued typing. *As far as Vermont goes,* I started to reply, wondering how to tell her I really didn't have any choice in the matter, because after I refused to become a Daughter of the Moon, I was pretty sure LA would be my next stop. But before I could answer her, another text came through.

And who knows, maybe you'll meet your own Magnus!

I laughed at that, thinking how little she actually knew. But then a more serious thought entered my mind and I considered whether she might be right about this place. Was it responsible for pumping me full of imaginative, new ideas? What if the unknown muse I'd discovered here left me as soon as I returned home? Furthermore, if Luke or whoever erased my memories of this place, how would I even be able to continue the story I'd started? I mean, it was based on real people—which was probably one of the reasons Janice liked it so much.

So could the universe be telling me that maybe... I should stay? At least, for a little while longer? But that would mean...

I wasn't seriously considering becoming a Daughter of the Moon just to get this book finished, was I? I stood there for a moment, thinking about the two options open to me (to leave or not to leave) and how each one might affect my future career.

Let's say I accepted the official post of becoming a Daughter of the Moon—was it like a full-time gig? Would I even be able to find enough time to write my book? Or would I be battling otherworldly shit left and right? Or was it more a sit and wait for something to happen sort of position? Maybe I'd just wind up opening my own business telling fortunes and find myself reading tarot cards all day.

"Hey, Magnus," I called out, interrupting his vigilant watch as I turned around to face him. "Is this Daughter of the Moon thing a full-time job or what?"

He looked at me without any trace of amusement. "It is not a *job*. It is a calling."

"Right—but like... is it the kind of calling that requires all my time? Will I be able to do other stuff also? Or do I have to be a Daughter of the Moon twenty-four/seven?"

"I have no interest in your imbecilic questions."

“Ugh! God, you are like having my own, personal rain cloud wherever I go,” I grumbled. Facing forward again, I decided I might as well end my conversation with Janice since I’d sort of left her hanging.

“I am not a rain cloud. I am a warrior.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered, waving him away with a dismissive hand as I texted Janice back.

Okay, I think I can manage to stay here a while longer—at least long enough to finish the book.

Perfect, Janice replied. Can’t wait to see what you come up with! Send me the chapters as soon as you finish them—I’m waiting with bated breath!

You can expect my next batch very soon, I responded quickly. But all the while, I wondered if I’d be able to deliver as promised.

I clicked off my messages and decided to call Luke, because trying to get anything out of Magnus was next to impossible. Luke answered my call on the first ring.

“Kate! What can I do for you?”

“I just had a couple of questions I needed to ask you.”

He paused and I could hear the sounds of people talking in the background. No doubt, the bookstore was busy as usual. I imagined the café portion of it was less busy after Magnus had eaten all of Luke’s goodies.

“Shoot,” Luke said.

“Okay, if I were to take you up on this offer of becoming a Daughter of the Moon—”

“It’s not *my* offer, Kate. It’s something you were born to do.”

“You get what I’m trying to say.”

“Right. Keep going. I’m sorry for interrupting.”

“No problem.” I took a deep breath. “If I were to become a Daughter of the Moon, would that require all my time or would I still be able to write my books? I mean, I need to support myself at the same time, you know?”

“Well, no, actually, you don’t.”

“I wouldn’t need to support myself?”

“No, because anything you need monetarily would already be taken care of for you—that is, if you decide to accept the position, I mean.”

“It would?”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to get into that right now,” he continued in a more hurried tone. “Suffice to say, the funds for your remuneration have already been allocated to you, but...” Then he paused to greet someone

before telling someone else to *have a nice day*. “But if you still wanted to write your books, then the answer is yes, you could definitely still do that. This isn’t like a nine-to-five kind of occupation.”

“Okay, great.” I cleared my throat, pleased to hear his explanation even as meager as it was. Again though, I felt torn; half of me was still annoyed that I was even considering taking on the role. But my writing career was all I had. And if I lost that, I didn’t know what I’d do or what my purpose might be. “And my other question—”

“Wait just one sec, Kate,” Luke interrupted me before I heard the sound of a cash register opening. Then I caught the noise of it ringing, which indicated someone had just bought something. Next I heard a woman’s voice asking Luke where she could find the mystery section. “Sorry,” Luke told me when he got back on the line again. “It’s kind of a busy day.”

“No problem. I’m really sorry to interrupt you at work.”

“You aren’t interrupting me and, besides, what we’re talking about is much more important than anything in this bookstore anyway. So... go ahead. What’s your next question?”

“Oh, right,” I said, finding myself smiling even though I wasn’t sure why. God, was I really developing a freaking crush on this guy? Seriously? After so many years of thinking that part of me had died, did it really have to come back now and make me get all googly-eyed over him? Damn! I needed to get out more often.

“Kate?”

“Sorry,” I said, reminding myself to pay stricter attention to our conversation and less attention to my errant thoughts. “So... I know you can’t tell me much more about this Daughter of the Moon stuff but can you at least tell me what sort of danger I could be facing?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I mean... no, not really.”

I sighed with defeat. “I’m not asking you to identify what the danger is—not like saying I have to contend with demons or vampires or anything like that—I meant more like determining the threat level I could be facing?”

“The threat level?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Imagine if it were fire season, would I be dealing with a warning of like, moderate, high, or extremely high?”

Luke chuckled at my analogy. “Fire season?”

“It’s the best way I can explain it.”

He chuckled again. “I would say, the threat level would be low to moderate but emphasis on low.”

I frowned, because that didn’t make a lot of sense to me. “Then why do I need Magnus for protection?”

“Because, if you take up the role, you’re very important.”

“Um...”

“Your safety can’t be taken for granted—it’s of the utmost importance to make sure you’re protected at all times and that’s why Magnus was assigned to you. But as to the current threat level—well, there really isn’t one. Any threats have pretty much been dealt with already. There might be a few little fires here and there that need to be put out, but yeah—just a low threat.”

“Okay, so can you describe what I’d be doing all day then?”

“Learning,” he answered immediately. “Arming yourself with knowledge in case the threat ever becomes anything more than low to moderate.”

“So... is it like I’d be going back to school?”

“Have a great day and I hope you enjoy it—I think it will become one of your favorite reads,” Luke said, clearly addressing someone else. “Sorry,” he told me when he came back on the line again. “Yeah, it’s sort of like going back to school but you’d be learning stuff you could never learn in any university or college.”

“Okay, well, thanks for your time.”

He paused. “Was that it?”

“That was it, for now anyway.”

He paused again. “So, will I see you tonight?”

I breathed in deeply, feeling suddenly nervous and unsettled. I mean—my mind had been made up this morning, but now? Not so much. And time was crucial to me at this point. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Kate, have you really thought about it and weighed all the pros and cons?”

“As much as I’m able to.” I had to admit to myself that Janice’s texts had really opened my eyes—making this decision a hell of a lot more difficult for me.

“Then you’ve reached your decision?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t have to know that wasn’t exactly true. “Oh, one other thing... if I did decide not to choose this... path, would I forget everything I’ve already learned here or not? You seemed kind of wishy-washy on that point when we discussed it yesterday.”

He breathed in deeply. "From what I understand, yes, you wouldn't be able to leave here with your memories intact."

"That's what I thought. Hmm, that doesn't sound good."

"Sorry—but that's just the way it goes."

"Okay, well, thanks for answering my questions. I'll see you tonight." I paused. "Um, what time again?"

"Well, the full moon is supposed to occur at 12:49 am... so, why don't I swing by your place at midnight?"

"Okay, that works for me."

"See you then, Kate and well, please... just be one-hundred-percent sure when you make your decision."

"Right," I answered and we said our goodbyes before hanging up.

###

The grandfather clock in the corner of the hall chimed twice, marking the passage of another thirty minutes. I sighed as I glanced at the digital clock on my phone for the millionth time so far this evening. It was 11 pm, and I still couldn't shake the uncomfortable sensation churning in my stomach.

Just a little over an hour remained until I'd have to make a decision that would either change my life forever or return me to my old life that was safe and familiar but also predictable, lonely and, let's face it, boring. I'd been vacillating back and forth about whether I should stay or leave ever since my conversation with Luke earlier in the day, but no matter how many times I weighed the pros and cons, I couldn't make a final decision. The main thing was, I couldn't even decide if my old life was really a life at all. My marriage was over, my career had stalled, and I was just about to turn forty-five with nothing but new crow's-feet to show for it. And the thought that everything I'd learned here, all the people I'd met, and the things I'd discovered, would be summarily snatched away from me—well, that didn't appeal to me very much either.

"Focus, Kate," I muttered to myself, rubbing my weary temples. I needed to get this book done—no matter what my decision turned out to be. Despite Luke's comment that money would be available to support me, I still had to have something of my own. My writing had always been that. It was the niche that defined me—what made me the person I was. There was no way I could just abandon that part of me or give it up, no matter what decision I made.

My eyes drifted back to the screen on my laptop, where I'd just introduced the new love-interest Janice had requested—Lucaster, the ancient wizard who still managed to appear like a forty-year-old hunk. Lucaster had the hots for Caterina, my demon-slaying heroine, and who could blame him? She was witty, brave, funny, independent and gorgeous. Everything I'd always envisioned myself to be.

And now you can be just as awesome as your character! When that thought suddenly entered my head, I wasn't even sure it was mine, although it sounded like my own voice. *All you have to do is make the decision to claim your birthright and become what you were meant to be.*

"It's not that easy," I argued with myself.

Isn't it? For once in your life, stop reacting to your fear of the unknown and be brave. What would Caterina do? Would she humbly crawl back to her old, useless life with her tail between her legs?

"Caterina is a character in a book and going back to her old life would turn out to be a really boring story," I replied.

Just like you going back to your old life is a really boring story. Only it's infinitely worse because you're living it.

After continuing to debate with myself for too long, I started reading the scene I'd just written, wanting to lose myself in the flow of my story.

Lucaster leaned in closer to me, his eyes locking on mine. "You have the ability to be so much more than just a demon slayer," he told me earnestly. "There's magic in your blood."

I hesitated, my heart pounding in my chest as I met his intense gaze. "But I'm happy in the knowledge that I'm keeping the world safe and freeing it from demons," I replied, my voice wavering slightly. "Why would I want to change that?"

"Because you were born for much greater things," Lucaster insisted, his voice barely a whisper now as he moved even closer, and our lips were mere inches apart. "Embrace your destiny, Caterina."

As Lucaster pressed his lips on Caterina's, I could feel my cheeks flushing. My brain, meanwhile, felt like a swirling mess of images and thoughts of the impending evening and the decision I'd have to soon make. Shaking my head, I pushed away from the desk and stood up, thinking that maybe I needed a glass of water to clear my head.

But just as I stood up, a letter suddenly drifted down from the ceiling before landing on the floor in front of me. I glanced up, like I always did

whenever this happened, but, of course, there was no magical portal or a chute connected to a cosmic post office. There was just the stupid ceiling above me. Glancing back down at the letter, I hesitated for a moment before picking it up.

“Artemis, I swear, if this is you again writing to me from God only knows where...” I grumbled while unfurling the parchment. Sure enough, her elegant handwriting was gracefully adorning the page.

Catherine, it began. You must know by now that Luke’s magic enables me to reach out to you from beyond the grave.

“Right, I remember,” I grumbled, pacing the room. “But how is that even possible?”

As if answering my question, the letter started writing itself in real time again. *There are many things you’ll learn in due time, if you choose to walk this path.*

I’m reaching out because I know you’re at a crossroads, unsure of which way to turn, the letter continued. One direction offers safety, familiarity, and the comfort of routine. The other leads into the unknown, and yes, that can be very frightening and intimidating.

“That’s not even the half of it.”

I know you’re struggling with this decision. But think about this way: your life could be so much more than it is right now. You have the opportunity to make a real difference in the world, and if that doesn’t sway you, maybe you’d like to know that the cards foretold that you’d even find new love along the way.

I raised an eyebrow. Love? Was she talking about Luke? I mean, I couldn’t think of anyone else since Magnus was clearly off the table since he was... well, *him*. Could she really mean Luke then? The thought made me both excited and nervous.

Choosing the path of a Daughter of the Moon, Artemis’s words swirled across the letter, will grant you a life well-lived. You’ll make a difference, doing something truly significant and full of meaning.

And the threat level is only low to moderate, I reminded myself. Then I let out a shaky breath, an odd mix of determination and trepidation flowing through me.

Trust in yourself, Catherine, the letter continued, as if responding to my thoughts.

“Come on, Artemis, if you’re going to keep writing me these letters, at least get my freaking name right.”

Catherine is the name you were born with and it is a very respectable one, which you should embrace and wear with pride.

“Right, but I don’t go by Catherine, I go by Kate.”

*The point is, **Catherine**, the letter repeated, you have the opportunity to start not only a new chapter in your life, but a new chapter in an entirely new book! A book brimming with possibilities, adventure, and magic.*

“Clever,” I grunted.

Remember, this is where your adventure begins!

With a flourish, the letter finished writing itself, and I stared at it for a long moment before sighing deeply. Maybe Artemis was right. Maybe I needed to take a leap of faith and embrace this strange new world that had inexplicably opened up before me.

I hesitated, my fingers tracing the edge of the paper as I wondered whether I had it in me to walk away from everything I knew in order to accept something totally unknown? Was I willing to trust Artemis, Luke, and whatever other magical forces were at play?

As I contemplated the decision before me, a tarot card slipped out from between the folds of the letter and fluttered to the ground. Not surprisingly, it was a card of The Fool.

I glanced back at the letter and saw more writing appearing in real time. *Just as I told you when you first arrived here, Catherine, this card represents you, at the start of your journey. The first card of the Major Arcana, it signifies new beginnings, spontaneity, and trusting in the unknown. Now you are at the end of your Fool’s journey. Tonight, you must decide whether to take the plunge off the cliff or to return to what you already know.*

And remember, The Fool is not just about taking risks; it’s also about embracing the awakening knowledge within you. Know you are on the right path even if you don’t know where it leads. Trust yourself. Rely on your intuition and believe in those who are close to you.

I took another deep breath, feeling the weight of the decision settling within me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

COUNTDOWN TO THE FULL MOON: MIDNIGHT ON DAY 3

6 of Cups

A loving exchange of support and care feels like home...

The moon was almost full as it cast a silvery glow on the castle grounds.

I stood by the window, twisting my fingers, trying to calm my frayed nerves. My heart, meanwhile, was pounding because I hadn't reached a decision yet and with every tick of the clock, my anxiety continued to swell. The final hour was fast approaching, and the weight of that knowledge threatened to crush me.

A knock on the front door startled me out of my thoughts, and I quickly composed myself as I walked over to it, feeling like my heart was now in my throat. I opened the door and saw Luke standing there. His normally confident demeanor was marred by a hint of nervousness in his eyes—as if he was afraid I was going to make the wrong choice.

Well, join the club.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his tone of voice betraying his concern.

"Ready?" I laughed without humor. "No, I'm not ready at all," I admitted, unable to hide my own uncertainty.

"Um..." he started, giving me a look that told me that wasn't the answer he'd wanted to hear.

"Please don't start," I said, shaking my head as I turned away from him and walked back into the house. I heard him close the door behind him before he followed me into the living room.

"Well, we need to do the ritual in the temple at the top of the hill, in the back garden," he started.

"Right. I know where the temple is," I said, my voice wavering despite my best efforts to keep it steady. "That's where I first told the moon I *didn't* want to be its daughter when I thought Magnus was trying to kill me."

At the mention of his name, the large warrior stepped out from the shadows of the hallway, scanning me with narrowed eyes as if he weren't sure what was going on or why Luke was even here.

"The Daughter of the Moon takes her final vow this evening?" he asked, his expression curious but guarded. Then he looked at Luke who nodded back at him. I wasn't sure what would happen if Magnus knew I wasn't actually going to take my vow, but instead, was planning on giving all of it up. Would he try to stop me? I didn't want to find out.

“Right,” I replied.

Just then, Rocco sauntered in, his goat hooves clacking against the floor as he casually remarked, “Hey, sweetheart, after all this hocus pocus, can you order me up some grub—I’m thinkin’ it should be a DoorDash kinda night, capiche? Maybe pizza? But hold the veggies—I’m a meat lover kinda guy.”

Luke looked at me with an apologetic expression, like he understood what I was going through and that the last thing I wanted to think about was pizza.

“Do you want to head up to the temple with me now?” he asked gently.

I nodded, eager to get this over with. “Yeah.” I exhaled a long sigh, trying to ignore the way my stomach was twisting into knots. Why couldn’t I make up my mind? One second, I was convinced that the answer was giving all of this up and returning home as quickly as I could. But the next second? Yeah, not so much.

“Lead the way,” I said to Luke, forcing a smile because I didn’t want him to see how truly terrified I was.

As we turned to leave, Magnus began following us, but Luke held up his hand, stopping Magnus in his tracks. “She’ll be protected by the moon tonight,” he assured the warrior.

Magnus looked like he was going to argue but then he simply nodded and took a step back. It was like watching a lion tamer telling the lion to sit this one out. Pretty impressive, if I did say so myself.

“What kind of voodoo mind trick was that?” I asked with a nervous laugh as we walked away. “Magnus never listens to anyone.”

Luke looked at me and smiled. “Guess you can’t say that anymore.”

He then led the way through the living room to the French doors that opened to the back garden as if he’d done it a million times before. For all I knew, maybe he had—maybe he was a frequent visitor when Artemis used to live here. As we walked into the cool night air, the scent of dewy grass and fragrant flowers filled my nostrils and the moon revealed the overgrown beauty of the garden, but all of that was presently lost to me. My heart continued to pound, and I couldn’t stop myself from stealing glimpses at Luke, wondering what in the world he was thinking.

“Relax, Kate,” he said gently, seeming to sense my unease. “Whatever choice you make, it’s yours and yours alone.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, grateful for his support.

As we walked up the embankment of trees, the moon seemed to grow larger and brighter, as if the celestial body were watching me, eager to hear my final decision.

“Are you all right?” Luke asked quietly, his clear concern furrowing his brow as he glanced back at me once we reached the crest of the hill.

“I’m really nervous,” I admitted, trying to steady my breathing. “This is... a lot to handle.”

“Understandable,” he replied, offering me a small, reassuring smile.

As we approached the temple, I glanced down at my Apple watch, noting that we had twenty minutes left until the moon was at its fullest.

“Okay, so what exactly am I supposed to do?” I asked, trying to focus on the task at hand.

“Stand in the center of the temple,” Luke instructed, gesturing to the spot where the moonlight would soon envelop me. “When the moon becomes its fullest, you simply state your intention clearly and without faltering.”

“Um, how will I know when the moon is at its fullest? Or do I just like look at it and guess?”

“No,” Luke answered on a small laugh. “I’ll let you know when the time is right.”

“Gotcha.”

And that was when I remembered something. The last time I’d done this whole moon thing (granted it had been the wrong night), I’d basically ended up as naked as it was possible to be. To say I wasn’t looking forward to that part was an understatement...

“Um, Luke,” I started as I cleared my throat.

“Yeah?” he asked as he looked up at me.

“Um, so... the last time I did this, something kind of weird happened and all my clothes basically disappeared. Artemis had warned that I was supposed to be naked or something but I hadn’t realized she was actually serious until—“

“It’s okay, Kate,” he interrupted on a chuckle.

“Says the person who doesn’t have to be walking around in his birthday suit.”

He shook his head. “The moon just wanted to gift you with...well, that new body of yours.”

I frowned. “So, you’re saying—”

“You don’t have to be naked and the moon isn’t going to take your clothes this time.”

I sighed out my relief. “You’re sure? I mean, Artemis—”

“I’m sure,” he interrupted. “Artemis knew you had some... insecurity issues—”

“—how the hell would she know that?”

And he just shrugged like he could tell me, but wasn’t going to.

“Never mind,” I continued, shaking my head. “It seems Artemis knew way more about me than I ever did about her.”

Luke nodded.

###

As the minutes ticked by, I paced nervously inside the temple, my thoughts racing in circles like a carousel gone haywire. Was I ready to make this decision? Well, that was an easy one—no, I wasn’t ready by any means. But I also doubted I’d ever be ready so this point in time was as good as any.

“Kate, try to breathe.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath and attempting to steady myself as I turned to give him a smile. “Thanks,” I whispered, grateful for his presence and support. “No matter what happens, I’m glad you’re here with me and I’ll always appreciate everything you did for me—well, unless you have to wipe my mind and then I guess I won’t.”

He didn’t say anything but gave me a sad, little smile.

The moonlight then began to paint the temple’s stones in a silvery sheen, the rustling leaves of the surrounding trees sounding like baleful cries.

“And how can you reverse what’s already been done?” I asked him, trying to keep my voice steady. “I mean, in the event that I choose to return to my old life?”

His expression changed, and I caught hurt and disappointment flickering across his face before he composed himself. “Once you state your intention, I will perform a ritual that should reverse all the effects of the previous outcome,” he replied softly.

“Reverse all the effects of the previous outcome?”

He nodded. “It should undo the magic that bound you to this path.” Then he paused as he breathed in deeply and sighed just as long. “Is that your choice, then—to return to your old life?” His question hung heavy in the air between us, and I couldn’t quite meet his eyes as I responded.

“I mean... I’m honestly leaning that way,” I admitted, my heart strangely aching at the thought of disappointing him. “But I’m also still torn.” I hesitated, twisting the hem of my shirt between my fingers.

He didn’t say anything and neither did I for the span of a few seconds. Then he broke the silence. “Kate, I want to make sure you’re happy with your decision, whatever that may be.”

As I stood in the center of the temple, bathed in the ethereal glow of the moon, I thought about my old life—the comfort and familiarity of my usual routine, the absence of magic and mystery. It seemed so ordinary compared to the incredible adventure I’d experienced since coming here, but it was also safe.

“Sometimes, the hardest choices are the ones that lead us to our true path,” Luke murmured, as if sensing my inner turmoil. “Trust yourself, Kate. You’re much stronger than you think.”

Glancing at my watch again, I couldn’t believe how quickly the minutes were slipping away. “Ten more minutes,” I muttered under my breath, feeling like a bundle of nerves wrapped in a tight knot. My heart was pounding, and I couldn’t help feeling angry with myself for not yet knowing what my choice would be: to leave or to stay?

Kate. There was that same calm voice I’d heard earlier, now whispering in my mind, *you know the choice you want to make.*

Um, I really don’t, I replied.

When the moon is full, just speak your own truth—whatever decision feels right in your soul. Your higher self will know the answer and it will speak for you.

Is that what you are? I asked, trying to grasp the elusive presence. *My higher self?*

But there was no response, leaving me with nothing but my own thoughts and the turmoil of my emotions.

“Are you ready, Kate?” Luke asked, pulling my attention back to him. “The countdown is on,” he continued, glancing at his phone before looking back at me with concern. I straightened my spine, determined to face whatever was coming with some kind of courage.

As I stood tall in the center of the temple, the moon began to glow even more brightly as it approached its zenith. A beam of light, twenty times brighter than the one I’d experienced three nights ago, suddenly reached out towards me, casting an otherworldly radiance over everything.

“Remember, Kate, to trust yourself,” Luke reminded me gently, his eyes locked on mine, steadying me. “Listen to your heart for the right answer. It will guide you.”

“I will,” I promised, although uncertainty continued to gnaw at me. I closed my eyes briefly, seeking some semblance of inner peace amidst the chaos of my emotions.

Luke is right. Speak from your heart, the mysterious voice echoed faintly in my mind once more. *Your higher self knows the right path to take.*

With each passing moment, the anticipation built, like a crescendo reaching its climax. The temple suddenly seemed to be humming with energy, as if the moonlight were somehow activating it. I could feel that energy coursing through me, connecting me to something much larger than myself. Even the air around me suddenly seemed more alive, charged with a power I’d never experienced before. I breathed in deeply, willing my heart to calm down at the same time that I felt a sense of warmth begin to spread throughout my body, chasing away the chill of the night.

“Kate, it’s almost time,” Luke whispered.

I nodded, my hands trembling as I tried to steady myself. I opened my eyes and focused on my breathing. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. As the seconds ticked by, I could feel something stirring within me, like a long-dormant power awakening from its slumber. It was as though I’d suddenly tapped into a wellspring of love and warmth, a force so much greater than anything I’d ever experienced before. All at once, I knew, without a doubt, that the source of this warmth was the spotlight of the moon. In fact, I now felt connected to the moon, as if its own life force were being drummed into me.

“Now, Kate!” Luke called out urgently.

With my heart pounding in my ears, I closed my eyes, summoning my inner higher self for guidance. As soon as the thought crossed my mind, it was as though a veil were suddenly lifted, granting me a clarity and understanding I’d never before experienced.

My heart stopped pounding and I could suddenly breathe more easily. It was like all the anxiety and apprehension suddenly oozed out of me, replaced with a warm calm. I was no longer afraid. Opening my mouth, I called out to the moon, “I accept my birthright and I choose to follow my destiny and become a Daughter to you...”

It was strange but I couldn't say I was surprised to hear the words leaving my lips. It was as if I'd somehow been aware that I was going to make this choice all along, but I'd refused to admit as much to myself—which, of course, made zero sense. Regardless, my words seemed to hang in the air for an eternity, like the universe itself was holding its breath, waiting to see what would happen next. And then, as if in response to my declaration, a surge of power washed over me, filling me with a sense of purpose and belonging that almost suffocated me.

"Kate," Luke breathed, his eyes wide with wonder as he shook his head and suddenly seemed as if he were at a loss for words.

I opened my eyes, feeling strangely at peace despite the enormity of the decision I'd just made. "I guess I accepted the invitation," I replied softly, a slight frown tugging at the corners of my lips as my thoughts began bash headlong with one another.

What in the hell had I just done?

I glanced up then, noticing that the moon was shining like a silver disc in the sky, illuminating the temple as I stood there, bearing the burdensome weight of my decision.

Then the shock of what I'd just decided hit me with such force that my knees buckled beneath me. Luke rushed to my side, catching me before I could collapse onto the ground. His strong arms wrapped around me and I clung to him, desperately seeking some stability. All the while, I couldn't stop wondering if I'd just made the biggest mistake of my life.

"Kate, I'm so proud of you," Luke murmured softly into my ear, his breath warm on my skin. "I know it might not feel like it now, but you made the right choice."

"Then why doesn't it feel like the right choice?" I croaked out, my voice shaking with doubt.

"Because it wasn't an easy decision to make," he answered, pulling back slightly to look deeply into my eyes.

"The words just sort of came out of me—like they didn't belong to me and I wasn't thinking about them."

He nodded as if he weren't that surprised. "I think deep down inside your psyche, you knew the choice you wanted to make. And it took a huge amount of courage for you to finally make it."

"I'm still not convinced it was the choice I truly wanted."

“Trust me—you won’t regret it,” he said with a big smile. “What’s more—this is a milestone for you, Kate.”

“It is?”

“Yes! Your journey as The Fool is now complete,” Luke continued. “And now you’re going to find the most incredible world you could ever imagine opening up to you.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to have this conversation yet,” I answered honestly. In fact, I felt like I might throw up.

“This was just the first step, Kate,” Luke said as he continued smiling down at me. “The path of the Fool was only the beginning, the first one you were destined to walk.”

“Then I’m no longer the Fool?”

He shook his head. “No, simply by choosing this path, you’ve learned the Fool’s lesson.”

Before I could even process Luke’s words, a low, guttural growling sound suddenly began to rumble through the trees surrounding the temple. I immediately paused, turning my head to see if I could hear the sound again. Luke, meanwhile, did exactly the same thing.

“Did you hear that?” I whispered.

He nodded before he pulled away from me as another low, warning growl sounded from exactly the opposite direction of the first—clear across the other side of the temple. As we both turned in the direction of the sound, it began to grow louder.

“Luke, do you hear what I hear?” I whispered, scanning the shadows nervously. He’d stiffened, his eyes narrowing as he searched for the source of the strange noise.

“Keep your back to mine, Kate,” he murmured in response, grabbing my arm and pulling me towards him. Our bodies were pressed together, providing me with a very scant sense of security.

“What’s going on?” I asked, my voice trembling.

“I don’t know,” he replied, and his tone was deadly serious. “But something is definitely out there.”

No sooner did he finish his sentence, then a huge beast suddenly emerged from the shadowy depths of the treeline, the gnarled branches of the tree canopy seeming to intertwine above it like huge, skeletal fingers.

The creature was easily the size of a Great Dane, and its fur was as black as its ebony eyes, although it glowed almost blue in the moonlight. At the

center of its irises was a peculiar, circular red dot—as if its pupils were on fire with a glowing, red light. When it turned its gigantic head to face us, its eyes smoldered with an unnatural fire. It continued moving forward, crouching low on its legs as its well-defined muscles rippled beneath its sleek coat. Each sinewy movement was filled with a sort of predatory grace. When it reached the stone floor of the temple, I could hear its claws, razor-sharp and the color of obsidian, scraping against the hard surface.

That was when its lips slid back from its snout to reveal very large, sharp and numerous teeth, which it bared in a snarl. The low, guttural growl persisted and seemed to resonate from deep within the animal. It took me several seconds to comprehend what was happening and that what I was seeing was actually real instead of some hallucination brought on from my over-stressed mind.

When more rustling sounds emerged from the trees and bushes, I turned to one side and then the other, only to discover that more of the horrible beasts were slinking out from the trees, their glowing red eyes locked onto the two of us.

“What the hell are those?” I whispered, my heart pounding like a jackhammer in my chest.

“Hellhounds,” Luke responded grimly. His eyes remained fastened on the snarling beasts that were continuing to inch closer and closer to us.

“Hellhounds?” I repeated, shaking my head as the weight of the word hit me. Hellhounds weren’t real. They were something you read about in books or saw on TV and movies. And yet... well, that wasn’t true because here they were—growling at the two of us. All at once, I felt like I was trapped inside a very bad dream or something, like I was somehow outside of myself and watching all of this like I was observing a play. Maybe that was just shock.

“I never expected to see Blackthorn’s dogs again,” Luke admitted, his voice sounding tense. “This shouldn’t be happening.”

“Black who?”

“Ezra Blackthorn,” he clarified, his eyes still locked on the advancing hounds. “He’s a warlock and our enemy.”

That was when it really hit me—just what had I freaking gotten myself into? Something I never should have. Warlocks and hellhounds? “Son of a...”

“Kate, a newly awakened power lies within you,” Luke interrupted, his voice laced with urgency.

“A newly awakened... what? What is that supposed to mean?” He might as well have been speaking Swahili to me.

“You need to locate that newly awakened power inside you ASAP.”

I shot him an incredulous look over one shoulder. “What the hell does that mean?” The demon dogs or hellhounds or whatever the hell he called them were rapidly closing in on us, and their daunting growls and snarls pierced the air like rolling thunder. “What makes you so sure I have any power?”

“Because you’ve willingly accepted your calling to become a full Daughter of the Moon,” Luke answered. “And that means you’ve been gifted with some form of magic. You must summon that magic now, Kate.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to do that?!”

“You have to feel for it,” Luke replied, his voice just as calm as it had been which didn’t make a lick of sense.

But before I could ask him another question or further doubt myself and this supposed magic I now possessed, the hellhounds attacked us.

Time seemed to suddenly slow down as I watched Luke raising his hands to the monster closest to us. Almost immediately, a glowing ball of blue light appeared in his palm and slid between his fingers. After a split second, he released it. The ball of light hit the hellhound squarely in the chest, incinerating the animal in a burst of flames, leaving the creature’s body a pile of smoldering embers that then simply disappeared from view, as if it were never there to begin with.

A loud cacophony then erupted from the woods, and the rest of the beasts began howling as the sound of something extremely large began tromping through the trees and bushes. Whatever the thing was, the noise it was making instantly superseded the snarling growls of the hellhounds. A second later, out jumped Magnus, wielding his well-honed blade like some kind of barbarian god clad in blue denim. He was both awe-inspiring as well as somewhat ridiculous.

The scent of burning fur filled my nostrils as Magnus cleaved two of the vicious hellhounds in half with a single, powerful swing of his sword. And just like when Luke had launched his fireball, both the hellhounds erupted into fire and embers before vanishing altogether. I sighed as I felt a surge of relief, but unfortunately, it was short-lived.

One of the hounds had managed to slip past the two of them, and was now standing between me and any hope I might have had for rescue. Its glowing red eyes bored into mine, and I could see every muscle in its demonic body growing tense, like a huge, feral cat preparing to pounce.

“Kate, you have the power now,” Luke shouted at me, his voice barely audible above the snarls and growls of the other hellhounds who were still advancing. Magnus swiftly took both of them out.

Luke’s confidence in me did little to quell my growing terror because I couldn’t stop myself from wondering if he could be wrong. I mean, although the moon had given me a happy warm and fuzzy feeling, I didn’t notice any new sort of latent power electrifying my skin or anything else inside me for that matter. Not that I knew what to expect with that sort of power, but I figured I’d at least feel something.

My heart raced and my mind reeled as I tried to capture the elusive power Luke insisted I now possessed. It was at that moment that the hellhound lunged at me, its vicious jaws opening wide. I didn’t have time to think or react, let alone, to summon up and activate the hidden magical ability that was supposed to lie inside me. Instead, I had to rely on pure instinct, so I threw up my hands in a feeble attempt to protect myself from the attack.

Then, to my utter surprise, the miracle of all miracles happened.

The hound completely froze in midair, just inches from my face—in fact, I was fairly sure his spittle was still dribbling down my cheek. As to the creature—well, it seemed to be caught inside a freeze-frame of a camera—like someone had just paused a video of a hellhound attacking.

Magnus strode toward me, his sword raised high before he brought it down on the motionless creature. The hound split in half, erupting into a ball of flames. Then a shower of embers rained down around us before the beast vanished completely, just as the others had.

“Is everyone all right?” Luke asked as he ran up to me, his sincere concern gleaming in his eyes. After he surveyed the scene and the resulting aftermath, his gaze returned to mine.

I couldn’t answer him. I was still so shocked and blown away that I didn’t even know what to think, much less, what to say. I couldn’t believe what had just happened—or rather, what I’d just managed to do without any conscious thought. No, it had been more like a physical reflex. The whole

event seemed to be some kind of twisted dream, but the lingering smell of smoke and sulfur told me it was all too real.

“Looks like the moon endowed you with time suspension!” Luke exclaimed, nodding approvingly as he gave me a wide grin—like everything we’d just experienced was simply part of a silly amusement park show or something. “That power will definitely come in handy!”

When I turned to face him, something inside me cracked and all the fear, panic and shock I’d previously endured suddenly turned into white-hot, raw anger.

Walking up to him, I pulled my arm back and then released my fist against his cheek as I yelled, “That was not a low to moderate threat!”

The End

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MIDLIFE MYSTERIES BOOK ONE,
A GHOSTLY GUARDIAN
CHAPTER ONE:
PHILIPPA



I never imagined I'd find myself sitting behind bars in a holding cell in Scotland Yard.

But then again, I never imagined that my stepson would accuse me of stealing a diamond necklace in the first place. When I'd awakened this morning, I certainly hadn't planned on spending my day like this.

As far as I could tell, Scotland Yard (also known as The Metropolitan Police Service) had several holding cells for the temporary detention of suspects, as well as for those awaiting trial.

I certainly wasn't awaiting a trial but would have been considered a suspect, I supposed. Either way, I wasn't at all pleased to find myself in this unlikely quandary.

As the constable escorted me through the dimly lit and poorly ventilated holding cells, I noticed with some concern that they were quite overcrowded.

The constable paused at one cell and with the help of his comrade, emptied it of all its occupants, shooing them into the already overcrowded cells on either side. Then he turned to face me with a quick nod.

“In you go, Mrs. Fairfax.” He gave me an apologetic smile then and, overall, seemed quite embarrassed about the whole situation. “I’m awfully sorry about your husband, ma’am. He was a good man.”

It wasn’t as though my husband had recently passed—he’d been gone now for a year, but the condolences were appreciated, all the same.

“Yes, he was,” I answered and realizing the constable hadn’t wanted to put me, a lady of polite, London society, in with the other poor retches (men and women alike), I thanked him for his kindness.

My cell was furnished with nothing more than a wooden bench and a straw mattress on the floor. I didn’t dare sit on either, not so much for fear of whatever creatures were sharing this domicile with me, but the place was quite filthy. It was also depressing, austere and inhospitable. The shorter my stay here, the better.

I leaned back against the cold stone wall and let out a deep sigh as I figured I should be grateful that the constable had seen to it that I was jailed on my own. With the sounds of whatever was happening in the holding cell beside me, it was a small mercy to find myself alone.

But as to this whole incident, it was absurd, really. Yes, I’d stolen the necklace, but only because it was mine to begin with. My no-good stepson had stolen it from me and I’d simply taken it back. Not only had I offered to purchase Andrew as many diamond necklaces as he liked, but I’d actually made good on my offer! Hancocks & Co. had hand delivered not two, but *three*, diamond necklaces to Andrew’s home, all of which were of far higher quality than the one in question. The only reason I cared about *my* diamond necklace was owing to its sentimental value.

“Mrs. Fairfax,” came the sound of another constable’s voice as he turned the corner and appeared in front of my cell. The sound of the cell keys jingling met me before he did. “The inspector will see you now.”

“Thank you,” I answered and gave the man a quick smile. He responded in kind, though his smile was a bit on the ill at ease side and he fumbled with the keys in the lock, dropping them once. I was quite certain it wasn’t everyday a lady of the ton was admitted to Scotland Yard as a thief. And if the newspapers caught a whiff of just what was going on, I was more than sure I’d be on the cover of every one of them come the morning. Not that I gave a snuff—the more you cared about your reputation, the more you lived for other people.

The constable escorted me out of my cell and down the long hallway. We passed holding cells on either side of us, each of them near overflowing with all manner of law breakers. As we passed, those incarcerated had plenty of colorful comments for the constable or, perhaps the comments were aimed at me, I wasn't quite certain. As an American in London, I still hadn't quite grasped the English accent and all its various forms.

After taking the stairs, we were greeted with yet another hallway and when we reached the office at the end of it, the constable paused before he rapped on the door exactly three times. "Inspector Stirling, I got Mrs. Fairfax here for ya."

"Escort her in," came the response, delivered in a heavy Scottish accent.

The constable opened the door for me and I took my cue, bursting past him in an array of skirts. As to the particular gown I was wearing, well, let us just say it was an absolute shame I'd been arrested in this ensemble as it was one I'd just received direct from Paris. The fabric, a lightweight silk, was both delicate and airy, with lace and ruffles embellishing each sleeve. The bodice was fitted, the neckline high and the sleeves long and slender. My waist was cinched in tightly with a corset (a most uncomfortable and irritating contraption, to be sure), and the bodice extended over my hips, creating a smooth, elongated line. The skirt was full and trimmed with lace at the hem along with gathers at the waist, creating a voluminous effect. The back of the skirt extended into a bustle, but one smaller than what was currently all the rage, owing to the fact that I found the things quite frustratingly awkward. As to the fabric, well it was quite lovely, the color a sapphire blue, something all the rage in Paris. I did imagine sapphire would soon catch on in London, owing to the fact that London was really a gray city and, thus, could use a dab of color.

My wide-brimmed hat was the exact color of my dress (as were my gloves) and decorated with feathers. And because I was careful to overdo it, my jewelry was minimal, just a brooch to add a touch of sparkle.

Before you suppose I'm quite a vain creature, I must inform you that it was my responsibility of sorts to notice such details where ladies' wear was concerned. Among the ton of London, I had (inadvertently) made a name for myself as a bit of a fashion icon—mostly because I'd spent the last year or so living in Paris, among the most fashionable of all ladies.

"Detective Inspector," I greeted the man who was standing before me.

As to the inspector, I knew his name was Grant Stirling, because my late husband had said as much. Patrick had told me that he and Inspector Stirling had been quite close—not just because Patrick was the inspector’s superintendent, but also because they were friends. I’d never met Inspector Stirling before, but from what I understood from Patrick, Grant Stirling was a true gentleman, a hero in his own right, and a Scot to boot. I couldn’t help but wonder what he would make of me, an American heiress accused of theft and the wife of his deceased boss—one who had left town as soon as her husband had died.

Well, now I was back and facing this... mess.

Inspector Stirling looked up from where he was standing behind his desk, rifling through a stack of papers as I entered his office. He immediately took stock of my gown with an expression of... well, let us just say it wasn’t admiration. But men are very rarely in the know when it comes to fashion.

“Mrs. Fairfax,” the inspector greeted me and then faced the constable, giving the man a single nod to send him on his way. I was quite embarrassed to admit (if only to myself) that I’d completely forgotten the constable was still standing there! But that was the inspector’s fault because he had a quite formidable presence and I did imagine most people would forget any others who happened to be in a room with him.

Grant Stirling most likely towered over most people with his imposing height (upwards of six feet, were I to guess), standing tall and straight, his shoulders squared. He was also exceptionally handsome with a sharp, angular face including chiseled features and a strong jawline, accentuated by a neatly trimmed beard and mustache, the hue of which was the same shade of black as his hair.

As was to be expected, he was dressed in the attire of a detective, exuding a sense of authority and professionalism. A long black coat lay folded over one of the leather chairs in the corner of the room, something that would have paired nicely with his white and crisp shirt, buttoned up to the collar, with a matching waistcoat and dark trousers. His black leather shoes were polished to a high shine, giving off a sharp reflection.

A pocket watch dangled from his waistcoat pocket, and a silver chain linked it to a fob, marking him as a man of some class. On his desk lay a black bowler hat and beside that, a black leather satchel.

Around his left hand, he wore a bandage. I couldn’t help but notice the way he held his hand protectively, as if trying to hide his injury.

“I knew your husband well.”

“Yes, I’ve heard,” I answered, trying to keep the tremble out of my voice, but there was something about the inspector that I found somewhat intimidating. Perhaps it was the thunderous sound to his voice or the storm that brewed in his eyes when he looked at me. A storm that was full of suspicion, I might add.

Though we’d only said less than ten words to one another, I was overcome with the feeling that the inspector disliked me. And I had an idea that his dislike had originated long before this moment.

“Though I’ve never met you,” he continued, eyeing me narrowly as if that fact was somehow my fault.

“A shame, I am certain.”

Inspector Stirling nodded and gestured for me to sit in one of the leather chairs opposite his large mahogany desk. I did as he instructed and found him leaning over his desk directly in front of me, his blue eyes now narrowed on my own.

“It’s not every day we get a lady of your *station*... here. Nevermind one who was married to the superintendent.”

“I should imagine you don’t.”

He studied me for a moment, as if trying to decide if we were playing some sort of game and if we were, which character he should assume. “As I understand, you’ve been brought in on charges of theft?”

I took a deep breath. “I haven’t stolen anything that didn’t already belong to me.”

“And, yet, your stepson seems to believe you have.”

At the mention of Andrew, Patrick’s son from a previous marriage, I felt my stomach drop. Andrew and I had never gotten on, but now things had reached an all-time low, to be sure. “The necklace in question was a gift from Patrick. He gave it to me on our wedding day, thus it was mine and still is.”

The inspector raised an eyebrow at that, but didn’t appear convinced—not in the least. “And how did the necklace come to be in the possession of your stepson, Andrew, then?”

“That’s just it,” I said, feeling a spark of anger as I reminded myself to stay in control of my emotions. If there was one thing I didn’t want to do, it was to lose my temper, because men had a stupid way of attributing a

woman's anger to her 'inability to think rationally'. And if I was one thing, it was rational. "Upon my return to London," I started.

"And where were you before your return?"

"Paris." He nodded as if none of this was new information. Perhaps he'd done his research where I was concerned.

"Hence why none of your husband's colleagues have ever met you."

I nodded once. "Correct."

"Go on."

"Upon my return to London a month or so ago, Andrew came to visit me, claiming the necklace was rightfully his."

"And why did he think that?"

"He said Patrick had left it to him in his will."

The inspector nodded. "And according to said will, Andrew was correct."

Keep control of your temper, Pippa, I reminded myself. "No, he wasn't correct."

Stirling's eyebrows reached for the exceptionally high ceilings in his office. "Am I correct in stating that according to Patrick's will, you and he both kept the belongings, money and otherwise, with which you both entered the marriage... separate?"

I nodded, wondering what that had to do with anything. "That's so."

"A strange legal arrangement to be sure," Stirling continued as he walked around his desk and crossed over to the numerous windows that overlooked the Thames River.

With his back to me, it was impossible not to notice the detective's firm and well-defined posterior, revealing the evidence of regular physical training and quite an active lifestyle. The muscles of his *derrière* were prominently shaped, sculpted by what I imagined was rigorous exercise and physical exertion. As he moved, the well-toned muscles flexed beneath the fabric of his tailored trousers, the contours of his backside hinting at the agility and dexterity required for pursuits that demanded swift action and quick reflexes.

I tried to force my eyes up—to the gray view of the Thames beyond the windows—the river just a shade or two darker than the sky itself, but my mischievous gaze seemed intent on returning to the rather pleasing shape of the detective.

His posture exhibited an upright stance, displaying confidence. The breadth of his shoulders was wide, as was the width of his biceps (which seemed to appear even broader owing to the bands he wore on either of his upper arms). While I would describe the detective as an exceedingly cynical man and none too friendly, his athletic and muscular backside certainly served as a visual testament to his dedication to physical fitness, suggesting that he possessed the strength, agility, and endurance necessary to navigate the challenges of his investigative work in the bustling streets of London.

He glanced back at me then and catching me in the act of taking in his person, I immediately cleared my throat and glanced down at my lap, feeling a blush creeping over my cheeks.

Good God, Pippa, will you stop staring at his posterior! I yelled at myself.

“Do you not suppose that’s a strange legal arrangement?” he repeated, looking at me with a pronounced scowl.

“Oh, well...” *Oh, Christ. What the bloody hell was he talking about?*

Please let it be known that in general, I tried to dissuade my active mind from thinking up such brazen words but sometimes when one is faced with a quite cross inspector, one’s mind can’t be regulated.

“What was the strange legal arrangement again?” I asked, smiling most apologetically. My heart was now racing and I felt lightheaded and flummoxed over the fact that my brain had suddenly gone as blank as a sheet of paper. It was as if I’d forgotten everything in that moment, including the reason why I was sitting here, staring into space.

Inspector Stirling was stone-faced as he responded, “your husband’s will.”

“Ah, yes! Right!” I said, nodding immediately as I gave him a large grin. “Patrick organized his will in such a way to ensure that should anything ever happen to him,” I took a deep breath at this point because I very much disliked thinking about what had happened to Patrick. “That none of my extensive wealth would pass to Andrew.” I swallowed hard. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you about Andrew’s penchant for gambling?”

The inspector shook his head. “Aye, you don’t have to tell me—I’m aware.”

“Anyway, in keeping our assets separate, Patrick forgot to add a line in his will for the necklace and that oversight has led to this... debacle.”

The inspector looked at me and nodded, while pulling on one end of his mustache. “A necklace which had belonged to his mother, as I understand it?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“So, the necklace was something that came from Patrick, hence it was something that should have been handed down to Andrew?”

I frowned. Yes, it was quite obvious that the inspector didn’t like me, though I felt that bias was completely unfair because this was the first time we’d ever been introduced to one another. And wasn’t there supposed to be truth to the statement: ‘innocent until proven guilty’?

“That’s not true or...” I paused as I considered it, cocking my head to the side as the inspector gave me quite the glum expression. “Perhaps it was true at one point, but it’s not true any longer.”

“I see.” Inspector Stirling then gave me a placating smile but it wasn’t genuine—it was a smile the cat gives the mouse before it’s ready to pounce. “And why is it no longer true?”

“Because, as I mentioned earlier, Patrick gave me the necklace and in doing so, it became mine.”

Inspector Stirling frowned. “And yet there’s no proof that Patrick gave it to you—thus, it appears we only have your word to go on, is that so, Mrs. Fairfax?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s so.” I blew out a frustrated breath—truly, it was quite a maddening situation to be accused of something for which you were wholly innocent.

“Furthermore, I must admit that I do find it strange that your stepson would accuse you of such a crime if the crime were not based in fact—not only that he’d accuse you, but that he’d go to such lengths to take the necklace from you,” the inspector continued as he huffed out a breath and turned from the window to return to his desk. Once he reached it, he stood behind it, one hand reaching out to clutch the top of the chair before him.

I found my eyes settling on his hand—it was the injured one. The bandage wrapped around the entire length of his index and middle fingers and wrapped around the center of his hand. The rest of his fingers grasped the leather of the chair quite emphatically. It was a large hand, to be sure, long fingered, with a dusting of dark, black hair peeking out from under the muslin of the bandage.

“What happened to your hand?” I asked, even though I hadn’t meant to be overly prying or personal—the words had just sort of sprouted from my tongue before I could stop them.

The inspector seemed surprised by the question and immediately stood up straight, pulling his injured hand behind his back. I could tell he was a man who didn’t like to show any vulnerability.

“It’s nothing,” he said gruffly. “Just a little accident.”

My curiosity got the better of me. “Is it broken?”

“Aye.” He hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath before continuing, “I got into a scuffle with a suspect.” His voice was low and gruff. “He didn’t go down easily, and required a good laying out.”

“Goodness,” I replied, eyebrows reaching for the ceiling. “You hit him and broke your fingers?”

He nodded and then shrugged. “It’s nothing that won’t heal in time.” He cleared his throat. “Now, Mrs. Fairfax, back to the subject of why your stepson would insist you stole something that belonged to him, though you insist it belonged to you.”

CHAPTER TWO: **PHILIPPA**

I sighed and inspected my gloved hand because on the subject as to why Andrew had made the claims against me that he had, I didn't have an answer for the inspector.

"I can only assume this is Andrew's attempt at trying to get back at me," I said, feeling a wave of frustration washing over me. This whole thing was a huge misunderstanding and it had thwarted my day in the most inconvenient way. "He's always resented me, ever since I married his father. But I never thought his resentment would go this far—especially after I've already provided him with three necklaces, all of which far outweighed the value of this one."

Inspector Stirling's eyebrows shot up at that and he stroked the end of one side of his mustache again, this time with his bandaged hand, as he appeared to be deep in thought for a second or more. "Did you?"

"I did."

"And can you prove as much?"

I nodded. "You have simply to inquire with Hancocks & Co."

The inspector nodded and then sighed as he shook his head and appeared even more perturbed than he had. "Mr. Fairfax failed to mention that."

I frowned and crossed my arms over my chest. "Of course, he did. He probably also failed to mention that not only did I purchase the home in which he currently resides, but I also provide him with £100 a month of my own inheritance I received when my father passed away. And I do so in honor of my late husband, not because I'm ordered to do so."

His eyebrows lifted in surprise once more. Clearly, Andrew hadn't painted the full picture for the inspector.

"Your purported generosity aside, Mrs. Fairfax—"

"It's not purported if it's a fact, Inspector."

"It's not a fact yet, as far as I'm concerned," he responded rather crankily. Then he continued, clearing his throat as the frown returned to mar his face. "Do you have any proof that the necklace was indeed given to you by your husband?"

I shook my head and sighed. This was the sticking point. "No, I'm afraid not. But you should ask yourself, Inspector, why would I steal from my own family, especially given the fact that I don't need to?"

His gaze was steady, his expression unreadable. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Fairfax, but it's simply your word against Mr. Fairfax's. And the only thing to call a spade a spade is your husband's will."

I gritted my teeth. "This is completely unfair." I started to stand up then as I faced him with a frown, figuring I most probably would now need to procure a lawyer. What a bother. "Then I suppose you'll let me know when my trial is to be set?"

"Aye, that is the way of things."

I nodded. "Well, until then, I shall return home and await your response."

Just as I was about to take a step towards the door, Inspector Stirling leaned forward and reached out to take my shoulder, pushing me back down into the chair I'd just vacated. It was a strange thing for him to do—invading my personal space in such a way—as if we were well known to one another. Left with no alternative, I sat again. But I was none too happy about it.

"Until I can verify your claim, I'm afraid I have no choice but to hold you here."

I felt a surge of panic overtake me then as I thought about returning to the odious cells below. He couldn't be serious! "Hold me? *Here*? You mean, I'm under arrest?"

He looked at me as if I were daft in the head. "That's exactly what you are."

"But... I can pay whatever bail is required for my release."

He shook his head. "Bail is at the discretion of the magistrate or judge handling the case and your case hasn't even progressed that far, Mrs. Fairfax."

"What does that mean?" I demanded, my heart now thumping away most uncomfortably in my throat.

"It means you will remain here until a judge decides what to do with you."

"Or until you can prove I'm innocent?"

He cocked his head to the side and nodded, though his expression said he didn't believe I *was* innocent.

I slumped back into the chair, suddenly feeling defeated and unsure of what to do next. This was not how I'd imagined my day going and I was starting to get more irritated by the second. I looked up at him then and frowned.

“I will have you know that I have an engagement later this evening, and a most important engagement at that. I don’t have time to be forced into one of your most unhygienic cells.”

The inspector arched a brow and appeared slightly amused for the first time since I’d entered his office. “An engagement?”

“A ball,” I replied, sitting up a little straighter. “Lord Abbott is hosting a gala this evening and he’s requested my presence—I am to be an honorary guest of sorts.”

And the amusement was suddenly gone from his expression just as quickly as it had arrived. “Why should I care about that?”

I rolled my eyes, figuring he wouldn’t understand. Not only was he a man, but he and I were cut from completely different bolts of fabric, as it were. “I’m something of a fashion icon to the ladies of the ton. As such, they’re expecting me to parade my newest gown at Lord Abbott’s ball—a gown imported from Paris, of course.”

“Of course,” he repeated with a facetious smile.

The gown had been created for me by my good friend and modiste, Augustine, who lived in Paris. And the only reason I’d agreed to parade this newest gown around the ton at Lord Abbott’s gala (I certainly wasn’t excited about acting the part of a living mannequin) was owing to the fact that I was doing a favor for my friend. Augustine, like me, was a single woman trying to make her way in society and I wanted to ensure that she succeeded. Seeing as how Lord Abbott was the owner of the Liberty department store and was interested in carrying Paris fashions, I’d agreed to sample all Augustine’s newest creations at his events.

But I doubted Inspector Stirling wanted to hear all of that, so I kept my mouth shut. Instead, I gave him an expression that showed him just how little I cared for his mockery. “Lord Abbott made a special comment about the reveal of this particular gown in his invitations, so it would be highly impolite of me not to attend.”

“And why should Lord Abbott have such an interest in you and your silly French gowns?”

I shrugged and pointedly decided to ignore the part about ‘silly, French gowns’. “He wishes to start carrying a line of French gowns in his Liberty department store.”

The detective had a serious look on his face, one that suggested he was about to tell me something I didn’t want to hear. “I’m sure all the ladies of

the ton and Lord Abbott too, for that matter, will understand why you couldn't attend your soiree as soon as it gets out that you were sitting in prison for stealing a diamond necklace that didn't belong to you."

I bristled at his comment, not appreciating his sarcasm. "I'm not going to be sitting in prison."

He chuckled at that but the sound was void of any humor. "You, Mrs. Fairfax, don't seem to understand just how much trouble you're facing." While I'd initially found his thick Scottish accent charming, now it just irritated me.

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. "I understand perfectly well, thank you. I just don't see why I should be in trouble in the first place, because I'm telling you the truth."

He raised an eyebrow, studying me for a moment. "You are in trouble, Mrs. Fairfax, because you were caught with a stolen necklace in your possession."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, I know that much. But if the system favored women as much as it favors men, I wouldn't be in this mess to begin with."

He let out another low chuckle. "Is that so? And what do you suggest I do about that?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe start treating women as equals in the eyes of the law?"

His lips twitched, but the smile never fully birthed itself on his mouth. Good thing too because that would only have enraged me, I was sure. "I'll keep that in mind. In the meantime, I need to figure out what to do with you."

"You could release me and allow this misunderstanding to work itself out?" I figured it was worth a shot.

His eyes narrowed slightly, his expression turning serious once more. "Forgive me for being a bit skeptical, given your past."

My jaw clenched at that, because I had no idea what he was talking about. "What does my past have to do with any of this?"

He walked around his desk then and stood in front of it, just beside me, for a second or so before taking a seat on the edge of the desk and stretching his long legs out before him. He wrapped his arms against his chest, holding his bandaged hand close. Then he leaned forward, his eyes intent on mine. "As I understand it, Patrick died fairly soon after bringing you over from the

continent. I can't help but wonder if there was more to that particular story than meets the eye."

I stiffened, my heart pounding, as anger and indignation began to flood me. "Are you suggesting that I had something to do with my husband's death?"

Good Lord! The bloody nerve of the man! Who in hell did he think he was to say such a horrid thing to me?

I was already of the opinion that Inspector Stirling was a hard and dour man who probably hadn't truly laughed a day in his life, but this! Well, this insinuation was just as shocking as it was irreverent.

He leaned further forward, his expression intense. "I find it suspicious that Patrick died so soon after you arrived in London."

I glared at him, so completely insulted, I didn't even know how to respond. I swallowed down the acid retort that was perched on my tongue and took three deep breaths as I tried to calm myself down, but I was truly and wholly livid. "As you're well aware," I managed to respond with a calm voice which was truly a feat in and of itself. "My husband died of tuberculosis, nothing sinister."

Stirling didn't appear convinced, but he didn't say anything more on the topic and, instead, just studied me with narrowed eyes. "Tell me more about your life in America."

"Why?"

A glare. "Because I'm asking."

I matched his glare. "What do you want to know?" And why had this conversation taken such a personal turn?

"For starters: how did you meet Patrick Fairfax?"

I sighed—I really didn't have the time for this, because it was true—Lord Abbott was throwing a gala this evening and if I wanted to be prepared for it, I needed to start those preparations in an hour or so. But, as I eyed the inspector, I was met with the feeling that he was used to playing by his own rules. And when in Rome... "My father was a notable archaeologist and traveled the world, giving lectures about the artifacts he found."

He appeared surprised to hear that. "What is your maiden name?"

"Russe."

Inspector Stirling nodded as if he recognized my surname, which wasn't much of a surprise because my father had been very well known before he'd died. "Archibald Russe?"

“Yes.”

“I remember Patrick talking about attending your father’s lectures at the British Museum.”

I nodded. “That’s where I met Patrick—at the British Museum during one of my father’s tours.”

“Aye,” the inspector said, getting up and walking around his desk as he took a seat in his chair and then leaned back into it, bobbing up and down like a buoy on a turbulent sea. “And how did your relationship develop from there?”

“I don’t understand how this is pertinent to my case, Inspector.”

He continued to bounce back and forth, his fingers (well, except for the bandaged ones) steepled in front of him as he inspected me as if I were an exotic insect, dead and mounted beneath a sheet of glass.

“Humor me.”

I rolled my eyes and made a frustrated sound, but the stupid inspector continued to bounce in his stupid chair.

“Fine,” I breathed out the word on a sigh and gave him a look that said I was none too excited about having to recount such personal information. “After our initial introduction at one of my father’s lectures, Patrick began calling on me while my father and I were still in London.”

“How long ago was this?”

I glanced upwards as I tried to remember. “Perhaps eighteen months ago.”

“Go on.”

“After we returned to the states, Patrick even made a few trips out to Boston to visit me,” I continued, feeling a twinge of nostalgia for those early days of our courtship. I missed Patrick terribly and it was times like this, when I was reminded of our short time together, that made me miss him even more.

“Boston is where you’re from?”

I nodded. “During the times Patrick and I weren’t physically in the same country, we corresponded. My father and I made many trips here, to London, to visit him and sometimes he would meet us in other countries during my father’s tours.”

“Then I’m assuming the sudden fortune Patrick found himself with must have been yours?”

“Sudden fortune?”

The inspector nodded. “Your husband certainly earned a good wage as superintendent but nothing that would have enabled him to live the lavish lifestyle you must be accustomed to.”

I frowned, because it was impolite to speak of finances, but the inspector didn’t seem like someone who was concerned with propriety or common decency, for that matter. “My father uncovered many ancient relics and antiquities and in selling them to museums and private collections, he managed to earn a very respectable living.”

The inspector laughed at that. “I’d call your inheritance more than respectable, Mrs. Fairfax.”

“Call it what you will.”

He nodded, seeming to accept my explanation—at least for the time being. “Interesting. And what made you decide to settle in London?”

I shrugged. “Patrick—as Superintendent of Scotland Yard, wasn’t eager to leave his post.”

The inspector had stopped buoying in his chair and now leaned back, studying me with a thoughtful expression. “Yes, Patrick was the best at what he did. What I do find interesting though is that I worked with Patrick for years and yet I’m only just now meeting you.” And there was that suspicious expression again—only this time it was more pronounced.

“We had a long-distance courtship mostly,” I answered on a shrug. “Until sixteen months ago, when he asked me to marry him.”

“He proposed after only two months of courtship?”

I nodded. “And we were married two months after that, though it would still take me another few weeks to relocate from Boston to London... because my father was ill.” I breathed in deeply because I didn’t like discussing the deaths of the two most important people in my life. In general, I tried to banish such thoughts from my mind because the pain was always too much to bear. In my forty years on this planet, I felt as if I’d suffered quite a bit of death and sadness. “Then, after my father died, Patrick moved me out to London and after just a few months, he too was gone.”

“And then so were you.”

And here was the crux of the matter—the reason why the inspector had always been suspicious of Philippa Fairfax, before he’d ever even met me. “Yes, I left London directly after Patrick’s death,” I admitted.

“And why was that?” Another hostile expression.

I shrugged. "I couldn't bear to live in London without him and I couldn't return to America because I was haunted by the ghost of my father there, not literally, of course."

He nodded. "Of course."

"So, I moved to Paris for a year." I swallowed hard as something occurred to me. "Did Patrick never speak of me?" I would have imagined that the inspector would have already known some of these details from Patrick, himself.

Inspector Stirling studied me for a few seconds before he released the breath he'd been holding. "He spoke of you, aye—often. That is, when he was here—in London. Towards the end of his life, I must admit he wasn't here, in the office, very much. I shouldered the majority of his cases."

Neither of us said anything more after that and the silence stretched between us for a good few seconds. Inspector Stirling just continued to look at me, as if trying to make me uncomfortable with the depth of his gaze. It was strange but I got the feeling that he was curious about me and not all of that curiosity was suspicion. Or perhaps I was simply imagining that last bit.

"So, Mrs. Fairfax," he said finally, his Scottish accent thickening on my name. "There is still the matter of the diamond necklace."

I breathed in deeply. "I swear to you, Inspector Stirling, that Patrick gave it to me as a gift. He said it was a family heirloom and he wanted me to have it on our wedding day."

He raised an eyebrow. "Did he put that in writing anywhere, Mrs. Fairfax, because at this point, that's the only way you'll be able to prove your claim."

I shook my head, feeling a surge of frustration. "No, he didn't—or as far as I know he didn't." Then something occurred to me as I frowned at him. "Don't you think it worthwhile to ask yourself why I would steal a necklace when I'm already an heiress to a vast fortune, as you so indecently put it?"

His eyebrows lifted momentarily and I got the feeling that it was a rare occasion when Inspector Stirling was challenged by someone. Then he looked at me shrewdly. "Your father's fortune is no guarantee of your own financial stability, Mrs. Fairfax. People have been known to do desperate things for money."

I glared at him, feeling insulted. "I'm not 'people'. I'm a respectable widow and I would never stoop so low as to steal a piece of jewelry unless it was rightfully mine and something my husband intended me to have."

He sighed, looking almost apologetic, but then he shrugged as if there was nothing more he could say on the subject. “My hands are tied, Mrs. Fairfax. Unless you can provide concrete evidence that the necklace was intended for you, I’m afraid I’ll have to charge you with grand theft.”

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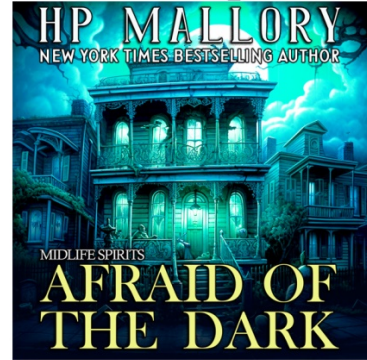
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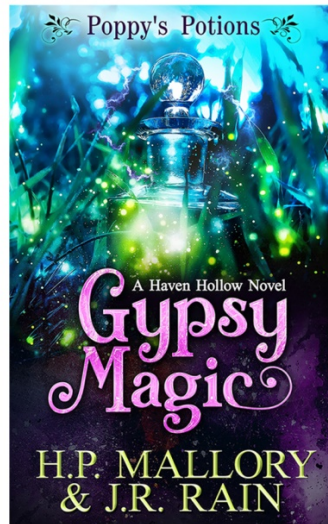
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About H.P. Mallory:



H.P. Mallory is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author. She writes paranormal fiction, heavy on the romance! H.P. lives in Southern California with her son and a cranky cat.

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